

# **THE SACRED BAND**

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## **DESTINY**

James MacTavish



## *Red Dragon*

*Sir Galahad*  
(*Todd Allen*)

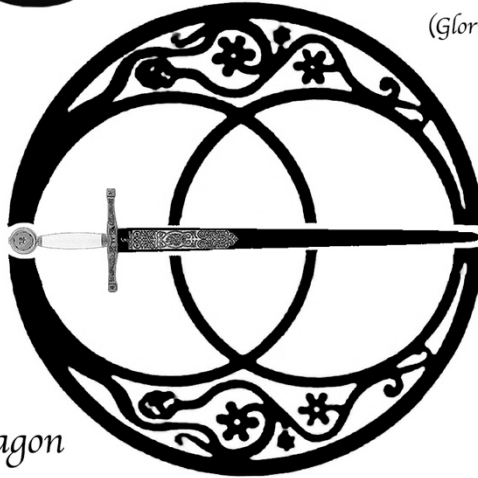
*Sir Gawain*  
(*Camille Rochelle*)

*Sir Bors*  
(*John Butcher*)

*Sir Kay*  
(*Tim Patch*)

*Sir Gaheris*  
(*Gloria Uppingham*)

*Sir Bedivere*  
(*Ben Benson*)



## *White Dragon*

*Sir Lancelot*  
(*Charles Campbell Worthington*)

*Sir Tristan*  
(*General Alfred Becker*)

*Sir Geraint*  
(*Christine Hartley*)

*Sir Gareth*  
(*Commander Walter Dorf*)

*Sir Palamedes*  
(*Amin al-Husseini*)

*Sir Lamorak*  
(*Michael Von Lamorak*)





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

*Adam Drobinski*  
*Otto Hurtz*  
*Tomaz Muller*  
*150 male partnerships*

## Prologue

A thousand years. You heard correctly – one thousand years. For a complete millennium I, Morgan le Fay, have decided which empires shall rise and when they should fall. Now I am certain for a mere mortal this may appear close to an eternity, but for an earth spirit such as I, it is little more than a human heartbeat. My power lies within the rocks and stones, the roots of trees and the grains of sands, all of which can endure aeons of change and remain, so please do not try to question my resolve.

What I will confess to is my fatigue, being confined within this interminable shell of flesh and bone in order to walk among you. Such a languid existence you all must lead for what is only the faintest knot in an otherwise seamless tapestry of time. My sister, Nimue, is born of the waters and the rains, the lakes and the rivers, hence forever moving and changing. Her form often reflects this, and if the fresh eyes of a child born at dawn were to gaze upon her now, I would expect those same eyes to see a very different face once weathered and prepared to close for the final time come dusk. Such alterations have their benefits no doubt, especially when it comes to wiping the slate clean like the tired skin of a serpent. A failure of duty from the spirit you

would know as the Lady of the Lake can be forgotten with each incarnation presented to mankind. I, however, do not have such a luxury. What I do have, though, is knowledge – an understanding of the intricate and often idiosyncratic motivations of men and women that has come to serve me well. Far better than my mentor, the great sorcerer Merlin, would have ever predicted.

Humans are motivated by two conjoined narratives – power and desire. What is truly unique about them is that, unlike any other creature I know, they are prepared to ignore the status quo of nature, of balance. Even upon reaching the summit of a mountain, they are determined to touch the stars. This is an unreserved compliment I might add, as why wouldn't one ask for more? What is fascinating is just how far they are prepared to go in order to achieve just that – *more*. It is this realisation that brings my skills into play. Let me try to explain.

Towards the end of his life, a mortal of power by the name of Septimus Severus whispered into the soils near Eboracum, the British city now known as York, a very solemn and lonely tale. From his birthplace in Leptis Magna, on the northern plains of Africa, he was enchanted by the reciting of a Greek legend featuring the deity of wisdom, Athena, and the tragedy that befell her when she lost her dearest friend Pallas. Her sorrow

became encaptured within a statue, the Palladium, which she entrusted for safekeeping to a Grecian tribe known as the Sacred Band of Thebes. These men, these warriors, drank from the Well of Ares, Athena's brother, which imbued them with strength and, one might say, *magic*. Their loyalty and love for one another ensured protection of the relic that, in other hands, could do far more than just protect. For despite this wealth of power that sat within the walls of Thebes, it was never the desire of the Sacred Band to expand into an empire. But sadly Ares, the God of war, had a thirst that was not to be satisfied by amity.

Along comes another relic, one of his own creation, the Necklace of Harmonia, named after his daughter and certainly not the bearer of concord as its name might suggest. For the Necklace fuelled lust, life itself you could say. When hung around the neck of the wrong individual, a curse. No more, no less. Septimus knew of this connection between the two relics, and the cycle that ensued, for his own Roman Empire was built upon it, as was that of the venerable Alexander the Great before that. He knew the day would come when Rome too would fall, he just did not know when – the tease of inevitability. You can imagine when I came to learn of this marriage, the rise and fall of empires, I saw an *opportunity*, not a curse. Merlin and my sister advised against it, despite being ever mindful that our days of influence were ebbing away. I refused to accept such a

fate – and nor did those that follow me still today, my White Dragon knights, the six from King Arthur’s most noble line of thirteen and their descendants that have sworn allegiance to me and my methods. The old ways shall never be extinguished, we shall endure.

Unfortunately, not all of the knights agreed, but given time, they will.

So, from as close as Britain to France, or as far as Iberia to Mongolia, I have commanded legions, without their knowledge. I have profited from their plunder and their perishing. Once stretched too thinly for too long, the weaknesses of mankind become apparent, and the time comes to move the Palladium into the hands of another arrogant fool. I sit here quietly now, adorned with the Necklace of Harmonia, whose previous owners only saw its power of everlasting beauty and sweet charm over men, whereas I am prepared to go further. I decide when an empire’s time is done, not those beneath me... just as I decide when one should rise again. Looming over my own marionette, strings forever in my grasp fills me with a sense of purpose. For if I am not to be worshipped like the new Gods, I can be sure that I intend to remain influential in the affairs of mankind. It is this sense of purpose that sustains me throughout the pain of having to tread this earth with mortal footsteps when even the White Dragon knights around me have the privilege to pass their swords to their next of kin – even my beloved Sir Lancelot.

Please be under no illusion though that I do not feel pain, or loss, or grief. For there have been many an occasion when my best-laid plans have not come to pass. At least seventeen, in fact. My sister and Merlin kept from me a little secret you see, a third relic of insurmountable strength. A sword to lead all swords, a King's Blade. We call it Excalibur – and only the worthy can wield it. King Arthur used this very blade against me, seemingly overpowering that born of the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia like an ointment on an infected wound. I prayed that this incident was in isolation, but it appears the bloodline of Sir Bedivere clings to such a legacy that can frustrate. From the Wars of the Roses in England, to the Spanish Armada, to a delightful civil war in what is now the United States of America, the power of Excalibur has been exercised to halt my cleansing. Most recently in 1918 were the fields of northern Europe spared from my most ambitious performance to date, a truly global war.

I have been twisted and bitter ever since, soothed only by learning of the turmoil within the Sir Bedivere ancestry. To bear the responsibility to wield the King's Blade is by its very nature, to sacrifice in order to satisfy its thirst for blood, for only that will suffice. Not every ancestor of Sir Bedivere has been up to such a task. I am tantalised by the prospect of holding all three relics, as no one has ever achieved before. A quest for another time perhaps.



For now, at least, I am reinvigorated once more – and my thoughts turn to Germany. My gift of foresight, however fragile and intermittent it can be, spurs me to revisit this land. For there is a storm coming, built upon the very foundations of the last, only this time, more intense. If the first Great War was the prelude, then this will undoubtedly be the climax. Buried deep within the Germanic people lies an insatiable hunger for real change, an empire with no equal. At its heart lies a man, a born leader like so many before him, who epitomises that very notion of limitless desire, prepared to step upon mounds of skulls to achieve his aim. Be it the Sacred Band warriors, or those six knights that make up our opposite known as the Red Dragon, all could be crushed at his feet, should he possess the right tools. By the time the unhinged mind of Sir Bedivere comes to its senses and retrieves Excalibur, the lightning would already have struck, swift and without mercy. A demonstration of defiance that could threaten even the new Gods themselves. There would be no going back.

The stage has been set. Now, to quote another famous Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius – ‘Begin. To begin is half the work, let half still remain; again begin this, and thou wilt have finished.’

## Chapter 1

### Atlantic City, USA

24<sup>th</sup> March 1914 AD

‘Come away to Munich with me, darling.’ Morgan wrapped her arms around Mr Robertson’s now frail shoulders hunched over a typewriter. Cigar ash dropped on his stained fingers, he wheezed out a curse word or two through his dried lungs. ‘It would do you a world of good, I’m sure,’ Morgan teased his tightening torso muscles.

‘Hmmm... on the brink of war they say in the papers. The German Kaiser Wilhelm the Second getting a bit itchy over his status in Europe I hear. The arms race has truly picked up over there. It’s a bonfire just waiting for a match to be lit.’ Mr Robertson rattled his tin of matches to support his metaphor before striking up a match to light another cigar. He stood gingerly with the assistance of his writing table, practically choking on his first inhale of tobacco. He slid a finger inside a cut crystal tumbler and decanted his third shot of whiskey. ‘Besides, my dear, I’m hardly in a fit state to travel, and you know I have two more books to complete for the publishers if I am to have a hope of holding on to this

apartment come rent day.’ He retired back to his desk, soothing each racking cough with a gulp from the glass.

Morgan panned around the small living quarters. Basic, with a combined living room and kitchen, the single bedroom and a tiny bathtub barely wide enough to wash an infant. Thick, textured grease covered the tiles immediately above the cooker, what were pale magnolia curtains now a mellow ochre from years of nicotine abuse. She scuffed her heel on the worn, lime-green carpet and sighed, finding solace in the one redeeming feature of the domestic prison – the Juliet balcony that offered salt-swept views across the Atlantic. She breathed deep the scent of warm sands and saline as if purifying her senses. Eyes screwed shut, she rubbed her thumb over the red jewel hanging delicately from her neck. A quick peek down and she caught its shimmering burnt crimson glow, enough to reinvigorate her and step back inside the apartment.

‘All work and no play my darling...you know how the saying goes,’ Morgan said with a smile.

Mr Robertson paused in thought for a moment. ‘That’s good dear. Very good. I might just use that one,’ he gave a weak chuckle. ‘Always been my muse haven’t you?’

Morgan shifted through some early editions of Mr Robertson’s now impressive and diverse portfolio of literature. A tatty newspaper cutting fluttered to the

floor, the New York Times describing Mr Robertson as more fortune teller than novelist following the tragedy of the *RMS Titanic* little under two years ago. Mr Robertson himself was always keen to avoid the label of prescient skill. 'Tell me, did you ever settle your little dispute with the United States Navy? The periscope?' Morgan asked.

'You know I didn't,' Mr Robertson grunted back, clicking his knuckles loose. 'Besides, I'm a storyteller, not a scientist, so let them make the discoveries. I'll add the fiction.'

'Never underestimate the power of a good story, my love.' Morgan resumed her embrace. 'As for me, I live for myths... for there is always a grain of truth within them.' She nuzzled the creases in the weathered skin of his neck. 'What's this one called, by the way?' she settled her chin on his shoulder.

'No title just yet. Just an idea.' Mr Robertson leant back with a stretch.

'Indulge me, sweetheart.'

'Well, as I said, Europe is on the brink of war. Here in the United States, it's been a mere fifty years since we were all at each other's throats... Unionists and Confederates. I believe it's only a matter of time before we here are brought into another conflict, always appears to be the cycle, doesn't it? If we're not fighting

each other, then we need to find an enemy. Alas, human nature.’ Mr Robertson pinched his eyes with fatigue and aimed for the cigar dish this time as he tapped off the ash.

‘Indeed we do. The very essence of power I would say, to prove your land greater than those around it. An obsession with control and order,’ Morgan replied coldly. ‘So, you believe the United States will enter any prospective war in Europe?’

‘Possibly. Even if not directly, then I’m sure we won’t pass up an opportunity to take a side, and then, of course, be rewarded handsomely for doing so,’ Mr Robertson smirked, picking up a freshly minted dime from the desk and tossing it high into the air before attempting to snatch it – but Morgan caught it first.

‘You are getting slow,’ Morgan teased with a peck on the cheek. ‘You Americans and your fortunes...if it’s not coins, it’s gold, if not gold, it’s oil. So materialistic.’ She rolled the dime across her knuckles.

‘From a Brit, I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m sure your empire doesn’t benefit one inch from its colonial expanse upon which the sun never sets,’ Mr Robertson mocked.

‘Ah, it’s true. Quite the success I must confess. But like all empires, they have their time...they need to have their time. Let new ones grow like winter moves to

spring,' Morgan mused, passing the dime back to Mr Robertson. 'Here, think you'll need this more than me.' She stood sharply and reached for her white fur coat. 'I really must be going...Charles will be wondering where I am.' She noticed the time on Mr Robertson's Rolex.

'How is the old fool?' Mr Robertson spat through a brief coughing fit. 'Still burning through his family inheritance I take it? What's the latest vanity project? Is it the motor car still? I lose track.' His tone became bitter.

'Golf,' Morgan replied. 'Might I just say, Charles has brought his father's business a very long way since its pumping industry days. Might just learn a thing or two about tenacity from him.' She gave Mr Robertson a little slap on the forearm.

'Now there's a man who stands to profit from a war. Who doesn't need good water sanitation during what's bound to be a stalemate in Europe? Always the ones that can feed and water their troops the best that win the day, not those with the firepower,' Mr Robertson replied waving a judgemental finger in Morgan's direction. 'I believe he's got a pedigree on allegiances with the British following their issues in Sudan?'

Morgan reviewed herself in the dressing mirror and ran her nails through her silver hair. 'That was decades ago...things change my dear. As I said, Charles has other interests now. In fact, the reason he's not accompanying

me to Germany is due to his own visit to Scotland – he wants to demonstrate his new lawnmower device for fairways. Quite ingenious.’

‘More people out of work then? Just at a time when we desperately need employment,’ Mr Robertson grunted. Morgan perched herself on the edge of the desk, laid a palm on his cheek tenderly.

‘Must you always be so maudlin? It really doesn’t suit you, dearest,’ she whispered.

‘Maybe I wouldn’t if you decided to stay here, with me?’ Mr Robertson shot back.

Morgan retreated. ‘You know I can’t. Whatever you may think of Charles and the Worthington family, he is my husband, that is my choice, darling.’

‘But are you happy?’ Mr Robertson seized Morgan’s hand before she tried to leave.

‘We are close. Closer than you’ll ever know, yes. Always will be.’

Mr Robertson sighed and released her hand. ‘Sadly, I believe you.’

Morgan leaned in once more, caressed Mr Robertson’s brittle stubble and brought her lips to his for a fleeting second. ‘Life is never black and white, my love. Try to always think beyond the spectrum,’ she smiled.

'Please, Morgan, be careful out there in Germany. For whatever time I have left on this earth, I would not wish my mind to be filled with the torture of worry as to your wellbeing.' Mr Robertson swiftly wiped a welling tear from his eye.

'Ah, time is an old friend of mine, sweetheart. Trust me.' Morgan winked as she headed for the door. 'Besides, I'm sure whatever skirmish might arise from the bowels of hate within Europe, it will be short-lived. A victor will soon emerge...and with it, who knows? Maybe a new empire for us to debate?' With one foot out into the corridor she turned, 'Oh, while we're on this subject, never underestimate the Japanese.'



## Chapter 2

### Munich, Germany

12<sup>th</sup> August 1935 AD

Probably no finer examples of neogothic architecture could be found anywhere in Europe than here in the Marienplatz, where Morgan Worthington soaked in the late summer afternoon sun while sipping a frothy coffee. There was quite an energy from the bustling locals busying themselves through the central square market, a palpable buzz of optimism not seen in Bavaria for some time. Hard to believe a little over ten years ago this was a city on the brink of despair, from food shortages to civil unrest, societal conflicts at their most belligerent. That all changed two summers past, when the scars of a world war were covered under a veil of tribal National Socialism, the powdery orange rooftops of the city now proudly dressed in blood-red fabric. So many failed attempts, Morgan thought, from as early as a 1918 uprising through to a failed coup d'état five years later that saw their venerable chancellor arrested – this was truly the *capital of movement*, as many across the country had come to call it. Such momentum could not be wasted.

Through the crowds Morgan watched a stout lady, curly blonde locks and plump berry-red lips, standing by a fountain. A group of children sat attentively at her feet, all dressed in smart beige uniforms and waving small flags replicating those that draped from nearly every balcony overlooking the square. The lady traced her finger across the black lines encircled at its centre, formed a melodramatic facial expression that brought her juvenile audience to rapture. 'This is the symbol of hope, children. For your generation. Carry it with you always and you will never fail, for the Führer himself is watching over you. Go home and become the new, creative Germany that will live forever!' the lady concluded to thunderous cheers.

'Barbara! So sorry I am late.' Gretl placed a gentle palm on Morgan's back, followed by a warm embrace. 'Have you ordered already?'

'Only a coffee. Please, order whatever you wish,' Morgan replied, beckoning a waiter over.

'So kind, thank you. I could do with a coffee, Mr Hoffmann has been keeping me so busy these last few weeks. There's just too much to capture on film at the moment.' Gretl unhooked her coat from her shoulders. 'I see the good Lady Hansel over there is educating our children once again. She's never without a copy of *Mein Kampf*.'

'I take it Mr Hoffmann is pleased with the royalties from its print?' Morgan smiled.

'Oh yes. Delighted. As I said though, he is keeping us all so busy – posters, stamps, signed photographs. The Führer will need more ink, let me tell you,' Gretl said whilst she scanned through the café menu, deciding just as the waiter arrived.

'Very good, gnädige Frau, and for you, Dame Morgan?' the fresh-faced waiter asked.

'Only another coffee. Danke.' Morgan gave a brief nod before shooing the young man away.

'Dame Morgan? Oh dear, please don't tell me I've been calling you by another name these past few months. So embarrassing.' Gretl's eyes popped.

'No, no. Please, Barbara is my preferred name. I've travelled so much you see, and in Ancient Greek it means *foreigner*, so it's very suitable. Besides, where I'm from in Britain, Morgan is more associated with motor vehicles than ladies. My husband might approve but I most certainly do not,' Morgan sighed.

'Very well. Your husband, Charles, will he be joining you in Germany any time soon? You speak so little of him.' Gretl welcomed her coffee and immediately seized the sugar.

Morgan shook her head. 'Hard to find a true companion these days. Always committed to his work, not so much a marriage. Still, I do hear he finds the time for some pleasures... if only they were with me.' She wiped the foam from her top lip. 'Speaking of relationships, how is your sister, Eva?'

Gretl raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'What have you heard?'

'Only that she was unwell.'

'Well, you could say that. Being on the arm of the High Chancellor comes at a high price. You say your husband is committed to his work, try Adolf.' Gretl casually lit a cigarette. 'Second time she's tried taking her own life out of desperation, I dread the saying you British have... what is it? Third time is the luckiest?' she scratched her forehead for the words.

'Charm,' Morgan replied with a weakened smile. 'So sorry to hear that, Gretl. Still, she's happy here in Munich is she not? Closer to you at least.'

'She'd rather be closer to him. Not sure how long this relationship is expected to last but at least Adolf appears to be trying. With his life now firmly in Berlin he does have plans to have Eva move there permanently. Not sure she wants to leave her family behind but what choice does she have? I did see the plans Mr Speer drew up for the apartment mind, quite the lap of luxury. I'd

happily move in tomorrow.’ Gretl flicked some cigarette ash into the tray, easing herself into her chair, pleased that she’d manage to lighten the mood. ‘Now there’s a man you simply must meet...Mr Albert Speer. Genius. The Führer loves him so much. Such vision for the Third Reich and for Germany. The Zeppelinfeld at Nuremberg...a triumph! A cathedral of light they called it. Wunderbar!’ she inhaled deeply.

‘Sounds fascinating. I’ve always thought that you can tell so much more about a person by what they choose to build, rather than what they simply think, do you not agree?’ Morgan winked. Gretl laughed in agreement. ‘You know, this Mr Speer might be able to assist me with something...’ Morgan leant to one side and reached inside her handbag. She placed a cylindrical object in the centre of the table, cloaked in hessian cloth. She slowly unwrapped the item, and Gretl’s eyes popped open once more.

‘My dear Barbara, what is this?’ Gretl carefully picked up the small stone statue, inspecting every inch. ‘It looks like an antique. Is it a family heirloom?’

‘You could say that,’ Morgan replied whilst interlacing her fingers. ‘I’ve held on to it for so many years now, never been entirely sure what to make of it... but to be honest with you, I’ve never cared for its look. Too old-fashioned for my taste.’

‘No, surely not. It’s beautiful. It’s like a classical Roman carving. Could well be as old.’ Gretl turned the object in different directions looking for markings or hallmarks. ‘I’m certain Mr Speer could tell you more about its provenance. He’s due to visit Munich in a few weeks to help celebrate my birthday, alongside the Führer himself.’

Morgan twitched the corner of her mouth. ‘Could I meet him? Mr Speer?’ she asked softly.

‘Why of course. I will need to confirm with my sister but see no reason why not,’ Gretl replied. ‘He would love to hear more about your travels, and your love of history...just don’t let him bore you with the virtues of Doric over Corinthian columns, you’ll be begging for mercy after only a few minutes,’ she chuckled.

‘And the Führer himself? What about him?’ Morgan’s expression diluted.

Gretl thought for a moment, handed back the statue. ‘He’s understandably a little more private. Especially when around my sister. However, I can certainly ask.’ She offered a timid smile of consolation.

‘I’d very much appreciate it. I’ve just been so fascinated by him, and his love of, well, the old ways,’ Morgan gushed. ‘Of course, what is said to be old soon becomes the new again doesn’t it? Just look at fashion,’ she beamed, showing off her silver gown. ‘This certainly

wasn't the talk of the town back in the United States – that Marlene Dietrich has much to answer for,' she joked.

'Nonsense. You look splendid,' Gretl flattered. 'Oh, and certainly don't mention Marlene Dietrich around the Nazis, too much of a capitalist sympathiser heading across the Atlantic like that,' she frowned.

'Well, let us make a deal.' Morgan pressed her hand against the statue, pushing it back to Gretl. 'You arrange a lovely introduction to Mr Speer and the Führer, and in exchange, Eva can present this statue as a gift, together with my appreciation.'

Gretl cradled the carving as if it were her child. 'Oh Barbara, that is so kind. Eva could do with such tenderness right now, given everything that's happened. This would certainly make Adolf happy. I will speak to her this evening.'

'My pleasure.' Morgan brought her hands together in gratitude before reaching for the menu. 'I suddenly have my appetite back, what do you recommend?'

## **Chapter 3**

### **London - England**

**28<sup>th</sup> August 1939 AD**

The first drops from the heavens had just landed on Todd Allen's black wax jacket just as he exited Whitehall. Ominous bulbs of grey clouds suggested a storm was coming – never had a forecast been so reliable. He hunched his broad shoulders while attempting to pull the hood of his jacket over his head for protection from the building rain, shooting envious looks to those who were prepared with umbrellas, passing him on the steps. A sharp splash of pooled water from the nearby kerb caught his shoes, he spat a quick curse word at the car driver then squelched his way towards Westminster Underground.

Todd had made it a habit to avoid eye contact whenever in the capital, whether it was born from his connections to the upper echelons of government security and administration or simply because he could not abide the casual chit-chat of Londoners, he was never sure. His head was always lowered, his left hand deep into a pocket, the right firmly gripping his wooden staff. 'Will there be war? Read all about it,' came the shrill voice of



a pubescent boy on the roadside corner flogging the latest copy of *The Times*. Despite being several sodden steps ahead of the rest of the city regarding foreign relations, Todd indulged the flat-capped lad with a smile and dug out a few pennies. The headlines were never going to make for pleasant reading, more hysteria as usual, accusations towards Germany's illegitimate swelling might and a prime minister here in Britain that carried about as much weight as a feather caught in a gale. One look at the strident front photograph of Adolf Hitler in sharp contrast to Neville Chamberlin said it all. Todd sighed despondently. At least, the fresh crisp pages made for a relatively decent makeshift umbrella.

'Still unprepared for the skies above, Mr Allen?' came a coarse, throaty voice that sounded all too familiar to Todd. He turned moments before taking the first step down towards the underground, greeted by the waist-length, smooth overcoat of Mr Charles Worthington. Elegant and well-groomed as always, neat moustache combed evenly with a side-parting of winter grey hair angled to perfection. The skin around his neck had become tired though, bones protruding from the collar as if a tent tarpaulin had been stretched too far. Leathery wrinkles around his cheeks and jaw had worn well for a man his age, but his eyes reflected a different story, Todd thought. 'Never ceases to amaze me how the Red Dragon knights, after all these centuries, fail to account for the basics. In this country, rain is inevitable.'

Charles mocked, while pointing his wooden cane towards the comfort of his tartan umbrella.

Todd balled up his newspaper and tossed it into the bin by his side. 'Thought you were in America? What brings you back to London, Charles?' he grunted. 'Already made it clear it's not our summer climate.'

'Indeed.' Charles took a step closer, hiding a gentle cough behind his hand.

'So what then? Lady Morgan sent you over here to spy on me? The rest of the Red Dragon? You'll be relieved to hear I've not seen the witch nor in fact any of your White Dragon followers of late. But I can guess where they might be,' Todd growled.

Charles brushed off a few stray drops of rain from his forearm that had made it past his umbrella courtesy of a sudden change in the wind. He looked up at the skies disapprovingly. 'This rain is only going to get worse... where is the nearest pub?'

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Plumes of acrid smoke filled The Red Lion public house, mingling with the aromas of ale, nicotine and cigars to make a suffocating atmosphere. Charles's cough began to intensify as he and Todd sat down in the nearest booth to a window. 'We can go outside if you prefer?'

Todd gave a concerned look at the yellow stains blotting Charles's neat white handkerchief.

'No, this is fine. Warmer.'

'Prefer the brine-laced air of New Jersey I expect,' Todd said with a shrug, gulping beer. 'Or is it the east coasts of Scotland now? Heard you were becoming a bit of a golf enthusiast?'

Charles's cough abated long enough to take a sip from his pint glass. 'You know, I can't recall there being such an age gap between the knight of Sir Lancelot and knight of Sir Galahad for quite some time, can you?' he asked. Todd ticked through his mind a difference of what must be a decent fifty years separating the two men, his counterpart comfortably in his mid-eighties now, whereas he sat spritelier at thirty-three. 'Just as well we are not in the business of crossing blades today, eh?' Charles dared a laugh.

'The tragedies of war, Charles. Bloodlines fall behind. Sure it is the same across both our factions,' Todd sneered. 'It didn't go unnoticed by our side that you remained remarkably silent throughout the Great War, despite your wife's obvious interference with the Palladium. What happened? Death of millions a little too rich for you?' he sneered.

'Alas, young Mr Allen. You forget my late father witnessed a similar fate upon his shores during our own

civil war not seventy or so years ago. I was only a child of course, but the tales he told me of the battle in Gettysburg left quite the scar on the memory, trust me.' Charles shook his head in sorrow.

'So much that it permitted you to allow Lady Morgan to repeat the same thing over again this side of the Atlantic fifty years later? Very noble,' Todd persisted.

'You won't believe me when I say it was not my intention to do so.'

'You're right there,' Todd scoffed with another gulp of beer. 'Let's cut to the chase, Charles, what does the leader of the White Dragon, son of Sir Lancelot, have to say about the current situation? Have you come to gloat or to aid?'

Charles's head remained lowered, twisting his silver signet ring around his little finger. *Albus Draco* he muttered under his breath.

'So to gloat then? Splendid. Well, I have work to do...assuming of course Nazi Germany is in fact the work of Lady Morgan and the Palladium once more. Pleasure seeing you again Charles...' Todd hastily finished his pint and slammed the empty glass down on the table.

'Please Todd, sit down.' Charles raised his palm. Todd ignored him and reached for his damp coat. 'You know as well as I do that Ben Benson is not of stable mind, far

from it. Just how exactly do you expect to bring about this particular cycle of destruction without Excalibur by your side?’ he choked out through a wheezy cough.

Todd paused and swallowed hard. ‘How did you know about Ben?’

‘You think Lady Morgan hasn’t learnt? About the unfortunate passing of his young son and wife to Spanish flu? How his world has crumbled into a downward spiral of pain and remorse, infested with memories of the Great War like bolts of lightning that never cease, even with the devil within the alcohol? Trust me, I’ve seen too many a toughened soldier witness the horrors of war to know its impact.’ Charles leaned across the table in desperation. ‘He won’t be able to find the King’s Blade, not like he did in the Great War or his ancestors did during the American Civil War before it.’ Charles’ eyes grew wide with concern. ‘Even if he did, do you truly think such a weapon is safe in such an unhinged mind?’

Todd returned to the booth, lowering his voice to little more than a whisper. ‘I don’t know what clairvoyance you think your wife has, but Ben Benson knows of the sufferings placed upon the Sir Bedivere bloodline, the challenges he must face. He will overcome them and we will stop the White Dragon’s cycle again, you can be sure of that,’ he hissed through gritted teeth.

‘All I’m sure of is that Ben Benson, like me, is tired, Todd. The prospect of another global war where he and he alone must face the inevitable burden of humanities’ last hope... for a second time no less. Trust me, my wife has always done her research when it comes to which empires should rise and when they should fall, always to our benefit within the White Dragon – she sees greatness in Germany, especially *this* incarnation of Germany – you thought the Great War was born of hell, I fear its sequel may stretch beyond the gates of Hades.’

‘Ben also has a daughter out in Jamaica...’ Todd began optimistically.

‘Oh yes, only a teenager I hear? And pregnant? Perhaps she was destined to be the carrier of the Sir Bedivere sword, maybe the saviour with Excalibur too – would explain how his eldest son passed away from a mortal illness so quickly – but still, after all, she has suffered? A mother-to-be and estranged from her father? I very much fear the bloodshed would have erupted to such a degree this world would have torn itself apart long before she curls her fingers around the King’s Blade,’ Charles countered.

‘So what are you saying? You believe it to be hopeless for us and the Red Dragon? In which case, why are you even here? You and your White Dragon sycophants will have got what you’ve always wanted...a world that’s

truly under your control.’ Todd slumped back in his seat, puzzled.

‘Because, believe it or not, Mr Allen, despite us having locked horns for generations, it has never been my intention to destroy a world which I have come to call home. It is true my allegiance will always be to Morgan le Fay, her charms have long held sway over my family and my fellow knights – and I cannot say we haven’t reaped the benefits. But following the Great War, her thirst for blood is ravenous, and only growing. You know after all her years of wandering this earth how she desires real change, to be worshipped once more like in the times of our Round Table kin, revered. Each war she strikes, each empire she commands, this intensity grows... a world war like no other is coming, and she will be at its heart.’ Charles seemed caught in his own dolorous reverie.

Todd softened, tapping his fingernails rhythmically on the table. ‘Do you think she has ever loved you? Or indeed any of the Sir Lancelot ancestors before you?’ he asked bluntly.

‘At times, yes. But whether this love is enough to triumph over her own ambition is the real question you need to ask. That necklace she wears, the one born of Harmonia, it has always corrupted as you well know. It fuels greed and passion in men like nothing else, and brings down what the Palladium creates. Lady Morgan

just holds the stopwatch. She enjoys this game, the toying with mankind, but after nearly a millennium, even the sorceress of earth and stone can get...well, tempted,' Charles squirmed uncomfortably.

'Tempted? In what way?' Todd squinted his eyes with curiosity. 'Lady Morgan doesn't just play with empires and armies does she?' he cracked a grin.

'Also a man's heart, yes. I've known for some time of her affair with that writer, Mr Robertson. How else can someone possess such amazing insights into the future in his works? As we said, it's all a game isn't it?' Charles gulped the last of his pint. 'Besides, the bastard writer is dead now, what do I care?'

'The great Sir Lancelot, strong in body but tender in soul...I shall remember that.' Todd gave a polite and respectful nod.

'Must have been easier when my ancestors were women, eh? No need for infidelities to ensure an heir to the Sir Lancelot blade. That said, sitting with my two daughters, Morgan will have her work cut out, whichever one inherits.' Charles raised an eyebrow, swiftly followed by a sly grin.

'So, the Sir Lancelot line will pass to a woman again?' Todd thought out loud. 'Bit of a rarity, almost as much as much as my own line of Sir Galahad... can't recall the last female sword-bearer.' He scratched his shadow of



stubble. 'Take it Lady Morgan still not one for children then of her *own* making?'

'Not even sure she can. But no, don't expect any bastard son or daughter from Morgan or Mr Robertson. I have a true love in my dearest Maude anyway. For that I am forever grateful,' Charles settled. 'And you? Where might the heart of Sir Galahad land these troubled days?'

The question caught Todd off guard – the very notion he could find a wife of his own was a tease of fantasy right now... but if his own bloodline was to continue, a prelude to another great war requiring his actions and as yet with no offspring sent a cold shiver down his spine. For it was not just his blade he needed to pass down, but that of the Sacred Band as well, as legend foretold. 'We'll see,' was the only stoic response Todd could provide to his company. 'So, where will you go now, Charles? If not in a rush to be by your wife's side in all of this carnage to come?' He stood, straightening his jacket.

'My gift to you, Mr Allen, is but the mere warning of what's to come. That, and the detail of my wife's location. You should try Munich if you didn't already know. I would suggest that you have your knights and the Sacred Band on high alert,' Charles proposed.

‘Well, the leader of the Sacred Band is German, from nearby in Hanover. I have been in constant communications with him since Hitler’s rise to power there. He and his partner have already worked their way into some of the highest ranks of the German military – the Abwehr I believe it’s called. Told me about a plan – *Fall Weiss* – means...’ Todd was cut short.

‘Case White’. Charles interrupted. ‘Very original of my knights.’

‘indeed. If Lady Morgan and your allies were set on keeping things subtle, they failed,’ Todd mocked drily. ‘Otto and Tomaz will engage and see what this plan reveals.’

‘Very good. Then I shall leave you to it, Sir Galahad.’ Charles stood with a wince at the numbness that had set into his ageing limbs. ‘I will return to Scotland and know this young knight. While my loyalties shall always be with my followers, it is not my intention to interfere. I trust my coming to you today has proven this?’

‘Again, we shall see.’ Todd cracked a smile and offered a handshake. Charles gripped it with both his frail hands, tighter than Todd anticipated. He pulled the larger man in closer for an embrace, Todd feeling the mild tremble through the loose skin as he awkwardly tried to reciprocate.

'I'm sorry I cannot do more, my fellow knight,' Charles near wept into Todd's ear. 'My time here is near spent, but I hope that you and indeed all our knights are still standing come the end, their futures, and their children's futures, secure and safe.'

Before Todd could respond, Charles ripped himself away and leant heavily on his wooden cane, swiftly composing himself. 'Albus Draco,' he said definitely, as a means to wipe clean his altruistic confession before heading for the pub door, a chain of coughs echoing as he faded into the grey rains outside.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Mosty, Polish-Slovak Border**

**28<sup>th</sup> August 1939 AD**

*Letter from Otto Hurtz – 28<sup>th</sup> August 1939*

My dearest Mr Allen,

I apologise I cannot report back to you with favourable news, and that it might have taken several days for you to hear of my ill fortune. I did instruct some fellow Sacred Band members to relay whatever messages they could, should they have not heard from me or Tomaz by nightfall of the 26<sup>th</sup> August, but several have been driven underground by the regime of the Third Reich, from Munich to Berlin. Rest assured, they are playing their part to defend our people from any further persecution, but alas, they can only fight so many battles.

I shall get to the point, Mr Allen – Poland will fall. By the time you read this letter, the country may have already fallen. The German-Soviet alliance has held and the Treaty of Riga has crumbled to dust. Expect Poland to be ensnared on both sides come winter. Tomaz and I

successfully infiltrated the Abwehr as agreed, and supported the small group of seventy or so Nazi soldiers at Cadca along the Slovak border. As informed, operation Fall Weiss was briefed on the evening before its launch, and we were to capture the rail station at Mostly as of strategic significance to the Führer and his plans for invasion. Among the group was the same individual you and the Red Dragon had warned me of – a Von Lamorak. I only ever heard his surname, the lineage of a White Dragon knight without question. There was a rumour that it was he that suggested the very name of the operation to General Herzner, so undoubtedly a man of influence and with the ears of the Nazi High Command at his beck and call.

The briefing suggested we would meet little to no resistance at the station, but Tomaz and I knew otherwise. The Polish are not as foolish as Hitler may think, and have long held a military garrison at the steel works nearby. No sooner had we embarked through the Jablonkow Pass than Tomaz split off to alert the nearest telephonist. I, as you know, had strong feelings about such separation, but Tomaz insisted it would look less suspicious given our obvious close bond, evident to the group. Within moments, we were under fire from the Polish military and police, the main train line tunnel funnelling whatever small resources we had into little more than a pin prick. I will confess to breathing a sigh of relief when the first round of bullets came from the

Poles, as this confirmed my hopes that Tomaz had been successful in his mission.

I tried to seek out the one they called Von Lamorak, heard his name shouted several times amidst the gunfire. Sadly saw no sign of a face, but I did without question witness the brilliance of a knight light spark its way down the train tunnel as we retreated. I thought for a moment it came from a young, delicate-faced boy no more than in his early twenties – would this age appear right to you for the Sir Lamorak line? Again, I stress I cannot confirm.

Post our retreat, I will admit to being trapped in a haze of my own confusion. I was desperate for a sign of Tomaz, a flash of blue fire somewhere among the melee of pistol smoke and grenade cinders. But nothing. That was until I turned for a final time, the unmistakable crew-cut hair of my lover standing at the opening of the tunnel, blue-flamed shield on display. Once that same pulse of white light struck the fragile brick of the edge of the tunnel entrance, a deadly avalanche of soil and rocks collapsed upon him. I could watch no more.

I write to you now with only pain and sadness in my heart at losing the pillar of strength in my life. I shall remain in Cadca for two further days but expect a full retreat back to Munich imminently. The Führer has ordered a full invasion under the guise that the Mostly advance was little more than an accident and a

misunderstanding by the Polish government. Again, what fools do they think they are? It could well be that by the time we correspond again, Britain will be at war with Germany for a second time, a notion that fans my grief only further. If Lady Morgan and the White Dragon are at the epicentre of this latest belligerence, then you and the Red Dragon knights must prepare yourselves for what I fear is certain to be an advance of warfare the likes of which the world has never seen. I will continue to manoeuvre those I can contact with the Sacred Band across all continents to assist, from here in Europe to the northern coasts of Africa, but our numbers fall short of the standard three hundred as you know, following the ongoing troubles in Manchuria and the Japanese empire – perhaps a miscalculation or sublime diversion as to the potential location of the treasured Palladium? I for one would not rule out a convergence of east meeting west anytime soon.

Wishing you all the very best, my dear friend. Keep your allies close, your enemies closer.

*Otto Hertz,*

*Leader of the Sacred Band.*

## Chapter 5

### Dunkirk - France

4<sup>h</sup> June 1940 AD

Jacques was only a step or two behind her, Camille Rochelle remembered. She was certain. Her brother had boomed at the top of his voice 'Run Camille, run!' as the two bolted like mice through a hole just as the Messerschmitt's fearsome growl had grown louder from the skies behind. They had leapt over the sandbag wall together amidst the scattering of gun fire from the wing guns. 'Go, now!' Jacques ordered as the stream of blue flame shot from his spear arm, striking the German plane on its underbelly, engulfing it in Sacred Band fire and causing it to spiral down like a corkscrew into the sea up ahead. Camille had kept running, her mind channelled, focused on reaching the haven of the harbour and what she and her brother hoped was rescue. It was only when she turned, panting, that she realised Jacques was no longer there. She shouted his name out, once, twice...the third time more a scream. Nothing. Perhaps he had made it to the beaches? Maybe taken a different route, she thought. She scrambled her way across the dust-grey dunes to the waters, spotted a lonely group of British soldiers huddled together for warmth and immediately headed in their direction.



'Pardon... Sorry, *excuse me*, sirs,' Camille stuttered between her native tongue and the needed English translation. 'Did a young Frenchman come your way? His name was Jacques, he would have been wearing a military uniform. Brown hair... about, maybe your height?' She pointed her wooden staff towards one of the taller British soldiers.

'Sorry love, not seen no French here just yet. Might want to try further up the beach?' a shorter, stocky soldier replied with a flick of a finished cigarette. 'Group of your lot waiting for a boat I heard.' The growl of yet more German fighter planes echoed in the distance, switching the soldiers' attention to the pale skies above once more. 'Bloody 'ell. Look lively lads, they're coming back!' the same soldier squeaked with terror in his voice, rifle already locked and loaded. 'Best find cover love, either that or run as fast as those frog-legs can take you,' another snipped as their group dispersed into the dune grasses.

Camille spotted the menacing dark crosses of Messerschmitt wings appear through the clouds, engines pitching higher upon approach. 'Merci' she managed to blurt out before sprinting in the opposite direction towards the thin black line of a queue faintly underscoring the horizon. Several ships of varying sizes dotted the English Channel, the chalk-white cliffs of Dover hazy like a mirage to her right – she could make it. Her brother could make it. They'd got this far. The

queue began to take its true form of hundreds of battle-worn men patiently rooted on the spot, some idly chit-chatting, others frozen in shock. Camille tapped a rearguard soldier on the shoulder – ‘Excuse me, err... English or Français?’ she asked in a fluster.

‘English!’ the rearguard snapped. ‘Don’t you go queue-jumping now, miss! French go second, remember that!’ he squared up with a puff of his chest. ‘You a nurse or something?’ he cocked his head to the side.

‘What? Why do you think...?’ Camille began to protest, then realised her plaited ponytail had slipped from beneath her beret, belying her charade of masculinity. ‘Oui. Yes, I am a nurse.’ She bowed her head, crestfallen.

‘Explains why a woman might be running up and down this God-forsaken beach armed only with a broom handle,’ Another rearguard soldier a few spaces in front mocked with a nervous twitch. ‘Ready to clear up the mess afterwards are we, madam?’ he jokingly performed a clumsy curtsy through his grating attempt at the French accent. Camille hid her staff beneath her coat, boldly staring the young man squarely in the eye.

‘I am looking for my brother, Jacques. He’s...’

‘Aren’t we all, sweetheart. Every man here is looking for either his brother, cousin, lifelong friend or the remainder of their regiment. Answer is always the

same...just get on a boat and quit complaining,' the first rearguard interrupted sharply. 'You might get lucky, miss, we can always do with a decent nurse aboard ships for our wounded. Get in line.'

'With respect, sir, I would rather find my brother.'

Camille stood firm. A lonesome cry came from the back of the queue as a young British soldier limped his way forward, a wounded compatriot slung over his shoulder. The youngster collapsed feet from where Camille stood, weeping and in deep shock. His fellow soldier was bled of colour, lifeless save the delicate flutter of his eyelids and short, shallow breath. Bright red blood oozed from his neck, staining the white sands beneath.

'We took fire, Charlie-boy here got hit. I carried him back but...' the young soldier had spent his lungs' worth of air before finishing. He was helped to his feet by the rearguard and supported by both arms by those in front. 'Can anyone save him? Please...he's not dead. He's not dead!' he wheezed while being towed away. Camille knelt by the casualty, ran her palm across his smooth cheek, tapped the other for a response, achieved only a murmur. Without thinking she ripped the sleeve from her coat, held the fabric over the welling gash on the soldier's throat and pressed hard. It would need more, she knew. But it was the best she could do. The skies growled once more, the screech of plane engines rang above their heads sending the once orderly queue into a diving panic. A few rifle rounds

were sent high into the heavens, shouts for cover rippled across the air as the Messerschmitts drew down to strike level. Two neat lines of plumed sands spurted from the sands in front, the rattle of gunfire relentless and without mercy. Camille drew her wooden staff from beneath her coat, single-handed, let out a yell of defiance and pulsed a shimmering white glow that blinded all around her. The German planes jerked upwards and parted ways, offering a welcome reprieve. The sinister growl faded away. Camille let out a sigh, catching sight of her brilliant steel blade embedded deep into the sands, hot to the tip.

‘What in the name...?’ one of the rearguards blurted, lifting his hands from his head and uncurling his body. ‘What did you just do? What was that?’ he demanded. Camille neatly transformed her sword back to its wooden state and hid it once more.

‘Photoflash bomb? Never heard of one in Britain?’ Camille shook off the intimidating stance from the rearguard.

‘Not in the hands of a soldier, no,’ the rearguard puzzled.

‘Well, as you say, monsieur, I am a nurse, not a soldier’. Camille twitched a dry smile. ‘Now, how soon can we get your comrade here aboard a boat?’

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A gentle rock of the waves gave some comfort to the handful of shell-shocked men crammed in the lower deck of the quaint fishing trawler. Some managed a sip or two of hot tea, others remained speechless, staring in front of them in a trance. Camille remained by the side of the wounded man known as Charlie for the entire voyage back to the Port of Dover, a voyage that seemed to last an eternity. Each bump against the hull, every creak in the rivets prompted a jolt of fear from all aboard that lingered in the air long afterwards. The sour stench of vomit mixed with the briny wash, causing Camille to retch several times, but she refused to let go of her patient's hand, as if it were her own brother's she was holding.

'Thank you, miss,' came a croaky voice from Charlie, responding to Camille's kindness with a clench of her hand for the first time.

'De rien,' Camille replied softly.

'Sorry...what does that mean?' Charlie tried to sit up, only to be forced down again by his good Samaritan.

'You're welcome,' Camille let out a slight chuckle. 'I did the best I could with the stitches from the first aid kit on this boat, but you'll need proper medical attention once ashore.'

‘Hmmm,’ Charlie slipped in and out of sleep. ‘We’re home,’ he sighed with relief.

‘You are, yes.’ Camille dabbed a tear. ‘Me, I’ve just had mine taken away.’

Charlie forced his eyes open, for the first time getting a clean look at his saviour – her satin complexion, pinched thin rose lips and powder-blue eyes – an expression uniquely balancing both hope and sorrow. ‘I’m sorry.’ were the only words he could offer to comfort her.

‘Je sais. I know.’ Camille forced back more stinging tears, turning her head away as she did so. ‘Tell me about your home here in England,’ she encouraged bravely.

‘Village called Combe Down, not far from the City of Bath,’ Charlie replied with a wince of pain. ‘Pretty place, if you like that sort of thing.’

‘What sort of thing, sorry?’

‘Y’know...quaint, nosy neighbour sort of villages where everyone thinks they know everything there is to know about everyone else but in fact remain clueless,’ Charlie said softly. Camille furrowed her brow, not quite following, but nodded along regardless. ‘You might like it,’ he added.

‘A place where people remain *clueless*? Sounds perfect.’ Camille put on a grin of her own. ‘Not far from Bath, did you say?’

‘That’s right. You’ve heard of Bath?’

‘Everyone’s heard of the City of Bath,’ Camille said as she ran her fingers through Charlie’s matted, strawberry blond hair. ‘Speaking of baths, you could certainly do with one, monsieur,’ she teased.

‘Think we all could.’ Charlie closed his eyes once more and took a few deep breaths as the groan of a mooring line could be heard above. The men aboard began to shuffle their way to the upper decks. ‘Did you find your brother? Your... *frère*?’ he said, unsure of his schoolboy French.

‘Non,’ Camille responded, her head bowed while hooking her arm beneath his, levering Charlie to his feet. ‘Perhaps aboard another boat, I hope.’

‘Sure he made it...if he’s anywhere near as tough as you, Camille...?’ Charlie waited for a surname.

‘Rochelle. Camille Rochelle. My brother, he was called Jacques, and yes, quite the spirited warrior.’ Camille leant against her wooden staff for support while aiding the heavy frame of her patient.

'We'll scout for a Mr Rochelle once dry side. Can't be many by that surname that made it across...' Charlie cut himself short, fearing his sharp tongue might have just caused harm. 'Apologies... I'm sure plenty of French did manage to...'

'Oui, Charlie. Oui. I'm sure they did,' Camille blocked out her own negativity. 'Charlie...?'

'Wood. Mr Charlie Wood – at your service, madam.'



## Chapter 6

### London - England

**1st September 1940 AD**

*Letter from Todd Allen – 1st September 1940*

Dear Otto,

Our correspondence has been fleeting of late, I know. Getting communications out in any form to Germany has been fraught with difficulty, even from within my position in Whitehall. Everything is scrutinised, redacted where necessary, even sent in code at the highest of levels. You'll no doubt be aware of the unique messaging service the Nazis appear to have developed, a complex radio code that links their naval forces and continues to frustrate our own Royal Navy efforts in protecting the vital merchant resources streaming from North America. Many here have been working tirelessly to crack it, aided by the capture of one such Enigma machine by our allies in the Polish Cipher Bureau, but to no avail so far.

It is for this very reason I contact you now, Otto, and pray to Merlin that my words reach you. The British Government fears our island nation now stands on the edge of the precipice of capitulation, as the ruthless

Nazi bombardment of our Atlantic ships has begun to take its stranglehold on my people. Food is short. Other vital resources are running low. Another year and the United Kingdom may have no other option but to agree to peace terms – something the Red Dragon and I trust the Sacred Band can never allow, knowing what we know of our enemy's true nature. While our thoughts turn to the skies and the advance of the Luftwaffe raining hell upon London, conflagrations of fire might bring many a castle down, but the people can rebuild...only if they have the sustenance to do so. Thus, I turn my attention to the seas. Intelligence from Sweden suggests the German Navy has completed its leviathan, a beast of the oceans capable of crushing any single battleship within our own ranks...and she is to be the first of many. Our understanding is this will be Hitler's ultimate weapon in the North Atlantic, its sole purpose to bring merchant shipping to a standstill. His own iron wall of a blockade.

Otto, you have made me and the entire Sacred Band immensely proud with your indefatigable leadership and courage, especially after the loss of your partner Tomaz only last year. I will not dwell on your loss in these lines as I know any such grief will have already served its purpose for you. Your aim now is to honour Tomaz's legacy and do whatever must be done to halt the White Dragon and its ruthless advance. I ask that you use your position, your infiltration into the German Navy, to board this battleship and provide me with whatever

intelligence you can as to its whereabouts and its operations. If, as you shared, the knight of Sir Lamorak has already revealed himself as part of the Polish invasion, you can be assured he will do so again. Lady Morgan might choose to keep others of the White Dragon closer to her chest, but leave that to me and my order of knights here. Focus on this Mr Von Lamorak, track his movements and try and earn his trust – a little more honey than vinegar as we say here in England. I stress caution as always, you'll know the strength of a single knight and their blade, and their fervent loyalty to their cause. Should you engage, I know you will stand valiantly to the end, as all your warriors do, but remember you are the leader of the Sacred Band, and thus have more at stake in the war than mere primal revenge for your partner.

Camille Rochelle made it as part of the final evacuation from Dunkirk, in case such news did not reach you. Her brother Jacques, a Sacred Band member whom you may well know, remains unaccounted for. He had already lost his partner during the earlier periods of French Resistance through the Ardennes, and was determined to honour him and his sister's line of Sir Gawain until the end. We still have hope he may have survived, but know many Sacred Band fighters gave their lives on the borders of France and Belgium, and I trust you can rest easy at night knowing they were integral to the greatest military evacuation known to man. It must appear strange to consider a retreat a victory, especially to

someone of Sacred Band stock, and I too would have shared in such sentiment had it not been for the words uttered by Churchill the day Camille arrived on the shores of Dover – I trust even the mightiest men and women of the Third Reich heard them. Our fight may stretch beyond beaches, landing grounds and streets, but such resolve remains at the core of what the Red Dragon and the Sacred Band have stood for over these centuries. We too, in our own way, await the liberation of the old, the cycle of destruction brought about by the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia in the hands of Morgan le Fay. For it is never truly a new world the White Dragon claim to create, only a reflection of past wrongs.

I shall say no more, my friend. If dare I tempt fate, this is to be our last correspondence, then you take with you my reverence and love. My hope is that when this war is over, we shall meet once more, and share in our hope for the future. I shall forever rest easy in the knowledge that the three hundred Sacred Band fighters, wherever they may find themselves across the globe, will swear upon their duty as their ancestors did in Ancient Thebes, as I will for my own kin of six knights loyal to King Arthur's legacy. Let that be enough for you too, dear Otto.

As I find myself repeating to our most valiant Ben Benson and the line of Sir Bedivere at such dark times – never lose hope.

To the Sacred Band – the Lions of Leuctra and noble  
Sons of Ares.

*Mr Todd Allen,  
Line of Sir Galahad.*

## Chapter 7

### Berlin - Germany

#### 15th September 1940 AD

'Let me tell you, gnädige Frau Barbara, our Führer could not be more proud.' Albert Speer swept around the corners of his impressive assembly, a table several metres long, the foundations for crude, ashen building blocks typical of early architectural design concepts impressively constructed like a toy village. 'The Volkshalle will be the jewel of Berlin, inspired by Hitler's own admiration for classical architecture and his recent overview of the Parisian Pantheon.'

Lady Morgan 'Barbara' Worthington smiled delicately, studying aspects of Speer's design and pointing a finger or two at certain features, exciting its designer. 'Most impressive, Herr Speer,' she found herself repeating several times, to the point of exasperation.

'Your knowledge of the classics is what is proving impressive, Barbara. That and your wealth of historical contexts. How is it you came by such insight? I only know what the Braun sisters have shared about you and your time in both Britain and more recently the Americas. Were you a student of architecture? or Greek and Roman scholars? That statue you presented Eva

with was most unusual and the Führer...' Speer's ramble was deflected.

'Let's just say I know my history, Herr Speer,' Lady Morgan cut in sharply, keeping one eye on the mahogany grandfather clock gracefully ticking its way towards midday. They would be arriving soon here at the Chancellery, and privacy would be paramount. 'Tell me, Albert, I heard rumours of some wondrous treasures secured by Germany from the city of Vienna and their Imperial Treasury. What can you tell me of them?' she asked.

'Ah, yes. Hitler's love of imperial insignia, the relics of our own German people and proof of the glory within the fatherland. They are safe from any western raid, I can assure you, hidden deep within the vaults of Nuremberg Castle.' Speer's chest swelled proudly.

'I would very much like to see them,' Lady Morgan replied.

'Well, I can certainly arrange a visit sometime in the near future I'm sure, Barbara. I have been there only a handful of times myself, and the complex tunnels of the Historischer Kunstbunker require a seasoned tour guide. Not insurmountable of course. Perhaps after our Führer and his High Command have completed their plans on obtaining superiority over the skies of Britain we can revisit this request?' Speer's voice dulled.

‘Of course. I hear of a change in tactic by Herr Göring and the Luftwaffe? No longer concerned with the RAF and its airstrips, more the docks and the capital of London?’ Lady Morgan raised an eyebrow. Speer gave an uneasy look.

‘Strike the British in their hearts, not their stomachs. Let their people suffer the ruins. A solid tactic from our Führer, would you not agree?’ Speer bristled.

Lady Morgan nodded respectfully, making an obvious glance towards the grandfather clock as it chimed the top of the hour. ‘Herr Speer, I have kept you too long. You must be so busy. Please, let me keep you no longer,’ she smiled warmly. Speer gathered his loose papers and sketches, bundling them into his satchel, welcoming his dismissal. ‘May I stay and admire this beautiful design work for a little longer?’ she followed.

‘By all means.’ Albert hurried for the door. ‘Any feedback would be most welcome, Barbara. But please, do keep our meetings to yourself for now if you don’t mind? I do appreciate all your work of course, as does the Third Reich, but you are still...’

‘A foreigner. I know and understand, Herr Speer. Please, do not feel uncomfortable at the thought of claiming credit, you are a remarkable architect and young man,’ Lady Morgan soothed. As Speer reached for the brass



door handle, it moved of its own accord from the other side. Behind it stood the imposing figure of three men, long black trench coats indicative of the Schutzstaffel, only Speer could see no known insignia save the loyalist swastika pins upon the right breast. The trio cast the gravest of expressions upon him, three wooden staves regimentally by their sides like truncheons ready to strike at any moment. Albert was forced to take a few clumsy steps backwards as they stepped forward into the room. 'Ah, Herr Speer, let me introduce you to some of my closest colleagues...' Lady Morgan placed a comforting hand upon Albert's now trembling shoulder. 'I trust you have heard of Mr Alfie Becker here...most incredible mind, let me tell you. An engineer of the highest order, and has made many a modification to the ground vehicles now at the forefront of the German advance.' She prompted an exchange of hands between Albert and the frosty, clean-shaven blond Becker. 'This gentleman here, Mr Walter Dorf, has quite the military record, having served under your celebrated General Wilhelm List in both Poland and France of late,' Lady Morgan continued to the bulking centre frame of Dorf, towering over Albert like a mighty oak, a neatly trimmed moustache just covering his upper lip. 'Finally, this young man here on your right is a true mastermind, destined for greatness upon the seas for the glory of Nazi Germany,' came the introduction to the smaller, wiry built Michael Von Lamorak, barely out of teenage years Albert reckoned, pimply complexion and goofy ears sticking out from ash brown strands of hair like a

harvest mouse. He was the only one of the three to dare crack a smile upon shaking Albert's hand.

'A pleasure. I hope to meet you all again, my apologies this introduction is having to be cut short. I'm sure Barbara here can explain,' Albert stuttered as he wove his way between the three men. 'Heil Hitler!' he concluded with the familiar salute. The three men shot confused glances to one another before being prompted by a forced cough from Lady Morgan to reciprocate. They drew their wooden staves to their chests and repeated the same command. The double doors closed dismissively in Albert's face.

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*'Heil Hitler is it now?'* Walter Dorf scoffed as he took a spare seat by Speer's construction. 'What happened to *Albus Draco*?' he toppled one of the miniature building blocks with a flick of his finger.

*'And Barbara? What's the meaning of that?'* Michael Von Lamorak snipped from Lady Morgan's side. 'We all supposed to have aliases now?'

Lady Morgan positioned herself at the far side of the table, loosened her shoulders and cricked her neck. 'As I have spent most of my prolonged life trying to explain

to your ancestors, you of the White Dragon knights have the privilege of anonymity, by virtue of your generations. Your faces, and with it your lives have the blessing of change...I however have no such luxury. Hence, I choose to take alternative names,' she sighed.

'Hiding,' Dorf scoffed once more.

'No, Walter, son of Sir Gareth, not hiding. For I am changed, and real change must take many forms,' Lady Morgan snapped back.

'Forgive my brothers' impertinence, my lady,' Alfie Becker chirped. 'This has been a long campaign for many of them, and as such, allow them some level of indiscretion,' he followed with a bitter look upon the two. 'Now, please enlighten us as to your next move. Now that the Palladium has successfully worked its magic once again for Adolf Hitler and his desires for an empire, how can we ensure continued momentum?'

Walter let out a heaving sigh of his own, brought his large hands to his face and cursed into them. 'It's the Great War all over again, isn't it? Just as our own parents fought for this wretched Germanic land, so do we all over again. We'll get so far, maybe to the edge of glory, whatever that looks like, only to have the Red Dragon thrust Excalibur into the soil and bring the entire cycle to an end once more.' He clenched a fist and planted it angrily upon the table, crushing the fringes of

Speer's design. 'Empires rising and falling like these very buildings laid out here. Tell me, what's so different this time, Lady Morgan? Why should we continue to support your cause when we cannot appear to defeat our Red Dragon counterparts, especially those of the Sir Bedivere line?'

Lady Morgan straightened, boldly stepping towards Dorf, eyes simmering green in contrast to the vibrant red of the necklace pulsing from below her sleek chin. 'Because, Sir Walter, we have advantages,' she whispered.

'Do enlighten us,' Walter replied, unfazed.

'Ben Benson, knight of Sir Bedivere, has a mind that is broken. The toll of the Great War together with the loss of his son to the Spanish flu has exacerbated the long known curse upon his family. He is old and weak now, a mind poisoned by spirits and opiates in a futile attempt to subdue the pain. He will be no use to the Allen family or the other Red Dragon knights now,' Lady Morgan announced, her hand caressing the red jewel tenderly.

'I heard he had a daughter, out in his homeland of Jamaica?' Alfie interrupted. 'Might she not step up in such times of need?'

'Indeed, I have foreseen that too. A daughter, an estranged daughter that appears as lost as a lamb

without its shepherd. Too much grief with which to contend, not interested in our fights,' Lady Morgan said with raised finger. 'Besides, Mr Becker, son of Sir Tristan, we as stated, have more at play this time.' She aligned her point to the framed picture of the Führer above the marble mantelpiece.

'Hitler?' Michael Von Lamorak smirked. 'That lunatic? You consider him to be an advantage? He's more unstable than the entire lineage of the Sir Bedivere line going back centuries! Just another power-hungry despot looking for his place in the history books surely?'

'Not quite, young Sir Lamorak. I fully appreciate over the years having spoken with your ancestors, your parents, your parents' parents, about those that are *destined to lead*. So many, it's true, end up becoming failures and disappointments, the Palladium often wasted in their hands, empires held together purely at my choosing, save those unfortunate occasions when they are brought to a close by Excalibur. Let me tell you, quite often that comes as a relief to me, given it too provides me with much-needed time to reflect on any mistakes made and choose our next ally more carefully.' Lady Morgan slid a gentle palm across Von Lamorak's pitted face. 'When I first heard of the man they call Adolf Hitler, his ambitions for a new world at all costs, his insatiable appetite to see the German people thrive following decades of oppression, I could see genuine change. A leader that would stop at nothing to achieve

such goals, fuelled by his own admiration for the movements of the past, legends and myths, dare I say it...the ways of our own native culture.'

'You're saying he is some devout follower of paganism?' Alfie pinched his brow incredulously. 'One that might revere you as a deity over new Gods?'

Lady Morgan cast her head down to her necklace, rubbing it tenderly. 'I would not presume as such, no. For that can be a dangerous prediction of hope for our people placed into the hands of a contemporary visionary. As Michael said, Hitler's approach is unsteady, reckless even – however, one can still dare to light the fuse even if they know the damage caused might be irreversible for so many. We can endure, we have done so for centuries...and far easier to rebuild a world of our choosing from ashes rather than stone.' She turned to Speer's design, picking up and moving pieces like pawns on a chessboard.

'You believe this war within Europe will spread?' Walter asked.

'Unquestionably,' Lady Morgan replied without hesitation. 'It will be a war to end all wars. No part of the inhabited world will remain untouched.' Her spark ignited a sly grin from Dorf.

‘Forgive me, my lady, but what of Charles? Mr Worthington? Should he not be here with us at such a seminal time?’ Becker enquired. Lady Morgan fell silent, casting a gaze outside the high windows, entranced by the mechanical goose-stepping of German soldiers beyond the Reich Chancellery gates. She folded her arms in an act of self-comfort.

‘We need not bother my husband just yet. He grows old, Sir Becker, and with the passing of time comes the dulling of a once sharp mind. No. Leave the heritage of Sir Lancelot to me. When our work is done, his descendants shall be welcomed into our halls as they have always been,’ Lady Morgan instructed before turning back to her followers. ‘Our focus, my loyal knights, must be on this war and its advance. With the Palladium in the hands of Hitler, its power has been set ablaze. This continent will be his, as will the east of Asia and Africa through either force or alliance. Only the Americas will then stand in his way.’ She stepped confidently towards the Führer’s picture. ‘The oceans must be our target now, the lifeline of Britain and thus, Todd Allen and the Red Dragon knights that may seek to stop us. Hitler’s highest military command I’m told has quite the arsenal of warships at its disposal, is this not correct, Herr Dorf?’

Walter gave a brief nod. ‘*Bismarck*-class. Two ready for action within months for the Kriegsmarine stationed in the Baltic and set to torment the merchant shipping

lanes of the North Atlantic...so Wilhelm Keitel informs me.'

'Strikes from both sea and air. Most resourceful. Already taking the shape of an affray the likes of which none of your kin have witnessed before,' Lady Morgan mused. 'What of land offensives?'

'Operation Sea Lion is the protocol for any such invasion of Britain, my lady,' Becker intervened. 'Although it will require a form of amphibious craft I have yet to adapt. It is also worth considering the might of the British Royal Navy and...'

'Ha! Might of the British Royal Navy!' Von Lamorak chuckled from his slumped posture in an ornate corner chair. 'We have the Palladium, do we not? Why not take it to the forefront of the battle? Lead the charge across the seas? Nothing will stop us.' He threw his hands in the air triumphantly.

'Out of the question, Michael,' Becker spat back, putting his younger knight in his place. 'Only our lady can command the Palladium, and she must remain here at High Command in Berlin.' He bared the tip of his wooden staff like a cattle prod at Von Lamorak.

'But Adolf Hitler has the Palladium? You've seen it fit to give to him but not one of us? The very Knights of the Round Table? Absurd!' Michael tutted.



'The Palladium is not truly in Hitler's hands, Michael. It remains in this very building for safekeeping. Trust me, I keep a close eye on those objects that are precious to me.' Lady Morgan gestured at the glossy waxed doors leading to the government chamber and touched her necklace once more. 'While this necklace I wear, that of Harmonia, will forever be drawn to the Palladium, it is not a magnet, Sir Lamorak, more a guide. Therefore, Sir Becker is correct, I shall not allow it out of my immediate sight, not when the odds are so favourable to us now.'

'But my lady...think what would be accomplished if it were to sit at the spearhead of the North Atlantic assault. The entire Royal Navy could be extinguished in days, Britain crippled in months. Your campaign accelerated at a rate never seen before. It would put the Red Dragon and the Sacred Band so far on their back feet they'd topple quicker than Poland,' Michael drew close to pleading. Walter Dorf let out a booming laugh.

'Of course, you would say that, Michael! What a fantastic job you did on the Polish border last year. A simple task entrusted by our lady to you, knight of Sir Lamorak, to capture a trifle of a train station and you failed,' he cursed, drops of spit landing indignantly on Michael's ruddy skin.

'I told you. Told you all. The Fall Weiss operation was *sabotaged*. The Sacred Band were there, I saw the blue fire from at least one infiltrator, perhaps two in partnership. If they can interfere once, they can do so again. Their three hundred fighters are scattered across the globe, from eastern Europe to Australia. While they are few in number, a pairing can match a dozen regular men – you know this to be true. Look at what a few did at Dunkirk. Are you honestly telling me they don't pose a threat to any mission Lady Morgan entrusts to us and...?' Michael stubbornly ranted at the group, walking tight circles.

'Enough!' Lady Morgan intervened with a bolt of energy that ignited the charcoal fireplace beneath the mantle place with a brilliant snake-green flame. The three knights bowed submissively. 'Dearest Michael, your passion is respected, indeed, inspiring to us all,' she retreated into composure once more. 'However, your fellow knights are correct, the Palladium shall remain here in Berlin. I foresee a time when it may be needed for another cause, a red veil from the east, a wind that at first appears friendly, only to become the storm of a foe,' she mused with closed eyes, jewel pulsing once more. 'Unclear for now, but to be heeded,' she cautioned. 'I do not wish to quash such passion though, which is why I am commanding you to lead the efforts in the North Atlantic. Ensure the Nazi operation...its name, Herr Dorf, remind me...?' she clicked her fingers at Walter.

‘Operation Rheinübung,’ Walter snorted.

‘For the love of the earth, these German code names will be the death of me long before this necklace gives out.’ Lady Morgan pinched her brow. ‘Operation Rheinübung, make it a success for us. Defend it against any Sacred Band or Red Dragon knight, do you understand?’ she placed both hands on Michael’s shoulders.

‘I understand,’ Michael said grudgingly, still smarting at such denigration from Dorf and Becker. ‘I will do my duty. *Albus Draco.*’

‘Splendid. Meantime, Herr Dorf and Herr Becker, blood of Sir Gareth and Sir Tristan – you shall focus your time on securing the eastern front and the campaigns in North Africa,’ Lady Morgan concluded.

‘North Africa? Can Amin el-Husseini and his followers of Sir Palamedes not pick up such a call to arms?’ Dorf queried.

‘Let Sir Amin el-Husseini run riot in the Middle East as he has always done. He too will come forth when needed, and following the recent issues in the contested region of Palestine, he is no friend of the British,’ Lady Morgan reassured. ‘I do though consider it prudent to contact Christine Hartley in England, have the line of Sir

Geraint monitor our Red Dragon actions in and around their stronghold at Glastonbury.'

'Still has her head stuck in those dusty old books?' Walter sneered once more. 'No doubt claim all the victory after the war is won.'

'Those dusty old books helped me understand the synergy between the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia in a way I alone could not hope to fathom, Walter,' Lady Morgan corrected. 'Christine's study of the occult, the interpretation of my own visions as clairvoyance, has been crucial to the success of this campaign so far. Who else could have recognised the inner workings of the troubled Sir Bedivere mind and how it moves through the generations? Do not be so quick to dismiss her and her students.'

'Hocus pocus nonsense created to help sell books to the dumb and the ignorant,' Walter grumbled. 'Wouldn't do her any harm to wield a sword in battle every once in a while, would it?'

'When your men finally take the shores of Britain, she will be waiting,' Lady Morgan quipped. The clicking of heels upon marble could be heard from outside the main door, the brass handle clunked open, presenting a sharply dressed German general. He flustered for a second, brushing down his powder-grey uniform and

angling his array of medals as if to be inspected for attention.

'Heil Hitler!' the general shot his arm into the air.  
'Forgive me, Herr Dorf, Herr Becker, am I late to the briefing?'

Dorf and Becker looked at one another, then to the clock. The military council was set to convene as it always did within the Chancellery shortly after lunch.  
'No, Herr Keitel, you are on time. The Führer or Göring have yet to arrive,' Alfie soothed, tucking his wooden staff beneath his overcoat.

General Keitel breathed a noticeable sigh of relief. 'I was rushing from the outskirts of the city, and was late to the previous briefing back in July...the Soviet invasion. So much talk, perhaps this time some action, yes?' he flustered with an uncomfortable chuckle. Dorf and Becker again shot glances at each other, then settled on Lady Morgan. 'I'm sorry, who is this fine Dame?' the general moved forward with an eager hand.

'Lady Worthington, but you may call me Barbara,' Lady Morgan cooed.

'Pleasure. I am General Wilhem Keitel. I sit on our Führer's highest military command....and he has mentioned your name a few times. Such an honour it

must be.’ He slithered forward and gave an obsequious bow. ‘Recognition by our father himself.’

‘Oh, quite.’ Lady Morgan hid her amusement, snatching her hand away before the general had a chance to kiss it. Michael Von Lamorak narrowed his eyes in frustration from his side-lined position once more.

‘Well, if I am for once, early, I shall make a good impression and set the seats within the government chamber,’ General Keitel said, almost skipping across to the same waxed doors behind which stood the Palladium itself, pushing a shoulder against one that refused to budge on the first attempt. ‘Will you be joining Walter? Alfie?’

‘Sadly not, for they are needed elsewhere – the Führer’s orders,’ Lady Morgan answered, posing as a secretary. ‘As you note, much discussion about the Soviets,’ she finished with a smile. General Keitel smirked in accord before bidding a farewell. Lady Morgan waited for the door to close fully before making her enquiries about any such eastern invasion.

‘First I’ve heard of it,’ Dorf proclaimed. Alfie agreed.

‘Still think Christine’s time analysing my visions has been a waste of time?’ Lady Morgan teased as she led the two knights from the room. ‘A red veil from the east. Fascinating.’

'Wait!' Michael squealed from behind, nostrils still twitching. 'So I am to spend the rest of this campaign on some battleship out in the Atlantic while you present at the forefront of the action?' he seethed.

'Your role is an important one, Sir Michael Von Lamorak. We've discussed this.' Lady Morgan ushered Dorf and Becker from the room impatiently. 'Out of sight is not out of mind. If events are unfolding as quickly as they appear to be, the Red Dragon will no doubt not be far behind our plans. We all must be ready.'

'It's not just the Red Dragon. I told you before. The Sacred Band has a trace on me, that was clear from Mosty and the Jablunkov Pass. They will continue to track me wherever I go now.' Michael whirled through his words without thought. 'Please, let me redeem myself, my lady.'

'There is nothing to redeem, Sir Michael Von Lamorak. Believe me. Now, go to the Baltic and take your place aboard the *Bismarck*. We will meet again soon, and at such time, this world will be a very different place.' Lady Morgan took his freckled hand, playfully twisting his silver ring around his finger.

'And the Sacred Band?' Michael questioned.

Lady Morgan inhaled deeply. 'You know, it is a true miracle when a man such as Hitler comes into this world. An individual that is such a visionary that he and his followers are prepared to make an entire race of people extinct. Now, his focus has been those of the Jewish faith, but it hasn't stopped there – Romanies, Gypsies, the handicapped. Even those of a certain *sexual* persuasion. All hunted down, rounded up and destroyed,' she exhaled. 'Let me build upon this epic momentum. Leave those of homosexual intent within Europe to the Nazi regime. See how long their people last. The Sacred Band will be exterminated, just as Alexander the Great intended.'

Michael just had time to let out a slight croak of disbelief as Lady Morgan turned on her heel and glided from the room. Could it really be that simple? A mass execution of homosexual men? This really was an era of warfare like no other.

'Oh, apologies,' came the high-pitched voice of General Keitel from behind. 'I was going to ask Herr Dorf about his recent meeting with Field Marshall List, I assumed he would be attending the briefing too but if Herr Dorf and Herr Becker are not set to attend then chances are List might not either and I...' Keitel's words trailed off into background noise for Michael as he looked through the man into the government chamber. Upon a small plinth stood the carving of Pallas Athena, the Palladium itself. His eyes grew wide, first with wonder, then temptation.



'Forgive me, General Keitel. What has Field Marshall List told you of the Führer's desires for his flagship *Bismarck*?' Michael interrupted Keitel mid-ramble.

'Oh, only that it is the grandest ship to ever sail within the Kriegsmarine. A marvel of modern naval engineering, armour several feet thick and...'

'Yes, yes indeed. But I mean the absolute desire of the Führer. The operation known as Rheinübung,' Michael butted in once more.

General Keitel scratched his pencil moustache. 'Well, that is the command of the North Atlantic sortie, to disrupt merchant shipping to Britain from its allies in America. Speaks for itself, does it not?'

'It does. General, it does,' Michael toyed. 'I am to travel aboard the *Bismarck* upon the orders of the Führer himself. His direct words.'

'What an honour. Your family must be so proud,' General Keitel beamed.

'You'd think so, wouldn't you?' Michael rolled his eyes. 'I believe it to be so, and so does the Führer, which is why he asked if that statue over there could accompany me on its maiden voyage. A good luck charm if you will.'

The general cast a perplexed look upon Michael, then looked back at the small carving upon the plinth in the corner of the briefing room. 'Really? The Führer himself requested that?'

'He did, General.' Michael stood firm, leaned in closer to his ear. 'That lady you just met, Barbara, the statue belonged to her family you see. She gave it to Hitler as a gift, and it would mean so much to her to have it accompany me on such a privileged mission,' he whispered softly. 'Surely you understand?'

General Keitel gave an abrupt cough, cocked his head to one side. 'Well, if the Führer and Lady Barbara demand it, then who am I to challenge.' He moved aside, allowing Michael to step forth. Von Lamorak seized the foot-high statue eagerly, letting out a mellow chuckle.

'The Führer will thank you most graciously for this, General Keitel. Just wait for news of victories upon the high seas.' Michael bowed, with a raising of his wooden staff. 'I leave you to your briefing.'

'Heil Hitler!' General Keitel saluted.

'Albus Draco!' Von Lamorak saluted back, leaving bemusement etched upon his host's face as he departed.

## Chapter 8

### Sachsenhausen concentration camp - Germany

20th September 1940 AD

Adam Drobinski pulled on a dangling thread of cotton, plucking free the stitches one by one and twirling the strand around his index finger. The skin on his hands had been worked red, blisters bubbling on the knuckles and sores weeping upon both palms.

‘Keep digging, will you,’ came Janick’s gravelly voice from his side. ‘Ten more minutes and we’ll get a break. We always do.’ He heaved a shovel load of topsoil over his shoulder, then arched his brittle back, waiting for the click of his lumbar before digging down once more. ‘Don’t keep pulling at that patch either. The guards won’t thank you for it,’ he huffed.

‘Why do you think they made it a pink triangle?’ Adam resumed his task, thrusting the rusty shovel head deep into the earth and drilling down at twice the rate of his partner. Over the year the pair had spent incarcerated, it had not gone unnoticed by Adam that Janick had been suffering the effects of the poor diet, rat-infested sleeping quarters and general squalor all had been subjected to. Whereas Drobinski was squarely built, muscular and used to the rough streets of Warsaw,

having been nomadic and self-reliant since the age of fifteen, his lover was accustomed to the finer aspects of life – a socialite, a frequenter of the loftiest bars and clubs within the city, thanks largely to his family connections and brilliance at the piano. Adam often thought it dumb luck the two met outside a hotel one night, Janick nonchalantly asking for a cigarette while Adam dug his way through the garbage, desperate for food. It was this extraordinary measure of equals that kept the bond between them so strong, Adam not once made to feel out of place anywhere Janick introduced him. In return, whenever Janick felt threatened by those that did not consider him an equal – and Poland sadly had plenty – the brute force of his partner played its part well. When rumours of war spread, the Polish Airforce immediately geared up with an active recruitment drive. Had it not been for Janick's parents and their connections within government, Adam's gift as a pilot would have gone undetected. Within months Drobinski was top of his class, thanks to his remarkable reflexes and, as one co-pilot commented, 'super-human' endurance, whether in the skies or on the ground. Janick was proud, his parents were proud – Adam now only wanted his home country to be proud. When the boots of the Soviets and the Nazis came to pinch Poland and forced an almost immediate submission, there was very little left of which to be proud. Now the pair found themselves shackled together, links in a long chain of men rounded up seemingly overnight by their

oppressors, forced into servitude and cruel labour alongside others deemed inferior, or simply different.

'I heard it was originally shaped the other way, like a pyramid,' Janick wheezed an answer, breath becoming shallow. 'Either symbolic of the Jews in Egypt or...'

'Or what?' Adam pushed. Janick cracked a smile and pointed to his bony rear end. 'Oh, A is for...I get it.'

'Arschficker!' growled the cold voice of the German soldier from behind the chain, night-black rifle clamped against his dull grey uniform, hand sliding upwards to the trigger. 'I said faster! This fence has to be complete by the end of the week, you understand?' Droplets of warm spit landed on the back of Adam's neck. He allowed himself to pause momentarily, channelled whatever rage was welling deep within him, exhaled and increased his rate of turf tossing. 'Good. Now you, music-boy, match this animal's rate of work.' The soldier turned his full attention to Janick.

All could see Janick quiver, beads of sweat forming across his brow, skin drained of colour. He was already weak, everyone knew it, the soldier most of all. In an all too familiar sadistic presence, the soldier prodded the butt of his rifle into Janick's ribs. 'Too slow. Move faster,' he sneered. Janick's pace increased, as did the rate of his tears. 'No crying, arschficker! Faster!' the jolt into the rib cage was firmer the second time, causing

Janick to buckle. 'Stand up! When I ask an animal to stand, it shall stand!' the soldier bellowed, grasping a handful of Janick's matted brown hair, hauling him to his feet. Janick was spent, but Adam dared not look him in the eye – that was until the soldier slammed his rifle butt hard into the back of Janick's skull, dropping him face down into the mud. A weak groan escaped from Janick's smothered face, the soldier's boot crushing down between his shoulder blades, almost to the point of splitting his frail body in two.

'Stop! Please!' Adam brazenly interjected, dropping his shovel and raising both his hands innocently. 'Sir, my friend here is sick. Has been for days. He's starving, like so many of us, and...'

'So what?' the soldier twisted the barrel of his rifle towards Adam. 'We feed you animals the amount you deserve. Far more than the pigs. You should be grateful.'

'But sir, he cannot work any faster.' Adam began to shake, whether through anger or fear he was not sure. 'Please let him rest, I will work at twice his rate for the remainder of the week, you have my word.'

'The word of a monster? An inhuman? Ha! What good is that to me?' the soldier mocked, temporarily releasing Janick from the pressure. 'A sick man you say? Well, then we must attend to him urgently, must we not,

Arschficker?’ a sinister grin broke across the fresh-faced youth as he clicked his fingers for the attention of two more soldiers. ‘A night or two in the infirmary should sort this creature out.’ Janick was again hauled to his feet by the shaded grey uniforms on either side, dragged from the link with feet trailing. A chilling pause came from across the labour line, looks of horror exchanged upon hearing the word infirmary. A condemning word for a condemned man – they all knew it. They buried their emotions beneath the same sods of earth they relentlessly ploughed. Adam, however, was now certain as to the source of his trembling, and acted as only he knew how.

With a cry of fury, the cuffs of his shackles were severed. He lunged at the abusive soldier, a fist made of blue fire hurled its way through the air into his abdomen, catapulting the youth a good three metres back before he had a hope of readying his gun. Drobinski turned his attention to the two soldiers carrying Janick, charging one down in a tackle and sliding across the muddy puddles, punch after punch raining down on the soldier’s chest. Support for the young pinned German came from the second soldier, rifle locked and loaded. ‘Stop! Stop now!’ the fierce ultimatum came. Adam could not hear, he did not wish to hear. The lust of revenge had swollen beyond control, the more of the soldier’s blood poured into the murky waters around him, the better. His rough hands gripped his prey’s throat, the soldier’s every gasp was like sweet

music, charging the blue flame growing stronger in his eyes, interrupted only by the snap of a gun barrel ready to fire. The periphery of Adam's vision saw the puff of smoke from the second soldier's rifle, the acrid smell of gun powder reached his nostrils. The limp body of Janick fell upon his lap – bullet wound precise, just below his striped collar.

For the first time since arriving at Sachsenhausen, Adam could hear the song of a bird. A blissful and treasured second of peace swiftly suffocated by the roar of militant Germanic barks and the clicking of more rifles. Adam guessed six or seven were pointing at him now, he cared not. He could only look down upon the crimson blood oozing from Janick's corpse, his haunting cry of anguish let out for all to hear.

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The infirmary was cold and sterile. A tease of daylight entered from a high corner window, breaking the bleak and oppressive shadows. The steel bed slate stuck to Adam's back, causing numbness. He tried to move, wiggle himself free of his restraints, if only for a more comfortable position, but was unable to. His eyelids grew heavy from the dark, he forced them to stay open – a sedative had no doubt been administered, but not to spare him pain, of that he was sure. It made him



submissive, easier to control, like the animal he was considered to be.

The electric neon tubes pulsed into life above him, their radiance prompting him to squint and adjust. To his left, he could now see a circular lamp, a heater of some sorts, about the size of his torso. To his right was a basic metal door and a clinical workbench, instruments of all shapes and sizes laid out neatly as if in preparation for an operation. Adam tried to work his way through each tool, the nature of their blades becoming more malicious the further he went. The creak of the door broke his focus.

‘Blau? Blaue Flamme?’ came the chilling voice of a surgeon, muffled behind a mask. Bold rimmed glasses were repositioned to the edge of his nose as he thumbed through a clipboard of papers. ‘Adam Drobinski. Born in Warsaw, 1920. Good health and bone structure, strong muscle tone.’ The surgeon scanned Adam’s stripped body.

‘Correct, sir. *Blaue Flamme*,’ came the response from the same repugnant young soldier stood by his side, nursing his midriff with an ice pack. ‘Very...powerful. We should exterminate him.’

‘Nonsense!’ the surgeon dismissed, with a wave of a rubber-gloved hand. ‘This is precisely what the Führer’s High Command has asked us to look for. Our troops

have spoken about such skills within the ranks of our enemies, and thus we must learn more. What drives it, how strong it is, how we can harness it,' he instructed while manoeuvring the circular lamp and leaving it hovering just inches from Adam's chest. 'Perhaps extreme heat upon the skin will trigger it again? Let us find out.' The surgeon tripped a switch and the lamp hummed into life. The heat flowed mildly at first, but quickly intensified to a fierce burn. Adam's skin glowed pink, the nauseating smell of roasting flesh filled the room, he gritted his teeth to tolerate the surging pain. 'More, more maybe?' the surgeon cranked a dial and the lamp hummed louder, heat scorching like the sun upon asphalt.

Adam did not summon the blue fire by choice, only desperation. He screamed defiantly as he wrenched his wrist free of its restraint and smashed a shield of brilliant blue into the torturing lamp, unhinging it from its hoist and sending the head into the far wall. The relief was instant, and Adam lowered his guard, granting the young soldier time to throw a vengeful punch to his jaw and refashion the restraint. 'Filthy Arschficker!' he spat. 'Sedate him again. We cannot run this risk.' He turned to the surgeon, leaning with all his weight on both Adam's arms.

'Just hold him there, soldier. Sedation weakens the response and thus leaves my work incomplete.' The surgeon carefully chose a medical utensil from his

workbench, lifting it into the light for inspection. The silver curve sparkled to a sharp point, not dissimilar to a fisherman's hook. Adam shuddered. 'Having dealt with several of these Homosexuellen for some time now, I have come to learn there is no quicker way to garner the right response than to remove what they have come to abuse so abhorrently in the eyes of God.' The surgeon stepped closer, meeting Adam at the hip.

'Do it quickly then!' The soldier strained to contain the reviving strength of Adam.

The prick of the hook stung the loose skin of Adam's scrotum, the muscles in his neck bulged as the sharp pain spread into agony across his waist. He squirmed violently, blue fire surging once more down his arms. The soldier wrestled with him. 'Faster, faster! I can't hold him down,' he pleaded with the surgeon, who appeared to be savouring each prolonged second of pain extracted from Adam. The circle of blue flame singed the soldier's hand, forcing him to release. A swing from the free arm knocked the youth to the floor, motionless. The surgeon retracted the hook, dropping it to the ground in shock as Adam jolted upright on the table, pupils flaring blue. A vibrant blue spear struck the surgeon in the stomach, Drobinski propping him up like a stuck pig.

'Should have worked faster,' Adam growled, his top lip curled baring his teeth. The surgeon let out a final

pathetic squeak, then collapsed to the floor by the soldier.

Without hesitation, Adam unfastened the restraints on his ankles and leapt from the table. Furiously he darted around the room for some clothes before measuring up the size of the soldier out cold before him. The uniform was stripped from the German's body, Adam squeezing his hulking frame into the coat as best he could, a seam or two splitting as he did up the buttons. The flat, ash-coloured cap he balanced upon his head while forcing his stubbornly larger feet into the black knee-high boots. The silhouettes of other soldiers could be seen behind the frosted glass of the corridor, Adam holding his breath as he reached for the chrome handle of the metal door.

He kept his head low, dipping the rim of his cap each time another soldier passed by. He walked awkwardly in the snug-fitting costume, wincing slightly with each step as his toes curled painfully inside the boots. The main entrance to the camp was to the far left of the enclosure, he remembered upon his and Janick's arrival. Two turns down this meandering corridor and it would be within sight.

But what then? A rescue? He would find himself in the heart of Brandenburg, miles from the Polish border, which was occupied. He could try the northern ports to the Baltic perhaps? Still heavily fortified with Nazis and a

near-impossible task of crossing the border into Denmark and across to the neutrality of Sweden without being spotted. His mind raced as he took the final turn that presented the door to freedom, arrested by a command echoing from behind.

‘Halt!’ shouted a superior officer. ‘Your name, soldier,’ the clean-shaven general insisted, squaring up to Adam to the height of his shoulder. Adam fumbled for a brief moment.

‘Erik.’ Adam desperately tried to hide his fear beneath slow inhales of breath.

‘Erik...?’ the general pressed.

‘Erik *Schneider*,’ Adam flustered again, this time with a dry forced cough. He covered his charade with a smart standing to attention.

The general narrowed his eyes, turning his head to one side with a sense of incredulity. ‘Where are you heading, Erik Schneider?’

‘For...for a cigarette, sir.’ Adam avoided eye contact, instead, staring across the cap of the general directly at the stark stone wall behind. ‘I am scheduled for a break, sir,’ he embellished, trying to sound natural. The seconds of silence that followed stretched for what felt

like an eternity. 'I...I was relieved by another soldier, sir, and told I could...'

'Yes, yes. Fine.' The general relaxed suddenly, growing tired of the delay. He presented a small cardboard box to Adam, sealed tight with scotch tape. 'Here, take these badges to Sonderlager block A, will you? I have a call to make to Berlin.' The box was thrown into Adam's unsuspecting arms. 'I tell you, Albert Speer's plans for our capital will be the end of me. Always more bricks! We're burning through these creatures like parched paper on an open fire. Barely keep them fed, and yet expect them to quarry twice as much. Madness.' He mopped his brow with a handkerchief. 'And in this heat! Thank the Führer!' he added, sarcastically.

Adam remained silent, opting for a subtle nod in agreement. He turned slowly with the box, breath still tight in his lungs.

'Remember, the pink triangles are for the Homosexuellen. The yellow stars for the Juden. Ask me, both should be slaughtered on the spot right here and now,' the general quipped casually. Adam paused in his tracks, considered turning once more, instead continued his stride forward towards the main exit. 'Oh, Erik...' The general stopped him once again, just as Adam's hand leant against the glass frame of the door.

'Yes, general?' Adam gulped hard.

'Your uniform. It is split down the right side. Be sure to have it repaired please. Shouldn't be difficult for someone by the name of *Schneider*,' the general ordered firmly.

'Yes...my sincerest apologies, sir,' Adam settled his trembling with a few more deep breaths before stepping outside into glorious sunlight.

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There were two vehicles stationed outside, accompanied by two German soldiers both enjoying every puff of their cigarettes and idly chatting about the women they'd left behind in Berlin to be stationed in this shit hole. One boasted about the size of his girlfriend's breasts, cupping his own pectorals while dancing around effeminately. The other cackled, sweeping his gelled blond fringe back in a manner best suited to represent his own blonde beauty awaiting him back home.

Adam approached the duo calmly, box tucked under one arm. 'Heil Hitler!' he yelled gauchely, complete with a hand salute.

'If you say so,' One of the soldiers grunted, stamping out the stub of his cigarette. 'Where you off to?'

'I have an order – deliver these badges to Sonderlager block A,' Adam replied coldly.

'Ah, running short again, are they? I hear they are rounding up more Jewish heathens and Arschfickers to aid our Führer's cause by the hour. We'll be needing far more badges over the coming months,' the same soldier joked.

'And your needlework, Hans, is second to none. All of Germany knows that.' His compatriot gave him a playful jostle, earning one back in return. 'No, leave it to the ladyboys here to knit their own labels I say, spare the vital hands of the Third Reich.' He pulled a second cigarette free before offering one to Adam.

'The truck, may I take it?' Adam hurried while already moving towards the driver's door.

'Why? Sonderlager block A is only a few minutes' walk away,' one soldier queried.

Adam thought quickly, reaching for the driver's door handle. 'Might want to run down a few Arschfickers on my way over?' He forced out a smile. Both soldiers appreciated the slur.

'Go ahead.'



'Danke.' Adam slid into the driver seat, sparking the ignition. He managed to slam the door shut just as the sirens shook from the gun towers on either side of the entrance gate. He knew what it meant.

The two soldiers looked at one another, puzzled, switching between readying their rifles then lowering them, unsure as to where to fire and for what purpose. The wheels of the truck spun furiously upon loose scree as Adam threw the truck into reverse, skidding one hundred and eighty degrees, then steaming full ahead for the gates in a cloud of dust. He kept his foot fully down on the accelerator pedal, waiting for the sound of the sirens to die out behind him. Sure enough, they faded with every passing second, only to be replaced with the final cries of Janick resonating in his head.

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Adam's head grew as heavy as the night. Pitch black skies illuminated with autumn stars hung above as the main road rolled in the headlights. He had been driving for three hours straight towards the Polish border, careful not to draw too much attention when passing the rural villages nestled within Oberhavel. A few German guards marched past at a crossroads, followed by large transports filled with troops heading east. Adam stretched his thoughts in an attempt to figure out

the logic behind such a mass movement of soldiers away from the western front and the shores of Britain. Perhaps Hitler had hit a much-feared wall beyond France and decided to retreat. It was a flash of a thought that comforted him, until he realised he too was swept in this Nazi tide flushing through his home country. His chances of reaching the border unnoticed were thinning rapidly, but Krakow and possible contact with the Polish Resistance stationed there was still his best and only hope. He pressed on, rubbing the encroaching desire for sleep from his eyes.

The German-Polish border approached, heavily guarded as expected. Adam searched through the glove box for any approved documentation that might permit safe passage. Nothing but mints and a revolver, which he buried in his pocket. Headlights dimmed behind a cove of trees, he waited, drifting in and out of dream-laced sleep – each time it veiled him he saw only Janick's crumpled body, sparking him awake in terror. A call was heard from one of the border towers indicating a switch of personnel. This was a chance – catch the new midnight watch with a fabricated tale on how he had driven all night on the command of Berlin to join his men in action? No. He could do better...driving all night with urgent commands from Berlin and Hitler himself to present to the most senior officers on the Soviet front? Would that wash? What if the new watch asked for said commands? Phoned through to Berlin for confirmation? His mind ached with the buzz of possible outcomes, as

shouts were heard from one of the towers, followed by a rattle of gunfire. Adam ducked down behind the dashboard, sneaking up ever so slightly to peek at the ensuing assault.

There were Polish voices, high-pitched, almost juvenile. The gunfire continued, German soldiers bolting from their posts and hurrying into the woods behind the border, flurries of bullets pluming smoke. Adam took his chance – revving the engine of the truck into life and speeding forward to the barrier. A lone German soldier, no older than Adam himself, tried to remain on sentry duty, desperate to follow his troop into the forests in hunt of whatever triggered the alert. ‘I must pass, sir. Orders from Berlin,’ Adam ordered with as much authority as he could muster. ‘Now, if you please.’

‘What...what orders, soldier?’ the German soldier queried half-heartedly, eyes still tracking the movements of his men up ahead.

‘The usual. What’s going on here?’ Adam gestured informally.

‘Damn Polish Resistance! They’ve been attacking our stations up and down the border for weeks now,’ the soldier grunted with a slight lift of his rifle.

‘Don’t know when they’re beaten, these Poles, do they?’ Adam feigned humour. ‘Now, if you please, sir.’

‘Very well. Heil Hitler.’ The soldier remained twitchy as he beckoned Adam through the barrier. ‘Try and pick a few off on your way,’ he shouted.

‘Of course.’ Adam drove gently until out of sight, then increased his speed the instant the road widened. He pulled into a layby and stepped out, bent over and vomited twice. Falling to his knees he sobbed, uncontrollably. A lungful of the freshest air he had tasted in over a year soothed him momentarily, the gentle trickle of a nearby stream like an ointment on a wound. A sense of freedom enveloped him like a warm blanket. The cold tip of a gun barrel touched his right temple.

‘Wrong place to break down, *Nazista!*’ a grizzly tone spoke up. A gaunt gentleman, faced obscured with camouflage paint, dressed in pastel brown adorned with a red and white armband, stood rooted to Adam’s side. ‘Get up,’ he barked.

Adam rose gingerly, hands on his head. ‘Comrade, this is not what you think.’

‘Cisza!’ the gentleman shot back. ‘You think I don’t know a Nazi brute when I see one?’

‘Then I’ve done my job too well, comrade,’ Adam stuttered while unbuttoning the tight uniform that had

imprisoned his bulky frame, displaying his bare torso, much to the surprise of the gentleman. 'Tell me comrade, how many Nazis would dare wear their uniform without a crisp clean shirt beneath?' he sighed.

The gentleman refused to lower his rifle, but took notice of the small tattoo upon Adam's upper arm. 'Orzet?' he enquired.

'Indeed. From when I was twelve, sir. Again now, how many Nazis do you know that would not wear a shirt and dare sport the Polish Eagle on their skin?' Adam shivered in the cold. The rifle aimed at him was slowly lowered. 'Dziekuje Cu – thank you.'

'I am Aleksander of the Wawer.' The gentleman introduced himself, no hand offered. 'You are?'

'Adam. Adam Drobinski.'

'Well, Adam Drobinski. Welcome to the Polish Resistance,' Aleksander replied comfortingly. 'Tell me, are you any good with a gun?'

'I am good in a plane,' Adam replied resolutely.

Aleksander chuckled. 'A plane you say? Pity, we Polish have only a few of those remaining here. Still, if you are a skilled pilot as you claim to be, perhaps you can prove it?'

Adam raised a cautious eyebrow. 'How? A little late for the Polish Airforce to stage a counter attack on Germany now, isn't it?'

A chuckle came from Aleksander once more. 'True, it is true. Too late for Mother Poland, but not for the British,' he smirked. 'Many of our pilots have travelled to their shores to assist in defending their skies...and we, Mr Drobinski, might just be able to get you there.'

## Chapter 9

### Glastonbury - England

1st October 1940 AD

‘Wood? That was his surname?’ Todd Allen placed a comforting arm around the petite frame of Camille Rochelle as the two walked carefully up the cobbled flagstones towards the Chalice Well Gardens, wooden staves interrupting the occasional slip on the early morning frost. ‘You realise you might well be related,’ he mocked.

‘Stop it!’ Camille jostled back. ‘Go back enough centuries and we’re all likely descendants of Emperor Charlemagne. No need for a lecture.’

‘Not sure that logic applies to the Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain lines, Camille, but I take your point,’ Todd admitted. ‘So, you’ve spent most of the summer with this Charlie Wood?’

Camille gave a quick nod, describing the quaintness of his home village of Castle Coombe and how his family could trace their lineage back to the days of John Wood the Elder, principal architect behind many a splendid Georgian construction across the City of Bath and the

wider Cotswolds. Her face grew solemn as she spotted a local newspaper splashing the latest headlines from London and the month-long bombing by the German Luftwaffe – carcasses of buildings scorched black from fire, still burning days after the raids. The thought of the thousands left homeless and destitute drew her close to the chest of Todd, burying her head deep into the warmth of his wool sweater. ‘Has this part of Britain seen any raids yet?’ she asked sheepishly. ‘I’ve heard the sirens go and we ran for the cover of the Anderson shelter outside, but no actual reports of damage?’

‘A little in Bristol, that’s all. London is bearing the brunt so far, but the government is preparing for more. Docks and major industrial cities will be targets, that much is certain.’ Todd squeezed Camille tenderly. ‘Will Charlie be reassigned?’

‘Not yet. Still recovering. Maybe in a few more months,’ Camille replied despondently.

‘Might need a few more architects when all this is over. Could put his ancestry to good use,’ Todd said, trying to lighten the mood. ‘Recall the Wood family was close to my own – Mr Ralph Allen of Bath. Both he and John Wood had a love for Palladian-style architecture...having our families united in such a way once more would certainly have made them and the bloodlines of Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain most proud.’ He smiled while giving a wave of acknowledgement to Ben Benson,



sitting patiently at the steps of the Garden entrance. It went ignored by the grey-haired Jamaican, who chose instead to promptly hide his silver flask beneath his tatty brown overcoat.

'If you're trying to pair me up with Mr Charlie Wood after a mere few months of intimacy, my dearest friend, then think again. No *cloches de mariage* just yet I'm afraid,' Camille managed a chuckle through her thick French accent.

'Ahh, give it time and a few more years of war with our foes on the side of the White Dragon. Might be grateful for the commitment and loyalty,' Todd exclaimed with a prod to Ben Benson's upper arm from the tip of his staff. 'Not often we see you arrive early for council, Mr Benson. Knight of Sir Bedivere finally gotten around to purchasing a watch?'

Ben was not in the mood for such informality, that much was clear. He tucked his arthritic fingers beneath his arms and muttered critically about the cold and damp of England, aware of what awaited him inside the chamber beneath the spring well itself. The impressive Rolls Royce insignia pulled up alongside, alloys buffed to a mirror shine and not a speck or blemish upon its crystal blue paintwork. A sharply dressed chauffeur uncoiled his beanstalk legs from the driving seat, gave the most formal of nods towards Todd, Camille and Ben, then opened the rear passenger door.

'Are you certain this is the correct place, Mrs Uppingham?' the chauffer maintained his snobbery while casting a dismissive glance towards the three knights. The welcoming hiking boots of Gloria Uppingham swung out together with her own wooden staff, forest green wax jacket and red scarf clumsily tied at the back of her head with a packer's knot. She stretched out the cramp in her thighs, gesturing to the chauffeur to open the opposite passenger door for her travel companions.

'Yes, yes. Thank you Mr Grimsbey. This is the place. Shouldn't be more than an hour or so...feel free to drive around this charming town that is Glastonbury. Pick us up from this exact spot.' Gloria waved him clear from her path as she embraced Todd and Ben. Turning to Camille Rochelle, the embrace became more heartfelt. 'My dear Camille. So, so sorry to hear about your brother, Jacques. How are you faring?' she kissed Camille on both cheeks.

'As well as I can, Mrs Uppingham. It is, as you say, the nature of war.' Camille lowered her head slowly.

'Indeed it is, child. So many of our own schoolboys now being considered for enlistment once more. Makes you wonder if this lost generation is ever going to know peace.' Gloria's wrinkled eyes dimmed. 'I take it Jacques was of the Sacred Band?' she enquired boldly. Camille's shot an off-guard glance to Todd.

'Yes, yes he was. Partner killed in Ardennes during the Nazi advance just months before the Dunkirk evacuation,' Todd explained, triggering another motherly look from Gloria upon Camille.

'If it's any comfort, my dear Mademoiselle Rochelle, my close friend Baron Wolfenden is in full support of the same-sex cause in this country, and once all this goose-stepping is over, expect wonderful things for those that swear allegiance to your brother's cause. Change is coming,' she soothed.

'Once this is over?' Ben Benson grunted as he turned his back to swig another sip of liquor from his flask. 'Keep telling yourselves these antics of Lady Morgan and the White Dragon will be one-offs. That this will be the last time that bloody Palladium rears its ugly head and spills the blood of many an innocent again and again...' he stumbled in his rant.

'Ben, let's save it for the council, shall we?' Todd pardoned his friend. The chauffeur stood rigidly by Gloria's side and made unnecessary introductions for her two travelling companions, John Butcher and Tim Patch. Gloria shooed Mr Grimbsey away once more, repeating her instructions of pick up within the hour.

'First-class travel for us this time. Could get used to it,' John Butcher's portly frame jiggled with his laugh, beard

coarse and straggly, ginger hair thinning slightly on top. 'Never thought I'd see a Rolls Royce outside my pub in a million years, I can tell you.'

'You can thank Baron Wolfenden for that,' Gloria reminded. 'And please wipe your boots clean before stepping inside once more, Mr Butcher, I really don't want to add to Mr Grimsbey's workload – you can see how stressed the man is. Same goes for you, Mr Patch.' Tim fuffed with a tartan handkerchief around his chin and forehead, smearing soot and ash in streaks, spitting crassly into his hands before rubbing them dry on his usually neat fireman's blazer, grubby and damp from a long night of action. His stern expression was dampened - 'As I said, same goes for you, Tim. No excuses.'

Tim Patch, his weathered features and worn brow partially obscured by the bowl-shaped tin fireman's hat, gruffed an apology before politely reminding Gloria that the Germans were not entirely in keeping with the Red Dragon Council meetings and their bombing raids. He leaned on his staff, sharing a grimace with the group and pointing to his dodgy hip that had been playing up for weeks ever since he braved the fireman's ladder's once more in service. A Great War veteran such as himself had been urged by his family to rest, to sit this one out – such service was not in the nature of the knights of Sir Kay.

‘Shall we? Before that stiff in a suit comes back with a gas mask on or something?’ John Butcher led the way through the Garden gate. ‘Not much to entertain him here in Glastonbury for an hour, is there...not a Fortnum and Masons in sight.’

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Ben Benson always thought he was prepared for the dank air that surrounded the cavernous underground tunnels of the Chalice Well, but each time he set foot inside, the chill was sharper than he remembered. His breath seemingly froze in the air the moment it left his chapped lips, each stone stair he descended adding to the strain upon his lungs, like a corset slowly being tightened. At the forefront of his mind were the warm sands of Jamaica, a Caribbean breeze through the palms, laced with the tantalising smell of jerk chicken. It had been over twenty-five years since he had swapped one island nation for another in the name of duty – a duty that went far beyond what many recognised as the common cause of the Great War. His fellow Knights of the Red Dragon were once again desperate for the King’s Blade to bring down the latest cycle of destruction at the hands of their White counterparts. A young West Indian man, both blessed and cursed with the blood of Sir Bedivere, once had the fervour for such adventure, despite the toll it would ultimately take upon his own family. Ben squeezed the small doll in his left

hand – the one he had made from the same Glastonbury thorn drilled deep into Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh back in 1918. A rite of passage for his kin, to be passed to the next wielder of both the Sword of Sir Bedivere and Excalibur itself – but so rarely needed in such quick succession. The very roots of the same Glastonbury thorn now teased him from behind the red-soiled walls of the Well, whispering in a language Ben knew only his kind could interpret. Always in the guise of a sage female, a siren of hope, even when he could find none. For the second time in his life, these whispers called to him, falling upon the ears of a tired old fool, he thought, drained of fortitude, rather than the hero they desperately craved. He took his position to the right of Todd Allen, knight of Sir Galahad, head hung low and remorseful.

‘Friends, I thank you for your presence here today,’ Todd announced, staff held upon his right shoulder in tribute and respect. ‘These are unforgiving times as we all know, and while I can share with you what news I have from my time behind the clandestine walls of the British government and Whitehall, I doubt there’s much you all haven’t already heard or at very least, worked out.’ His voice remained resolute.

‘That we’re losing!’ John Butcher spat bluntly from his position directly opposite, tapping his wooden staff with aggravation against an exposed root of the thorn. ‘Quite

the showstopper this time from Morgan the Witch and her dogs on a leash, eh?’

‘Certainly operating at full force, Mr Butcher, son of Sir Bors, that much is true,’ Todd replied. ‘From the report given by Camille, daughter of Sir Gawain, and the speed at which France and the Lowland countries fell to the Germans, this has to be the result of the Palladium. Lady Morgan and the White Dragon have been drawn to the same country once more...the question is why,’ he concluded with a sigh.

‘Hitler,’ Gloria spoke up. ‘I doubt anyone throughout history could recall a man with quite such a malicious soul as that podgy little Austrian,’ she cursed. ‘I’ve heard rumours of the extraordinary lengths he and his Nazi followers have gone to purge their lands of all but the Aryan race – the people they consider the purest. Please don’t underestimate my words here, Todd, for I am not speaking of refugees or the displacement of people – I am speaking of genocide. Murder on a scale unseen. What better puppet for Lady Morgan and Charles Worthington to pull the strings of?’

‘More than just the Jews?’ Tim Patch enquired.

‘Oh yes – tip of the iceberg my friend. Travellers, homosexuals, those born disabled or handicapped. No one of difference will stand in the way of Nazi ideology.’

Gloria shook her staff in rage. Tim twisted his head back to Todd, face a flood with shock.

'The Sacred Band? They will be targeted...' Tim began before Todd cut in.

'Otto Hertz, leader of the Sacred Band, has been in regular contact with me, Tim son of Sir Kay. Yes, homosexual men are being hunted by the Nazi Secret Service, that's true, but so far, they have held their ground well.' He tried to reassure, only to be met with the bruising gaze of Camille to his left. 'Some, of course, have given their lives to our cause,' he amended.

'And how many are left, Todd?' John snapped once more. 'Three hundred men across the entire world against armies of millions...and not just here in Europe. What about the Far East and Japan? British colonies are reporting attacks there too, Sacred Band battalions have already been overwhelmed in Europe, Australia soon to follow...and don't get me started on North Africa!' blood rushed to Butcher's head, forcing him to slow down and breathe deeply for a moment.

'The followers of Sir Palamedes still causing mayhem out there, I take it?' Tim asked.

'Amin el-Husseini is alive and well, yes. But whether his goal is to support Lady Morgan and her overall objective as always, remains unclear. Fickle lot, the line of Sir



Palamedes, as we know...could be his militia remain rooted to the lands of British Jordan for the time being.' Todd gave a shrug of his shoulders.

'He'll turn. His line always does. Whatever side emerges victorious, his followers will slither their way back into the ranks,' John sneered. 'What of the illustrious Charles Worthington? The oh-so noble line of Sir Lancelot? Not joined at the hip of the witch as he usually is?'

Todd rubbed his strained eyes, still adjusting to the dark of the cavern, took a seat upon a damp rock. 'I've spoken with Charles Worthington, he appears – well, quite distant from the entire campaign,' he sighed.

'What? What do you mean, you've spoken with him? When?' Camille quipped, unsettled.

'Last year. He met me outside Whitehall, must have gotten wind of me working there within the Ministry of Defence. Wouldn't have been difficult I suppose, him being an elderly gentleman now, and long held checks on my father during his time in government. Likely deduced I'd follow in his footsteps.' Todd cocked his head casually to one side.

'But you work in intelligence, Todd. Code breaking and transmissions. Hardly of comfort to know the head of our enemy knew where to find you,' Gloria said, sharing Camille's concern.

‘As I said, he does not appear interested in Lady Morgan’s actions. Trust me. Like all men and women of our proud lineage, we grow old and tire. Charles is eighty-six years old, seen his own father drawn into the schemes of Morgan le Fay in the fallout of the American Civil War, and lived through that same corrupt magic during the Great War. He knows how this can, and will, end. His focus now will be his children.’ Todd stood assuredly to his feet.

‘As will become the focus of Lady Morgan too, no doubt,’ Ben Benson uttered beneath his increasingly wheezing breath. ‘Can’t blame the man for being tired.’ His laconic response drew the attention of his brethren.

‘Mr Ben Benson, you and I are unique here in having witnessed the Great War. Survived to tell of its horrors. Might I dare ask, where is your mind on retrieving the King’s Blade once again?’ Tim Patch moved within touching distance of Ben, hand hovering just above the shoulder, prepared to offer comfort, swatted away fiercely.

‘I’ll tell you where my mind is, Tim, great knight of Sir Kay – where it should be, focused on my own family!’ Ben blurted, outraged. ‘My daughter will not speak to me, tore me out of her life like pages from yesterday’s newspaper and discarded in the litter bins. You want to talk about cycles of power? Empires rising and falling? What about cycles of pain? Over and over again, the

likes the five of you will never experience. Never!' he became animated through his fury, body unable to keep pace with his emotions, and bringing him down to his knees with a rasping cough.

Gloria raced to his side – 'Ben, please relax. This does you no good.'

'Away with you! Away with all of you and all of this!' Ben cursed aloud, rousing himself to stand and making for the stairway in haste. 'Damn voices! Voices all the time! Enough, demons, enough!' his shadow echoed.

Gloria and Tim turned to one another, then to Todd. Allen could only let out a painful string of tuts and give a pinch of his brow. 'Never enough time,' he muttered to himself.

'He'll only listen to you, Todd lad,' John pushed. 'Go have a word.'

'I've been doing that for the best part of ten years John...in preparation for just such an event. I cannot undo the Sir Bedivere curse, the relentless torture he and his descendants endure. Whatever gift my father had over Ben when he was a young soldier in the Highland Light Infantry, I am saddened to say I have not inherited. Just his sword, it would appear,' Todd replied shaking his head.

'Hell's last issue,' Tim Patch reminded him. 'Saw suffering beyond most on the front. Such sacrifice will leave a scar, trust me.'

'That and the loss of both wife and first born son to the flu epidemic. Buried here in England but without even a gravestone, a privilege reserved only for those born of our colour, despite such service,' Gloria added.

'So, my brother died for nothing?' Camille sparked. 'No, I refuse to accept that, Todd. We all lose those we love, that's no reason to stop the fight.' Her breast swelled with pride. Todd had heard enough now too, the fresh scent of the October air catching him as he followed in Ben's footsteps outside.

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'Remind me of her name,' Todd asked tenderly, taking a seat on the roadside kerb next to Ben, watching his large black hands twist the small doll he was never seen without. 'Your second child, the daughter.'

'Janine,' Ben snorted. 'Not so much of a child now...nearly twenty in fact. Even settled with a man back in Kingston. Possibly carrying a child of her own. I hear so little from her.' His eyes grew bleary with tears.

‘Too old for a doll then?’ Todd gave a gentle smile. Ben forced a laugh back. ‘What about a sword?’ he followed in a sterner tone.

Ben withdrew, gripping his wooden staff and staring unnervingly forward. ‘I know what you’re doing, Todd Allen, and no, it will not work. Sidestepping me as a failed generation in the hope my daughter will pick up the mantle of Sir Bedivere and find your precious King’s Blade is a fool’s hope. I cannot allow you to corrupt my family any further, no matter what the cause.’ He continued to stare at the fading evening sun.

‘The cause is grave, Ben. You know this. We cannot do this without you, without Excalibur. How many must die this time at the hands of the White Dragon? What if this time it is, Merlin forbid, a war to end all wars? The world set aflame to a point even we, the Red Dragon and our allies in the Sacred Band cannot withstand?’ Todd began to plead.

‘I knew your father, young Mr Allen. He was a good man.’ Ben took another swig from his flask and let out a loud belch. ‘Integrity, courage, intelligence...all values associated with the Sir Galahad line. He would have been very proud of you.’ His voice trailed off.

Todd shared the reverent acknowledgement with a bow of his head. ‘He always spoke highly of you and the Benson family, especially your hardship in the Americas.

His memory was sketchy towards the end but...' Todd stuttered.

'He was a family man, Todd, family came first. You as his only son, always came first – sword or no sword. That is what I choose to remember, and what I must do now.' Ben drew a deep breath, noting the gleaming bonnet of the Rolls Royce purr its way to the Chalice Well Garden gate. 'Right on time I see...Gloria will be pleased.' He revealed a small golden pocket watch, flipped it open to show a picture of his late wife and son treasured inside. 'Been in my family for generations, now it must be handed down,' he confessed.

'So, the Benson family have always understood the precious nature of time?' Todd gave a sly remark. 'Never be late again, eh?'

'Perhaps.' Ben stood unsteadily, the drink maybe taking its toll.

'Then you'll know, Ben, how close we are to running out,' Todd reaffirmed.

'Yes, yes I do. But in order to help you, I must help myself first, Todd. Let me square things with my own family, my daughter back in Kingston, try to right the wrongs of my own failures as a father. It might just bring me the peace I am told I must find.' Ben tapped the side

of his skull, turned and walked slowly back towards the town.

‘For what it is worth Ben, for all our preaching about the importance of Excalibur in such times, we all do recognise your struggle,’ Todd said clearing his throat.

Ben shot an incredulous look back over his shoulder, his expression saying more than words. ‘Struggle gives us strength, your father told me that,’ he followed with a weak smile. Todd’s mouth fell dry, watching Benson’s broad build disappear from sight. His reverie was broken by the sound of the Rolls Royce car horn and the emergence of the wiry Mr Grimsbey from the driver’s side once more.

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‘Yes, yes. Coming,’ Gloria fussed, zipping up her wax jacket and straightening her headscarf while offering a farewell kiss to both John and Tim, and two for Camille. ‘I imagine it will not be long before we meet here again? Assuming it is still safe to do so?’ she posed.

‘Safer than London,’ Todd suggested.

‘And Ben Benson?’ Camille enquired.

'He's on the right path.' Todd cast an uneasy look to the group, not unnoticed by John and Tim. 'We have to hope, right?'

'So true. Right, I shall take Mr Patch and Mr Butcher back to Bath before returning to Shrewsbury, the Baron Wolfenden shall be wanting his car back and his man servant no doubt.' Gloria shook the red soil from her boots before entering the car, encouraging Tim and John to do the same. 'I take it the two of you will head back to London?' she gestured to Todd and Camille.

'I will. Camille may stay here with this Mr Wood chap.' Todd cracked a grin, quickly overturned by Camille.

'Ah, we spoke about Mr Wood, didn't we Camille. Close ties between our Mr Allen here and the Sir Gawain line, might be a good match should you choose...' Gloria began, only to have Camille force her chattering head into the car.

'Really not a time for such...proposal,' Camille joked, slamming the door closed. 'Au revoir, Madame Uppingham.' She moved her fingers in a playful wave. Mr Grimsbey shoved her from the driver's door without thought, only to pause and turn to Todd.

'Oh, Mr Allen, sir. When in town a gentleman at The George and Pilgrims Public House asked me to give you this correspondence from London. Said it was



important.’ Mr Grimsbey slid a manilla envelope from his waistcoat. Todd spotted the familiar handwriting of his trusted landlord friend and ally, fresh ink blot suggesting a recent line of dialogue from Whitehall jotted down as if transcribing a telephone call – Todd always careful to provide an alternate, private number for government correspondence. ‘Thank you’ he nodded to the narrowing eyes of the chauffeur.

The Rolls Royce pulled away, Todd unfolding the letter inside and scanning his finger across. His eyebrow shot up.

‘What is it? Something urgent?’ Camille leaned over to grab a look at the note.

‘Possibly,’ Todd thought out loud.

‘What does it say?’ Camille seized the note and tried in vain to decipher the scribbles. ‘Wait, it mentions the French Resistance. Monsieur Gustave Bertrand,’ she squealed.

‘You know him?’ Todd asked.

‘Oui. He’s a code breaker. Never spoken to him myself, but the Resistance owes him and his work much thanks,’ Camille replied. ‘Does the British Government have contact with him?’

Todd took the note back. 'You could say that. However, we could use a good French translator.' He patted Camille on the shoulder. 'You and I need to get to Bletchley Park.'

## **Chapter 10**

### **Guangxi Province - China**

**1st October 1940 AD**

Miko Honjo had taken his first life at the age of eighteen. A Chinese soldier perhaps a year younger than he had popped his head up above the shelter of a machine gun nest with all the naivety and innocence of a Japanese leveret come the first days of spring. Miko had pulled the trigger unconsciously, his reward a spray of red mist and the frantic shouts from his fellow soldiers of the Revolutionary Army desperate to regroup and stage a heroic counter attack. It failed of course – Shanghai fell only six days later. The kill by Miko was the first in an unforgiving blood bath that had continued to this very day. The wave of the glorious Red Sun had swept across Manchuria in the years that had followed. What made the Japanese Empire so special? Miko had given this much thought. He had read much about the exploits in the far reaches of Europe and the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, the crusade of the Nazi Regime tearing its way through both mountain and field as if a divine storm. However, unlike Adolf Hitler, the emperor needed no allies. The might of Japan was all of its own making, its own destiny – no alliances, no pacts or agreements, just its people. At least, that was Miko's understanding, until only recently.

The stunning peaks of the Guangxi Coast bit the morning sky like razor teeth, sharp leaf-green jagged upon ocean blue. It had been home to Miko for nearly a full year now, a war of attrition between obstinate Chinese outposts desperate in their need for supplies by sea, and the righteous blade of the Imperial Army seeking to sever such ties and let their enemies wither on the vine. This blade, however, had grown blunt of late, the much fought over Kunlun Pass brought to a grinding halt by hardened Chinese stone. But sit for three years on a stone, Miko's father said once, and soon you will learn to accept your position. In this case, it was less about acceptance, and more about opportunity, as unhealthy hostilities between Germany and France provided much-needed cause to invade the latter's holdings in Indo-China. His father's proverb spoke of three years – the Japanese Empire had broken it in less than one.

'We find ourselves with friends,' General Rikichi Ando announced, small sake cup in hand, and toasting his fellow leaders, all standing to attention. 'At last, we can leave this cursed Chinese rock and move forward in the name of the emperor. Glory to the Chrysanthemum Throne!' he cheered, his supporters shouting Banzai in shared acknowledgement. Miko stood quietly outside the tent, awaiting his summons. His thirst for blood had not gone unnoticed by the generals, a sharp-shooting rate higher than any other in his division and a guile

worthy of envy from his commanders-in-chief. One had likened him to a *kitsune*, the native fox, small in presence but cunning and focused. Miko had slid through enemy ranks through innovative use of camouflage – mud, branches, sand – blending into any background, to reveal himself to his prey only at the final death stroke. He entered the tent now as a seasoned hunter, body aged just twenty-two, with a mind boasting twice the wisdom of his peers. He spoke few words, and only ever when spoken to directly. The playful banter within his division never drew him in, it was always an unnecessary distraction from the task put before them. Miko knew such carelessness would one day get these soldiers killed, just like the young, inquisitive Chinese boy he had first slain, and blood was Miko's teacher now.

'General Ando, may I introduce Miko Honjo of the 21<sup>st</sup> Army,' the unctuous voice of Miko's commander intoned as he was beckoned forth. 'So many of our enemies dead at the hands of this young man we have lost count,' he followed with a firm pat on Miko's shoulder, spilling sake on to his freshly buffed black boots. Miko never made eye contact with a high-ranking general, instead gave a snappy salute and held his steely gaze above Ando's bald-skinned head. 'Who knows, General Ando, with more men like Miko here, Japan might not need the assistance of the Germans after all.' The commander continued to joke gauchely before being dismissed along with his companions. Miko

remained rooted, General Ando offering to refill his sake cup, together with a warmer smile.

'I speak of friends to my men here today, Honjo san...truth is I believe in none,' General Ando continued, resuming his seat. 'They all chirp as birds in dawn chorus at my achievements here over our enemies, but I know full well I face persecution back in Tokyo for ignoring our Emperor Showa and launching an assault upon the French territories. This despite our forging a pact with Adolf Hitler only last week – his foes now becoming ours.' His plump frame let out an exasperated sigh. 'No. In war, you depend only on yourself, Honjo san, not the fortunes of others. Carve your own path, don't follow in someone's footsteps – that's where greatness truly lies,' his finger pointing like a needle. 'Now, tell me, Honjo san, who do you believe to be Japan's most formidable enemy in this war?'

Miko remained loyal to both his character and beliefs – 'The empire has no formidable enemy it cannot overcome, general,' he snapped, much to General Ando's amusement.

'Ha. I once sounded just like you. Arrogant and a fool. This arrogance grew with every soul I took on the battlefield, each cowering monkey that bowed before me in mercy. It was only when teaching young soldiers like you I realised the error of my ways. How we fill each forthcoming generation's heads with promises of power

through perseverance. That a nation need only be prepared to stand up more times than it is knocked down in order to triumph – nonsense, I'm sorry to tell you.' General Ando hastily poured a second cup of sake, swallowing it greedily.

'Please forgive my ignorance, General.' Miko bowed with a nervous twitch.

'Not at all, as I said, I too once thought like you. Please, feel free to guess again,' General Ando softened.

'The Soviets?' Miko suggested. The general shook his head. 'The British?' – his second answer prompted a spurt of sake in laughter from General Ando. 'The Americans?' – the third guess brought a frown from his superior, but was dismissed with another shake of the head. General Ando rose to his feet and made for an intricately carved box at the far end of the tent. The box looked long enough to house a sword, Miko thought, perhaps General Ando's own gift from the emperor, like so many bestowed upon his rank. Surely this was not now to be granted to an ordinary soldier like himself? Miko would not accept such a gift, no matter how disgraced the general was perceived back home. It was only when General Ando creaked the carved box open that Miko's eyes shone like never before. Revealed was a delicate wakizashi, shorter than a regular katana, modestly jewelled on its hilt, with a lone red ribbon

trailing from its guard. The blade itself gave off no sheen, its metal tired.

‘Do you know what this is?’ General Ando presented the weapon. Miko broke his gaze to inspect the sword, but dared not touch it. He confessed his ignorance.

‘Wouldn’t expect you to...we teach so much of the arts of war in Japan, but fail in our duty to teach our history,’ the general mourned. ‘When I was young, my father told me of the legendary Kublai Khan and his Mongol Horde, way back in the thirteenth century. This tyrant set his eyes upon the shores of Japan, and a fleet that was many a thousand ship strong set across our seas for invasion and certain subjugation. Our ancestors prayed for strength, the courage to make a stand knowing of their imminent death – and their prayers were answered,’ came the tale, ended by a single word. *Kamikaze.*

‘A divine wind?’ Miko engaged for the first time.

‘*The* divine wind, soldier. Sent from the heavens by the God Raijin to destroy our enemies. Upon which every sacrifice made by the children of Japan in this very war has been based. However, there’s much more to the legend than many would care to entertain,’ General Ando closed before offering the sword to Miko. ‘Go ahead. Take it.’



‘What...what will it do?’ Miko flustered, placing only a finger on top of the pommel.

‘That, Honjo san, you will need to determine yourself. But if it serves you on this mission as well as it has served me, expect those that stand before you to scatter like fading cherry blossoms.’ General Ando placed the blade into Miko’s trembling hands.

‘Mission? What mission, general?’ Miko enquired.

‘Our people are not the only ones with legends, Honjo san. I asked you whom you thought to be Japan’s greatest enemy in this war...let me enlighten you with my own thoughts. Those with an understanding beyond the material insights of man and more with the minds of a God will thus bring this world to order. I have not just come to learn of native myths, but those born of a different age in Ancient Greece, powering rulers such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar – I’m sure I need not lecture you on their historic achievements?’ General Ando went for a third cup of sake.

‘Alexander the Great had a sword of unmatched power? I thought that was more a story of the British and their King Arthur?’ Miko caught his superior off guard.

‘Indeed, Excalibur. Sword of the Round Table. Trust me, I do not believe that legend to be buried in time either, Honjo san. But no, this concerns a statue that goes by

the name Palladium, and its holder will command an empire like no other before it,' General Ando replied. 'That empire should be that of the rising sun, not the swastika.'

'You believe Hitler holds this statue? This Palladium?' Miko asked, still inspecting his blade.

'I have my suspicions, ever since the previous Great War of Europe. We saw an accelerated advance of warfare not seen in generations, suddenly brought to a close, only to rise again from that very same country in less than two decades. Remarkably resilient, would you not agree?' the general posed.

Miko gave an assured nod. 'You don't believe the Berlin Pact will hold, do you, general?' he enquired.

'If I held the power of a God, I would not settle for the whims of men,' General Ando struck back, raising another firm finger. 'Only question is, are their Gods superior to ours?'

'You mean, will this Kamikaze Blade match the Palladium?' Miko concluded.

'Better still, Honjo san, what could be achieved by the wielder of both?' the general smiled. 'This is your mission. Travel through the Siberian wilderness into the heartlands of the Soviet Union, meet Hitler and his

advances head-on and seek out this power. Our intelligence shared after our little pact suggests that Nazi Germany is preparing for a push against Stalin and his Red Wall, while our emperor awaits Hitler on the other side. Once free of the British and French colonies, Asia will be ours to....*share.*' The general tilted his head loosely to one side.

'Why me, General?' Miko lowered the sword to resume his rigid stance.

'Because, Honjo san, much like me you know that sharing benefits no one. Smart prey knows that when a threat is shared, the hunter will go home empty-handed. I would rather be a smarter hunter, would you not agree?' General Ando pushed his face within inches of Miko's, the sake redolent on his breath causing him to flinch a little. 'Report only to me, Honjo san. Wherever my emperor places me upon the shogi table.'

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The coastal winds had picked up as the sun hit midday. Miko sat quietly on the gold-kissed sands of the Li River, its waters breaking fast towards the South China Sea. Pounding truck wheels shook the ground as the Imperial Army began its move further down into the core of the French Indo-China territory, a few divisions

splitting off west to face the menace that was to come from the Soviets and certain political sanctions from Europe as a result of General Ando's aggression. Miko's own mission became galvanised with each passing of a uniform before his eyes.

The pungent smell of engine smoke reached him, in the distance the charred fuselage of a shot down Zero plane still smouldering. Miko took several tentative steps towards it, the heat still radiating and forcing him to shield his face. Flames licked from its cockpit, the pilot burnt alive inside. The sight alone would have made the bravest Japanese soldier retch. Miko swallowed the bile welling in his throat back down. In a surge of rage, he whipped the Kamikaze Blade from its sheath with a cry, a sound carried instantly on a savage wind conjured and controlled by the sword itself. The gale so strong it silenced and smothered the flames, extinguished in seconds, the Zero's shell itself overturned like a frail, crisp leaf – just a brittle shell, wings and tailfins snapping off. Miko stumbled back in astonishment.

Suddenly, General Ando's remarkable achievements in the field of battle had new meaning, the spirit of a God in his hands of which only he had knowledge, used once more to subdue Japan's enemies. Now, this power rested in the hands of Miko, the strength of the divine wind at his command. The tantalising thought of this being one of many relics imbued with heavenly force

sent a shiver down his spine, soon replaced with a strengthened resolve towards his purpose and his mission. A pure white strip of fabric escaped the fires of the Zero and fluttered its way to Miko's feet. He snared it beneath his boot. The pilot's own hachimaki headband had survived the inferno – no further signs from the Gods were needed.

## Chapter 11

### RAF Northolt - England

7th October 1940 AD

Adam Drobinski passed on the offer of a stick of chalk. 'Are you sure? All the instructions on a Hawker Hurricane are in English,' a fellow Polish pilot asked while finishing off a crudely sketched caricature of Adolf Hitler just behind the cockpit, exaggerating the ears and dribble of a moustache.

'I'm sure,' Adam confidently replied. His fluency in English was assured, he had Janick's parents to thank for that – rolling in the higher echelons of Polish society and being presented with many an opportunity to meet dignitaries from here in Britain and the United States. Janick always held the upper hand, slick charmer that he was, small talk in both languages coming effortlessly to him...all Adam could do was listen and perhaps pick up every other word if he was lucky. Settling uncomfortably into the cockpit, sharp metal edges biting his biceps each time turned the control wheel, he found space among the dizzying array of dials to position a small sepia-toned photograph of him and Janick taken at a gala dinner party in Warsaw a year after they met. Janick captured mid-laugh at the piano, unaware of the photographer that had caught Adam's eye just in time for him to strike an awkward pose against the glossy

varnished lid of the Bechstein. Always brought a smile to Adam's face, Janick often commenting on how little his partner knew of blending into a crowd and mastering the art of making others believe you belonged there. If Adam had his way, neither of them would have needed to act, but a smart lesson for life none the less. 'Any idea where we are headed?' he shouted across the roar of the plane engine.

'Somewhere east of London, Thames estuary I think. Luftwaffe on another little bombing raid – you'd think they'd be getting the message by now, right?' his comrade raised both eyebrows and followed with a wink. Since the formation of the No.303 Squadron upon request of both the British Airforce and the Polish Government in Exile, the fleet had clipped the wings of nearly a hundred German fighter pilots, each blaze of a Messerschmitt fuselage plummeting into the English Channel a proud chalk mark upon the side of an adopted Hurricane or Spitfire. Glory of course went to the pride of the Royal Air Force for their successful repulsion of any Nazi domination over the skies of Great Britain, their international support reduced very much to a footnote in newspapers and speeches. Still, the squadron cared little, the sweet taste of vengeance against their homeland invaders satisfaction enough.

The ripe-orange evening sun burnt the clouds as Adam slid the roof of the cockpit over his blond curls, touch of claustrophobia setting in as it always did until fully

airborne. Once there was nothing but sky ahead, he allowed himself to swell with the pride of having fought for his own freedom – the same relief that came when his PZL-43, bolts and wings rattling to exhaustion, crashed down spectacularly in the fields of Kent not two weeks ago. His escape plane from Poland was tired, barely enough fuel to make it across occupied Denmark where he sustained most of the damage from enemy ground fire, each choke from its engine a double-beat in Adam’s heart as the white cliffs of Dover drew brighter and brighter. When he was found by the Home Front that morning, he was encouraged to rest – body trembling and soaked with sweat as he was hauled from the bullet-riddled bomber. He permitted himself twenty-four hours – which felt like an eternity – before demanding a spot in the Polish Resistance Airforce. Commanders said he was not ready, Adam silenced them with twelve German shoot downs in forty-eight hours.

Stacks of smoke rose from the City of London, parts still smouldering from the previous week’s raid by the Luftwaffe. The summer months had been intense for the capital, the onslaught of incendiaries razing many a building to the ground, punctured holes in the urban landscape exposed like gaps in an old man’s teeth. The iron will of England had endured, and with each passing day a swell of stoicism that even the Führer himself could not hope to quash. All pilots above the British Isles hoped such a message had been relayed to their allies



across the globe, a message that resistance was by no means futile, but the months had worn on, and little more than a slow hand clap from the Americans had made even Adam question the cause. What could a small island split from the European continent achieve when surrounded by the barbs of fascism? A pillar of strength slowly worn at its base by the gradual attrition of a maniacal despot in Berlin propped up by a puppet premier in Moscow. Desperation hung heavy as a ball and chain attached to Adam's ankle, the sharp crackle of a squadron pilot through his head phones renewing his focus.

'I see eight, possibly ten German fighters,' the unfamiliar voice came. 'Usual formation, two Junkers in the centre.'

'Permission to engage?' Adam replied.

'Granted. Focus on the Messerschmitt entourage. Draw them away from the bombers.' The crackle came in and out of clarity. The pops of the anti-aircraft guns began to litter the skies as Adam drew higher, hoping the German advance would follow suit. Two Messerschmitts took the bait, rearing like cobras preparing to strike, only to quickly part ways and straddle Adam with a flurry of gunfire from both sides. 'Damn it,' he cursed to himself upon being out-manoeuvred, now caught in a dog fight with two on his tail. A second blast of bullets shot overhead, Adam diving deep with a steep ninety-degree

incline. He righted himself, pulled up aggressively, still shadowed by the two Germans.

‘Could do with some assistance here,’ Adam held his voice firm. ‘Two on the tail.’

‘Novice,’ came the playful voice of a fellow Pole. ‘What did you expect charging straight ahead like that? I’ve got one German in sight, just hold steady,’ the voice reassured. Adam dared a glimpse back upon hearing the rattle of gunfire from behind, a trail of fresh grey smoke streaking down to the greens below. ‘One down. Think you can manage the other?’

‘Sure, I’ll be fine. Thank you,’ Adam mocked, twisting the wheel fiercely to the left while ascending once more, his tracker caught off guard and sailing straight past. Wings balanced again, he grinned as their positions reversed, the German fighter now clear in his sight. Adam squeezed both trigger thumbs tightly, releasing a spray of sliver, at first inches from the target but with only minor adjustment reaching the Messerschmitt tail wing in an explosion of sparks. Same grey smoke flowed smoothly as the plane lost its drive. ‘Unlucky thirteen,’ Adam noted.

‘Once you’re over yourself Mr Drobinski, might want to return to the Junkers. They are fast approaching Saint Paul’s Cathedral. Not really where the British want them,’ his compatriot soothed in Adam’s ear.

'Have the anti-aircraft guns below shot down anything yet?' Adam sighed.

'Don't be daft. Never do. That's our job, remember?' the Polish pilot joked. 'Wait...' there was an immediate pause in communications, then an eerie screech of a plane engine ringing through Adam's head phones. He tapped each side several times.

'Hello? You read me?' he spat impatiently.

'Got another on my tail. You see him?' his comrade replied. Adam darted looks all around, cream pale clouds beginning to obscure vision. 'I've taken a hit. Left wing.' Instruction followed, Adam finally spotting the flicker of fire from one of two dots in the distance. 'I'll need to bail, good...' the sentence cut short. Adam squinted, the fire on the first plane erupting into an inferno, the carcass of the Hurricane falling silently to the ground. Before he had time to confirm his fellow pilot's demise the same German fighter changed course and headed directly towards Adam, the flank of his Hurricane now exposed. He cursed loudly to himself, swung the right wing out wide to face his opponent head-on. The roar of both planes bellowed louder as they drew closer on collision course, a game of chicken with one patiently waiting for the other to buckle. The German fired first, red-hot streaks missing Adam's underbelly. He went to respond with a volley of his own, pressed down hard again on the triggers, the guns

making all the right noises but producing nothing. He pressed a second time, then a third, still nothing. Curse words ricocheted within the cockpit as the Messerschmitt smelled blood.

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Adam bizarrely felt his whole body begin to relax, a sense of fate and finality as he tipped the plane wheel slightly to align its direct collision course with his German foe. Within seconds, bullet-riddled or not, his fighter would smash into his enemy and there would be one less pair of wings within the ranks of the Luftwaffe. It was not the end Adam intended, but it was at least his choice. A luxury few men in this war had ever been granted.

In a blink, a bolt of blue fire sprang from beneath the Messerschmitt, the cockpit set alight. The German plane veered uncontrollably, Adam suddenly finding himself having to judge the mid-air wobble as he grasped his controls. A mild tilt upward and the enemy spun below in a rich pageant of blue and yellow flame, crashing into the waters of the Thames. Adam struggled to fill his lungs with air once more, despite being prepared to forfeit his ability to breathe just moments before. He scanned down upon the rooftops of London at the anti-aircraft turrets still furiously pumping rounds into the skies around, all wildly off target. Was this pure chance?

A lucky strike that had saved his life? The one time his own machinery failed was the same time those down on the ground below found their mark? Adam was never one for the fortunes of fate, but when spotting two young men perched high on a roof not half a mile from the Admiralty he realised there might be a role for such a belief after all. A familiar pair of blue ring shields could just be made out, the marksmanship of spear-like projectiles far more refined than any mechanical construction. One of the Junker bombers was swarmed with both Hurricanes and Spitfires like flies on a dead rat that was reduced to cinders in the rubble below, the second managing to offload its incendiaries upon the innocent fields of Hampstead Heath before retiring under heavy fire.

Adam clenched his fist, summoning his own shield of blue flame tightly within the close confines of the cockpit. 'Good job, Squadron 303. Rafalki reigns supreme once more,' a crackling voice came through the head speakers again. 'Return to RAF Northolt with haste.'

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There was never much talk after a defensive run. Most pilots honoured each other just with a reverent pat on the shoulder or a quiet nod of acknowledgement. All

aware of what had been gained, and what had been lost. The barracks painted a sombre mood as at least one locker was emptied, a British commander desperately trying to translate details from Polish pilots as to the names and family details of their fallen. Adam at this point would usually interject with his bilingual skills, but not today, his mind a whirl with the actions of those two men at the top of the building still etched firmly in the front of his mind. He sat pensively on his bed, the sepia photograph of Janick kissed and returned to the inside of his locker door, when he felt a tap on his forearm.

‘Forgive the intrusion Mr...Mr Drobble-son-ski?’ a young British desk jockey piped up while surveying a clipboard of papers. From the drawn, ashen look on his face, the boy had been awake most of the night, attending to notes and wireless calls, Adam thought. He stood to attention, towering a good two feet above his guest.

‘Drobinski. Yes,’ Adam corrected.

‘Ah, Drobinski. Apologies. You were recommended to me by one of your Polish friends here as having a particularly strong command of the English language, yes?’ the Brit ran his eyes up and down Adam’s imposing frame.

‘Not bad, I suppose,’ Adam replied, keeping his gaze above the head of the boy.

'Well, not bad might just be good enough for Bletchley.' The boy gained some confidence while thumbing through more papers. 'They need Poles with a good ear for English, some translations of German codes or something.'

'Codes?' Adam looked at the boy. 'We're receiving German codes?'

'Oh yes, have been for a while now. Not making much sense I'm afraid, but some early work by the French and Polish Resistance still active in the occupied Continent is helping. Only thing, the clever minds of our cryptographers could do with some decent French and Polish interpretations. Might assist in speeding the process along.' The boy tried to stifle a yawn.

'Bletchley? Where is Bletchley?' Adam enquired. The boy's face turned sour.

'No one really knows. Nor should they, Mr Drobinski,' he said with a steely gaze. 'As far as you and I are concerned, this conversation never happened. Now, pack your things. You'll leave for Bletchley Park in an hour.' He turned on his heel.

'But, I'm a fighter pilot, sir. Not a cryptographer or translator. I belong in the air,' Adam protested.

'Intelligence from Whitehall suggests Hitler might be changing plans. The Battle of Britain is nearing its end. It's his next move that concerns us now,' the boy replied, checking his watch. 'Hence, we need more details. Quickly.'

'Is this the same intelligence than cannot interpret my native language?' Adam snipped. The boy did not play along with the jovial sarcasm, only furrowing his tired brow. He zoomed in on the pink triangle badge stitched neatly on the inside of Adam's beige shirt, raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

'Might want to hide that, Mr Drobinski.' The boy pointed a judgemental pen tip at Adam's chest. 'You might be an ace in the air, but down here, people won't be so fast to support you should you require it.'

Adam turned the corner of his mouth up, kicked open his locker door to reveal a small box at its base. 'Got a whole bunch of these badges, some Jewish Stars of David too if you're interested?' He held his half-grin. 'Fresh from Sachsenhausen concentration camp, embroidered only last month.'

The boy remained unimpressed. 'The truck will take you where you are needed, Mr Drobinski, within the hour. Please be ready.' He turned his back and headed towards the barrack door adorned with a Polish Eagle flag, a tut of disapproval as he left. 'The rest of you will



be transferred to Leaconfield by the end of the week. His Majesty's Royal Air Force thanks you all for your service,' he announced with weakened authority, knowing most ears did not understand a single word. The barrack doors slammed shut behind him.

'We're being moved again?' a seasoned Polish pilot approached Adam. 'Is that what the little British runt said?' Adam gave a nod, sorting out his belongings.

'You all are, yes. For how long, he didn't say,' Adam replied with a heavy sigh.

'Very grateful.'

'He did say thank you on behalf of their king. They're all wrung out too here in England remember. Don't be too harsh, Ronald,' Adam advised.

'And you? Where are they sending you?' Ronald picked up the sepia photograph treasured by Adam, who quickly snatched it back. 'Same place as the Germans would have sent your kind I suppose? Told you, you should never have worn that blessed pink triangle – still means something, even here.'

'Which is exactly why I wear it,' Adam fired back. Ronald raised his hands in surrender and backed away.

'When this is all over, whoever the victor is, you will be judged, Adam,' Ronald continued to whisper in retreat. 'The world will still be a lonely place for you.'

Adam's thoughts returned to those he had witnessed defending the skies moments earlier. The solidarity of the blue fire alike to his own gave him much-needed optimism, a sense of hope he'd never dared entertain in his life thus far. He brought a simmering blue ring of flame around his left wrist, extinguishing it swiftly as others in the barracks began to haul their hessian sacks of belongings past. He needed answers, desperately.

## Chapter 12

### Bletchley Park - England

10<sup>th</sup> November 1940 AD

When Camille Rochelle had leaned over a cryptographer's shoulder to more closely inspect the scattering of French notes earlier in the month, she tried as best she could to find a common idiom for an answer that stared right into one's face. 'En face!' She bit her bottom lip, thinking out loud but within earshot of Todd Allen.

'En face?' Todd asked. 'What do you mean?'

'Sorry, *en face* – term in ballet to face the audience. Couldn't think of the English equivalent to state something that you would think was obvious, to as you say, stare you in the face,' Camille continued to express her thoughts.

'En face?' Todd asked again, with a tepid smile. 'Sure the best minds in this building, even the one they call Turing, have long thought the same about trying to break Enigma. Probably the most obvious aspect of any code that has gone overlooked. So easy to overthink such matters.' He cast a weary eye across Camille's

successful Anglo-French translations before passing them along to an eager secretary. The secretary plumped her brunette curls and asked if there was anything else to be relayed across to Commander Denniston that morning. Todd gave a shake of his head followed with a simple 'All good,' Camille added 'C'est tout bon', simply repeating Todd's comment in her native tongue. Whether the young secretary had meant to impress the commander with her newfound fluency in French or it was a simple misunderstanding, the two knights' work thereafter was known as BONIFACE. An odd portmanteau that made Camille chuckle each time she heard it.

'Wonder if she'll put in an application to support the translation efforts?' Camille joked over an early tea with Todd.

Todd put his usual two full teaspoons of sugar into the chipped mug and stirred slowly. 'Might well do. I know Alan Turing and his lot have asked the commander several times for extra help since they now believe they are making progress with Enigma. Not sure whether it has been approved,' He said, shoulders hunched.

'Any more Polish translators? Most of the early work was done by their own Cipher Bureau years ago,' replied Camille, sipping her tea.

‘Some. I heard a few made their way over from front line duty – the Polish Resistance provided the RAF with several pilots, some with a solid grasp of English,’ Todd replied.

‘Pilots? Not sure we have need for Polish pilots here, Todd,’ Camille queried.

‘That’s what the RAF said just before Hitler started blitzing London!’ Todd gave a grin.

‘Point taken. Heard anything from Otto Hurtz of late? The Sacred Band?’ Camille moved in on a rich tea biscuit.

‘Last week I received a letter from him. Was tracking this Von Lamorak character to the Baltic coast of occupied Poland. He’s successfully worked his way into the German Navy, which is useful for us and the convoys over the North Atlantic, but he still needs to find a way to get word to us.’ Todd wiped his mouth with the back of hand. ‘Better than the odd letter every two or three months, that is.’

Camille sat up and stretched her back, sore from hours slumped over a desk. ‘If all goes to plan here, we could be deciphering German messages much quicker than Otto can write...might be able to stand him down?’ she suggested.

'Don't believe any Sacred Band member will ever stand down from a fight, Camille. Especially one in mourning,' Todd said firmly. Camille cast her gaze down to her tea, face crumpled with regret, not just for Otto and his loss of his partner Tomaz, but for her brother Jacques, his Sacred Band partner, and the many others across the Continent that would have either fallen side by side in battle or, worse still, been rounded up like cattle for slaughter at the hands of the Nazi purge. A shot of anger had Rochelle tighten her grip on her wooden staff, flash of white light shooting down to the tiled floor, but she recovered her composure before the staff became steel in front of a small, unsuspecting audience. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to be so...blunt,' Todd confessed.

'Je vous pardonne.' Camille's eyes held more pity for her friend than her words ever could. 'We should try to meet some of these new Polish recruits. Maybe they have more insight into the actions of Lady Morgan and the White Dragon? Much like Otto, they are really on the front line of it all?' she suggested with a flicker of newfound optimism.

'Not sure how many would know of the power contained within an Ancient Greek statue, but worth a shot I agree. Not getting much from Gloria Uppingham despite her wranglings with John and his own close relationships with the ambassadors to the United States,' Todd concurred.

'John?'

'Sorry, Baron Wolfenden.'

'On a first-name basis now is she? Sounds serious.'

Todd cracked half a smile. 'Possibly. You know how coy Gloria gets when it comes to relationships, but yes, I suspect the noble knights of Sir Gaheris might soon have a successor. Quite a useful one too, if the Wolfenden family remains in such high regard on both sides of the Atlantic.'

'I thought the baron already had a son?' Camille asked.

'He does, Jeremy. Not ten years of age yet, but a good head on his shoulders. Strong mentor for whatever comes next.' Todd gulped the last of his tea down and brushed the biscuit crumbs from his wool jacket. 'Shall we go try our hand at some Polish then?' he gestured with his staff. 'You can lead, the most I recall is *czesc*.

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Words were heated from within Hut Eight, and Todd waited a few seconds to tap on the door. 'Bad time maybe?' he whispered to Camille just as the door flew open and the massive frame of a blond-haired Pole stormed out, barging his way between Todd and Camille, still cursing relentlessly in his own language. A

chief cryptographer yelled from the window, frantically waving a few sheets of decoded paperwork, trying to extinguish what appeared to Camille as a blue flame. Its flicker caught the sunlight, perhaps playing tricks on her. She kept quiet as she followed Todd's lead into the hut.

'My apologies, we were not expecting visitors from the Main Office.' A smartly dressed Pole offered his hand in welcome. He pushed his thick oval glasses back up the high ridge of his nose and neatened his sticky gelled hair that looked singed at its tips. 'Bit of loose cannons, some of these new recruits. That one was a pilot, all brawn and no brain. Trigger-happy types, you know?'

'Probably what kept them alive,' Todd suggested, noting some fellow cryptographers pouring cups of water on still smouldering papers. 'Someone drop a cigarette?' he enquired.

'Ah, no. Not quite. In fact, not sure at all what happened. One minute the man was holding some papers, the next he'd set them on fire. Wonderful for magic tricks at children's parties but not much good here. Mr Zygalski, Henry Zygalski,' the stout Pole introduced himself. Camille failed to respond with her name, instead still focused on the scorch marks upon the nearest desk and their all too familiar pattern. 'I trust you both have settled in well here at Bletchley? Have you met Commander Denniston?'



‘We have, yes,’ Todd confirmed. ‘Camille here is part of the French Resistance – been assisting with translations from Gustave Bertrand, whatever information he and his team can provide from Vichy France. Me, I’ll confess to being little more than your average British Government stiff from Whitehall, here to make up the numbers and ensure they all add up,’ he continued to charm.

‘Very good. Mr Turing and I have made some great progress with Enigma, especially useful of late given the battle in the skies of Britain. Might just have swung this in your favour, Mr Allen.’ Zygalski walked ahead slowly. ‘As for what Hitler and Nazi Germany might have planned next, a little more difficult to determine I’m afraid.’ He paused to pick at some loose sheets on his desk. ‘Possible mobilisation headed east, that’s the latest, not much else I’m afraid,’ he resigned himself, both hands to his hips.

‘East? Towards the Soviets?’ Todd queried.

‘I know, doesn’t make much sense does it? Still, what does, coming from Berlin these days? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to relay what’s left of this burnt information to Commander Denniston. Feel free to speak to any of my colleagues here. Try not to take up too much of their time though, lost enough with fire-fighting today as it is.’ Mr Zygalski bundled a bunch of loose forms in his arms, stopping abruptly in his tracks

as the heavy-set Pole, sent out in disgrace, now stood between him and the door. 'Ah, Mr Drobinski, settled down now have we?'

'Przepraszam.' The large Polish pilot heaved a muscular sigh. 'Won't happen again.'

'Be sure that it doesn't, Adam. The war is out there, not in here. Understand? Dobrze.' Zygalski slid his way past. 'And what have I said about wearing that jacket? Take it off. You are not a pilot here, Mr Drobinski.'

Adam rolled his eyes and began to lift the padded jacket from his shoulders when interrupted by Camille. 'Where did you get that?' She pointed to the pink triangle stitched on the left breast. He visibly shuddered, turning the collar over far enough to cover the symbol, head lowered.

'Doesn't matter,' Adam said, grounding his teeth and taking to his desk. Camille wrenched the arm of Todd, busying himself with a wall map of Western Europe.

'That Polish pilot...you notice anything strange about him?' Camille uttered quietly. Todd's interest was piqued and he cast his eyes towards the still flustered individual. 'Those triangles, I heard about them when in France...like the Jews, the Nazis have decreed that those of races deemed inferior should make themselves known to the world, and that includes people like, like

my brother,' she stuttered with a sudden well of emotion.

'Your brother? How much like your brother?' Todd raised an eyebrow.

'Enough to bring fire to a cryptographer's hut and make it appear like a magic trick.' Camille rattled her nails upon her staff. 'You think Otto Hurtz might know him? A listed Sacred Band member? I know the leader of the Sacred Band won't keep track of all three hundred, but...'

'If indeed there are three hundred left,' Todd sighed. 'Only one way to find out.'

## Chapter 13

### Gotenhafen - Poland

12<sup>th</sup> November 1940 AD

*Letter from Otto Hurtz – 12<sup>th</sup> November 1940*

Dear Todd

My deepest apologies for my lack of word of late. All communications are being strictly monitored here in the Gulf of Danzig, I dare not write too many letters to Britain through fear of being intercepted. In fact, this might be the last you hear from me in some time, given this behemoth of a battleship called the *Bismarck* has nearly completed her sea trials. Had it not been for her intended purpose, I would say she is a marvel of modern naval warfare – foot-thick armour plating, unrivalled speed and four fifteen-inch gun turrets that not only sound like the Valkyries have been unleashed to full fury, but with arrow-tip precision unlike anything I've ever witnessed. Perhaps more frightening still, she has a sister, *Tirpitz*, docked nearby and soon to see action. Together, they would bring terror across the waves of the North Atlantic – please heed my warning.

On the subject of the knight known as Sir Michael Von Lamorak – I know of his presence here in Gotenhafen. Crew members crack jokes about a man of short stature and odd-shaped ears matching that same description from Mosty and the Jablonkow Pass. I believe I exchanged a word or two with this man. He went by the name ‘Mickey’ after bowing to the jokes of other higher-ranking officers, a nickname that has quickly spread throughout the crew here aboard the *Bismarck*. He appears to be one that is somewhat disillusioned by the entire Nazi regime, perhaps the reason for his shyness. However, beneath that veneer I sense he has cunning and strength just as you forewarned, a subtle yet deadly knack of twisting the will of others to do his bidding. He shared a close connection to Field Marshall Wilhem Keitel, the ‘yes man’ of Hitler, from his time in Berlin – hardly the sorts of ranks one would expect a regular naval officer to fraternise with. Sadly, no further mention was given by this Von Lamorak as to the whereabouts or plans of his kin...Lady Morgan Worthington or the remaining White Dragon knights. I trust and pray that you have greater success with any ongoing relations you may have forged with Charles Worthington and the Sir Lancelot lineage. As always, you know my feelings on this engagement – aged nearly ninety years or not, he is still your enemy. Do not let loose lips cost lives, Mr Allen.

If I may share some more positive news from the wings here in Poland, I have heard British obstinacy in the skies has dampened many a German heart over the summer. There have even been rumours of abandoning an invasion of the British Isles for good, at least for the time being. That leads me to believe Hitler will turn to an alternative plan of action, one that will see you starve rather than struggle on a battlefield. These two tyrants of the ocean are set, waiting to realise this plan, and your and Mademoiselle Rochelle's work in the decoding operation is both timely and wise. There is a frequency of communications from here in this very port as to the whereabouts of all German U-boats within the North Atlantic, presented in a manner I cannot decipher. I wish you both well in your task in cracking it.

Mademoiselle Camille Rochelle has my thoughts and prayers. These past few months following the loss of her brother Jacques and his partner Eric in such quick succession I know must have been near unbearable. So many Sacred Band members have paid the heaviest of prices in this war, and now some of those reborn to the three hundred within Europe face enslavement at the hands of the Third Reich. Our numbers might not ever recover in time. I do not wish to sound so down-hearted, Todd, but the bloodline of Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain has a difficult period ahead – and I ask you to consider your own role in producing heirs for both the

knight's sword and the blue fire. As it stands, I have ordered the remaining Sacred Band fighters south to the edges of Africa to help stabilise the region around Palestine and the upset caused by the followers of Sir Palamedes, Amin el-Husseini. They may hold the British provinces for a short while, but should these troubles rumbling from the Far East and the encroaching Empire of Japan reach our shores, I fear we will be outmatched. So far little is known about any Sacred Band member born so deep within Asia, but I will keep trying.

You have been cautious I note, not to mention anything of Ben Benson and the Sir Bedivere line. If the fabled curse upon the wielders of Excalibur has rooted itself into his mind, then I again pray it has not come at too great a price. I am sure you will seek out his heir when the time comes, even if that should mean travelling to the West Indies and picking up the loose ends Ben has left there. Perhaps that was the purpose of him taking such a decision to abandon us? A passing of the ceremonial torch, knowing his body and mind are spent? A whimsical hope maybe.

Further news I will endeavour to share with you, old friend. Whether I be safe on land or at war in the seas, we will fight for that very notion – to be safe. Safe from the cycle of destruction brought forth by the Palladium, the Necklace of Harmonia coiled around the witch Morgan le Fay's heart, but above all, from those that

continue to embrace such an ideology that to have power, is to be superior.

*Otto Hertz,*

*Leader of the Sacred Band*



## Chapter 14

### Bletchley Park - England

14<sup>th</sup> November 1940 AD

‘They said we should choose. And choose wisely,’ Adam scoffed as the bell rang across the park to signal the end of the lunch break. ‘Either London or a city called Coventry. Both in line for devastating raids, perhaps as early as this evening.’ He flicked the butt end of his cigarette into the hedgerows behind Todd and Camille. ‘I never used to smoke, until I came here to England. Tells you something, doesn’t it.’ His nose twitched.

‘You came up from RAF Northolt, Mr Zygalski said?’ Camille asked. Adam gave a quick nod, nervously checking his watch. ‘How long have you been a pilot?’

‘Seven years. My partner supported me, at least, his family did back in Poland. Would never have made it into the armed forces without their help,’ Adam choked a little while reminiscing. ‘Still, not much good it did me or my country.’ He quickened his pace back to the hut.

‘I heard you have been quite the asset. All of the No. 303 Squadron have been during the Battle of Britain,’ Todd calmly corrected.

'Oh? Who told you that?' Adam asked incredulously.

'My own contacts in Whitehall.'

'Ah, that's kind of them. Would be good if they were to share that to the masses here in Britain. A headline or two in the newspapers, you know?' Adam stung, lengthening his stride while patting his pockets for a second roll up. Todd clicked his own tobacco box open and offered a roll up of his own.

'Believe it or not, I didn't smoke either until working for government. But, forgive our country for its patriotic indulgences.' Todd tossed a coy smile, snapping the lighter.

'So, what is it you two want with me?' Adam sucked greedily through the cigarette paper. Camille stood squarely up to the large Pole, nudged his left arm with her wooden staff.

'The fire outbreak in your hut earlier. How did it happen?' she asked firmly. Adam immediately began to withdraw.

'Accident,' he dismissed. The response didn't wash with Camille. 'I...I started it. Apparently. I'm not quite sure how,' he tried to satisfy her curiosity.

'Shouldn't have had a problem lighting your own cigarette just now then, surely?' Todd lightened. Adam's

face grew cold. 'Apologies, I don't mean to trivialise, but Camille and I, we must know something...'

'What?' Adam snapped.

'Your partner, Janick, could he summon fire?' Todd cut to the chase. Adam's muscles tightened at such a direct remark.

'No.'

'So you know not of the Sacred Band?' Todd followed, undeterred.

'The what?'

'The Sacred Band of Thebes. Soldiers of legend, who defeated all, from the Spartans to many other warring tribes across Ancient Greece. Met their end at the hands of Alexander the Great and his father...' Camille began to recite.

'Philip II of Macedon. I know the history, thank you. I am not following your question,' Adam's English broke slightly. 'What has this to do with me?'

Camille raised her staff once more and pointed to the pink triangle stitched on Adam's left breast. 'You know the foundations of the Sacred Band belief? Why they fought so well? Arguably above any fighting unit known to history? Alexander the Great was influenced enormously by their skill alongside Hephaeston, his

companion. Even the exploits of Achilles and Patroclus in the Trojan War laid the foundations for such unions between men of war.’ Her lecture began to glaze the eyes of Adam.

‘You speak of myths now, Miss Rochelle. I prefer reality. This reality. And no matter how cruel, it is the only one we have and we must fight for it.’ Adam puffed his last and discarded the stub. ‘Oh, and my partner, Janick, he was no fighter...more an artist. He loved music, the piano to be precise. Had he the skill of which you speak then neither of us would have ended up in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He wouldn’t have...’ Adam began to choke once more, choosing instead to end the conversation.

‘Died?’ Todd completed, sparking a contemptuous sneer from Adam. ‘They executed him?’

‘He was shot, trying to save me. Is that enough for you both?’

‘And didn’t try to deflect the bullet with a shield?’ Todd pushed.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Throw a blue spear perhaps?’ Todd pressed again.

Adam’s brow furrowed. ‘Spear?’

‘Correct. Blue flame from the right hand, same as the circle that would have made a shield in the left,’ Todd elaborated. Adam’s mouth became dry, he swallowed hard several times.

‘How...how do you know of all this?’ were the only words that Adam could produce through his immediate shock. ‘What are you both?’

‘People that have come to know that myth and reality are more closely entwined than many would care to believe, Mr Drobinski.’ Camille dared reveal the shimmering silver of her sword, Adam’s jaw dropping as the wood became steel, only to transform back once more. ‘Your people, the Sacred Band, are all born from my and Mr Allen’s own bloodlines, those of Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain, Knights of the Red Dragon. Many, many centuries ago of course.’

‘How many?’ Adam absorbed what he could, overwhelmed, all the while ignoring the calls from his decoding colleagues demanding an immediate return to the hut.

‘Only ever three hundred born upon this earth at one time. Always stronger when partnered, and sadly in desperate need of new recruits,’ Camille said lowering her head, mind flooded with a grief her face failed to hide.

‘My last flight run, over London, I saw two men high upon a roof top.’ Adam cast his gaze down. ‘A bolt of blue fire took down a Messerschmitt fighter, in a blink. I didn’t understand...’ he scrambled for a sentence. ‘They were...?’

‘A Sacred Band pairing. In London you say? Not sure whom we still have stationed there...Oliver and Eddy I believe. Only a few others in the capital and some in Glasgow. As Camille says, they are running low on numbers thanks to the Nazi purge,’ Todd confirmed. ‘Your leader is in fact a German, Mr Otto Hurtz, with whom I have some correspondence. He is tracking a White Dragon knight aboard one of Germany’s latest battleships. I sadly have little contact beyond the occasional letter.’ Todd pulled a stained folded paper from his pocket. ‘Lost his partner too, trying to defend your country last year.’

Adam tilted his head to one side, perplexed. ‘A German? Defending Poland?’

‘Not all of Germany is against you, against us. Don’t make the mistake that we’re alone in this war. The situation is, well, difficult. A difficult situation requires difficult decisions. Like for example, which cities must suffer for the benefit of all. Like Janick, sometimes sacrifices are needed.’ Todd straighten his posture.

The bellows from Adam's hut were now final, leaving him torn between asking more questions of Todd and Camille and incurring the wrath of Mr Zygalski. 'Look, I must return to my desk. But...I want to help. More than I am now,' he snapped, chest swelled.

'We'll keep you informed, Mr Drobinski. For now, continue your work here; however, should you come upon any decoded information as to activity either in the North Atlantic or the eastern front, especially from the Polish Resistance, please come and find us both. We'll be stationed in the main house here at Bletchley for the time being at least,' Todd instructed while granting Adam permission to leave. 'Oh, and not a word to Mr Zygalski or Commander Denniston about that matter. Leave that to us.'

Adam turned his head in acknowledgement, jogged back towards his hut then paused suddenly. 'Wait...if you are both Red Dragon knights – what is a *White Dragon knight*? Why must they be tracked?' Adam's cheeks twitched as his mind raced, trying to comprehend the complete absurdity of the discussion. 'Are they...the real enemy?'

Camille turned to Todd, lips pursed. 'A discussion for tomorrow, Adam. I promise we'll give you all you need to know,' she soothed. 'How many here in Bletchley can promise you that?'

## **Chapter 15**

### **Gotenhafen - Poland**

**5<sup>th</sup> May 1941 AD**

Otto Hurtz never believed he would get so close to the Führer. His uniform was pressed like fine vellum, boots buffed to midnight black, insignia gleaming upon his naval cap. The right arms of his crew mates shot to forty-five degrees as Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel and Vice Admiral Günther Lütjens sycophantically flanked the smaller, hunched figure of Hitler – hands grasped behind his back as was typical, a brief nod of approval to every other young man he locked eyes upon. Before his turn for inspection, Otto lurched back to try and catch a glimpse of Michael Von Lamorak, several heads further up the front line, ears sticking out from beneath his officer's hat, flushed red either from nerves or the spring sun. When Hitler approached Michael, Keitel took extra care in making introductions, several officers of similar rank seemingly casting envious glares in Von Lamorak's direction as the Führer honoured him with a pat on the shoulder before moving on. Keitel lingered a second longer, quickly muttered something into Von Lamorak's ear, out of hearing range for Otto, but a fleeting grin from Michael suggested whatever he muttered was met with approval by his youthful superior.



Hitler and Lutjens skipped over Otto, quickening their pace towards the end of the inspection line. Operation Rheinberg was overheard, a crew mate briefly lowering his now aching right arm and shaking out its soreness. 'When do you think we'll sail?' he asked Otto casually once the commanders had passed. 'All trials have been passed, we're at near full capacity on crew, and *Prinz Eugen* over there has been at full tank for almost a week now.' He pointed across the bay to the slim grey streak of the cruiser cresting above the waterline.

'Not sure.' Otto's eyes were distracted by Michael's dismissal and hurried move back down below decks. 'What the Führer and the Field Marshall may want might well be at odds with the Vice Admiral. Lutjens won't want to rush and risk losing the element of surprise.'

'We don't need any element of surprise,' a second crew mate wrapped his arms around Otto in a playful jostle. 'Biggest warship ever to have sailed. The British won't know what hit them,' he boasted. Otto remained transfixed on Michael, catching the glint of a silver ring as he slipped sleekly down into the galleys. It was the first time Otto had noticed it, Von Lamorak himself looking too tender to be married or even engaged, but placing the certainty of a White Dragon token upon him was still too early, despite the best guidance from Todd Allen and the Red Dragon Counterparts. 'Otto. Otto

Hurtz...?’ the second crew mate snapped his fingers to break his trance. ‘Ah, good. Still with us. We need to remove the additional banners and flags from the port side now inspection is over,’ he instructed. Otto blinked several times, loosening the tethers of the swastika-laden fabrics.

‘The officer a few heads up from us. The one the Führer took an interest in,’ Otto began to query. ‘What do you know about him?’

‘Mickey? Little Mickey the Mouse? Not a lot. Other than he was granted permission to come aboard following some high level connections in Berlin. Might be how he knew the Field Marshall? Family friend or something,’ the first crew mate chimed in. ‘Why? Thought you’d spent more time talking to him than most?’

It was true that Otto had tried to tap whatever information he could from chance encounters with Von Lamorak, but such opportunities were rare between regular seamen and their officers. All snippets gathered had been pieced together and provided to Todd Allen in his letters, the window for delivery becoming smaller and smaller by the day. Otto was desperate for a sign, something more definite than mere conjecture – show of a sword perhaps? Even a wooden staff would do, a flash of brilliant white that stood in contrast to his partner Tomaz during the early Polish raid being the pivotal stamp of approval required. A White Dragon

knight aboard the flagship of the Kriegsmarine. Where one knight stood, the remaining five were likely to be close behind, he reasoned. 'I have. He's a timid man, not appearing to be too enamoured with the Nazi cause,' Otto replied.

'You think he's a western sympathiser?' the second crew mate enquired with concern. Otto gave a shrug. 'Maybe a spy?' his crew mate's expression deepened.

'No, no. Not suggesting that,' Otto quickly backtracked.

'Then what? Wait...are you suggesting...? *Arschficker?*' the first crew mate's eyes sharpened with disapproval. 'Heard of a few like that at sea – months away from their sweethearts back home, if indeed they ever had one. *Filthy creatures.*'

'No. Not suggested that either.' Otto's tone became firmer. 'Nor is that a rumour that should be spread upon this ship. Or any other for that matter.'

'Absolutely. Be rounded up like the rest of the animals in Germany.' The first crew mate rolled the flags up neatly. 'Put to work in the brick mines, about the only thing they'd be useful for. Hard labour,' he sniggered as he slung the roll over his shoulder with a slight stumble. 'Still, now you've mentioned it, Otto, I'm going to be keeping a close eye on Herr Von Limerick. I believe his quarters are not far from mine...do not want anything

evil approaching me in the middle of the night.' He patted his backside while clenching his jaw.

'It's Von Lamorack,' Otto corrected. 'Limerick is a five-lined rhyme, idiot.'

'Ah, well I shall have to work on that too,' the second crew mate chuckled. 'Let's see...There once was a sailor from Munich, who liked nothing more than flowers on his tunic, he'd dance and he'd preen, like a fanciful queen...' he scratched his coarse stubble in search of a final line.

'...then the Führer made him a eunuch!' the first crew mate bellowed with laughter, sliding on the freshly mopped deck. Otto shook his head despondently. The primary siren sounded over the air, summoning all crew to their briefing rooms immediately. Bodies scurried like ants through doors and down ladders. 'Looks like we're on the move,' the crew mate followed with glee.

Michael Von Lamorak popped his head out of the galley entrance, surveying the commotion before stepping back out on deck. A bundle of tightly wrapped cloth was pressed under his arm, care taken to shroud it beneath half of his heavy coat. He snatched a glimpse of Otto Hurtz, turned his nose up then made his way up the steps towards the bridge. Otto went to follow, only to be intercepted by another officer demanding he make his way below deck immediately. He moved without

protest, watching Michael's pointy ears slip away behind one of the anti-aircraft turrets. His fingers twitched as if rehearsing the act of penning a letter, a letter he knew now would never reach his friend and ally, Todd Allen.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Kingston – Jamaica**

**26<sup>th</sup> May 1941 AD**

The smooth, bone-white sand was warm beneath Ben Benson's bare feet, the wash of the Caribbean gently cooling with each step. It was a trip Ben had come to know well over these past few months, a twenty-minute walk past the tin-shack huts that lined the coast, alive with vibrant colour. A tantalising aroma of roasting plantains and bubbling curry broth made the saliva run in his mouth. Had these walks ended in more pleasant circumstances then Ben would have believed it to be paradise, his homeland as he remembered it when a child. The scars of war, blood and tears swept away by the kiss of the West Indian sun, the screams and cries of soldiers drowned out by the welcoming smiles of his people. Despite the ruins of an earthquake and the tumultuous movements of recent trade unions, homes remained open to those seeking company.

That was, all but the home of one – Ben's only remaining child, his daughter, Janine. Each time he had arrived at her door, settled by the soothing music from her guitar inside, his knock was greeted by the stern

face of her fiancé, Robert. He made it no further, whether because of the fumes of alcohol on his breath or some other reason, the response was always the same. Not today Mr Benson, not today. Once Ben had arrived in poor shape, a full day's worth of drink soaking every sinew of his body, thinking irrationally. He'd tried to force his way inside, cursing loudly at his daughter and demanding she take his wooden staff and accept her duty in such times of crisis. Robert had apprehended him, dismissed his rants as the ramblings of an old, battle-worn fool and tossed his feeble body to the porch. His thoughtless actions that night were to be his undoing, he knew it. Janine was with child, just as he both celebrated and feared, the size of her baby bump suggesting she was in her third trimester. She was frightened, as all soon-to-be first mothers are, if only through concern that her precious cargo would somehow endure the same fate as her mother and elder brother. Her father was no more welcome than the Spanish flu that had taken their lives and decimated the European continent little over a decade earlier. In fact, Ben had begun to think of himself as a form of plague upon his own family, his curse, his weakness. Better to rid his daughter of his wretched presence once and for all rather than linger like a shadow of what could come to pass for his grandchild.

The moon was bold and high tonight, a twinkle of a thousand lights carved a path to the horizon. Ben

dragged the tip of his wooden staff through the sands, humming off-key as he sucked the last remaining drops of rum from the bottle. If tonight was to be his last chance, he thought, then he could wish for no finer. Janine sat on a small stool beneath a shady palm tree, the amber glow of their hut lights barely illuminating her long, braided black hair peppered with bright beads. She spotted him lumbering clumsily up the beach, turned to call for Robert, but for reasons unknown to her, succumbed to a sense of pity for her old fool of a father.

‘I told you, Father. My answer is no. Now please leave us be.’ Janine plucked a single string on her guitar, unhappy with its noise. ‘Don’t make me call for Robert again. He won’t be so gentle this time.’

‘You think I can’t handle your boyfriend?’ Ben scoffed with a swing of his staff.

‘Fiancé. And in your state, no.’

‘Probably right.’ Ben let out a belch then crumpled on the flimsy step of the porch, swatting a few gnats away in temper. ‘There was a time though...’ he began.

‘When you brought about the end of the Great War in Europe. Yes, Father, so you keep saying. The noble line of Sir Bedivere and the wielding of Excalibur, bringer of death and rebirth, used on several occasions to prevent other Knights of the Round Table from an ongoing cycle



of destruction and chaos. All very relatable. All very alluring, too. Shame your phenomenal powers couldn't save my mother or brother...what happened? The magic of King Arthur abandoned you when you discovered the miracle that was spiced rum?' Her words were laced with poison.

'Well, Excalibur's magic doesn't quite work like that.' Ben tried to enlighten her through his inebriated state. 'You see, only that created by the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia...' his narrative was severed.

'Enough now, Father. I don't want to hear it. Whatever it was you got involved in all those years ago has brought nothing but ill fortune to us all. I want no further part in any of it! Don't you understand? I have a life of my own!' She stroked her belly.

Ben withdrew, wounded. 'Indeed, you do. As do many of us...all those dying in Europe and beyond at the hands of the White Dragon. I felt as you do once, that this pain is not mine to bear, but it is, and you cannot run, Janine. Trust me, I tried.' His eyes moistened, his voice beginning to break.

'Then do this work yourself, Father! You did it once, now do it again. Don't lay such a burden upon me,' Janine fired back, her volume alerting Robert from within the hut.

'I've tried, Janine. But she won't let me...and I know why,' Ben began to weep.

'Who's *she*? Heavens, man, speak English! I don't understand and never have done, nor did Mother.' Janine rushed to pin the outside door closed to spare Ben from Robert's impending fury. 'Please now, leave. Don't come back, you hear?'

Her words were final. Ben could do no more as the warning sounds came from Robert, cursing his name. He closed his eyes in remorse, buried the grey curls in his hand and muffled any further sobs. 'The child, is it to be a boy or girl?' he managed to stutter.

'Not sure,' Janine softened in a moment of sympathy. 'Robert hopes for a boy, likes the name Lucian, after the grandson of Doctor Sigmund Freud apparently – had plenty of his books. I'm not convinced. Lucian Benson...doesn't sound right.' She allowed a brief smile.

'You'll keep the Benson name?' Ben wiped his eyes clear.

'Least I can do for my brother,' Janine bristled once more. Ben bowed his head, having just enough time to place the small carved doll at Janine's feet. 'What's that supposed to be? We don't practice voodoo here.' She prodded the doll with her bare foot.

'I know. But if you are to keep our family name, perhaps you can also keep some of our *traditions*.' Ben began to step away, stumbling over the porch step as Robert burst through the door and thrust himself past Janine.

'Be gone, you old man! I told you, never set foot in here again! Go drink yourself to death someplace else!' Robert spat, cricket bat waving high. Ben brought his fingers to his lips and mouthed the word *remember* to his daughter before retreating to the dark safety of the night.

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The midnight breeze was still gentle when Ben reached the sea, his body suddenly feeling heavy like a sack of grain. His knees buckled, dug deep into the damp sands, and his hands followed, bowed in prayer. 'I've tried. Oh Lady of the Lake, hear me, I've tried. I have failed. I cannot do as you ask, and nor can I shift the weight of responsibility to my daughter, just as I couldn't save my wife and firstborn son from nature's judgement.' He pulled a hand free from the wet sand and shook a fist at the full white moon. 'If this is my curse, the pain of Sir Bedivere and all those before me, then I have answered it once. Overcome it to its source and wield your so-called gift of the King's Blade. What more do you want from me now? What more can I offer you? Blood of a

knight or not, I am still but a man of flesh and blood, with all the imperfections that entails. You know this. You know this of all those descended from the Round Table. We can only do so much, only so much...' he cried hysterically, chest heaving, close to giving out.

From the saline air came an unfamiliar warmth, as if two satin-smooth hands had cupped either side of his face. Ben heard a dulcet voice, the same that had whispered into his ears for many a year. Now, almost as if spoken by something corporeal, sitting right there in front of him. He wanted to reply, had it not been for the captivating sense of relief that had engrossed him completely. It was a moment of peace, a moment he did not wish to part with. 'Rest now, Ben Benson, knight of Sir Bedivere. Rest now,' he heard the voice speak, and he surrendered to it, slowly slumping back upon the sands, wooden staff still in his grasp. In a final blink, he captured the flicker of the moon, his last breath sending a ripple across the ocean, guided by its light far into the horizon.

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The flashes of bullets streaked violently into the dull grey skies, Swordfish planes bearing the RAF colours buzzing like flies beneath the *Bismarck's* lowest line of

fire. A single torpedo was dropped, its trail building menacingly as it drew a course for the battleship's bow.

'Hard to port!' barked the order from the bridge. The ship's wheel spun as the giant metal frame of the ship groaned stubbornly to the right. Michael Von Lamorak leaned across the deck railings, eyebrows pinching as the torpedo disappeared from sight, breathing a large sigh of relief upon hearing the shouts from the starboard side that its target had been missed. Still the Swordfish wings shot by, one caught out from reaching too high, delicate fabric wings torn apart by the anti-aircraft salvos pulsing from each turret, spinning uncontrollably before splashing down into the cream-topped waves. The British were not deterred, but Von Lamorak knew daylight was against them, each passing shot an opportunity missed to prevent the Führer's march into the Denmark Straight. It had been a successful campaign like no other, first the pride of the British Navy – *HMS Hood* – blown to smithereens in a matter of minutes, its consort the *HMS Prince of Wales* forced to flee, now the glory of the Home Fleet scattered to the four corners of the earth. Michael held the brown cloth close to his chest, the precious Palladium safely wrapped beneath – what a story to tell Lady Morgan and his White Dragon brethren upon safe return to Germany, a mission that had not only reduced Britain, but also their lifelong foes of the Red Dragon to grovelling dogs. This was his moment, his plan, his

decisive and innovative action that forced the tide of the war. He would be remembered and revered for centuries to come.

A second splash of a torpedo was sighted, a last-gasp attempt as the Swordfish broke formation and fled into the pastel purple evening clouds. Otto Hurtz abandoned his post at the rear for the briefest of moments, running to the stern to try and track the second trail. The commands from the decks above suggested no action required, the torpedo seemingly set to sail past toothlessly. The assumption appeared correct, Otto as always conflicted as to the result – shackled aboard a heathen that was set to destroy all that he and the Sacred Band had fought against, but equally, his new home sparing him from the murky depths of the Atlantic. He would have turned away, had it not been for an inexplicable feeling of regret in doing so, a sixth sense heightened almost. He faced the choppy waters off the stern once again, the torpedo gaining momentum. What was at first a course of insignificance suddenly twisted to one of aggression and intent, the trail shifting almost incomprehensibly a good ten degrees or more. Had Otto's own sense of pragmatism not gotten in the way, he could have sworn the torpedo had been guided somehow. Impossible.

The boom from below was instant. Otto seized the railings, slipping on the wet wood decks as several crew

members fell to the floor. The battleship remained in motion, but a definite list was noticeable beneath Otto's feet. Within minutes a team of seamen had been assembled to descend into the lower decks, to the frantic barking of orders from senior officers, including Michael Von Lamorak. Otto pushed his way to the front of the growing crowd set on the *Bismarck's* bow, catching the arm of one that was pointing to the early evening north star that was strangely drifting from its usual position. He leaned over the sides again, the proud bow veering unmistakably to the left. They were sailing in circles.

## Chapter 17

### Nuremberg – Germany

1<sup>st</sup> June 1941 AD

It was the fourth successive night Lady Morgan Worthington had bolted upright in her bed, soaked in a cold sweat, trembling. The gentle tick of the pendulum from the mounted wall clock opposite settled her nerves a little. She brushed away the silver strands of hair from her face, rubbing the red jewel upon her throat. Its sparkle was lacklustre, dampened, brought alive only by the shards of moonlight casting their way through the open window. In contrast, Lady Morgan's dreams were electric – suffocating beneath a weight of water that appeared to sit on her chest. She would gasp for breath, attempt to swim to whatever surface there was, but found herself unable to move. It was always when her eyes began to surrender and close that she awoke. Alone. She would pull the second pillow close to her, grip it tightly as if it were Charles Worthington lying asleep beside her – a poor substitute. Instead, she would try and think of Morgan Robertson, together with lazy summer evenings soaking in the cool ocean breeze of the Atlantic, memories she had long since buried following his passing over twenty-five years ago. The survival of the great Morgan le Fay depended on a single, yet unshakeable, vow – let love die with the past.



Only this way would she endure, and be worthy of the power that had let her shape the world.

She lay awake for several hours before the sun rose above the Brandenburg Gate, her close connections with the Nazi elite affording her and her knights some of the most prized apartments in all of Berlin. She reached for the telephone, counted the hours backwards to align with Greenwich Mean Time, requested the private line to Mrs Christine Hartley in Bristol, United Kingdom – international calls another luxury awarded to her, though limited to only a few minutes of dialogue. To her relief, Mrs Hartley answered, her ears always open to the word of her lady and the vivid description of her dreams. The knight of Sir Geraint provided reassurance that no such divination from her close acquaintances within the Fraternity of the Inner Light had matched that of either the Palladium or the Necklace of Harmonia, and that the former treasured relic had not found its way into the hands of any Red Dragon knight or Sacred Band warrior that she knew of. For added comfort, she reminded Lady Morgan of Nazi Germany's continued advance across Europe and Africa, and that the Tripartite Pact with Japan and Italy bore testament to an alliance that would soon overwhelm Asia. For certain, momentum was still with the White Dragon and the glory of the sorceress Morgan le Fay.

'But my sister...' Lady Morgan spoke quickly down the line, time running short.

‘What about her?’ Christine enquired. ‘What influence does the Lady of the Lake have without the steady mind of Sir Bedivere to call forth the King’s Blade? I hear Ben Benson has even abandoned his duties and fled back to the West Indies?’

‘She is not so easily deterred, Christine, knight of Sir Geraint,’ Lady Morgan replied. ‘Even if Ben Benson has not prepared his soul for the mighty Excalibur for a second time in his life, even with a seemingly unwilling heir in his daughter, my sister could still intervene.’

‘If she had, you would know it, my lady,’ Christine reassured. ‘As I said, the German advance is all the evidence you need.’ There was a hesitancy in her voice. ‘However, these dreams you have, of crushing waters and anguish, these could be a sign of something else to come.’

‘Such as?’ Lady Morgan asked.

‘A change in the head of the pack?’ Christine proposed. ‘The Empire of Japan will not likely just move westward as desired by Adolf Hitler, but it will surely have its sights on the Pacific and dominance of the east. This could bring to the table an entirely new front of warfare, one that forces the hand of the United States. Perhaps the red veil from the east is not purely that of the Soviets, but more the blood that will be spilt in the

oceans between east and west?’ she concluded with her usual giddy excitement.

Lady Morgan cast her glare down to a dogeared newspaper page beside the bed sporting an unusually sombre headline concern the Third Reich’s fortunes in the Atlantic and the destruction of the Führer’s flagship *Bismarck* at the hands of the British Royal Navy only days earlier. ‘Our fortunes appear intermittent at sea, Madam Hartley,’ she warned.

‘Yes my lady. Such news of the *Bismarck*’s sinking has sparked renewed optimism here in Britain, but let us not forget what a surge of might it wielded upon entering the Straights of Denmark – the pride of the British Navy, *HMS Hood*, incinerated just moments into engagement. It took a swarm of Home Fleet warships to even bring it to its knees, and even then, I am certain Michael Von Lamorak remained true to our doctrine and scuttled the ship rather than have it fall in the hands of our enemies,’ Christine vigorously reminded, barely pausing for breath. ‘My lady, our time runs short. Might I suggest you keep a very close eye on the Palladium in Berlin, it will help soothe your concerns I’m certain. Put trust in the strength of Walter Dorf, son of Sir Gareth, and the cunning of Alfie Becker, son of Sir Tristan – together we will see this grand vision of yours to the end. *Albus Draco*.’

‘Albus Draco, dear friend,’ Lady Morgan closed, perfectly timed to a knock on the door. The heavily accented German voice asked from behind whether the good lady was decent, and requested entry. Lady Morgan knew the voice; a smile broke the melancholy that had shrouded her face. ‘Come in, Gretl, come in,’ she chirped. Gretl Braun threw the doors wide, a grin spread from ear to ear, wrapping her delicate pasty-white arms around Lady Morgan and exchanging a kiss.

‘It’s been months, Barbara, months. So glad to see you looking so well.’ Gretl kept a firm grasp of Lady Morgan’s hands. ‘How have you been keeping here in Berlin?’

‘Very well, Gretl, very well,’ Lady Morgan said, feigning an appropriate level of enthusiasm towards her guest. ‘Wonderful times, truly. You and your sister must be so very proud.’

‘Oh we are. Eva especially so. She and our beloved Führer have never been so close, this despite his tireless efforts to see our great country thrive. Who would have thought a young Austrian-born man would give Germany such a much-needed vision of its future? Remarkable,’ Gretl gushed, throwing open the curtains and flooding Lady Morgan’s apartment in the morning sunshine. ‘But you, Barbara Worthington, I hear you too have found quite the favour in many of Adolf Hitler’s most loyal subjects?’ Her eyes twinkled with an almost

childlike wonder. 'Mr Albert Speer can't stop talking about you!'

'Ah, dear Mr Speer. Indeed, I have spent much time in his company since arriving in Berlin. Wonderful man with spectacular designs on this city, truly reverent to past empires and their styles – have you seen the plans for the Volkshalle? Marvellous. Had a little input myself but largely of his own making.' Lady Morgan loosened her green silk dressing gown and reached into the wardrobe for a flowing white number. 'In fact, today Mr Speer is taking me to Nuremberg Castle, a trip that's long overdue but understandably so.' She requested assistance from Gretl with the back zip.

'Beautiful location, very...romantic.' Gretl's coy approach sparked a chuckle from Morgan.

'No insinuation please, Frau Gretl Braun! We're only friends. Do please remember, I am still a married woman,' Lady Morgan replied, pointing to the silver ring on her finger. 'No, I wish to see the treasures collected from Vienna, my inner historian always gets the better of me.' She stood rigidly in front of the dress mirror, smoothing the creases out of the gown's fabric. 'I do still wish to remain presentable to those in the Nazi High Command of course.'

'Of course.' Gretl raised an eyebrow, looking far from convinced. 'When you return, you must join me and my

sister Eva for a drink at the Savoy Hotel. I'll be staying there until Tuesday before returning to Munich.' She assisted in applying a touch of blusher to Morgan's pale cheeks. A second knock on the bedroom door came, this one with more intent and aggression. 'My apologies, were you expecting someone?'

The door flew open, Walter Dorf dressed in his finest, cast a stony glare towards Lady Morgan and Gretl Braun. 'Forgive the intrusion, my dear Lady Morgan...'

'Barbara. She prefers Barbara. Herr Dorf isn't it?' Gretl boldly interjected.

'Apologies, my lady, *Barbara*.' Dorf twitched uncomfortably towards Gretl. 'Might I have a word in private?'

Lady Morgan sensed immediately the panic manifesting in beads of sweat on Dorf's pitted brow, made her excuses to Gretl and politely requested the two be left alone. Once Gretl had slid from view, door creaking closed, Dorf immediately straightened, jaw twisting in frustration. 'So, what is it, Walter?' she asked flatly.

'My lady, Alfie and I have just returned from a briefing at the Chancellery...our first in many months,' Dorf's nervous stutter was interrupted by a fast tapping of his staff on the floor. 'I always take the time to look at the plinth within the government chamber, Alfie spotted it

first and...' his voice began to break, a gravelly cough blocking his words.

'And? What?' Lady Morgan grew impatient.

'The Palladium, my lady. It was not there,' Dorf solemnly stated.

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There had to be an explanation, Lady Morgan buried her head deep in thought, the scenic beauty of Bavaria whirling past the back seat window of her Rolls Royce as Mr Albert Speer continued to cascade rhetoric about his latest ventures into historic architecture designs and the apparently fated influence that Barbara Worthington had on his work – Saint Barbara, the Saint of Engineers and Architects, Speer would remind Lady Morgan for the hundredth time. She pretended to nod in agreement, suggesting her full attention, when her companion had anything but.

A string of incidents began to haunt her, not only the loss of the *Bismarck*, but failure to capture the skies above Britain, the war of attrition in North Africa despite appeasement from Amin el-Hasseini, son of Sir Palamedes and his followers swearing allegiance. Reports of the Sacred Band members rallying in the Middle East further thwarted German efforts in

expansion. Was this mere coincidence? Was the tide turning? Great wars often have moments guided by fortune, the will of men as determined and unwavering as it has always been, but such a pattern of failure was becoming harder to ignore. Perhaps Christine Hartley was right? A new empire should receive the White Dragon backing now, with the rise of the west wind now bowing to that of the east? Too soon to judge, she concluded with a rub of her necklace, its gleam still gloomy. 'We're here. Nuremberg Castle,' Albert Speer announced, the wheels of the Rolls Royce coming slowly to a halt. Lady Morgan stepped out on her own, waving away any assistance from the smartly suited chauffeur. The striking rust-red roof tiles of the mediaeval fortifications neatly underlined the clear blue spring sky, the delicate scent of fresh flowers hung from low windows wafted through the air as she and Mr Speer walked carefully up the steep slopes of cobbled paths towards the Imperial Castle. 'Every Holy Roman Emperor since Henry III has walked upon these stones at some point in their lives, be it for strategic purposes, or honourable coronation,' Speer explained, already getting short of breath. 'This of course, included the fabled kings of Germany, hence always a special place for our Führer,' he concluded with a wheeze.

'I am aware, Mr Speer. Most enchanting.' Lady Morgan began to quicken her stride towards the imposing gates of the castle courtyard. 'Did you still require a guide for



the Historischer Kunstbunker tunnel network?' she asked impatiently.

'I do. He's set to meet us just by the Sinwell Tower there.' Speer gestured to a sharply pointed turret piercing the skyline.

'Excellent,' Lady Morgan chimed, already stepping through the smaller entrance door directly beneath the tower. 'Very much looking forward to this Albert, thank you for arranging it.' She paused and gave a warm pat on Speer's shoulder. Her mood had shifted, as if the bricks of the castle itself had triggered a memory she had thought lost in her history. Perhaps it was the talk of the lineage among the Holy Roman Emperors, her own fascination with Charlemagne over a millennia ago, the very necklace she now wore once in his possession. Now within these very walls was a bounty of treasures that were the heirlooms of the great leaders of their time...many of which Lady Morgan knew to be far more than glittering trinkets. There was an opportunity to be had here, and it was up to her to seize it.

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A pot-bellied German led the way down into the deep crypts of the Kunstbunker, temperature dropping with each step. He muttered critically about the alterations the Nazis had made to its complex tunnel network in a

prelude to the war, everything from ammunition to copies of important state documents piled into each small sub-terranean chamber. The air grew thin and damp as Lady Morgan and Albert Speer reached an unassuming wooden door, modestly carved and reinforced with steelwork. 'Chilly down here I know. Much cooler the other side of this door, for good reason,' the guide smiled as he lifted the locked slab of timber from its position, straining a little. The door was stubborn at first, but the combined strength of Albert and the guide made it more cooperative, creaking open and releasing a blast of dry, stale air.

Lady Morgan forced her way inside without hesitation, snatching the torch from the guide and scanning the contents inside. An array of glass boxes, each generous in their space for only a handful of precious items. Cut gems shone like night sky stars, lush red fabrics laced between threads of gold crowns and maces, finely shaped orbs of all sizes adorned with crosses and bearing various other marks of religious significance. Her eyes remained wide open, lips slowly parting to match. 'This here is the Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Emperor, first worn by Charlemagne himself.' The guide brushed off some stray dust from his blazer and pointed to a sumptuously jewel-studded relic. '22 carat gold, encrusted with over one hundred and forty precious stones.' He leaned clumsily against the glass box that housed it. 'The wording, you see here – *Me Reges Regnant* – it means...'

'By me, kings reign!' Lady Morgan cut in with her translation, the guide taken aback.

'Impressive, Lady Barbara. I can see why Mr Speer thinks so highly of you now.' The guide gave a respectful bow. 'You also have here the orb, sceptre, and sacred sword of the Holy Roman Emperors past. See here, this picture, this is our great Frederick the First, or Frederick Barbarossa as he was commonly known in Germany.' The guide pointed Lady Morgan's torch to a baroque framed oil canvas of the former king, lavishly depicting his coronation complete with full regalia. 'Now, Mr Speer tells me you are originally from England, is this correct?' Lady Morgan gave a swift nod, eyes catching sight of another object in the far corner yet to be introduced. 'So, you'll no doubt be aware of the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table?' the guide chirped.

'Well, only a little.' Lady Morgan blushed with a wink toward Albert, the two sharing a laugh.

'Of course, of course,' the guide hurried. 'Well, just as your great King of Britons is said to lie in slumber for generations, only to awake at the time of greatest need, our King Ferdinand shares a similar myth. He shall rise again to bring Germany to greatness once more.' He raised his arm proudly up at the painting. 'Between us, I like to think he is looking down on our Führer right now,

steering him on his path to glory and the divine retribution due upon those against our people. Perhaps, even walking among us right now. Apologies, a silly notion I know.’ The guide scuffed the dusty floors like a child scolded for an overactive imagination.

‘Oh, not at all, sir. I too like to believe in myths and legends,’ Lady Morgan entertained her host with a playful grin. ‘What is a country if it doesn’t have such tales? As we all know, every tale is based on fact after all.’ She swept past the guide confidently towards the object that captured her interest. ‘And this? Tell me about this?’

‘Why, that is the Holy Lance, my Lady Barbara. A particular favourite of Adolf Hitler’s.’ The guide rushed to Lady Morgan’s side. ‘Rumoured to be the spear that struck the body of Christ himself...I stress, rumoured.’ Lady Morgan scanned the spear tip from top to bottom, tracing her torch beam along its roughened metal sides, glints of gold wire wrapped taut around its centre. She inched closer to the glass.

‘Nothing stronger than a rumour sometimes,’ she whispered quietly to herself.

‘Should we be returning to the car, my lady? It is a good two hours’ drive back to Berlin after all, and I’m sure both the Braun sisters would still like to see you.’ Albert

offered his jacket, noticing the goosebumps on Lady Morgan's china-white arms from in the cold.

'Yes, yes. Of course, thank you Mr Albert for such a wonderful opportunity. I know your time is limited at the moment.' Lady Morgan snuggled into the jacket, rubbing her arms back into life. Turning to the guide, she asked, 'Is there a telephone I could use, sir? I may be late back to Berlin and wish to let both Gretl and Eva Braun know.' The guide nodded and led the way back through the dank tunnels.

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Evening clouds bloomed on the horizon as Albert Speer and Lady Morgan made their way across the stone courtyard, a final thank you of a handshake from Speer to the guide as Morgan shot directly for the telephone in his small side office. 'Do wait for me by the car Mr Speer, I shall only be a moment.' Her fingers flew around the dial. 'Yes, Mr Becker's line, please. Mr Alfie Becker. Danke.' She spoke firmly and out of earshot. 'Alfie. Yes, I am well. On my way back to Berlin now in fact. Yes, I know about the Palladium – Walter has told me. No, no I am not at all concerned, and nor should you be. Besides, I might just have come upon another item of significance, here at Nuremberg Castle as suspected. Adolf Hitler has indeed done his homework with ancient relics. You and Commander Dorf finish your

briefing at High Command and then make your way to the castle, ask to see the treasures recovered from Vienna's Hofberg Palace...one in particular. A *spear*,' she instructed. 'We shall meet later in the Chancellery when you both return. Albus Draco.'

The rumble of the Rolls Royce prompted Lady Morgan to cut short her call with Alfie Becker, the high-pitched peep of its horn dragging her out without a chance to thank the guide once more. 'Most fascinating place, isn't it?' Albert courteously opened the rear door for her. 'Do keep the jacket on, Barbara, the heating inside is not quite as it should be. English engineering for you,' he grinned.

'Forgive me Albert, you know I don't like raising matters of government or High Command directly with you but...what is the latest with our relations towards the Soviets?' Lady Morgan circled her thumbs around each other. 'My colleagues – Commander Walter Dorf and Major Alfie Becker – well, they did mention to me in strictest confidence that an invasion was imminent?' she purred.

Albert squirmed a little in his seat, the way he often did when matters of the military were raised so bluntly. 'I am an architect, Mrs Worthington, not a commander or ranking officer. I know little of such matters.' He drummed his fingers against the window. 'You'll no doubt be aware of the Führer's need for oil reserves in

order to continue his dominance throughout Europe, and that will only come from a march east.'

'Stalin not prepared to support us?' Lady Morgan questioned.

'Apparently not. The Soviets pulling out of our trade agreement late last year did not help our relationship, now we hear they are even seeking to defy orders to turn over their Jews and other heathens opposed to our Führer's cause. Stalin has forced Hitler's hand.' Speer relaxed slightly, reclining comfortably into the leather of the back seat. 'Much better off aligning with Emperor Hirohito, a more mutual sense of focus,' he sighed.

'Japan?' Lady Morgan masked her own shreds of knowledge. 'Quite a gambit. Still, look at what Germany has achieved so far. The whole world could be ours in a matter of years,' she teased appeasingly. 'Such a strike will no doubt have to be swift? Without mercy?' she pressed.

'Indeed. Hitler shared his vision with High Command just before Christmas. Our soldiers are already enacting his Directive Twenty-One protocol. We're pretty much at capacity on the Soviet lines in the Balkans, and the Luftwaffe remains on high alert.' Speer shifted slightly, as if sensing he'd begun to reveal too much. 'Might be why your friends in the High Command have been called back to Berlin so urgently?'

‘No doubt,’ Lady Morgan said, easing her pressure on Albert and placing a palm on his knee. ‘The British? No longer a threat I assume?’

‘Always a threat, but no longer the principal target for Hitler. Once the east falls, they too will fall with it.’

‘Certainly,’ Lady Morgan concurred, then turned away to admire the Bavarian countryside that she had insensitively ignored during their journey down. ‘Directive Twenty-One?’ she queried. ‘Somewhat underwhelming name for such a bold manoeuvre.’

‘You have a better title?’

‘What about *Barbarossa*?’ Lady Morgan flashed a grin towards Albert. ‘A little German history to honour the Führer’s achievements?’

‘Is that an ego talking there, Mrs Worthington?’ came Albert’s mocking response.

‘Not at all. Frederik Barbarossa the First. The former Emperor of Germany? The Arthurian-styled myth the guide spoke of? Honestly, Albert, were you not paying any attention back there?’ Lady Morgan chuckled back with a pinch of Speer’s chin. He turned the corners of his mouth down in quick thought.



'I'll consider it.'

## Chapter 18

### Bletchley Park - England

5<sup>th</sup> June 1941 AD

‘They’ll never thank you for it, you know,’ Alan Turing struck a sullen tone as he shuffled through the papers on his desk, seeking the screwdriver he had been using to tighten up a few loose-fitting wires at the back of his impressive decoding machine. Adam Drobinski found the item first, tossing it across, only to have it bounce off Turing’s forearm.

‘Thought you English were all meant to be good at cricket?’ Adam smiled.

‘What?’

‘You know. Catching a ball?’ Adam mimicked a reach and grab motion.

‘Oh. No, not really. I wasn’t ever any good at sports, to be honest.’ Turing fumbled with the screwdriver, frustrated by the last few stubborn turns. ‘Never one of my interests. Unlike you, I see.’ He pointed the blunt tip of the driver Adam’s way. ‘Heard the local boxing match between the British and Polish soldiers stationed here went your way?’

‘Was only a bit of light fun. Many of the men are bored waiting around here, merely running errands when many others like them are risking their lives abroad or at sea,’ Adam replied, thumbing through a few coded messages from that morning. ‘This one might be of interest? Talks of more German U-boats massing off the French coast ahead of the next merchant shipment from the United States. Think losing the *Bismarck* has gotten Hitler twisting in the wind a little,’ he smiled.

‘One ship. We sank one battleship. Hardly a war won, Mr Drobinski. No, in order to achieve victory, we shall need more than manual decoding of each German message. We’ll need something new, something far smarter.’ Turing wiped blobs of thick grease on a ragged tea towel. ‘Your boss, Mr Zygalski, for all the Poles’ solid work in the development of the Bomba technology, we can go further. I will prove it.’ His knees popped when he stood, relieved after squatting for so long.

‘So, the British will thank *you* then? For building this...this, advanced machine?’ Adam struggled for the right words. ‘You’ll be their true saviour?’ He let out a mild chuckle.

‘Truth is Mr Drobinski, I don’t think the world will thank any of us.’ Turing took time to acknowledge the stitched pink triangle offset left on Adam’s chest.

'You're a *cryptographer*, Mr Turing, not a *fortune teller*,' Adam rebuffed with pride. 'Leave prophecies and destiny to others I would.' He turned on cue to welcome Todd Allen into the hut, casual nods exchanged between the two. 'Mr Allen – you and Miss Rochelle have need of me?'

'Please, if you don't mind, Mr Drobinski. Mr Turing...?'

Todd enquired, Mr Turing permitting Adam's dismissal with a flick of his wrist.

Crisp spring air greeted Adam and Todd outside, marred only by the exhaust fumes spat out by a convoy of troop trucks trundling slowly past. 'Something happening?' Adam asked.

'Always something happening here,' Todd riddled. 'A few mixed messages coming in from our Resistance allies in France and Poland. Nazi Germany seemingly on the move eastwards.' He picked up his pace. 'You still been practising?'

Adam grunted a yes. Since first encountering Todd Allen and Camille Rochelle, Drobinski had felt he had been living a split life. One was a veneer, a normality to present to the majority at Bletchley as a basic Polish translator with a few tales to tell about his escape from a concentration camp and heroic antics in the cockpit of a Hawker Hurricane. Always went down well with both British and fellow Poles over a beer or two during a rare,

more relaxed evening. The other was a life of pure fantasy, at least that was how anyone else besides those closest to him would view it. Madness even. A surreal world of legendary knights, bitter feuds, sacred relics and same-sex warrior relations stretching back centuries. Each new shred of information woven like disparate pieces of cloth in Adam's head...a magical tapestry yet to be knitted together. So many questions, each answer more absurd than the last – but he need only summon a flash of blue flame from his wrist to be reminded of the grounded truth behind it all.

His born power had been refined of late, with aid from Sacred Band members Oliver and Eddy, drafted up from London at Todd's request to help shape Adam's potential. The pair had been in training for nine years together, Oliver a brute of a man, unshaven and haggard, face bearing the true scars of war. Eddy was younger, perhaps close to his own age Adam guessed, clean-shaven with piercing green eyes. The nimbler of the two, it was Eddy that taught Adam how to perfect his right throwing arm, spears struck like a seasoned marksman – Oliver weighed in on the hand-to-hand combat front, insisting a man of Adam's stature should be able to wrestle him to the ground without hesitation. The challenge was always accepted, Adam nearly always the loser. Drobinski rolled up his shirt to reveal the extent of his bright purple and blue bruises over his flanks and abdomen. 'This answer your question?' he mocked.

‘Good. Told you Oliver and Eddy would not go easy on you. Got a lot of catching up to do. At least you’ll heal relatively quickly.’ Todd deliberately prodded Adam’s exposed tender spots with his staff, winding the big Pole for a moment. ‘Tell me, when you fled Poland last year, who was it that assisted you?’

‘Aleksander Kaminski. Head of the Polish Youth Resistance – the *Wawer*. Encountered him and a handful of his young recruits on the German-Polish border. Why?’ Adam asked.

‘Camille believes he and his movement might be sending important messages as to Hitler’s next move – an invasion of the Soviet Union.’ Todd lowered his voice as they approached Commander Denniston’s office window. ‘Churchill and the British Government are filtering such information, not wishing to suggest we might be able to decipher Enigma codes and thus break the shroud of ignorance regarding Hitler. But Camille and her translation unit are near certain.’

‘When?’ Adam narrowed his eyes.

‘Could be as little as weeks, maybe days. German troops are already massing on the Soviet borders,’ Todd conceded. He scanned a sea of fresh faces in front of the main Bletchley Park Manor House offloading from the trucks, zooming in on the assured, stern-looking

Oliver by the main entrance. 'Such a major movement of force could be in the hands of one relic in particular...the one we tutored you about.' Todd pulled Adam close, making his way carefully through the crowd.

'The Palladium? Lady Morgan will be among those German men along the border? Ready to strike?' Adam looked unsure.

'Maybe not the good lady herself, but one of her acolytes we spoke of. The White Dragon six. We've known for some time the bloodlines of Sir Gareth and Sir Tristan have pegged their way up the chain of command within the Nazi military ranks – Commander Walter Dorf and Major Alfie Becker. Then, of course, there's Michael Von Lamorak, of the knights of Sir Lamorak...' Todd shook Oliver's large, calloused hand and asked about Eddy – already inside one of the translator rooms with Camille.

'Thought you said Von Lamorak was last spoken of aboard the *Bismarck*?' Adam queried. 'As was Sacred Band leader Otto Hertz? Don't suppose you've heard anything from him since...' Adam caught the sorrow in Oliver's eyes.

'Not registered as any of the survivors from the North Atlantic campaign, no,' Todd confirmed with a comforting but firm hand on Oliver's back.

'Just hope he got that weasel Von Lamorak before she went down!' Oliver's face curdled with rage. The office window flew open, Camille poked her head out with a curious, then disappointed look.

'Seriously boys...you're discussing these matters in broad daylight? Some spies you three will make! Get inside now,' she instructed.

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Rochelle was sure to bolt the office door from the inside, hurrying Todd, Adam and Oliver along, sweeping a glance left and right down the Manor corridors for any unwanted attention. 'Right.' She secured the lock. 'Eddy and I have been reviewing the latest messages from Poland, relayed back through Paris to here in England.' she tossed a few notepads full of scribbled digits and letters towards Adam. 'My Polish is a little off here, but what does *Wlocznia* mean?'

Adam turned the notebook over and around several times, squinting hard. 'Wlocznia? It means...how would you say? Err...?' he mimed the same strong throwing action using his right arm, met with approval from his teacher Eddy.

'Like a *harpoon* perhaps? Good. This would corroborate a similar French notification of *Operation Harpon*. The



texts that have been coming in for the last month.’ Camille rushed to a worn blackboard in the corner of the room, already covered with chalk scribbles. ‘The Germans called it *Harpune*, which we all believed to be a renewed attack on British soil.’ She scrawled a few more characters onto the board, the unpleasantly sharp screech of the chalk causing Adam to grit his teeth.

‘Another attack? After losing the Battle of Britain?’ Todd frowned.

‘Indeed. Why wouldn’t Hitler try again? Especially with the Palladium...but!’ Camille frantically darted back to her desk, buried in yet more papers and notepads. ‘We know the recent naval engagement in the Atlantic did not go Germany’s way’ – she paused for a moment of mournful reflection in the presence of three Sacred Band members – ‘and for all the pernicious efforts of Amin el-Husseini in the Middle East and his loyal followers of Sir Palamedes, ground has been lost to the Allies.’

‘Meaning?’ Adam dug his hands into his pockets, swaying back and forth on his heels.

‘Todd, the Palladium doesn’t simply *stop* working. Never has done in the past – not while Lady Morgan possesses it. Yet, for some reason, Nazi Germany’s advance has stalled. At least in the west,’ Camille stressed, leaning over the desk to focus on Allen.

'You don't think the actions of the Sacred Band might just have helped stall the White Dragon efforts?' Oliver's husky voice showed his disdain. 'If Eddy and I had our way, we would not be sitting here in Britain, rather joining our brothers on the Continent and beyond fighting to our last to stop the witch and her rats spreading further...' his anger became more and more animated. Eddy lowered his partner's pulsing blue shield, caressing the nape of his neck.

Todd turned squarely towards Camille. 'Seriously, what is your point here? Last time you and I spoke we had more or less concluded that the Palladium was likely to be heading east to support a Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union...an *Operation Barbarossa*.' He picked up a random notebook confirming his reasoning. 'Hence, we should follow this imminent engagement, maybe find one of Lady Morgan's White Dragon knights – perhaps even Morgan herself – and try to end this tyranny by winning the Palladium back,' he surmised, receiving approving nods from Oliver and Eddy.

'What if Lady Morgan and the White Dragon don't have the Palladium anymore, Todd?' Camille stared her friend and fellow knight firmly in the eye. 'What if this advance is being undertaken out of desperation by Hitler, desperate to link with another expanding empire? One crested with the rising sun?' She tapped her staff

against a crooked wall map of the world, highlighting the islands of Japan.

‘The Japs? You think they’ve stolen the Palladium? Impossible. Lady Morgan would have known...the Necklace of Harmonia would have alerted her,’ Todd disputed.

‘Very well, maybe if not stolen, *gifted*. If there’s one thing this second world war has shown us, it is that alliances can be very fragile, Mr Allen. How would you say, backing a different horse perhaps?’ Camille proceeded to illustrate her argument with the switching of loyalties between Germany and the Soviets, then the Italians, each fuelling an undeniable sense that when it came to belligerence of this magnitude, subterfuge was so often the most reliable tactic. Lady Morgan and her White Dragon knights might just have stayed one step ahead this whole time.

Adam forced his heavy build between Allen and Rochelle. ‘This still changes nothing. We go to the Soviet front, and we either find this Palladium in the hands of a German or a Japanese. We take it from either regardless,’ he spoke with fervour.

‘Only we’re not at war with Japan, Adam,’ Camille reminded the spirited Sacred Band member. ‘We have no idea where Lady Morgan might be at this time, maybe in the very heart of Tokyo for all we know. And

given the current state of affairs in the Far East and the Japanese Imperial Army's push on sovereign Commonwealth territories, getting behind their lines won't be easy.'

'We could try Gloria Uppingham?' Todd suggested. 'She's made her move across the pond to Washington DC and is working in the British embassy there, trying to drum up more support from the Yanks. That said, from our latest discussions, the United States is a little uneasy about its relationship with the Japanese in the Pacific to say the least.' He stepped back and a loose slip of paper fell from one of the notebooks, landing softly at the foot of his staff. He reached down to inspect it, eyes widening. 'What's this, Camille?'

Rochelle snatched the paper, creased her brow in concentration. 'My attempts at early Polish translations for Operation Harpon, or Harpune. Thought it was *Spear* at one point...same thing I suppose. Why? Not really significant now, is it? No more than a ruse. We agree on the Soviet front, it's just whether Operation Barbarossa is either supported or challenged by the Palladium.' She went to ball the paper up, but Todd snatched it back hastily.

'Or *neither*,' Todd mutter to himself, marching towards the blackboard. He seized the stick of chalk and carved the name FREDERICK hard, Adam wincing at the sound once more. 'Frederick Barbarossa, early German King

and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Suitable name for an epic Nazi invasion, agreed?’ he presented to the group. ‘An emperor that held by their side the divine right of Christ the Redeemer, manifested through one object in particular...’ he pointed the piece of chalk at Adam’s throwing arm. ‘*Wlocznia* is not harpoon, is it Adam? The Poles might think it to mean something else.’

Camille’s face dropped like a stone, mouth suddenly dry. ‘Mon Dieu,’ she croaked.

‘Couldn’t have put it better, daughter of Sir Gawain. Probably exactly the same words Lady Morgan might have used in front of Hitler’s High Command.’ Todd raised his eyebrows. ‘The Holy Lance, long held within the Imperial Treasury in Austria, almost certainly in the grasping hands of the Führer now...along with all its secrets,’ he continued to lecture.

Adam knew enough about Christian mythology to draw a frightful conclusion on this one – cold sweat breaking out on his brow. The spear that pierced Christ’s side when upon the cross, its stains of blood rumoured to have mystical properties of their own, enough to forge one’s own destiny. ‘Both?’ he uttered aloud. ‘She could wield *both*? The Holy Lance *and* the Palladium?’

The Sacred Band pairing of Oliver and Eddy exchanged quick and fevered looks. ‘Could even Excalibur break

such a powerful bond?’ Eddy spoke his mind. Todd lowered his head, knowing full well that such an option might be beyond the Red Dragon hopes as things stood – Ben Benson choosing solitude over solidarity. ‘We have to keep trying, with Benson I mean,’ Eddy reiterated. ‘It’s our only chance...’

‘No, Eddy. If this is indeed the strategy of Lady Morgan Worthington and the White Dragon, we must intercept them immediately. We cannot wait for the line of Sir Bedivere to retrieve the King’s Blade,’ Todd contradicted.

‘Then we shall come with you,’ Oliver insisted, pushing past his partner, shield shimmering blue. ‘For Otto, for the Band.’

‘And you would fight valiantly, Oliver, but please, I must insist you remain here in Britain and assist in our defences. I will instruct John Butcher and Tim Patch as knights of Sir Bors and Sir Kay to keep watch from Bath. We cannot risk losing all our knights on the Soviet front, not at this time,’ Todd ordered, attempting to appease the bloodlust. ‘If war comes to our shores, you all must be ready.’ Disgruntled, Oliver snorted an approval with the honourable Sacred Band salute - a thump to the left side of his chest.

Eddy folded his arms and sighed. ‘You think the White Dragon will play by the same rules? Dorf, Becker, the

witch-in-the-making Christine Hartley of Sir Geraint, perhaps even Amin el-Husseini and the followers of Palamedes all prepared to split their resources? Sounds very unlikely, Mr Allen,' he calmly critiqued. 'Might I also remind you we have very few Sacred Band members left in the Continent that we know of, fewer still penetrating the east and the Soviet Union. You and Mademoiselle Rochelle will be on your own.'

Todd turned to the barrel-chested frame of Adam Drobinski. 'Not quite, Eddy. Time for your student to shine.' He gave a warm wink. 'Mr Drobinski here knows of some Polish Resistance allies that might prove useful, correct?' In a jerk of surprise, Adam nodded. 'And is also, as fortune would have it, a pilot...a very good one at that.' Adam's self-worth inflated, his head held high to attention. 'I would say we've all we need for such an incursion into and behind Soviet lines, my friends.'

Camille stood alongside Todd, staff firmly by her side. 'Son of Sir Galahad, we have limited but sufficient intelligence to suggest the German offensive is set to begin somewhere around the Soviet city of Smolensk, about two hundred miles west of Moscow. Might I suggest our young Polish pilot make for there?' A smile broke across her face, chestnut brown hair tucked and tidied beneath her beret. 'I hope your friends in the Polish Resistance are good at making arrangements for guests at short notice, Mr Drobinski.'

## Chapter 19

### Smolensk – Soviet Union

10<sup>th</sup> July 1941 AD

Alfie Becker tapped his staff against the caterpillar treads of each Geschutzwagen artillery piece. What had served the Germans so well throughout the invasion of Western Europe might not have the stamina to bear up against the far harsher terrain of a Soviet winter, he thought. Thicker treads might be needed, improved grip, possibly even heavier firepower than the existing mount of the ten-inch barrel. The depth of the armour was also a concern, wafer-thin steel against the juggernaut of a Soviet tank might allow for a nimbler assault, but be little more than flies being swatted away from an elephant's back. He jotted his concerns down in his pocket-size notepad, tutting out loud.

'General Field Marshall Von Bock wishes to speak with you, Alfie.' Walter Dorf dropped his usual lead-heavy palm on Becker's shoulder. 'Wants to know how many of these pint-sized tanks he can expect to be ready ahead of the first advance.'

'How many is he expecting?' Becker shrugged off his fellow White Dragon knight's forceful hand and



marched on ahead. 'No doubt more than the division can afford to spare?'

'Have to ask him. Besides, we both know our arsenals are not what's going to win this war, don't we.' Dorf planted himself in Alfie's path, demanding his attention. 'The Spear our Lady Morgan spoke of, you have it?' his face grew stern.

Becker took a nervous look to each side, turned back the side of his shiny black jacket and revealed the blunted spear tip gilt with fine gold leaf. 'Didn't take much persuading, the guide at Nuremberg Castle was in and out within an hour.' Alfie flashed a quick grin. 'I must confess, Walter, if Lady Morgan is still confident that the Palladium remains loyal to her cause, why the need to invest in another sacred object? One that we know very little about.'

'Call it her plan B, I suppose,' Dorf replied. 'While the Nazi cause appears to be going favourably, these dreams Lady Morgan is repeatedly subjected to – visions, if you follow the so-called wise words of Christine Hartley and the Sir Geraint bloodline – are making her rethink the strategy. Something is sitting a little uneasy with her.' He paused to wipe freshly trodden mud from his shiny boots. 'Wonderful. Just when we're about to present to General Von Bock as well,' he muttered, sliding the sides of the boots along one of the tank treads.

‘Be prepared for more of that. Nobody said world wars weren’t going to be messy,’ Becker said with a smile, spotting an agitated Fedor Von Bock from outside the command tent. ‘Any more news on Michael Von Lamorak? The *Bismarck* sinking?’ he switched.

‘Only that he’s not among the survivors rescued by the British. My opinion, another failed mission by the knight of Lamorak. Why our good Lady Morgan ever put him in charge of the North Atlantic campaign is simply beyond me, not after the Jablonkow Incident. Little brat almost cost us the entire war,’ Dorf spat.

‘Hardly,’ Becker soothed, with a wave of acknowledgement towards General Field Marshall Von Bock. ‘What could cost us the war is arrogance and assumptions, however.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t trust what I can’t see, Walter. Lady Morgan may think the Palladium is safe, hidden someplace else within the Nazi High Command, perhaps by Hitler himself, but now is not the time to be foolhardy. We should have eyes on the statue at all times. There are many others on this earth who would seize the chance to take the advantage and steal...’ Becker lowered his voice as Von Bock approached. ‘General, my apologies, I

was just inspecting the artillery ahead of the push on Smolensk. All appears to be in order,' Becker nodded.

'Very good, Major Becker. Commander Dorf,' Von Bock answered, doffing his cap. 'We need to review the advancement plans on the city, after the Soviets' counter-offensive yesterday. Quite pitiful, to say the least, but the Führer wants no interruptions ahead of capturing Moscow. If you please.' He beckoned Dorf and Becker into the tent. A lone operations desk complete with unrolled scrolls of paper, aerial photographs and beige folders stuffed full of military commands filled nearly the entire space. Alfie wedged his way besides the broader frame of Walter, a nudge towards the larger knight's direction in accusation for taking up too much available room. Von Bock rambled for several minutes about the movements of two Panzer divisions west of the target city stronghold, minimal resistance but a handful of Soviet snipers snipping at the heels of the German soldiers, lowering morale. A swig from his silver flask appeared to clear any remorse from the Field Marshal's throat as he shifted what looked like an impressively carved paperweight from one of the strategic assault maps. Becker's eyes caught it instantly, an inconspicuous jerk of his head and a sharp clip of his staff against Dorf's leg followed. Dorf frowned down upon the knight of Sir Tristan, stubbornly refusing to shift from his spot in front of the desk, Alfie encouraging him to follow his gaze towards the paperweight. The

realisation then hit the knight of Sir Gareth in equal measure. There in front of the pair was the Palladium.

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The fuselage of the plane rattled upon touchdown. Camille tightened her grip on the safety straps and creased her brow. She never did like flying, especially over the war-torn territory of the Continent. Each pop of the engine, each shudder of the seats through a turbulence saw her flinch. Her efforts to pen a letter to Charlie Wood had been dashed, a futile attempt to pass the flight time to the Polish-Soviet border and distract her whirling mind from the task in hand. In a fit of anger, she tore the latest page from her notebook, screwed it up and threw it at Todd's feet.

'My flying that bad, Mademoiselle Rochelle?' Adam gave a cocky grin, flipping a few switches and winding the engine down to a close. 'Did warn you two knights it was never going to be a pleasure ride.'

'Lovers' quarrel,' Todd joked, unclipping his harness. Camille shot a fiery look Allen's way, already preparing a second balled-up paper projectile made especially for Adam's forehead. 'I'm sure young Mr Wood will be safe and well back in Britain. You said yourself he is not likely

to return to active duty for King and Country for another six months,' Todd reassured.

'Depends how desperate Britain is by then,' Camille sighed. 'They'd call up an infant right now if it meant holding on to their shores for just a few moments longer. Look at the age of the men that were marched to their deaths during the last Great War.' Tears began to pool in the corners of her eyes.

Todd pulled her close to his chest. 'We won't let that happen. It's why we are here, remember?' he whispered softly. 'Besides, if this young soldier with whom you are so enamoured is truly a Wood, he'd know duty comes before all else. He'll do us all proud, of that I am sure.' He playfully rubbed his thumb against the small dimple on Camille's chin. She brushed away any sign of hurt before Adam could see. 'Adam, your Polish Resistance contact – Aleksander Kaminski – what did his scouts advise?'

'Not to travel,' Drobinski mocked, pistol loaded and sheathed in its holster. 'But aside from that, the German offensive has not been stalled by the Soviets over the last forty-eight hours. The likelihood is they'll be on the outskirts of Smolensk city by the weekend, possibly sooner.' He pushed past the duo towards the plane door. 'We're about four hours away from the main line, on foot. The forests to the north and south of the city

are where the Germans appear to be gathering, so I suggest we approach from the east.'

'Not if the aim is to find any White Dragon knights. They'll almost certainly be among the generals and commanders. We'll need to confront them head-on.' Camille's face went at once from tender to determined. 'Todd, you know I'm right.'

Allen sighed with a nod. 'The main command, under General Field Marshal Fedor Von Bock, did the Polish Resistance note its whereabouts?' he asked Adam, tone firm. Adam made his unease known, posture akimbo, but grunted an approval. 'Good, then we head for the German front line. With any luck, your friends in the Resistance might just pave an opportunity for us to get close enough to the real enemies in this conflict.'

'The Polish Resistance staging a defensive in support of the Soviets? You ask for too much, Mr Allen,' Adam muttered.

Todd assisted Camille from the plane. 'Who doesn't ask for much during war, Mr Drobinski? You'll learn'.

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'Was this planned?' Alfie Becker paced irritably up and down the enclosed space of the tent, glare fixed on the

Palladium statue perched on Von Bock's desk. 'I mean, Lady Morgan must have known about it? Moving such a precious relic so far from her grasp...' he was cut short by Walter Dorf, the knight of Sir Gareth mindful that Von Bock was still within earshot just outside, the two relieved momentarily as the General Field Marshal was summoned outside by a young officer.

'It's Lady Barbara from now on, remember. Especially in front of this lot! For all we know, this entire Soviet invasion could be named in honour of her.' Dorf seized Becker's arm, taking the opportunity to pick up and inspect the statue with his free hand. All looked in order, same shape and size, same dull and pasty exterior, though having had very few opportunities to handle the prized object, Dorf could not be certain of its weight. He handed it to Becker for closer inspection. 'Maybe Lady Morgan felt it was so secure in Adolf Hitler's hands she was happy for it to be taken to any front line. After all, it's hardly been a stalemate when it's come to our adversaries this time has it? Perhaps with Western Europe conquered, the combined strength of the Palladium and the Spear of Destiny would prove beyond any doubt that the White Dragon's cause would be unchallenged. Even if the line of Sir Bedivere rallied with its fabled Excalibur, who knows whether it would be sufficient.' He paused to draw breath just long enough to allow Fedor Von Bock back into the tent, alongside company.

'My apologies, gentlemen. Ah, I see you've spotted the Führer's good luck charm. His beloved Eva Braun presented that statue to me at Hitler's request – you know how he is with his charms. All nonsense of course, but still, not done us any harm yet, has it?' the General Field Marshall gave a crooked smile while prompting his guest to come forward. 'Gentlemen, may I introduce you to Mr Miko Honjo, Imperial Japanese Army. He has been sent here to review our advance into Soviet territories and support our efforts for collective expansion into Asia. Comes with quite the glowing recommendation of General Rikichi Ando, supreme Japanese Military commander responsible for many a victory over Korea and Indo-China,' he boasted while pouring two small toasting glasses full to the brim from his flask.

Dorf and Becker gave the familiar Nazi salute, Honjo curving a grin, then bowing as his custom dictated. The two knights noted first the man's small stature, impeccably pressed earth brown uniform, and a delicate but icy expression. The longer their assessment of the individual drew out, the more uncomfortable the pair felt – a sense of duplicity and scheming lay beneath Honjo's crisp, dark eyes, aware of their improper behaviour but disguising it with childlike innocence. Unescapable too, was Miko's own captivation towards the Palladium, tracking its every move like a predator to prey.



'If you please, Dorf and Becker. Honjo san and I have much to discuss before his return to Tokyo. I ask you both to return to your station and prepare for the first assault. With good fortune, Hitler will have his first catch on Soviet soil by the close of the month.' Von Bock flicked his fingers towards the knights in dismissal. They saluted the Führer once again, took their leave, Becker staring down at the unusually shaped sword by Miko's side.

'We should inform Lady Morgan about the Palladium,' Alfie said when they were clear of the tent. 'She'll want to know it is safe.'

Walter grumbled his agreement, still smarting from such ignominy received from their General Field Marshall. 'I'd be tempted to tell her that the Japanese appear to be the saviours from now on. Ask her if Christine Hartley and the Necklace of Harmonia have informed her of that much,' he snorted.

'Our lady will have a plan, she always does, Walter,' Alfie tried to reassure. 'You'll see. With both the Palladium and the Spear of Destiny, the fall of Asia will be easier than slicing through the finest cut of steak, compared to the stubborn fat that has been Europe. Trust me.' He proudly revealed the Spear from his coat, letting its golden tip glimmer in the morning sun. Dorf wasted no time snatching the item from his compatriot. 'What are you doing?' Alfie recoiled.

‘Look, you are set to be based behind the front line, tinkering with all your little machines and gadgets here, Becker. All well and decent of you. But I, knight of Sir Gareth, will be on the front line of these advances into Soviet lands. Therefore, it makes sense I should carry the Spear of Destiny with me. Make sure of our victory.’ Dorf puffed his chest out and towered over the smaller Alfie. ‘By all means let Lady Morgan...Barbara...whatever she wants to be called now...know about the Palladium and its whereabouts. If it aids her rest at night, wunderbar! You can also let her know I plan to take firm action in this region and bring glory to her cause...not wait for the Japanese to steal such victory from us.’

‘Us?’ Becker raised an incredulous eyebrow. ‘I don’t hear any act of unity for the White Dragon in your proposal, Walter.’

‘We all play our part. Even Michael Von Lamorak knew that much. Go now. Do what you must. I’m certain you’ll get your chance to shine once again when our forces reach Moscow. For now, let me complete the mission here in Smolensk.’

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Needle-light stars speckled the evening skies, brisk winter winds blew down from the north of the ridge

where Adam, Todd and Camille had settled. 'Is it ever summer here?' Camille's teeth chattered, she pulled her overcoat across her back and tucked her fingers beneath her arms. 'See anything?' she elbowed Todd.

His binoculars fogged. He huffed a warm breath on each lens and refocused. A dim light from the German camp provided just enough luminance to study the faces of troops drilling back and forth, rifles held at attention. He paused and zoomed in the best he could on the shining black coat of an officer – Alfred Becker, knight of Sir Tristan. Todd was certain, passing the binoculars to Rochelle. 'That's one. Suspicions confirmed,' he sighed.

'Can't see any other. Walter Dorf?' Camille's eyes strained. 'Would expect both White Dragon knights to be here, wouldn't you?'

'Still three against one,' Adam sparked from behind. 'What's the plan?'

Todd readjusted his position, aching from lying against the hardened soil for several hours. 'Becker has moved in and out of that tent in the centre there several times. My guess is that is where Fedor Von Bock or whoever is leading this campaign is stationed. Possibly more...' he theorised.

‘Keeping the Palladium and Spear close to hand?’ Camille questioned. ‘Makes sense. Also gives us a chance to retrieve both.’

‘Which is what concerns me. Two important relics so close together, Lady Morgan surely wouldn’t leave both in the sole hands of one knight. She could well be here, maybe others,’ Todd grimaced.

‘So? No point in speculating is there? Not when we’re this close. I didn’t fly across the Baltic at high risk for nothing. Let’s move,’ Adam flared, shimmering blue flame already searing in his pupils.

‘Adam – if it’s three on one I would agree. But trust me, if Lady Morgan alone is present, that will be enough to force our retreat...remember what we told you about her and her powers. You are quite correct that all of this could be for nothing if we don’t assess the situation and judge when to make our move. What if Amin el-Hasseini, the knight of Palamedes, has been drafted in from the Middle East? Let alone the whereabouts of Walter Dorf and...’ Todd’s cautions went unheeded and resisted by Adam.

‘What if I had remained in Sachsenhausen concentration camp? Not dared move a muscle even when Janick had perished? What if all of us there just sat and rotted as the Nazis wished us to? Millions of others of the Jewish faith? Freedom is controlled by fear, Mr Allen, and fear

is the strongest weapon on this earth, not a statue, or a lance, or even a sorceress.' Adam underlined his stance with a pointed finger held just below Todd's chin.

With a sag of his chest, Todd conceded. 'Fine. Just how do you propose we get close enough? I doubt any of us are going to pass as German troops.'

Grasping the binoculars, Adam moved his finger in the direction of an isolated group of Germans settled by a Panzer tank. He passed the binoculars back to Allen. 'Just hope they are all wearing sizes that fit us.'

## Chapter 20

### Smolensk – Soviet Union

10<sup>th</sup> July 1941 AD

‘I already feel dirty,’ Camille said as she wriggled into the soiled trench coat of the fallen German soldier stripped down to his underwear by her feet. ‘I would have thought having to serve in this army was torture enough, without having to wear this.’ She scratched around the collar of the snug-fitting grey shirt.

‘Supposed to keep you warm,’ Adam noted, relieved that this time a soldier was found that matched his size. ‘How do you think I feel anyway? Having to do this twice is far from ideal but, when in Rome...!’ he tried to adjust his helmet. Todd stamped a few times on the heels of his stolen boots, admitting to barely being able to manage a few steps without wincing. ‘I suppose we just nod and salute should we be stopped?’ Adam followed, rifle locked and loaded.

Todd hid his staff beneath his coat, prompting Camille to copy. ‘Absolutely. We move in on the tent, search for what we came here for and leave – hopefully not empty-handed. No firing. Understood?’ he ordered with a piercing glare at Drobinski. The trio slunk past the

neatly lined tents of the encampment, Camille picking up as best she could on the light-hearted German banter within each, snippets of loved ones back home, families, friends and warming food and drink. An odd cruelty of war, the reminder that regular men stand to lose so much at the feet of those that care so little. An exposed tent peg caught her ankle, she stumbled, Adam quick to hook her arm just as two guards walked past.

'Besoffen' Adam spurted defensively without hesitation. The two guards shared critical looks but let the incident pass, Camille careful to bury her head into Adam's neck to hide any obviously feminine features.

'Did you just say I was...' Camille quizzed with a slow exhalation of relief.

'Drunk. Yes. Better than saying you were *entertainment* for the men!' Adam snipped with a mild look of jollity, Camille unsure whether to be thankful or offended.

Todd stopped abruptly, one tent away. 'That's the one. Becker was marching in and out of there like an ant earlier. Has to hold something of interest.' He scanned its entrance, two more German guards rigid like sentries. 'We'll need to try the opposite side. Cut our way in.' He gestured with his staff. 'Adam, Camille and I will go...you keep a lookout.'

Adam curled his upper lip. 'Just how much German do you know, Todd? Not much I've heard. Surely it is better to have two people relatively fluent in their language to make the move? Just in case...'

'In case of what? You want to enter into deep conversation with one of them? Ask about the weather or...'

Todd fumed.

'Boys, enough. Not now.' Camille clipped each one round the ear. 'Todd, Adam is right. If we both go we can at least linguistically get ourselves out of trouble, Adam doesn't exactly know what he's looking for and I am not so naïve as to try and attempt this alone,' she calmed them.

'Might have escaped your attention, Camille, but...'

Todd waved his hand over Rochelle's torso. '...might blow your cover a little more than any well-accented German.' She scoped the ground for a muddy twig, hastily smearing soil beneath her nose. 'Oh, that's genius,' Todd scoffed.

'Could remind them of someone?' Camille mockingly performed a Nazi salute, then tugged at Adam's arm. 'If you wish to alert us to anything, whistle.'

'What?' Todd's mouth dropped.



'Whistle. Like a bird...Polish Resistance do it all the time.' Adam gave Todd a playful punch on the arm as he trailed Camille to the back of the tent.

'Scout training behind enemy lines. Unbelievable,' Todd tutted.

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Camille pressed her ear against the damp fabric of the tent – sounded empty, no sign of movement. She unsheathed her sword's blade from its wooden form, slicing through the canvas without a sound. Adam slithered through the gap. 'Clear,' he whispered. The gentle glow from a small electric heater provided just enough light for the two to navigate around the main desk, Camille turning over papers while trying to examine the strategic maps laid out, eyes straining.

'39<sup>th</sup> Corps from the north, 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> from the south,' she muttered beneath her breath.

'Just as Aleksander Kaminski and the Resistance advised,' Adam joined, glance shooting between the map and a collection of items sitting on top of a smaller side table, a portrait of Hitler taking pride of place in its centre. 'If Smolensk falls, it'll be a straight march upon Moscow within months. The Soviet falls.'

‘Or retreats at least?’ Camille questioned, panning down the length of the River Volga into the Black Sea, its surrounding coastline dotted with black crosses, oil-rich lands. ‘I don’t think the capital is the main objective here...Hitler wants the natural resources of the Ukrainian soils. The oil fields here in Maykop and Grozny. Then he can advance deeper into all of Asia...’ her voice tapered off. ‘Nothing would stand in his way, except...’

‘The Japanese Empire,’ Adam concluded, studying the items to the side. Placed behind the Führer's monotone photograph was a carving, a woman, elegant and detailed. Adam went to beckon Camille over when a commotion was heard outside the tent’s entrance. Two muffled groans were heard, followed by dull thuds, and a slim shadowy figure revealed itself, white headband highlighted by a hint of starlight.

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Whistle? What sort of whistle? Todd chewed his tongue before cupping his hands over his lips and attempting to make an avian sound. He succeeded in covering his palms with a film of saliva, his mouth going dry as a sharp prick struck his neck.

‘Really, Mr Allen? Is this is what the mighty Red Dragon knights have been reduced to – foolish espionage and

dress-up?’ sneered Walter Dorf, his sword digging deeper into Todd’s flesh, drawing a trickle of blood. ‘Stand up, drop your staff!’ he ordered. Todd rose slowly, hands held high. ‘I’ll admit to being impressed, son of Sir Galahad – you and your loyal band of six have held out for quite some time against our good lady’s latest fight. Alas, it would appear your saviour Mr Ben Benson has failed to rally to the cause as he did so majestically back in 1918. Pity.’ Dorf circled round to face Todd, sword ready to strike.

‘Quite the offensive you have in motion here, Walter. Doubt Lady Morgan has left anything to chance this time?’ Todd held firm. ‘Although, not exactly gone according to plan I would say, has it? Not quite the walkover in Britain and the North Atlantic one would have anticipated from the Palladium and its master,’ he twisted his words.

‘Oh, give it time Mr Allen. You and the Red Dragon will soon see that all your previous attempts to stop Lady Morgan Worthington and all her loyal subjects were all in vain. Indeed, it would be prudent for you and whomever you are here with to submit now, join us, and usher in a new age of empire,’ Dorf teased, taking a small step forward, allowing the edge of his sword to bite a little deeper. ‘I take it you are not alone, knight of Sir Galahad? Another Red Dragon loyalist perhaps? Maybe...maybe a Sacred Band warrior? Can’t say there’ll

be many of those left once the Third Reich completes its destiny,' he sneered gleefully.

'Destiny? You call genocide a destiny?' Todd ground out his response through gritted teeth.

'A purging of the impure, yes. As the Gods have done for centuries...why should we of the Round Table be any different? Or have you forgotten your beliefs, Mr Allen? Those same beliefs that run in your bloodline and forged your very sword? Why, this is not about Nazis or Adolf Hitler, no more so than any other empire founded or toppled by Lady Morgan. This is an opportunity for us, our kind, to rise off the backs of those beneath us and take our rightful place once again,' Dorf pompously lectured. 'For once though, through the ambitions of the Third Reich we have a stable foundation to make our cause a reality, come closer to that destiny than ever before.' He patted the side of his pressed coat, gave a twitch of his eyebrow. 'Join us, Todd Allen. I won't ask again.'

'We don't, and never will, share the same destiny, Walter, son of Sir Gareth. I wonder though, whether the venerable Lady Morgan has as much faith in this campaign as you expect? Or do her powers waver? I cannot imagine why one so revered and so confident in her abilities would require more relics from a bygone age?' Todd fixed his gaze on Walter's chest. 'Something else to hide, have you? Greek myths and legends no

longer sufficient for those of the *Albus Draco*? You must begin to ask yourself how much faith and conviction Morgan le Fay has after such a stretched mortal life.'

'So be it, Mr Allen.' Walter raised his blade high, ready to strike, caught off guard by a bolt of blue fire from the Field Marshall's tent behind. His hesitancy gave Todd the advantage, swiping his staff up from his feet and unleashing his own blade, sparking against Dorf's in a flash of brilliant white.

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Camille threw herself on Miko Honjo's back, her sword creeping closer to the Japanese soldier's jugular. She felt her victim buckle, her feet securely back on the ground, then in an instant, her view was turned upside down as the slender man threw her over his right shoulder in a skillful move, landing her harshly on her back. Winded, Rochelle managed to block Miko's blade with her own just as he went for a killing blow. A scream of clashing metal broke the air, Camille and Miko both exchanging looks of disbelief as they found their swords at an impasse.

Adam hurled a blue spear, Miko ducked, allowing its trail to split through the flanks of the tent. The cinders fell upon the electric heater, erupting in a spout of flame that engulfed the far corner. The Pole threw his

fist, Honjo blocking it neatly and managing two quick jabs of his own. A sharp and precise kick to the stomach toppled his big frame, giving clear passage to the Palladium statue. Miko grabbed the carving, turned for the exit, intercepted by a revived Adam and a summoned shield of blue. 'Give it your best shot, Jap! Come on!' Adam beckoned menacingly. Miko's fingers curled around the pommel of the Kamikaze Blade, and would have brought forth a channelled gale sweeping his foe from his sight had it not been for the shock he felt the moment the ring of blue flame danced in his eyes. A recent memory of conflict in Korea, and a native fighter staring Miko down in defiance, his fallen comrade lying dead at his feet. The image was enough to make each muscle in Miko's body freeze, a sworn enemy prepared to die when his comrade in arms had been riddled with bullets only seconds earlier. The Korean stood, tears flowing down his crimson cheeks, blue fire surrounding his arm and guarding the body of the man he so clearly loved, until he himself fell beside him. Miko could not bring himself to execute the killing blow, just as he could not bring himself to now. *Aoi Hi* – the only words to leave his shocked lips.

Camille rallied, choking from the spreading plumes of smoke billowing within the tent. The shouts of German troops could be heard from outside, alerted to the danger – *Feuer! Feuer!* – the trample of boots and the click of guns heeded. She swung her blade once more at Miko, blocked again by his own. A bony elbow struck

Camille on her jaw, she fell, Adam darting between her and Miko's sword to block with his shield, the Kamikaze Blade springing back like elastic, its recoil throwing Honjo off balance and down to the ground, the Palladium still gripped in his hand. The smoke drew in on all three, as did the swelling shadows of German troops around the tent, splashes of water from buckets seeking to douse the flames, with little effect. More orders came in German to enter the tent and retrieve all its contents before it was too late. Adam took advantage of Miko's weakened position and in a state of confusion, seized upon the nearest sharp object he could find – a blunt letter opener. Drobinski hurled himself at a spread-eagled Miko, thrusting the small knife down towards his chest, grazing the arm of the sacred statue itself. A shard of stone was chipped from the Palladium, Miko and Adam both exchanging looks of shock. Honjo's brow was pebbled with beads of sweat, born of panic that his treasure could be harmed so easily. He positioned his knee beneath Adam's groin and levered him off with force. Before Adam could counter, the Kamikaze Blade was brought forth, slashing him savagely across his breast. A blast of controlled wind overturned the heavy wood desk, Adam and Camille tumbling over the top and ejected out the back like leaves trapped in a storm. The tent itself just held at anchor, pegs wrenching from the earth, fires inside extinguished by the force of the conjured wind. German soldiers barked more orders, now in disarray. Three moved in from the main entrance, only to be catapulted

out again by another blast of wind at the hands of Miko. His time among the German company was at an end and he turned and fled, the prized Palladium in hand.

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Todd and Walter had continued to trade blows, blade meeting blade, sparks and sprites of white light flying. The knights locked, neither buckling as their swords ground upon each other. Todd gave way first, the uncomfortable fit of the stranger's boot making any riposte difficult. Walter could smell victory, but was unhinged by the familiar cries of Alfie Becker in the background. He broke off, ran to the tent in time to witness the pulse of wind toss out two bodies from its back, then repeat it with the German soldiers entering from the front. 'Dorf! Dorf! Where are you?' Becker's voice echoed, the gleam of his sword barely visible through the charred remnants of the tent's tarpaulin.

'Yeah, you better run!' Todd breathed heavily, catching a glimpse of the slender figure and his white bandanna slinking off into the dense woodland beyond. The bodies of Adam and Camille lay in the longer grasses, hidden for now, motionless. He scurried his way over to Rochelle, who was slowly coming to. 'Camille, Camille. Quick, we've got to go.' He hooked her arm over his shoulder.



'The Palladium...' she croaked. 'He has it. The Japanese soldier.'

'The Japanese...what?' Todd tried to reason, all the while fixating on the masses of German troops frantically churning through the remains of the tent in some sort of futile salvage operation. He heard the muffled groan of Adam, the Pole staggering to his feet, blood weeping through his cloud-grey coat. 'Adam, can you manage?'

'*Tak,*' Adam sucked in whatever air he could. 'Make for the forests. We can look to regroup with the Polish Resistance.' His eyes began to roll into the back of his head. Todd spread his support to both Adam and a slowly recuperating Camille. 'I'm fine,' Adam said with a stumble. 'You two go on.'

'Save it, big man. Camille, can you help?' Todd bore the bulk of Adam's load as Camille rallied and slipped beneath Drobinski's other arm. 'Good, let's get out of here.'

'Where was your whistle?' Adam panted. 'Could have let us know trouble was coming.'

'Seriously?' Todd gave a shake of his head.

Alfie Becker promptly disguised his sword, reverting it back to its wooden staff form just as Walter Dorf appeared at his side. 'Care to explain this?' he rubbed the sleep from his bleary eyes, woken by all the frenetic activity and now standing bare-chested, only half the buttons of his trousers fastened, squinting in the floodlit camp. 'Tell me you saw it, the Palladium. Did Von Bock leave it in there?' he rattled his fingertips against his staff.

'Todd Allen, the Red Dragon, they were *here*,' Dorf grumbled.

'The knight of Sir Galahad is not capable of that kind of performance, Walter! A typhoon, one witness called it,' Becker snapped. 'And was almost certainly not alone. Was there another knight? A Sacred Band member? A soldier here swore blind he saw a flash of blue fire, thought it was a flare or even a bolt of lightning...' he ranted, pausing for breath and composure. 'If we cannot find the Palladium among that scorched wreck over there, Commander Dorf, then we have a problem...a major problem!' He jabbed his finger into Walter's chest.

'Spare me your sermons, Alfred!' Dorf spurned. 'We'll find the Palladium, and if not, we still have this.' He opened up the obsidian lining of his coat, revealing the Spear of Destiny, safely stowed away.

Becker frowned. 'Let us hope come sunrise, we have both once more. For your sake at least.' He turned on his heel and returned to his quarters. 'I'll let you inform General Field Marshal Von Bock as to the events here tonight...oh, I forgot to mention, I've been instructed to leave for the northern front towards Moscow tomorrow, so I will let you, Walter, *also* inform Lady Morgan as to these same events that have unfolded here tonight. I most certainly *will not* be the bearer of such ill fortune. Good luck, Sir Gareth.'

## **Chapter 21**

### **Moscow – Soviet Union**

**15<sup>th</sup> November 1941 AD**

Todd's breath appeared to freeze mid-air, his hands locked together barely mobile enough to generate enough warmth through friction. Snowfall had settled deep upon the outskirts of the Russian capital, carpeting what remained of the high rise dwellings of the Klin District in a blanket of cotton white. Chunks of sawn-off concrete hung from twisted strips of metal from the building in front, all but destroyed by relentless Luftwaffe bombing runs over the past few days. The German advance had been hammering down hard in its attempt to capture Moscow, news of the fall of Smolensk quickly spreading through the Red Army ranks and forcing Stalin's hand in hurling every available man, woman, and even those of an age Todd would have considered children, straight into the Soviet front line, often armed with only a pitchfork. Ammunitions were running low, each rifle and pistol shared among three soldiers during the most intense engagements – rescue coming to the fatherland not always from its fighters, but from its bitterly cold weather.

'Lowest temperature this century, the Soviets say.' A tender-faced Polish scout approached Todd with a cup of hot liquid. Allen sniffed it, unable to tell if it was coffee or tea, but welcomed its warmth. 'Don't think the Nazis will be prepared for minus forty degrees come the New Year.'

'Perhaps,' Todd sipped with a shiver. 'How long have you been operating here in the Soviet?' he asked the freckled youth.

'About six months now, sir.' The youth stood proudly to attention. 'Not many of us so far back behind the German line though. Most of the Grey Ranks operate from Warsaw. But when the Nazis decided to invade the Soviet Union, well, we made the most of it.' His eyes twinkled with a sense of delight.

'The enemy of my enemy I suppose.' Todd grinned, gesturing to the young Pole scout's grubby rifle. 'You ever fired that?'

'Oh yes.'

'At a person?'

The scout lowered his gaze, scuffed his boots on the frosted rubble, gave a quick shake of his head. 'Good to hear,' Todd reassured. 'There are other ways to help your country and the Polish Underground State, just as you and many of your fellow scout troops here today

have shown us.’ The young Pole gave an unconvinced look.

‘I was speaking to the Polish pilot you and Mademoiselle Rochelle brought with you. He says he escaped a Nazi concentration camp? Evaded capture from the Germans all the way to the outskirts of Warsaw?’ The scout’s face lit up with enthusiasm and wonder. ‘Then, our founder Aleksander Kaminski managed to smuggle him over to Britain where he shot down dozens of Nazi planes. Now he returns to us to help fight for the freedom of Poland,’ he regaled energetically.

‘Mr Drobinski did, yes. You wish to be like him?’ Todd took a seat upon a fallen concrete block.

‘Yes, sir. A true Polish Resistance hero,’ the scout replied.

Todd flashed a smile. ‘I’m sure he would like to hear more brave men like you say that. For it is the truth.’ The boom of a grenade could be heard several buildings away, a rattle of bullets shortly after. The two turned towards the horizon, plumes of ashen smoke mushroomed up. ‘Perhaps more important to remember his gallantry for generations to come, young Mr...?’

‘Pavel.’ The scout readied his rifle, aiming at nothing but pale skies.

‘Pavel. Also remember, during a war what matters is knowing when it is right to spare a life, rather than take

one. That is what Aleksander Kaminski would wish for you and the Grey Ranks to learn.’ Todd lowered Pavel’s rifle. ‘You’ve sheltered me, Camille Rochelle and Adam Drobinski – that is worth more than one dead German or Soviet at your hand. Save whomever you can, don’t think pulling a trigger makes you a hero. Be smarter than most in this conflict.’

Pavel nodded. Two more explosions from nearby buildings shook his body back on edge. ‘We should make our way to the bunkers below, Mr Allen,’ his voice squeaked with fear. ‘The Red Army looks like it’s on the move again.’

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Camille held a tepid, damp cloth against Adam’s chest, the fine slash from Miko’s blade drawn like red ink from nipple to nipple. ‘Stiches appear to be holding up.’ She smiled in contrast to Adam’s wince, the usually bullish Pole gnawing at his bottom lip to hold back any sound of pain.

‘Thought it would have healed by now. Usually they do,’ Adam breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Wasn’t made by any typical blade though, was it,’ Camille reminded. ‘In fact, we have no idea quite what it was.’

‘Or who *he was*,’ Adam confirmed, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, digits feeling the bite of the winter frost. ‘Other than being a Japanese soldier, we have no clue as to where he might have headed these past few months, to whom he reports, or...’

‘...or whether he does in fact carry the Palladium,’ Todd interjected, Pavel in tow. ‘Throughout all our ancestors’ many years spinning tales and secrets behind the relics of Ancient Greece, I’ve never once heard one speak of such a formidable object forged by Athena herself being damaged by something as pedestrian as a letter opener.’ He leaned against a crumbling brick wall, a sprinkling of dust showering his dark hair as yet more explosions rained from above. ‘Something doesn’t add up. This latest advance from Germany, as impressive and ruthless as it has been, is hardly on a par with the early successes in Western Europe. As Camille said, the Palladium doesn’t just stop working,’ he wondered.

‘I suppose the only way we’ll know for sure is to monitor the events unfolding out in the Pacific. See whether the grand Empire of Japan succeeds in its desired dominance. Would give the Americans something to think about,’ Camille replied, shaking fragments of brick from her beret. ‘The blade the Japanese soldier carried...’ her thoughts spoken out loud.

‘More than a simple sword I agree. Taken Mr Drobinski here much longer to recover from its inflicted wound



than most Sacred Band warriors.’ Todd lowered his voice to a whisper as Pavel crept up with a second cup of still unidentifiable hot fluid, offering it straight to Adam. The scout gave a respectful bow towards Drobinski, almost apologetic for the kind interruption, then quickly backing away to the lit stove. ‘As for his apparent skill in summoning gale-force winds. Well, that one is beyond me. A master of the typhoon? Never heard of it.’

‘Typhoon? Typhoon did you say?’ Pavel chirped, high-pitched. ‘Sorry...but that word I have heard of.’

‘Almost certainly, Pavel. It means a strong wind or storm...’ Adam began to translate into Polish before being cut off by the eager scout.

‘No, no Mr Drobinski. An *Operation Typhoon*. I believe that is what the Germans are calling this very offensive against Moscow.’ Pavel darted for a pile of rugged slips of paper piled in the corner of the bunker, pulling one loose. ‘Here, you see. From the Polish Resistance itself.’ He passed the crumpled note to Adam. Drobinski ran his finger through the text, mumbling a translation.

‘Where did you get this?’ Adam asked Pavel.

‘From the Polish Underground State. We Grey Ranks occasionally receive instructions based on decoded Nazi messages, helps us know when the way is clear to ferry our countrymen back and forth across the Soviet-Polish border,’ Pavel explained, immediately returning to the

pile and retrieving another note. 'This one here, it was received back in the summer when Hitler was set to invade the Soviets - Operation Barbarossa. We all hoped it was relayed to the wider Resistance and our Allies in Britain. Camille took the paper and read aloud its contents:

*OPERATION BARBAROSSA – IN HONOUR OF THE MOST HOLY FREDERICK BARBAROSSA THE GREAT OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND KING OF GERMANY. MAY HE AND THE HOLY LANCE OF DESTINY GUIDE THE THIRD REICH TO GLORY AS THE GOOD LADY BARBARA WORTHINGTON, DEAREST COMPANION TO THE FÜHRER'S FIANCEE, HAS WISHED AND NAMED. HEIL HITLER. A SPEER.*

'We had details of another military operation, one that sought to take control of your homeland, Britain, Mr Allen.' Pavel remained animated. 'We were not sure, you see, whether this Operation Barbarossa was the same, or something different entirely. *A Speer*, we thought, sounded similar to...*Wlocznia*.' His lungs ran dry.

'A spear, like a harpoon. Operation Harpune. Yes, we got that far too, mon chéri,' Camille smiled, giving Pavel's pastel-pink cheek a motherly pat. 'It's why we are here, the three of us. You see, the *Wlocznia* is just as you would translate into Polish, a spear. A spear of great

importance to the Germans and their advance into Soviet territory. But you see here...' she pointed to the final words of the message. 'A Speer. A different spelling from the English word meaning a long, sharp weapon. This is a name, the name of a very high-ranking Nazi.'

'Albert Speer!' Todd pinched his weary eyes. 'Lady Morgan, or *Barbara* as she appears to be calling herself as now, has managed to work her way right to the top of Hitler's food chain. Influencing even the Braun sisters themselves.'

'That'll account for Walter Dorf and Alfie Becker's current positions in the Third Reich Forces. Von Lamorak's too,' Camille confirmed. 'The White Dragon knights of Sir Gareth, Sir Tristan and Sir Lamorak all circling like vultures just waiting to pick at the carcass that will be the remains of humanity once the war is over.'

Pavel gave a puzzled look, turning to Adam for a translation, Adam giving a shake of his head, suggesting the boy's ignorance be a blessing. 'Pavel, this Operation Typhoon on Moscow, do you have any further deciphered messages from the Polish Underground State shared with the Resistance? Perhaps the most recent whereabouts of the Nazi Commanders? In particular, a Fedor Von Bock?' he questioned. Pavel's eyes wide pools, he scrabbled for one of the latest messages.

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There was cause for celebration in the weeks that fed into the earliest days of December. Soviet troops put on displays of Cossack Dance around roaring campfires in the streets of Klin, knee deep in the solace of snow. Their western enemy had been forced into retreat, the Red Army praising the might of the fatherland and Joseph Stalin for cleansing their lands of Nazi hordes. Word of mouth spread fast of the snaring of a German Panzer army to the north of the capital, cut off from the aerial support of the dreaded Luftwaffe and stalled solid in the hardened frost. While hopes of securing the scalp of a ranking Nazi commander like General Field Marshall Fedor Von Bock were dashed upon hearing of his imminent dismissal, the shackled line of captured German troops that were put on display was satisfaction enough. The welcome sight of the Red Air Force shooting overhead generated boisterous cheers and cap tossing, one landing on the head of Major Alfie Becker as he stood quietly among his defeated men.

‘Sir Tristan,’ came a familiar voice from behind. Becker spun around, went to grasp his wooden staff, only to be reminded that he no longer held any such weapon, as bare and defenceless as his German soldiers around him.

‘Looking for this?’ Todd teased Becker with his staff in front of his nose.

‘Todd Allen. Never would have believed Walter that you had the nerve to show your face this deep into the territorial campaign. How the knights of Sir Galahad so often surprise me.’ Alfie pursed his lips, hand pressed against a bullet wound oozing fresh blood from his upper arm. He ordered his capitulated soldiers to stand down, however little resistance they could now afford. ‘I suppose you wish to discuss terms?’

‘If by that you mean have a discussion, knight to knight, then yes.’ Todd leaned over Becker’s shoulder, speaking gently into his bloodied ear.

‘Will my men be spared from these Russian animals if I comply?’ Alfie raised his voice so all the captives could hear.

‘You and I clearly have different definitions as to what an animal is, Mr Becker,’ Todd said, fixing his gaze. ‘But if it aids you, of course, Mademoiselle Rochelle and I will see to it.’

‘Camille Rochelle? knight of Sir Gawain? Knew you lacked the spine to face me one on one,’ Alfie sneered as Todd plucked him from the group with a wrench of his arm.

‘Unlike the White Dragon, Mr Becker, we of the Red know a problem shared is a problem halved. Shall we?’ Todd forced.

Inside a bombed-out block of flats stood Camille Rochelle, sword glinting in the beam of morning sun that split through the shattered glass window. One side of her body bathed in blue from the flamed shield conjured by Adam Drobinski, her face like thunder. Alfie took to a seat in front of the pair, Todd judiciously positioning himself between them.

‘Now, we have our suspicions, Alfred, knight of Sir Tristan. The rise of this particular German Empire has not followed its usual pattern, would you not agree?’ Todd probed. Alfie screwed his mouth shut. ‘Which would lead us to believe something has gone wrong with Lady Morgan...or is it Barbara now?... and her handling of the sacred Palladium? Yes?’

Becker squirmed in his seat, transfixed by the heat of the blue fire held sternly by Adam. ‘Your kin, the fabled Sacred Band, I do wonder just how many will be left alive once this war is over. I see you, sir, already bear the mark of one doomed.’ He gestured to the pink triangle stitched on Adam’s coat. Such vile words triggered Drobinski’s quick reaction with a glowing spear, striking Becker on the thigh and producing an ungodly yelp from the knight.

‘Enough, Adam!’ Todd interrupted. ‘He’s no use to us dead.’ The Pole retracted. ‘Let’s try again, Alfred. The Nazis have tried to advance both west and east, and failed. This is not the Palladium we know from events past. Don’t try and fool us.’

‘What was it that you and Walter Dorf held at the camp in Smolensk? That which found its way into the hands of General Field Marshal Fedor Von Bock?’ Camille joined in. ‘That which is now in the hands of the Japanese soldier.’

There was an irritable cough from Becker, he shuffled once again. ‘I had my suspicions too. Our good Lady Morgan Worthington and her blessed Palladium...so often our guide and yet equally our fate it would appear. No, I don’t just mean the Necklace of Harmonia and her gift of prolonged life, not this time. The force that raises an empire has disintegrated to dust, like those that have fallen at her will over the many, many centuries.’ He lowered his head.

‘But why? Why when all favour and fortune was yours?’ Camille pressed. ‘Never before has an empire spawned so quickly, with a manipulable maniac at its head and a legion of sycophants at his call.’

‘Our Lady is plagued by dreams. Visions that have so far been poorly defined by even Christine Hartley, knight of Sir Geraint. She believes they reflect another empire,

one awash with red, beneath the waves of the seas...’ Becker rambled, trying to get to his feet, only to be pressed down again by Adam. ‘She’s been told it could be the Russians, the Japanese, maybe some other empire waiting to spread its wings and soar. All I know is that so far, that empire does not kneel to Adolf Hitler.’

Todd put his palm to his chin, turned thoughts over and over in his mind. ‘The statue secured by the Japanese soldier at Smolensk, it was *damaged*,’ he spoke into his hand.

‘Damaged? How?’ Becker’s interest was piqued.

‘By a simple letter opener. Sorry,’ Adam quipped.

‘Impossible. That forged by the Gods and Goddesses cannot be destroyed by mortal implements,’ Becker spat back.

‘Maybe this one can.’ Adam turned his back on their captive.

‘Unless...it is not the true Palladium at all,’ Todd chimed. ‘*A fake?*’

A stillness descended, all four in silence for a brief moment, a moment broken by a single gunshot and splash of blood on the cracked window. The back of a German soldier’s head smacked into the frame, slid down leaving a red trail. Becker’s mouth slowly parted in horror. ‘Mr Allen, you promised.’



Todd and Camille seized their staves, readied their knight lights with soft white glow. 'Alfred, please...we don't have much time. The Spear of Destiny, do you have it?' Todd spoke at pace.

'The Spear? No. You think if I did I would be in this pathetic situation? Moscow would have been ours, mine!' Alfie sparked, glare shifting to the open door behind and the sound of Soviet boots. 'Dorf. Commander Dorf, knight of Sir Gareth has it,' he panicked.

'Where?' Camille hurried, pressing her sword tip to Becker's throat.

'South, heading towards the oil fields of the Caucasus under Field Marshall Palaus, as the Führer has instructed. They were heading towards the River Volga and the Soviet stronghold of...'

'Stalingrad.' Camille finished for him.

'Mr Allen!' Becker demanded Todd's attention, hand outstretched to receive his staff. Todd kicked the item across just as the rattle of a machine gun echoed through the walls. Screams in German carried through the air, the metallic smell of warm blood nauseating.

'Go, Alfred. Return to Berlin at once, may the knights of Sir Tristan live to fight another day,' Todd noted, bowing. 'We'll leave it to your good grace as to how you choose to deal with Lady Morgan, but let it be known to her, this

fight is far from over.’ He sprinted for the exposed crack in the back wall of the war-torn building. ‘And don’t let us catch you on the front lines again,’ he warned as a parting shot.

‘I make no promises Mr Allen, just like you,’ Becker growled, sword prepared for a blinding knight light, wrist seized by the firm hand of Adam Drobinski.

‘You should, Knight of the White Dragon. For if I see you again, I shall do to you what your championed Nazis have done to my people.’ The edge of his blue-flamed spear drew close to Becker’s groin. ‘I understand you of King Arthur’s Round Table depend on your offspring to carry your legacy, I can soon put an end to that,’ he sneered a sadistic grin. Becker’s arm was relieved as Adam fled, time enough to slam his blade into the ground, casting brilliant white light. The entering Soviet soldiers shielded their eyes, blinked to readjust, finding only an empty space and an overturned chair.

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‘Do you think Alfred will make it? Back to Berlin?’ Camille hurried through the streets, sliding on icy paving stones and skipping over bomb-shaped craters that punctured the tarmac.

‘Probably. Wily as a fox, that one,’ Todd replied. ‘Should have taken my name.’

‘What?’ Adam queried, shield still on full display, prepared for any encounter.

‘Todd. In Middle English it means *fox*. So, you don’t know everything about languages, Mr Drobinski,’ Todd smirked. Adam took the hit, but was sure to push past the knight and lead the way ahead.

‘We can regroup with the Grey Ranks, Pavel said the scouts were still operating just south of Moscow and aiding evacuations.’ Adam headed for an abandoned Soviet vehicle, its owners still prancing to flute music around a burning Nazi flag. ‘We can seek safe passage down the River Volga from the City of Saratov. That is, assuming your knight of Sir Gareth hasn’t wielded some Christian force and subdued it under the boot of the Third Reich by now.’

‘Be somewhat reassured that the Spear of Destiny appears to be the only relic fuelling the White Dragon crusade now.’ Todd hopped into the passenger seat, scanning around for Camille. He called to her in urgency, Rochelle entranced by a nearby shop window. ‘Camille, come on. Now! Jeez.’ He threw his arms up in exasperation.

‘Listen.’ Camille pointed her finger to her ear lobe while tuning the dial of a domestic radio still broadcasting in

German, thrown from the shop display in an apparent looting.

'What?' Todd struggled with the translation, picking up a few words concerning the United States.

'Pearl Harbour. The Japanese have raided Pearl Harbour in the Pacific,' she said faintly. 'America is going to *war*.'

## Chapter 22

### Tokyo – Japan

8<sup>th</sup> June 1942 AD

His quarters were small, Miko thought indignantly as he stood on the terrace of General Rikichi Ando's private retreat in the heart of the Yamanote district of the capital. Apart from an inspiring view of the Imperial Palace, its slanted stone walls speckled with rain from the morning storm and sea-green roof tiles glinting into life by the clearing sun that followed, the amenities inside were basic. A pokey sleeping chamber, walls latticed with delicately carved wood, a simple kitchen with only a few beaten copper pans and basic utensils, and perhaps worst of all, a lowered ceiling with beams that Honjo banged his head on every three steps. Not a man of great physical stature himself, how such confinement was received by a decorated war general would have been Miko's opening topic of conversation, had General Ando not beaten him to it.

'Please, sit,' the general instructed, kneeling by the open shoji and pouring steaming green tea into glazed pottery cups. Miko lowered his head to avoid the doorframe, having already fallen foul of its height once, immediately

bowing deeply. 'Oh, please, Honjo san. No need for formalities now. By now I'm sure you must have heard, I am no longer an officer of the Imperial Army.' Ando said giving a brisk wave of his finger.

Miko twitched an eye while settling to his knees. He remained rigid as stone for a few moments, unsure how to react to such modesty from Ando, balancing his thoughts as to whether to discuss his forced retirement from the army further or simply leave it be. The fragrant aroma of the green tea mixed with the delicate scent of the cherry blossoms in glorious full bloom just beyond the terrace, the general breathed in deeply, then exhaled in a moment of relaxation and contentment. Miko opened his mouth to speak, but still could not find suitable words. He copied his mentor, closing his eyes and reflecting upon the same precious moment of peace the two had recognised to be so rare. 'You see, just over there...' the general took a sip of tea and nodded beyond the Imperial Palace walls. 'The Americans dropped bombs upon that very site not two months ago. Retaliation for the success we accomplished in Pearl Harbour last year.'

'A pitiful response,' Miko fawned over-eagerly, then wishing he could take his own words back when Ando's piercing gaze shot back.

'Pitiful you say? To strike at the very heart of our empire with such rigour and passion so soon after a humiliating

defeat? No, Honjo san, no. That is the spirit of a fighter, an enemy that is not prepared to back down even when their blood has all but drained from their body. They will stand, and stand again despite the beatings we rain upon them.’ Ando placed his cup down with force, frustration bubbling beneath his usual placid composure. ‘And indeed, we see it now, before our very eyes in the Pacific. The Midway Atoll and Isoroku Yamamoto’s plan for expansion, said to have his hand forced by me after sweeping through French Indo-China in the name of our heavenly emperor. Well, let me tell you, Honjo san, we do not wait for our enemies to come to us, we take the battle to them.’ Ando’s arms became animated through a sudden surge of passion. ‘The only difference between Yamamoto and me is that I succeeded. Whereas he will not.’

Miko stared at the floor, still unsure of his response. He tensed his back muscles, craned his neck to one side to catch a glimpse of the general’s old uniform, proudly dressing a mannequin in the corner of his sleeping quarters, katana blade neatly mounted on the dressing table beside it. He brought his fingertips to the hilt of the Kamikaze Blade buckled around his waist. He thought of returning it, a gesture of goodwill or better still, a potent reminder to Ando of his own greatness and skill. Would this be an insult? Miko over-worked his mind, hand slipping from its grip on the weapon. His voice returned. ‘Japan has achieved wonders, General Ando, true

wonders. No one, not even the Americans, would have predicted the success of Pearl Harbour, or our expansion into the colonial lands of Malaysia and Singapore. Why, even Australia could fall by the end of the year, leaving the British empire with little more than a setting sun in the east, while ours only rises,' came a rousing injection of optimism from the young soldier.

He pulled from behind his back the small wicker box he had brought with him, so eager to show the general its contents after so many months of travel and excursions across the Asian continent. He flicked the lid off, revealing the carved statue within. 'The Palladium, General Ando. The very object that gives birth to empires. Just as you instructed me – it exists! And we now have it.' Miko seized the object like a child with its first doll, shaking it with boundless enthusiasm. 'Don't you see...everything you dreamed of, that we dreamed of. The glory to the Chrysanthemum Throne. Together with the Kamikaze Blade we can...' the statue was snatched from Miko mid-sermon.

General Ando inspected the object, scratching at the chink cut into the arm of the maiden, looking to Miko for an explanation. 'A letter opener did this damage, Honjo san?' Ando gave an incredulous squint. He stood abruptly, shuffled towards his sleeping chamber and retrieved his katana from its mantle, unsheathed it and swung its blade with mild force. The statue was severed



at the maiden's midriff, two equal pieces tumbling to the tatami floor. Miko stared, horrified. 'Tell me, Honjo san, after our many lectures ahead of your mission, the tales and myths I fed your intellect with, did you really think such a relic of ceaseless power could be so easily damaged by a banal object such as a letter opener?' Ando sparked. Miko's mouth became parched like a desert, unable to close. 'Whatever this item is you have retrieved, it is not the Palladium of Ancient Greece, the forger of empires. A fake. A ruse, whatever you care to call it. It has no more perseverance than the ephemeral blossoms that sit right outside my own door! Brushed aside with the slightest breeze, just like our forces in the Pacific.'

'But...the Germans! They have advanced into the Soviet Union practically unchallenged. They had to have something...' Miko ranted, holding a piece of his sorry prize in each hand.

'Indeed, but this, Honjo san, is not it. And might I note, the Nazis might be advancing east as they planned, but all their attempts in the west have stalled. Britain remains obstinate, the German Navy in disarray, Moscow holding, rebellions springing up like bamboo shoots across occupied territory...and I even hear their own military codes might have been cracked? Hardly an empire destined for greatness.' Ando turned resolutely, katana still gleaming winter-white. 'No, they must have

something else. Something I missed,' He tutted. 'There destiny lies elsewhere.'

'Destiny?' Miko repeated. 'When in Smolensk, I heard two German generals talking of another relic, not born of Ancient Greece. A spear of some kind? Christian in its origins.' He bolted to his feet. 'They said it too had influence, perhaps in exchange for that possibly lost by the Palladium?'

Ando sheathed his katana, rubbed his oil-smooth bald head and let out a murmur. 'Different relics, different tales, no one clear vision. I, my dear Honjo san, am beginning to feel like the only true and trusted source of achievement comes from the hearts of men, and men alone. Those prepared to sacrifice all on the battlefield for what they believe to be right, that is honour at its most *pure*.' He walked past gingerly, cowered over like a monk serving penance. 'After all, what is victory without honour, Honjo san? Without sacrifice? An empire born of lies is not a foundation I would be prepared to accept. Nor would the emperor, I very much doubt.'

The words of General Rikichi Ando resonated through Miko, nods to honour and service. The descriptions of the man that confronted him within the tent at Smolensk, the blue flame, the *aoi hi* – for it was not the first time Miko had witnessed such power in the hands of his enemy, a steadfast defiance seen before on the borders of Korea and Manchukuo only four years prior. A

man of Miko's age then, teeth bared, black hair matted with mud and sweat, a fellow soldier slain by his feet. The enemy's rifle was emptied, no sharp weapon in sight, only the sphere of blue that spun from one arm that arrested Miko's trigger finger. For the man was not to be moved, more a plea for mercy to die alongside his comrade than a final charge of aggression, a mercy Miko struggled to execute. A shot whistled over his shoulder, fired from a Japanese soldier behind, ending his foe's life in a splash of rose-red blood. Whatever honour Miko believed he held that day was to forever be overshadowed, the circle of blue fire a sobering reminder as to what true honour is. He snapped his mind free of sentiment and whimsy - 'You told me once, General, that the smart hunter does not seek to share. If we allow this power, whatever this Spear of Destiny might be, to be wielded by our enemies, then all of Japan could fall to the Germans. You said yourself, the Berlin Pact is a fallacy, an allegiance of lies. No one can be trusted, least of all Adolf Hitler.' He retraced Ando's footsteps. 'Let me return to the Soviet front. Seek this power for our own hands, restore glory to Japan and ensure our conquest of the Pacific.'

General Ando stood silently, attention drawn to yet more granite-dark storm clouds rolling in off the coast. 'Very well, Honjo san. I grant your request. Head for the City of Stalingrad on the River Volga – our sources suggest Hitler will press through the southern passes of

Russia and look to capitalise on the much-needed oil reserves there.'

'Yes, their Field Marshall Von Bock was quite specific,' Miko cut in sharply. General Ando's eyebrows rose, whether he was impressed by his reconnaissance or alarmed at the clumsiness of the Nazi High Command, Miko could not tell. 'I can travel back through Manchuria, use the Trans-Siberian railway en route to Moscow, divert south before reaching the Soviet capital and...'

'No. That line is severed, another welcome gift to us by Hitler and his spurning of Joseph Stalin. Travel by road with the Imperial Army, far more chance of success. But...' the general dropped his sarcasm and stepped closer to Miko, tapping the pommel of the Kamikaze Blade. '...should this route too appear to fail you, remember the gifts you too have to hand, Honjo san.'

## Chapter 23

### Berlin – Germany

1<sup>st</sup> August 1942 AD

‘I’m telling you, my Lady Morgan, it was there. Right there in the tent.’ Alfie Becker marched back and forth, his motions tracked by the fiery green eyes of Lady Morgan Worthington. He swallowed hard, covered with a cough. ‘Of course, Sir Walter Dorf might have been mistaken? The statue we saw, while a striking resemblance, might have lacked some nuances, the colour possibly? Sandier in texture than I remember and...’ he tripped frantically over his excuses.

Lady Morgan stood, hands pressing on the smooth wood of a table set in the centre of the government chamber. A quick nod towards the empty plinth in the corner of the hall where the Palladium last stood. ‘Do you know, Alfred, son of Sir Tristan, in over a century I have never let the Palladium out of my sight, not once. Too precious a relic to let slip, from the greasy, rapacious hands of Yorkist Englishmen to Confederate Americans, even when I believed in their causes, knew that we as the White Dragon could prosper, I still held my guard high. Yes, I have my visions, and this here necklace to guide

me, rejuvenating my wits like the spring of youth even as my body slowly – painfully slowly – decays with each passing of the moon. However, I took a risk here, with Hitler, with the Third Reich...from the moment I saw majesty in the German people for the second time in a generation, I believed in them more than any other nation before me, before us.’ She contorted backwards, her spine clicking, ashen skin stretching thinly over protruding collar bones. ‘In Munich, the so-called capital of movement, I believed it. So much so as to try this blessed Continent once more, even go as far as to shed my own skin and give the present a new persona, Barbara, the foreigner, a foreigner on lands that should be *mine*,’ she seethed. ‘What have I learnt? About taking risks? About trust...?’ her hands clenched to fists, coils of green light wisping around the white of the knuckles. Alfie Becker froze, suddenly aware that his own wrists were ensnared by two shining green serpents, scaly tails wrapped above the joint, choking the flow of blood to his hands. Becker buckled to his knees, wooden staff rendered useless, the serpents burying their heads in pools of mist, weighing the knight down like two firm anchors.

‘My lady, let me explain...!’ Alfie gritted his teeth.

‘Let me tell you what I’ve learnt, son of Sir Tristan. *Trust no one!*’ Lady Morgan erupted with a blow of green energy that unshackled Becker and threw his body hard

into the far wall. Alfie hit the ground with an unceremonious thud, winded and trembling.

‘Please...Lady Morgan. We still have the advantage,’ Becker wheezed, attempting to clamber to his feet. ‘Even if the Palladium has fallen into the hands of the Japanese, we can still switch sides, can’t we? Let that empire rise and the Nazi one fall? We just need to...’ his sentence was squeezed short by a newly summoned green serpent, now coiled tightly around his throat. He gasped, fingertips trying to alleviate the mounting pressure on his windpipe but grasping at nothing, the spell a hologram only its caster could control.

‘Switch sides? What do you take me for, Alfred? A fool? The Japanese do not have the Palladium, nor do the Germans, nor the Red Dragon. For none have made progress, all have faltered. The Pacific is all but lost, Britain holds strong and Stalin resists. At least, for now.’ Lady Morgan snapped her fingers, the choking serpent vanishing in specks of green embers. ‘Hartley, daughter of Sir Geraint, she misguides, misreads my visions. I have come to know this. My dreams, those of crushing blue oceans and twisted metal, they do not speak of the rise of the Japanese, nor their apparent victory at Pearl Harbour.’ She slid around the table, caught in her own thoughts. ‘The veil of red...the mist...it fogs everything. It resembles not the Red Sun of Japan, nor the Red Flag of the Soviets. Rust. The way iron withers. A curtain,’ she

strained, falling into the nearest seat, hand hovering over the ruby jewel of the necklace.

Alfie tentatively stepped forward, head lowered and unthreatening. 'You push yourself too much, Lady Morgan. You must know by now your subjects, those six of the White Dragon, shall always remain loyal to you, and can bear the weight of your burden. We believe in your vision, one where the old ways can return to us, a world where the righteous govern. Not the weak. Our Round Table can be united once more, with you, not King Arthur, at its head.' He offered a hand of comfort. Lady Morgan swatted it away like an irksome fly.

'You speak of trust, Alfred. Where is Amin el-Husseini and his followers of Sir Palamedes right now? Where might I find Michael Von Lamorak, son of the Sir Lamorak bloodline?' Lady Morgan grunted.

'Both knights willing to die for your cause, Lady Morgan, certainly Michael Von Lamorak aboard the *Bismarck*. A crying shame for our kind that he left no direct heirs to his blade,' Alfie replied.

'Is it? Much like the Hussin family line, I question the loyalty of the Lamoraks, especially young Michael. So eager to please, so desperate for success. Those desperate make mistakes, Alfred. Often costly ones.' Lady Morgan's temper eased, shifting to remorse. 'Trust is a treasured thing, knight of Sir Tristan. The harsh



realisation is dawning on me that those within Nazi High Command might not have been the visionaries I once thought them to be, for they are beguiling, slippery. One might have taken the Palladium without my knowledge...supposing Hitler himself gave the real relic, not to Fedor Von Bock, but another within his ranks. Another that he too shouldn't have trusted. It means that the Palladium could be anywhere,' her voice sank beneath her melancholy.

'But you do still have your visions, my Lady,' Becker interjected. 'Oceans and shards of metal. It could mean a wreck, a site of destruction?'

Lady Morgan took to her feet once more. 'That is exactly what Christine suggested, a shipwreck, perhaps one of our own making,' she spoke at pace.

'Perhaps the *Bismarck* itself?' Becker insinuated. Lady Morgan cocked her head to the side and let out a sigh.

'If that were so, then not only has Michael Von Lamorak betrayed us, but Operation Rheinberg and the Battle of the North Atlantic was doomed from the very start,' she toyed with the Necklace of Harmonia once again. 'What sort of Athenian magic is undone by British battleship shells?'

'Von Lamorak swore he was tracked. Sacred Band he said, since his first mission into Poland. Might they have...?' Alfie paused, not daring to utter another word

once Lady Morgan's gaze shone vibrant green once more.

'Then the sooner Hitler and the Nazis exterminate them, the better,' she cursed. 'Their numbers are already falling across Europe and Africa. Even if we, the White Dragon, do not win this war, I shall take solace in the fact our Red Dragon allies will have been dealt a blow hard enough to set them back a generation.'

'And the Benson line? Those of Sir Bedivere? What of Excalibur?' Alfie reduced his tone to a whisper.

'Unsure. While the mind of Ben Benson might be impaired, he is not without offspring as we know. The chance to summon the sword of Excalibur remains alive as long as his children walk this earth. We can only buy ourselves time until we rediscover the Palladium. As for my sister...' Lady Morgan broke off, stepping closer to the high windows of the Reich Chancellery, observing the gentle gush of the fountain below at the centre of the Wilhelmplatz.

'The Lady of the Lake? Sir Bedivere's guide?' Becker stepped to her side.

'Indeed. Never one for breaking the rules of engagement, always willing the spirit of Sir Bedivere on to complete their task each time. However, if the Benson family should fail repeatedly, their curse of addictions and afflictions too strong, her ethereal hands might just

be forced.’ Lady Morgan studied her own palms, turning them over like parchments. ‘Crushing oceans,’ she muttered in her breath.

Alfie Becker gave a stern and forced cough. ‘My lady, our next move could be a decisive one. I know I have failed you in Moscow, but Walter Dorf still commands the Spear of Destiny and is making for the Soviet city of Stalingrad. Victory is all but assured provided we...’

‘Provided we don’t meet resistance. My knowledge of the Spear of Destiny is not as deep as that of the Palladium, and as such, leaves us vulnerable. It could be destroyed, or worse, captured by The Red Dragon – Todd Allen of Sir Galahad and Camille Rochelle of the Sir Gawain bloodlines. Yes, I did read your report from Smolensk, Alfred. My suspicions tell me that we might not have heard the last from our rogue fighter from Japan either, the summoner of storms,’ Lady Morgan mused.

‘I can join General Dorf and his new commanding officer, Wilhelm List, at Stalingrad. Two knights must be better than one?’ Becker proposed.

‘I thought that at Smolensk, yet still Mr Allen and Mrs Rochelle managed to break through your lines. No. Remain here in Berlin and I shall send for you if assistance is needed. If Stalingrad falls, you shall return to the Soviet front and together you and Walter will

march across Asia, Amin el-Husseini in tow. With or without the Palladium. Only the Americans can stand in your way, but by that time, a truce may be called, and thus, time is bought for our next move.’ Lady Morgan turned on her heel and resumed a more confident seat at the table.

‘And if Stalingrad does not fall?’ Becker shivered as the words slipped out.

‘Then you and I shall need to endure, focus all efforts on retrieving the Palladium, Mr Becker. As will all our White Dragon kin.’ An uneasy smile creased Lady Morgan’s pale cheeks. ‘Let Todd Allen throw his Red Dragon knights into the affray, have them and whatever remains of the Sacred Band be slaughtered, until their numbers dwindle into insignificance. We shall live to fight another war, and perhaps, on completely different terms to anything you and I have witnessed before.’

Becker nodded, raising his wooden staff high, silver ring glimmering in the evening light. ‘Third time is the charm, perhaps? For Germany?’ he lightened. ‘Albus Draco, my good Lady Morgan.’

Lady Morgan Worthington waved her hand in dismissal, crept towards a solidly perched globe in the far corner of the hall, spinning it playfully a few times before braking its motion with her finger, a black varnished nail scratched the map of the Middle East and Northern

Egypt, the first few letters of *Berg Sinai* in Gothic script torn from the sphere. 'Indeed, third time *could* become the charm. Just not for Germany.'

## **Chapter 24**

### **Stalingrad – Soviet Union**

**5<sup>th</sup> September 1942 AD**

The waters of the River Volga oozed gently, their surfaces littered with splintered crates and patches of oily foam. Camille Rochelle tried to dislodge the acrid taste of diesel fumes from her mouth with a few throaty coughs, the coarse smoke from the tug boat wafting just above her head and darkening the already hueless horizon. Although the autumn months still held some life, the chill of winter had laced its way into the northerly winds, scatterings of snow blanketing the riverbanks and bobs of ice chasing their trail towards the Caspian Sea. The further south they travelled, the more vocal the sounds of war became – the pounding of mortars, whistles of tank shells and the nerve-racking shrieks of the Luftwaffe piercing the lifeless skies.

The Germans had advanced quickly and mercilessly since first treading on Soviet soil nearly a year earlier, the failure to secure Moscow indefinitely resulting in several months of redirection and alternative strategy. Rochelle, together with Todd Allen and Adam Drobinski, picked at the slim information that was fed back through the

Polish Resistance and the Grey Ranks, relaying back to Britain whenever they could in a hope those still stationed at Bletchley Park would heed caution before making any rash counter-offensives on behalf of the so far intransigent Red Army. So far, the remaining Allies appeared to be prepared to let Stalin and his wave of loyal militants crash against Nazi iron like failing brakes on a runaway train, their attention perhaps drawn to the escalation of hostilities in the Pacific, and Japan locked in engagement with the United States for supremacy of the seas. Camille wondered whether the would-be Empire of the East had yet to figure out the treasured Palladium they had stolen was not what it first appeared. How many defeats the Imperial Army would need to tally before the penny dropped. As far as she was concerned, each passing day without sharpened teeth closing from both sides was a blessing – if the Americans could distract the Japanese for just a few months longer, wall off the British colonies and spare any overstretching of Churchill’s already exhausted resources, the time won was time invested into hunting down Walter Dorf, knight of Sir Gareth. They would claim the Spear of Destiny, wrench it from the knight’s cold, dead hands if they must, and truly turn the tide of this global war. Entertaining such a welcome thought warmed Camille inside, the war to end all wars that had soaked the soils of each continent in blood to the point where the depths of hell itself felt the drops fall like rain, could, *could* just

begin to ease. And all those trapped in the grinding gears of war, instigators or innocents, might finally be given the chance to heal such wounds of division. Looking upon the shredded landscape, punctuated with bomb-blasted houses and smouldering tree trunks approaching Stalingrad, such convalescence would take some time.

‘It’s getting colder.’ Todd Allen wrapped a grubby shawl around Camille’s shoulders. ‘They weren’t wrong about this potentially being the coldest winter on record for Russia.’ He blew into his cupped hands.

‘What do you think will be left?’ Camille asked in a mild trance. Todd stared back, bemused. ‘Of the world? When all this is over?’ she followed, pointing her staff to the steel-grey banks and their ruins.

‘Depends which world we inherit,’ Todd replied, trying to shake some life back into his fingers. ‘One ruled by men, or by Gods.’

‘Or Goddesses?’ Camille raised an eyebrow.

‘You mean sorceresses. There’s a difference.’

‘Not in Morgan le Fay’s eyes.’

‘Sadly true,’ Todd yielded. ‘I was always told by my parents that Gods and Goddesses did not make mistakes, irrespective of which you chose to follow. If some form of divine power has reached the hands of our enemies, it does make you question such logic, doesn’t



it?’ He too was now captivated by the horrors painted on the shores.

‘Do you think the Spear of Destiny, given its supposed provenance, would permit such atrocities?’ Camille questioned.

‘Let’s not forget what its purpose was in the first place,’ Todd replied. ‘Tainted with the blood of Jesus Christ, the final blow to his then-mortal life, a weapon of pure, vile anger. Slaying the lives of so many others through belligerence might just be its true calling.’ He dug his hands into his pockets, briefly distracted by the bickering upon the tug bridge between Adam Drobinski and the Russian captain. ‘The nail on the other hand...’

Camille furrowed her brow. ‘The *nail*?’

‘The Spear itself, I believe it also houses one of the nails from Christ’s crucifixion, right in its centre. Threading whatever legends and tales we hold about the final days of Jesus of Nazareth, fact and fiction, the Holy Lance as we call it was thrust into his side by the will of Longinus, making sure of death despite the likelihood that Christ had already passed. A confirmation. The nail that pinned him to the cross, that is what bears the stain of his living blood, and according to scripture, pierced through his skin *willingly*.’ Todd scratched the now lengthy tufts of hair that had sprouted beneath his jawline.

'You need a shave, Monsieur Allen.' Camille smiled while stroking the whiskers on his cheek. 'Possibly a bath too.'

'Thanks. Point me in the direction of the nearest hotel,' Todd joked before his face turned sour at the sight of bloated corpses floating just off the bow.

'This tug captain won't go any further than Dubovka. Too much activity from the Luftwaffe over Stalingrad.' Adam hopped down the steps. 'We'll have to disembark there and make the remaining journey on foot.'

'Was that what you were arguing about up there?' Todd asked.

'Yes. That and the fact the fat Russian didn't trust the Pole, let alone one wearing this.' Adam thumped his hardened chest and the stitched pink triangle, now fraying at its edges, smeared with both mud and blood. 'Amazed he even knew what it stood for.'

'You'll be surprised how far prejudice can spread in times of war, mon ami,' Camille soothed. 'Neither my brother nor his partner were spared, despite their allegiances.'

'Makes you wonder why I even bother,' Adam gruffed, turning up his nose.

'Because Janick would have wished you to,' Camille said while twining her arm through his. 'When we stop

fighting for change when change is needed, then we've truly lost.'

What was only a handful of bullet-riddled bodies had now become a steady flow, bumping against the sides of the tug like bottle corks, only to disappear unceremoniously into the mists of the stern. 'We're getting close,' Todd alerted.

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'He's sending who?' Field Marshall List spat down the phone line, shrill voice causing the officer next to Walter Dorf to jump in fright. The Field Marshall's forehead beaded in sweat, skin boiling to hot pink, collar loosened. 'Very well. I shall expect the Chief of Operations here on the front within forty-eight hours.' He let out a frustrated sigh and hung up. 'Dummkopf!'

'Trouble, Sir?' Walter tilted an enquiring head back.

'That was the Chancellery. Apparently, Herr Hitler is unimpressed with our progress here at Stalingrad. This, despite an unprecedented advance into Soviet territory and a Red Army that is soon to be cut off from all supplies down the River Volga.' List tossed his arm high. 'Alfred Jodl is now being dispatched to review our activities. Quite what he expects to find I've no idea.' He

collapsed into his chair, boots resting on the desk and cigarette popped from the case in his pocket. 'Do you have a light?'

Walter moved in with a half-empty box of matches. 'Danke.' List struck the head on his rough heel. 'You want to know what I think, General Dorf? This entire operation, Barbarossa, has been flawed from the start. Hitler has nowhere near the resources he thinks he has, our allies grow thin, and Stalin not only has the vast expanse of his country to retreat into, but also the shelter of winter. We do not know these lands, the Russians do.' He sucked the nicotine clean out in a single inhale, hands trembling.

'Not good for you, you know.'

'What?'

'Smoking,' Dorf snipped, pulling up a second chair. List replied with a nonchalant rattle of his cigarette case, taking two more and offering one to his general with a quick grin. Dorf accepted with a tut. 'We do have allies, sir, the Japanese?'

List balked, coughing up freshly inhaled smoke. 'The Japanese? General, please...that inflated dwarf of a man Hirohito and his blind ambitions? No, no. The Americans will see to him and his indulgences soon enough, the tide has already turned. The Third Reich stands alone, as it always should have. Depend on no one, Herr Dorf.' He

wagged a judging finger at Walter. 'Tragically, whatever fortune our Führer once held I fear might have abandoned him also. His vision of a new Germanic Empire hangs by a thread.' He pressed both palms into his weary eyes.

Dorf squirmed in his seat, arms tightening around his chest, feeling the blunt edges of the Spear beneath his coat. He twitched his broad nose in deflection – 'Did you ever get a lead on that Japanese soldier from Smolensk? Honjo?' he asked timidly.

'Nothing.' List took to his feet and began pacing. 'There was talk that he could be some sort of double agent, a Japanese working on behalf of the Soviets and leaking information. Especially after our failure in Moscow. If you want my assessment, the coward up and ran back to his rice paddy the moment he set eyes on Von Bock's military plans. As I said, General, trust no one in this war. No one,' he grunted.

'And the statue?' Dorf's gaze was cast down.

'What of it?'

'Did the Führer not ask as to its whereabouts?'

'Not that I'm aware of. Why would he care about some statue?' List enquired, stamping out the glowing embers of the cigarette butt.

'I just wondered, sir, that's all. Was a gift after all, and bestowed upon Field Marshall Von Bock for, as you say, *good fortune*.' Walter's expression remained clinical.

'Charms? Ha! Trust me, General, the only gift the Führer could offer any of us now is reinforcements. Planes, tanks, men. If we are to break this stronghold of a city and move on Grozny, we will need far more than Hitler is prepared to give.' List peered through the loose canvas veil of the tent, jutting his jaw out at the sight of several Junkers overhead, in arrow formation, heading straight for the pale cubic buildings of the nearby canning factor on the banks of the river. 'And certainly more than good luck charms, General Dorf.'

The phone line buzzed, the younger officer eager in service to his superiors, grasping the speaker. 'If that is Berlin calling again, hang up!' List shouted, the young officer nearby cowering in the corner. He spoke monosyllabically, nodding occasionally and ending the call with a simple *Gut* as confirmation. The line went dead. 'Well?' List barged to within inches of the officer, his bitter breath causing the young man to swallow hard.

'The Soviet First Guard Army, sir. It has dug in deep at the Red October factory, swarming with Russian snipers. The officers ask for immediate support, sir.' The young officer's adolescent voice trembled as if breaking for the first time.

List swung away, resumed pacing back and forth with murmurs of discontent. Dorf stood to attention. 'Let me lead Field Marshall List. I will move towards the front line on the Stalingrad Industrial District. Might just be able to rally our troops into a counter-offensive.' His barrel chest expanded.

'Very good, General Dorf. Please know this, however. When Alfred Jodl arrives, I shall need more than just news of a counter-offensive to secure my position here. I will need evidence of the Red Army in full retreat into the wilderness of Siberia. Do I make myself clear?' List's face turned to stone.

'Absolutely.' Dorf clicked his heels and saluted. 'Heil Hitler'.

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The chemical stench hit Walter Dorf the moment he stepped outside the tent. He gave brisk instructions to the nearest soldier to bring his truck around, wiping his soiled wooden staff clean with a handkerchief. *Heil Hitler* rang through his mind over and over again – was this a man of vision? Or merely another puppet whose strings Lady Morgan Worthington delighted in pulling? The third anniversary of aggression and still a stalemate, the White Dragon no further towards its honest aim than in times past. Yes, the world was on fire, but this carnage

seemed unwieldy, wild. When the licks of flame settled, perhaps neither the White nor the Red would remain, nor the Sacred Band. All remnants of a bygone age buried under the ash, and a new phoenix rising. The Spear of Destiny jabbed into his ribs, he flinched, pulling the object free from his coat. The gold leaf gleamed against the dull grey of the blunt tip, polished wax-wood handle slippery to the touch. Dorf inspected the relic closer, scratched at the shard of metal nestled in the centre of the spear head, cutting the skin under his cuticle. Fresh blood welled, Dorf nursing it by popping the finger into his mouth – at least one part was still sharp, he thought. The truck skidded to a halt, splatters of mud covering both staff and sleeves. The soldier was reprimanded with a firm clip to the ear by Walter, the door slammed shut and they bolted for the banks of the Volga.

High atop the crumbling remains of an abandoned residential block, two smeared lenses sharpened into focus, tracking the truck's path. Miko Honjo lay flat on his chest, torn tarpaulin hanging loosely over his back in camouflage. He jumped to his feet, leaping over the slain German sniper by his side, rifle slung across his shoulder.



## Chapter 25

### Stalingrad – Soviet Union

5<sup>th</sup> September 1942 AD

An eruption of earth knocked Todd off his feet, a mortar shell landing far too close for comfort. Adam scooped him up with one hand, urging him to keep moving forwards towards the shelter of an overturned Soviet troop truck metres in front. Camille had already reached it, back pressed hard against the buckled bonnet, wiping the engine steam from her face. Two more explosions followed, the Junker bombers riding like Valkyries above, finding their targets and lighting up the Red October factory in a conflagration of fierce orange and gold. The Soviet sniper resistance that had, to this point, held firm and successfully picked off isolated German soldiers, suddenly fell silent. Camille scouted around, eager to see if more puffs of red clouds sprang around the helmets of the German infantry, but all momentum appeared to be behind the swastika, the crunch of Panzer tanks churning the ground and shaking Rochelle's bones to the point of nausea. The booms of their mounted arsenals sliced through the air, a fountain of concrete and metal shards following, the lone cry of the Red Army front line pitched with panic was evidence

enough that the factory's resistance would crumble by nightfall.

'Can you see a way through?' Todd scrambled to Camille's side by the truck, gasping for every breath. 'Behind the German line, I mean. General Dorf has to be there, somewhere.'

Adam summoned his blue shield, deflecting a stray rifle shot neatly away before returning fire with a blistering round from his semi-automatic. He hit nothing, but prompted a few nearby German soldiers to duck for cover. 'We're not getting through here. Too many Nazi boots on the ground. And I don't much fancy taking on a Tiger Tank, do you?' Adam held his shield in front of the two knights.

'Adam's right, we'll need to retreat along the river bank. See if we can circle back behind the German line. Their firepower is too concentrated here. They seriously want that factory!' Camille dared to crane her neck around the burst tyre, reeling back in when a spark from a German rifle bullet struck the battered chassis. 'Quite a walk, mind.' She drew in a sharp breath. Through the smog and plumes of thick, black smoke a familiar stern figure could be seen. Camille narrowed her eyes, the sheen of a knee-length midnight wax coat faintly glimmered like a freshly minted coin thrown in murky waters. She squinted harder, a flash of precious metal, gold leaf, was revealed from beneath the figure's coat.

The object was held aloft, a beacon of light against an unforgiving sky – its shape unmistakable now, plumiform, a *spear*. ‘Todd!’ she called back to Allen, ‘Over there. It’s Dorf!’

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An audacious move by the knight of Sir Gareth, Todd thought. Perhaps nobly so, placing himself within the very heart of the battle for Stalingrad. Either noble, or foolhardy. Like so many other White Dragon followers, often so eager to prove themselves to Lady Morgan Worthington that such spontaneity could be their undoing. Todd hoped as much, tracking every step of Walter Dorf as he brazenly moved away from the safety of his truck and barked orders at the nearest German soldiers. Two more Tiger Tanks rattled past him, juggernauts ploughing through the streets of Stalingrad, Soviet bullets ricocheting off them like flies on the hide of a horse. The grinding of their cannons followed, their heads aimed firmly at the base of a barely standing wrought-iron tower. There was a rush of activity from behind the metal beams as the Red Army realised their cover was soon to be blown, the bellow of both tank guns forcing Todd to cover his ears and watch helplessly as the tower crumpled before him. A wave of soot engulfed Allen, he shouted for Camille and Adam, no reply. He brought forth his sword, drove it deep into the

ground for a pulse of knight light, the swirling dark clouds clearing for a moment, uncharacteristically so. The choking dust parted, a clear channel obstructed by the small frame of a Japanese man. Before Todd could react, Miko had thrown a blast of gale-force wind in his direction, tossing the knight back into the walls of a ruined warehouse block. Honjo advanced, focused and undaunted, Kamikaze Blade by his side ready to strike again.

Todd reached for his pistol, fired off a few rounds, Miko dived for cover within a shell crater. The Japanese soldier responded with two quick pops from his own pistol, shattering the remaining glass in the frame of the warehouse, Todd ducking and rolling to the safety of a stairwell. The rumble of Messerschmitts scorched through the skies above, a trail of bullets splitting the path between him and Miko, the German planes soaring high once more, preparing to lunge down on the remains of the factory. The warehouse was not safe, Todd thought, but if not safe for him, neither was it safe for his adversary. He goaded Miko, flashing the edge of his sword in a rare ray of sunlight, the Japanese soldier screwing his face up in response. If the warrior had returned to the Soviet offensive, then he must have realised whatever he stole from Smolensk was of no benefit to him or his empire. He was searching for something else, perhaps the Spear of Destiny itself, but was naïve, fumbling his way through in desperation to come across any sort of item that resembled the

supernatural perhaps. The blade of a Round Table knight might just have piqued his interest, much like the foreign blade he wielded – all Todd needed to do was keep him distracted. He spotted Camille running towards General Dorf's position, her own knight's blade on full display cutting down any stray German gunmen. He could buy her some time.

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The ringing in Adam's ears had not ceased, he lay chest down in the mud, separated from Todd and Camille by the twisted remains of the tower. The ominous caterpillar treads of the Tiger Tanks chewed through the metal beams, rolling over each one like wheat in a field. He charged a blue flame spear, hurled it at a leaning telegraph pole, the impact causing it to topple down on top of the tank's primary gun. The timber itself proved no match for its armoured shell, but its wires looped around its treads and tangled beneath the beast's belly, sweeping the pole underneath and forcing the tank to grind to a halt. Its cannon honed in on Adam, the Sacred Band fighter froze for a second in fear, feet turning to lead. The gun boomed, Drobinski hurled himself back into the mud, realising he alone was not the intended target, as a Soviet truck full of ammunitions exploded behind. Russian soldiers scattered in disarray, one faithfully returning to pick up the torn red flag left

trampled in a mucky puddle. Two Germans shouted orders to one another, rifles aimed at the plucky solo Soviet, both fired at once and would have found their target had Adam not bolted in front and absorbed both bullets into his blue-flamed shield. Before the Germans could react, Adam's semi-automatic was locked and loaded – '*Naklanis!* Get down!' he ordered in Russian to the Soviet flag bearer – shield up once again and spinning three hundred and sixty degrees, firing off an array of bullets like a lit Catherine wheel, picking off not only the duo of Germans, but three other aggressors marching in from all sides.

Adam permitted himself a deep sigh of relief, offering a hand to the Soviet man, more juvenile now upon closer assessment. '*Spasibo*' came a trembling young voice, face clammy and pale, smeared with grime, expression revealing shock at what he had just witnessed. The boy's bearskin hat barely came to Adam's neck, but stood proudly; whatever innocence once was in his blue eyes had been buried in the rubble that lay around the two of them. He held the red flag tightly in grazed fists. Adam could only give a polite bow, urging the young Soviet soldier to regroup with his division as the Tiger Tank began to grumble back into life. On the ridge behind, Adam could just make out the gleaming white blade of Camille, heading towards Walter Dorf. Between her and Drobinski stood the second Tiger Tank.

'For Merlin's sake, move forward!' Walter Dorf hollered at his subordinates. 'The factory is lost, the Red Army is in full retreat. Get to the blessed riverbank or I'll shoot you all myself.' He thrust the Spear of Destiny as if smiting a boar. 'Must I do everything myself in this war?' he cursed to the winds.

'I'd question whether you have done *anything*, Walter,' came the French accent from behind. Camille had caught up with her rival, coat caked in mud, brunette hair matted and knotted, splashes of fresh blood trickling from her cheeks. 'Each and every time the White Dragon rears its scaly, ugly head you six believe that it is you as knights that achieve the success over mankind, but...' her sword gestured to the Spear '...you'd be wise not to be so arrogant,' she snipped.

Walter rolled his eyes to the heavens, the roar of the Luftwaffe capturing the clouds once more. He spread his arms wide, spear in one hand, wooden staff in the other. 'Mademoiselle Rochelle, knight of Sir Gawain, do you truly believe this time you and the Red Dragon can win? Turn this formidable tide planned by our Lady Morgan Worthington? She has learnt from the last Great War, exactly which hands are best suited to the Palladium, to create an empire the likes of which the earth has never seen. You and Mr Allen, son of Sir Galahad might strike us down, but look around you, the

world has changed...and forever will be no matter the outcome of this war,' he jeered.

'Perhaps the good Lady Morgan Worthington, Barbara, or whatever moniker she chooses, has not been as careful in her judgement with the Palladium as you might think, Walter.' Camille raised her blade. 'Having a few issues jump-starting this campaign for unrivalled domination I would say, wouldn't you? Now reliant on a power that has long resided outside her reach, a little desperate one might think. What was the Spear of Destiny to the Great Morgan le Fay? Her backup plan?' she teased.

Dorf twisted his jaw in discontent. 'Do not speak to me of the need for a backup, Mademoiselle Rochelle, for where would the Red Dragon be if it weren't for the Sacred Band? Indeed, I hear your own sibling made a rather dashing appearance on the beaches of Dunkirk, alongside several other male pairs over the course of this war. Reports reached me of the warriors wielding brilliant blue light, from Poland to Palestine...and where are they now? Wait, I know – shackled in concentration camps like the swine they are!' he sneered, staff shifting to the steel of his blade. He threw its edge in front of his face, just in time to block a rage-fuelled barrage from Camille, sparks of blinding white flashing in every direction as the duel began.



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Another gust of conjured wind struck Todd's torso, he somersaulted backwards into some oil drums, barely finding firm footing on the ledge of the roof. The concrete cracked beneath his feet, Miko leaping forward with his blade and swiping inches away from Todd's neck. The knight turned, found himself in a more advantageous position and brought his own sword down, Miko dodging and landing a harsh kick to Todd's gut. Allen managed to riposte, the stinging tip of his sword piercing Honjo's thigh, forcing him to yelp and buckle to one knee. Todd went for his pistol, but its barrel was sliced clean off by Miko's blade before the trigger could be pulled. Another firm kick to Todd's ribs followed, a bony elbow landing dead-centre of his forehead, Todd falling backwards.

'Your weapon. Hand it to me and you will be spared!' Miko ordered in broken English, the Kamikaze Blade edging closer to Todd's throat. 'I shall not ask again.'

'You really should.' Todd crawled back on his forearms. 'Whatever you seek, sir, you shall not find it here, unless you wish for death?' he challenged.

'Majikku! Magic!' Miko held firm. 'That is what you bring here. Your kind. Be it sword, statue or blue fire, I want to know *how*. How does one nation come to rule the world?'

'No one nation should. And those that try are always doomed.' Todd fumbled for the hilt of his own sword.

'From an Englishman? The mightiest of empires? You *lie*.' Miko swiped his blade down, finding only stone as Todd rolled away to the side.

'Britain learnt the hard way, and is still learning even now. There is no honour in subduing others, only pain and blood.' Todd swung again, sure-footed. Miko's blade blocked its edge, but not Todd's punch that caught the Japanese man's jaw squarely, spinning him to the floor. 'Reverence is not earned by whom you kill, but by whom you protect.'

Miko spat iron-rich blood from his mouth, let out a scream. 'Liar!' his word burnt the air, and his blade struck Todd's chest from below like a viper from its nest, splitting through his clothes and finding tender skin beneath. Blood began to weep through Allen's leaf-green shirt, a diagonal red stripe growing wider. He stumbled backwards, hand clutching his breast, teeth gritted. Honjo brought his blade to his forearm, storm winds whirling directly behind, and with a shriek he threw the blast of air in Todd's direction. The knight skidded, boots grating on the loose stone floor. The edge of the building inched closer, his eyes widened at the drop below. With a gasp, he thrust his own blade into the concrete by his feet, knight light pulsing in a

bubble of pastel white – the opposing forces locked in a war of attrition.

From Todd's peripheral vision, he could see Camille sparring furiously with Walter Dorf. A swift pan to the right saw Adam Drobinski squaring off against a German Panzer tank alongside several Red Army soldiers. Both allies held their ground valiantly. A swell of determination stirred within the son of Sir Galahad, illuminating the orb of light with increased incandescence – with a guttural shout his blade's power overwhelmed his opponent's, Miko being thrown back, gale winds dissipating as the soldier clung to the roof ledge by his fingertips.

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Camille's heel found Walter's upper arm, the larger knight staggering back. He contorted, ducked another kick from the Frenchwoman, shielding the fragile spear from her blade. Instinctively he called for assistance from the nearest German soldier, to tip the odds of engagement in his favour, but the malevolence in Rochelle's eyes was evidence enough that an entire Nazi regiment might not be sufficient to repulse such a barrage. She swung her sword down again, Dorf blocking and shifting as nimbly as he could with one hand. Camille overstretched, exposing her midriff, and

Walter took the opportunity to bury a fist deep into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She knelt, blade high to shield herself from Dorf's blow, instead finding his knee rammed into the bridge of her nose.

'Enough, Mademoiselle Rochelle. It's over,' Dorf panted, sounding surprised at the outcome of the match. He held the tip of his sword to Camille's blood-streaked forehead, his towering frame blocking out the misty sun. 'This need not be the way, for you or the Red Dragon. You and I are the same, and deserve the same fortune and spoils of this war. You can have it. You can have it *all*.'

Camille let out a cry of anguish, face screwed tight at the thought of failing her brother Jacques and his partner, worse still, for a fraction of a second, entertaining the offer from Dorf if only to bring about an end to such merciless death and destruction. A shade of blue flame snapped her attention back and eliminated any notion of capitulation. Adam Drobinski had found his way past the Tiger Tank thanks to a bombardment of rallied Red Army mortar shells, and was now sprinting up the ridge to Camille's aid. It was a distraction that turned Walter's blade away and towards the Sacred Band warrior, leaving the Spear of Destiny vulnerable. Fingertips coiled around her sword pommel, Rochelle swiped the blade without hesitation or forethought, the Spear head shattering into fragments. Dorf wrestled between salvaging what was

left of the fabled Holy Lance and his own defence against Adam, Camille yelling instructions to Drobinski to seize the single fragment that had bounced its way back down the ridge and landed in the wastelands of rubble below. 'The nail, Adam. Destroy the *nail!*'

Drobinski altered course just as Walter Dorf struck a brutish palm across Rochelle's face. He reached for his own pistol, one eye closed, the other zooming in on Adam's back, and he fired. A spurt of red shot up from between Adam's shoulder blades, the big Pole fell to knees, the nail within arm's reach – but what was mere metres could have been miles as all energy drained from Adam's legs. Dorf fired again, this time the bullet skewing through Adam's lumbar and out through his abdomen. Camille made an ungodly cry, lunging for Walter's ankles, Dorf kicking her loose. Adam crawled on all fours, his sight fading as quickly as his breath. He made out the hazy shapes of Red Army soldiers mere metres away, motion slowed like a dream. A friendly face appeared directly in front, kind eyes, delicate and handsome features, same pink triangle stitched on the left breast. 'Janick?' Adam wheezed through fluid-filled lungs. 'You're...you're alive?' The familiar figure gave no answer, only a reassuring smile, fuller and brighter than Adam remembered when holding his lover during his last moments in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He blinked, and the face changed to that of the young Russian soldier, hand clamped on Adam's shoulder, nail held between his thumb and forefinger.

'Get back, Soviet scum!' Dorf bellowed with a pop of his pistol, a puff of chalky dust springing from the feet of the Russian, who scampered back like a mouse into its hole, leaving the nail of the Holy Lance in Adam's bleeding palms. Drobinski rolled onto his back, ash-grey sky rolling above, lifted the nail high and brought forth the blue fire of the Sacred Band. 'Stop! *Don't!*' Dorf warned, 'We can be better than all this. *We must* be better!' he pleaded.

Adam smiled to himself, the chrome clouds above clearing for the first time over Stalingrad, revealing warm ocean blue. 'He never thought so.' He closed his eyes for the final time, the blue flame racing up his arm and melting the nail into a hot metallic liquid. Like the epicentre of a quake, an audible boom rang out, accompanied by a ring of amber light. In a blink, it had passed, leaving General Dorf stuttering, '*Nein.*'

## Chapter 26

### Stalingrad – Soviet Union

5<sup>th</sup> September 1942 AD

Miko Honjo's hand became numb, the weight of his body hanging from the ledge becoming too much for his arm to bear. Had General Rikichi Ando been looming over him, he would have encouraged him to let go, free himself from the dishonour of failure. But from his perilous position, Miko had witnessed something, something extraordinary. The actions of the warrior with the blue flame, his sacrifice mirroring the one witnessed by Miko in the forests of Korea and Manchukuo, striking at the Japanese soldier's heart in precisely the same manner as before. A wave of uncontrollable emotion flooded through him, streaks of tears carving rivers down his grubby face even before Todd Allen had reached down and seized his arm, hauling him back over the ledge to safety. 'Not today, sir. Not today,' he reassured.

'Aoi Hi,' Miko lowered his head in a reverent bow. Todd was unsure of the translation but followed his pointing finger to Adam's body, spread-eagled on the ground below. The knight jumped to his feet, fleeing for the stairwell. 'Blue flame,' Miko whispered to himself. What is honour without sacrifice for what you believe to be

right? Honjo would not confess to knowing whether it was a case of trying to decide between loyalty to the beliefs of his emperor, or coming to learn of and respect the valiance of his foes, but the potent mix of the words uttered by his mentor General Rikichi Ando, together with those of Todd Allen, buttressed his understanding that to rule by might and might alone would not suffice. For the first time in his short life, Honjo felt he could afford to make a decision of his own, guided by the will of his own heart. He headed for the banks of the River Volga, and the advancing German line.

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By the time Todd had reached Adam's body, Camille was already cradling it in her arms, her flowing brown hair caressing his rugged blond stubble, her tears washing his bloodied brow. The growl of one of the Tiger Tanks was heard from beyond the ridge, the teeth of its tread marching menacingly forwards towards Rochelle and Drobinski. Todd unsheathed his blade once more, tugging at Camille's arm. 'Come, Camille. We've got to move, now!' he begged, the solemn thought that the destruction of the Spear of Destiny might not have had the effect the two knights intended weighing on him like pockets filled with rocks. Camille at first refused, clinging to Adam's motionless body as if it were her own fallen brother, a chance to say the goodbye she



was never granted at Dunkirk. The whistle of a projectile hummed in Todd's ears, he immediately looked above expecting Junker bombers to rain fire, was shocked when the jet-cloud streak of a Soviet missile shot through and erupted on the roof of the Tiger Tank, engulfing it in flames. The behemoth slowed to a snail's pace, smoke bellowing out from its turret, treads scorched from their wheels. The hatch above the gun opened, swarmed immediately by Red Army troops shooting the trapped Germans inside like fish in a barrel. The young red flag bearer charged at the head of the Soviet line, a boisterous rally to arms in the name of their motherland inspired either by the sudden bringing down of the Tiger Tank or in honour of Adam's sacrifice Todd was never to be absolutely sure. A part of him knew of course, but he also knew never to underestimate the will of mankind and their fervent belief in hope – the most formidable weapon any person can possess.

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Walter Dorf had retreated to the safety of his truck, German forces falling like pawns. The radio set in the back seat crackled with the snide remarks from Field Marshall Wilhelm List attempting to enforce a no-surrender rule. Walter thrust his sword back through the passenger seat straight through its speaker. He

floored the accelerator and skidded the wheels back towards the river, his men fleeing back alongside.

The far side of the Volga was home to the German advance, instructed by Adolf Hitler himself never to retract from the Nazi foothold deep into Soviet lands, to push ever forward. A handful of German soldiers had begun risking the turbulent flow of the river in an attempt to regroup with High Command, rafts and makeshift floats littered with glossy helmets made damp by the rising waters. Some men chose to wade through, rifles held high, others preferring the support of loose wooden crates or felled tree trunks. The waters receded, sucked free from the banks in an instant change of tide. Dorf stared in astonishment as his men went from being near-submerged to only waist deep. In the northern horizon bloomed an ominous black storm cloud, the rush of a storm breeze building on Dorf's face. He squinted, hand acting as a visor to his eyes, bearing witness to a tidal surge of water beating down like a tsunami. Screams from the German soldiers resonated all around, some managing to paddle their way frantically to the far shores, others heading back to Soviet-occupied side, but a large group stranded in the centre of the flow with nowhere to flee. The enormous wave crashed through, three storeys high if not more. Dorf stared, mouth agape. As quickly as it came, it had passed, ebbing away into the gulf of the Caspian Sea.

Walter blinked several times trying to regain his composure. A glance back up towards the wave's apparent source found the slight figure of a Japanese soldier, short blade held with both hands deep into the Volga waters. The jet-black clouds dispersed, and the figure had gone.

## Chapter 27

### St Andrews – Scotland

1<sup>st</sup> December 1942 AD

The first flakes of snow had fallen upon the famous Scottish fairway, the lush green course peppered with white. A few enthusiastic golfers donned typical tartan flat caps while trying to decide which colour of fluorescent ball to use against the increasingly muted conditions. A muscly breeze hit Todd Allen as he approached the Old Course Hotel, lime-washed bricks reminiscent of the stonework of his own home City of Bath, contrasting radiantly against the ice-blue of the North Sea beyond.

‘You know, there really is no need for a chaperone, gentlemen.’ Todd turned to the rigid figures of Oliver and Eddy flanking him either side. Eddy had made the effort once again to appear clean-shaven and groomed, his partner Oliver hirsute and coarse as the gravel path beneath them. ‘I doubt the knight of Sir Lancelot will be seeking to cross swords today.’

Oliver grunted. ‘Never can be too careful with this White Dragon lot, Mr Allen. The man might be old, but his lineage is not.’ A solid, large palm smacked Todd on

the back. 'Be interesting to see who might now own the double sword of Sir Lancelot.'

'You said he has two daughters?' Eddy asked. Todd nodded, going on to recall his last encounter with Charles Campbell Worthington down in London and the reticence to bring either of his children under the thrall of Lady Morgan and the White Dragon. 'That doesn't make them immune to her silver-tongued ways, Mr Allen,' Eddy cautioned as the trio approached the hotel entrance. A uniformed employee stepped out in welcome, enquired as to the three men's business, interrupted by a slim, frail woman with hair bunched high, flowing emerald gown belted tightly around her waist, gold pendant earrings dripping to shoulder length.

'Guests of Mr Campbell Worthington, my good Mr McCready, no need to enquire further.' The lady's wrinkled face creased in a smile, a fragile hand placed delicately on the employee's forearm. 'Do come through Mr Allen...your friends are also welcome to join us,' her East Coast American accent warm and welcoming.

'Oh, that won't be necessary. My two bodyguards here can wait by the car.' Todd shot a wiry grin towards Oliver and Eddy, the Sacred Band duo pursing their lips in discord. 'Sure this good gentleman here, Mr McCready can entertain them while we talk. A tour of the famous grounds perhaps? Shall we?' he stepped

inside, scuffing his boots and wooden staff against the rough door mat.

Very well. If you'd be so kind, Mr McCready.' The lady produced a crisp pound note and tucked it into his uniform pocket.

'As you wish, m'lady Maude.' Mr McCready stepped outside, inspecting the intensifying snowfall. 'Hope you two Englishmen can bear a Scottish winter,' he gruffed with an unmistakable Highland accent.

'Sure we'll manage,' Eddy snipped, Oliver still smarting over their dismissal.

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A satin-smooth wood-panelled corridor led to the master suite, Todd catching glances of baroque framed pictures of golfing founders dating back nearly two hundred years, confessing to knowing little to nothing about the sport.

'Oh, me neither, darling.' Maude Clement-Rice shuffled her feet, a lingering cough lying heavy on her chest. 'For me and the family, it's all about the fresh Scottish air here. But for Charles, it's more of a passion. When he swung his first driver across those lawns, that was it, I knew I'd lost him to golf forever,' she said as she groped for the brass bedroom handle. 'I warn you, my husband

is not in the best shape today I'm afraid, a little under the weather. Told him not to play in these bitter conditions, but he never listens.'

'I can imagine,' Todd responded with a raised eyebrow. 'You say you are here with your whole family?'

'Not this time, no. Our two daughters have remained in Atlantic City, the eldest busy with our grandchildren, no fit state to travel to Britain, especially with the escalating conflict and all. Damn Japs!' Maude snapped, adjusting her eyes to the dim amber light of the bedroom. 'Thank heavens for their new nanny, wonderful woman so Charles tells me, most wise and well versed in just about everything.' She clapped her hands several times to rouse her snoring husband, Campbell Worthington bolting upright in his bed and racked by several chesty coughs as he awoke, startled. 'Darling, Mr Allen is here to see you, as requested. We were just saying how baby Lawrence is in such good hands back in America thanks to that charming British nanny you found...what was her name?' Maude rubbed Charles' back.

'Morgan?' Todd's suggestion found the floor as his head lowered.

'Yes, that's it. A distant relative, in fact, isn't that right dear?' Maude plumped the pillows behind Charles, encouraging him to sit up straight despite his noticeable ailments. 'Your daughters and grandchildren are in good hands.'

'I bet.' Todd cocked his head to the side, an exchange of glances between him and Charles enough to have the bed-ridden knight shoo his wife away with a request for some tonic water. Maude hurried out of the room. 'Nanny? Is that how you've presented Lady Morgan Worthington now?' Allen scoffed.

'I warned you, Mr Allen, Lady Morgan would not be so easily deterred. If my own daughters were not to inherit my sword, then she would simply move to the next generation,' his words faltered as his sinister cough resumed. 'The White Dragon and Morgan le Fay will endure, you knew that much.'

'Surprised she kept her name – what is she? A long-lost sister? cousin?' Todd pulled up a chair. 'I doubt you went with mistress?'

'Whatever she wants to be called. She charms people, you know how she is. That cursed necklace, like nectar in people's ear. Such sweet...harmony.' Charles aimed for a spittoon by his side, let loose a few curse words. 'I must say, I don't envy her you know, having to live so long and reimagine herself each time. Heavy must be the toll of lies.'

'Not when you are accustomed to it,' Todd replied, offering his handkerchief, wiping phlegm away from the sickly man's mouth. 'Did you learn of her new name in Nazi Germany? Lady Barbara? We even thought the operation to invade the Soviets might have been named in her honour...that was until we learnt that a certain



Holy Roman Emperor might have snatched the glory first,' he said with a smile.

'Frederick Barbarossa the First. Grand Emperor of Germany – most fitting.' The tickle of a cough caught in Charles's throat. 'But you are correct, the good Lady Morgan once again achieved what she does best...worming her way to the highest levels of state and country, befriending even the fiancée of Adolf Hitler himself, I hear?'

Todd sat silently, inspected the blotted handkerchief speckled with red and yellow. He turned down the corners of his mouth and gave a subtle shake of his head. 'How long?' he asked firmly.

'Oh, we knights never know. Days, weeks, months – my physicians are never honest with me. Cannot say the same for my dear wife Maude either, certainly not the picture of health herself as you may have noticed.' Charles sank back down beneath the bedsheets. 'While as Knights of the Round Table, we are blessed with some immunity to this world's illnesses, our bodies are still at the mercy of time, withering like flowers from summer to autumn...my time will soon be at an end.' He raised a crooked finger towards his shortened wooden staff, fashioned more as a walking cane. Todd took the liberty of reaching for it on Charles's behalf, placing it in his fellow knight's hand. 'I have few regrets, son of Sir Galahad – the actions of the White Dragon remain as true today as they have done over the centuries...however, this war, this fire of hell that has

stretched to every corner of the globe, if such destruction is to be the future, I wish for no part in it.' His weakened legs swung out of the bed, trying to bear the weight of his infirm frame.

'If it is of any comfort, Charles, we believe that the Palladium is no longer in Lady Morgan's possession. And whatever hope she had placed in the fabled Spear of Destiny, well, let's just say her plans were foiled.' Todd's voice held true.

'Indeed...one need only hear or read the news to learn that Hitler's days are numbered. As are those of the would-be conquerors of the Empire of Japan. It is as if the age of men and their honest hearts has surpassed us fossils of a bygone era. We now approach an age of science, not magic.' Charles tapped the front page of the New York Times, monochrome photographs of a Mr Albert Einstein and Mr Robert Oppenheimer taking the lion's share of the headlines. 'Thus, a new age of conflict begins,' he choked out again, wincing with just a single step.

'The Palladium...can Lady Morgan recover it? Wherever it may lie?' Todd asked.

'Possibly. The Necklace of Harmonia and the Palladium are linked, but if one is genuinely lost as you claim, it may take time. Time that I would use wisely.' Charles shuffled a few more steps forward towards the liquor cabinet. 'For idle hands are the devil's workshop, Mr Allen, and as you and your Red Dragon brethren will

know, she and her acolytes will already be regrouping before this second Great War is over.’ He splashed neat whiskey into a tumbler, knocking it back in a single gulp. ‘Ahh...who needs tonic water, eh?’ he grinned.

‘Are there ways of finding it? Without the Necklace?’ Todd pushed.

Charles gave a shrug. ‘Not my area of expertise, more Christine Hartley’s and the knights of Sir Geraint. I hear she has been advising our good lady on such matters. The Palladium is born of both cherished love and loss, Athena the Goddess of Wisdom herself its founder, maybe like us, she too can live on? Or at least her pain can?’ he riddled, lost in his own thoughts. ‘Besides, why do you ask this of me? The Palladium’s own guardians are yours to command – the Sacred Band? I would suggest, Mr Allen, you start there. That is, of course, if this war leaves any such fighters remaining,’ Charles gave a petulant chuckle.

Todd bolted upright – ‘You’ll be surprised at their tenacity, those of the Sacred Band. They’ve faced persecution throughout the ages, and yet still stand. I for one, would not underestimate them, nor should Lady Morgan,’ he announced, head held high.

‘But like us, Mr Allen, strong yes, but not immortal. Their numbers dwindle, the infamous three hundred decimated by two great wars. As I reminded you several years ago in London, you and the knights of Sir Gawain have more than just a duty to your blades.’ Charles

shook his staff directly at Todd, almost losing his balance. 'Morgan le Fay will not rest, Palladium in hand or not. While she lives, each passing day is another chance to mould this world into her image. She will have learnt, Mr Allen, and that makes the next step most dangerous.' A volley of deep coughs forced the feeble knight to lean heavily on his staff. Todd moved in to assist, swiped away indignantly with a quick veined arm. 'Ready your armies, Mr Allen, son of Sir Galahad – Sacred Band or lineage of Sir Bedivere, the Benson family line, for your greatest test is yet to come.'

Maude rushed into the room, spilling tonic water at Todd's feet. 'Darling, you do too much. Please, let's get you back into bed, shall we?' she fussed. Todd took the chance to bow and take his leave, Charles just squeaking out in a dry breath some final words of comfort.

'One day, Mr Allen, our Table will be reunited once more. One banner, one cause.'

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Much to Todd's pleasant surprise, both Oliver and Eddy had wiped the disdain off their faces and were found sitting on a bench outside the hotel with the uniformed front of house, sharing hearty laughs. Mr McCready bid farewell to the pair of Sacred Band fighters before

nodding towards Mr Allen and returning inside. 'Enjoy your tour, boys?' Todd asked.

'Quite interesting actually, and Mr McCready there...quite the character I'd say. Says he has a wife and child but I'm not convinced, if you follow me.' Eddy gave a playful wink.

'I leave you two alone for ten minutes and you are...'  
Todd pinched his brow unforgivingly.

'Recruiting? Why, yes, we are. The Sacred Band will need all the men it can get, won't it? So many of us lost,' Oliver interjected. 'Our reach is bound to be limited until the war is over and Britain is only so big, Mr Allen.'

'Which is why you might wish to look further afield,' Todd said, passing Oliver a folded letter from his inside coat pocket. The washi paper was sealed with red wax and an ideogram not recognised by either fighter. 'Open it.'

'It's written in what looks like Chinese?' Eddy peered over his partner's broad shoulder. 'What does it say?'

'Firstly, it's Japanese, not Chinese,' Todd corrected. 'It was sent to me shortly after our folly into Stalingrad, how it got to me I'm not sure but its writer was, well, shall we say, *resourceful*,' he gestured to the signature at the base. 'Secondly, it says the wielders of the Blue Flame- the *Aoi Hi* – are not alone. Perhaps we need to cast our net further, Asia perhaps?'

Oliver and Eddy looked at one another in puzzlement.  
'Asia? There are Sacred Band members in Asia according to...who is Miko Honjo?' Eddy enquired.

'A friend. For now, at least,' Todd replied.

## **Chapter 28**

### **Bath – England**

**2<sup>nd</sup> December 1942 AD**

A detour came on the return to the south of England – the small village of Leaconfield nestled quietly in Yorkshire had become the home of many remaining Polish airmen of the 303 Squadron, awaiting their fates now the tides of war had shifted. Some reports had suggested immediate disbandment once the Battle of Britain had seemingly drawn to a close, while others recognised the storms of a potential counter-invasion over the coasts of Normandy being inevitable, with all available air support required when such a time came. The remains of Adam Drobinski had been cremated along with those of many millions of fallen Soviet Soldiers from Stalingrad, although unlike the trenches of foul-smelling corpses piled to the brim only to be set ablaze, Todd and Camille had ensured a true hero's sendoff, having his body cremated privately within the Red October factory furnaces and returning the ashes to Britain. A small steel box salvaged from the burning remnants of the metal works became Drobinski's final resting place, Camille wrapping it thoughtfully in Adam's pilot shirt emblazoned with his distinctive pink triangle. When Todd presented the box to the squadron's commanding officer – a Mr Sliwinski – he half expected

the stitched emblem of controversy to be ripped free in disgust. Todd held his breath as Mr Sliwinski inspected the package, the Polish commander enquiring further as to how one of his own had made it over to the Soviet front and for what purpose, only to be reassured by a fellow Pole who confirmed Adam's legendary skills in the air, together with his impressive shoot-down tally. As more of the squadron surrounded their commanding officer, the mood changed from intrigue, to melancholy, to chest-thumping cries of national pride. That evening Todd stood to one side at the informal interment of Drobinski's ashes alongside three other Polish fighters missing in action over the English Channel, the flag with the Polish Eagle raised high under a frozen winter moon. Oliver and Eddy stood side by side, raised left fists ringed with Sacred Band blue fire, casting a modest blue glow in a starless night sky.

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'You're looking...*mince*. Thin.' Camille prodded Charlie Wood with her knuckle, shaking her head in disapproval. 'You said you were going to eat. Build your strength up.'

'Might have escaped your attention love, but food has been rationed these past few years.' Charlie picked at the small bag of pork scratchings, picking the hard fragments out from between his teeth. 'You want to try



these? Pretty good,' he offered to Rochelle, arm wrapped warmly around her shoulders. The Frenchwoman took a nibble off the edge of a softer piece, immediately spitting it back out into a napkin.

*'Dégoûtant!* No wonder you British are starving.' She lapped her tongue on her sleeve while pulling a face. 'This place serve anything else?'

'If you're looking for fancy French cuisine, Mademoiselle Rochelle, then no, no we do not.' John Butcher marched over to the table and set down a round of ales ordered by Gloria Uppingham. 'You can have a pie of the day if you like? It's mostly suet mind...used up the remaining lamb cuts over the weekend.' Camille frowned at Butcher's suggestion, instead opting for the last remaining packet of salt and vinegar crisps from behind the counter.

'Think Johnny could do with a decent chef here at The Bear if he wants this pub to be a success.' Tim Patch raised his pint glass. 'Could be a good starting point for you, Camille, new life here in England.' He took a hearty gulp.

'Oh, so I'm staying here now am I, son of Sir Kay?' Camille quipped lightly. 'Maybe once the war is over, I can take my dear Charlie Wood somewhere, well, more scenic?'

'More scenic than Bath? France is beautiful, but come on dear,' Gloria defended, squeezing the hand of Baron Wolfenden, her partner so far remaining quiet, and

throughout the discussion, keeping an eye on his young son Jeremy playing hide and seek with another local child. 'Why, I'd move back here myself if it wasn't for the school and young Jeremy's education back in the Midlands.'

'Might get the chance if his application to Eton goes through,' the baron interjected, boastfully vocal for the first time since sitting down. Gloria rolled her eyes at such pretension, quickly switching the subject and noting young Jeremy's avid interest in the news and journalism, not politics. 'Don't worry, I'll make sure any inheritor of the sword of Sir Gaheris doesn't become some gala ball-attending shipping merchant or banker,' she whispered in Tim's ear.

'Well, if the young lad ever wants to become a firefighter, then let me know. Plenty still to be put out in every city.' Patch rested on his haunches, hands sooty from a now typical day's labour searching through burnt debris from nearby Bristol. 'We all know by now though, that the Knights of the Red Dragon usually end up fighting something else though, right?' he cracked a smile.

'Knights of what...?' Charlie Wood pinched his eyebrows, looks of curiosity darting between Tim and Camille.

'Chess. He's referring to games of chess. It's our local club, you play?' Camille's eyes widened and glared at Tim, now forcing the elder knight to fire-fight in a

different manner entirely. 'I'm the reigning champion out of us lot. So, no pressure.'

'Not sure I'd agree with you there, Mademoiselle Rochelle,' Todd Allen's voice boomed from behind, scarf unwound and wooden staff shaken free of the frost from outside. 'Apologies I'm late, things took a little longer than expected.' He moved in for a timid hug from Camille, then accepted a bear-hug from John Butcher in the way only the knights of Sir Bors could inflict. 'Good to see you too, Johnny,' he puffed. 'Pint please – Gloria and the Baron will be paying,' he winked playfully at the couple.

'How did it go? With the ashes.' Camille's face darkened.

'Very well. You would have been proud of the 303 Squadron, and the Sacred Band,' Todd let slip, causing the ears of Baron Wolfenden by his side to prick up.

'Sacred Band? As in Thebes?' the Baron enquired. 'Just been reading about them for a campaign I'm looking to run past government, an equality act for homosexual men.' He lowered his voice, scanning for judging looks from both company and locals. 'A successful string of fighter pilots, foreign or otherwise, named after such famous Greek fighters might be of use to me in the House of Lords,' Wolfenden continued with curiosity.

'You'll find no objection from any of us, Baron,' Todd replied, glass raised. Baron Wolfenden clinked the rim of his in return, excusing himself suddenly upon realising

his son Jeremy was sitting half-way up the stairs, head trapped between the balustrades, wailing inconsolably. 'Duty calls, Baron.'

'Don't get me started, Todd, that son of his always has his brain in the clouds,' Gloria tutted.

'You and the baron getting very serious then?' Todd replied. 'I know you were close to the school groundsman, what was his name?'

'Liam Willis. Lovely man, but...' Gloria paused, took a grip of her wooden staff. 'Not sure if he's Red Dragon material, Mr Allen, if you know what I mean.' Her mouth tightened. 'The baron is a good man, Todd.'

'I'm sure he is, but if there's one thing a knight must always do, it is to follow their hearts, which doesn't always mean to follow a fortune,' Todd reminded, gesturing to the endearing display between Charlie Wood and Camille Rochelle, knight of Sir Gawain. 'Our children must always honour that rule, or else...'

'We become the White Dragon,' Tim Patch finished with a belch. 'Which reminds me, how was the senile old fool that was once the great son of Sir Lancelot? Mr Campbell Worthington enjoying retirement up in Scotland or still plotting vengefully?'

Todd slouched back. 'I don't believe we need worry about Charles Campbell Worthington now, nor his daughters. His grandson, however...' Allen paused, rattling his fingernails in agitation over the table. 'Lady

Morgan might already have made her move before this war has even concluded.'

John Butcher found a spare moment during the bustling stream of customers at the bar to pull up a stool. 'Got another spawn of Sir Lancelot then? One for Morgan le Fay to twist around her finger? Should have just finished him off while you were up there,' he grunted.

'Very noble, Johnny.' Todd shot a look of disdain. He said out loud the final words spoken by Charles as he left the hotel of St Andrews, a Round Table reunited, someday. He playfully drew the two circles of the vesical piscis through dense spilt ale foam, then wiped it away. *Someday*, he thought to himself.

Through the crackly noise of the radio broadcasting the latest from the German advance into the Soviet Union and a successful Russian riposte codenamed *Operation Winter Storm* came the dulcet tones of a lone singer, clear as cut crystal and smooth like honey. John leapt to his feet and dashed the volume dial. 'Ah, my favourite. You've got to hear this one!' he insisted to the group. 'Came from that American film last year...almost made me rename this place *Holiday Inn*.'

'Of course, so many people looking to holiday in Bath this time of year,' Tim Patch heaved a mocking sigh through a drawn-out yawn.

'Shut up and listen, fire-boy,' John quipped and began to sway to the festive lyrics, mouthing each word from

*Dreaming of a White Christmas.* ‘Telling ya, this one is going to be a classic. Very romantic, don’t you think?’

‘If you say so.’ Todd folded his arms, unimpressed. Camille and Charlie rose to the occasion and began slow dancing in front of the roaring log fire.

‘Aww...you need to thaw that icy heart of yours, Todd. Sure both Oliver and Eddy reminded you that the Sacred Band depends on us, well, you know.’ Camille pinched Todd’s shoulder, then had to deflect another enquiring comment from Charlie Wood.

‘She’s not wrong, Todd.’ Tim leaned across, face stern and weathered with the wisdom of age. ‘We know Sacred Band numbers will be low after this war, and in many ways we got lucky with the blessing of Adam Drobinski...but you know Lady Morgan and the White Dragon will not be so easily deterred, even if her precious Palladium has slipped from her grasp. They will be regrouping, the knights of Sir Gareth, Sir Tristan, Sir Geraint, Sir Palamedes – perhaps even Sir Lamorak for all we know. Descendants can be very hard to track...look at the Benson family.’

Todd rubbed an aching tiredness from his face, concurred with a nod. Despite a shred of hope in the ebbing words from Charles Campbell Worthington and the near-promise of a reconciliation between Red and White at the hands of the Sir Lancelot lineage, Lady Morgan Worthington would not be deterred, perhaps even re-energised from any looming, crushing defeat

after such an investment in the Nazi Third Reich. Any opportunity gained from her potential rudderless direction as to the whereabouts of the Palladium must be seized upon, and it began with heirs, faithful heirs to both Band and Brethren. He shared with Tim both the letter sent by Miko Honjo and his apparent service to the recruitment of Sacred Band members from the Far East, together with a reassurance that the daughter of Ben Benson, after laying him to rest in his home town of Kingston, had also reached out to John Butcher earlier in the year, learning that The Bear pub was a favourite of her late father's, and asking questions only a would-be knight of Sir Bedivere would want to know. Janine Benson and her husband Robert swore to return to Britain and help rebuild whatever remained of its cities when the first ships came recruiting from the West Indies – and in time, possibly piece together the fragments that Ben left behind, from wooden staff to doll. Patch appeared soothed by such good news, putting aside his typical streak of incredulity.

John Butcher had managed to sway his way over, ungainly burly frame bumping into customers and spilling drinks. 'Mr Allen, there's a young nurse over there who hasn't taken her eyes off you all evening. Why don't you go and say hello?' Butcher pressed two firm palms down hard on his friend's broad shoulders and gave Todd a vigorous shake. 'She's Greek. You'll love her.'

'Everything is Greek to you, Johnny.' Todd freed himself from the brotherly grip, catching sight of a slender lady leaning against the bar, olive-bronzed skin, long coal-black hair and kind, oval face. She offered a welcoming smile, blushed pink then returned to her soda water. Whether it was the superstitious sprig of lucky mistletoe that hung above her head or just sheer impulse, Todd shuffled his way over, leaving Tim and John to keenly observe and lay bets as to his likely failure in courtship. 'My friend, the landlord over there, he says you are from Greece?' Todd squeaked nervously.

'Close. Cyprus,' the young lady stared back, deep brown irises rich like mahogany. 'I'm a nurse, been working over here for several months now, and forgive me, my English, it's not very good,' she chuckled coyishly. 'Your name?'

'Todd. Todd Allen,' The knight huffed with forced masculinity.

'Lukia. Lukia Baros,' the lady introduced herself.

'Lukia. I've always liked that name...bringer of light. Or sacred wood, can never quite remember.' Todd hopped from between feet nervously. 'Mind if I sit down?'

'Please, if you need a walking stick it's probably for the best, no?' Lukia grinned, pointing to Todd's staff.

'Ah, that's a different type of sacred wood. Can bring light too as it happens,' Todd replied, rapidly feeling as if he was losing control of the situation and preparing to



crash and burn...the sniggers from Tim and John behind now very audible. 'Err...Todd means fox. In English,' he stuttered, already wanting to slap himself in the face for such an awkward first exchange. Thankfully, his cumbrous approach had seemingly won favour from his guest. 'Do you like the song?' he followed more confidently.

'I do. But the words, I don't quite follow.' Lukia gave a playful shake of her head while following the melody.

'White Christmas. But the meaning is perhaps more about optimism. Dreaming of better times to come,' Todd elaborated.

'Optimism? This is like...like hope?' Lukia asked. Todd nodded with a half-smile. 'A rare thing, hope, but important during such times, yes?'

Todd needn't have replied, just a tender nod and a wide grin had lowered his guard completely. John Butcher interrupted with two pints of ale. 'On the house,' he winked.

'Those people sitting in the corner over there, they are all your friends?' Lukia leaned over Todd's shoulder.

'Yes, yes they are.' Todd turned on the stool and looked back at his group of Red Dragon knights, some chatting, some dancing, some laughing. 'Actually, no. More like *family*.'

'Ah, family. I do miss mine, back in Cyprus. So few left now sadly.' Lukia turned her face to the floor, her tone turning sombre.

Todd dared place a comforting hand on Lukia's wrist. 'Well, they are very welcoming...but I must warn you, we're a slightly unusual family.' He let slip a boyish giggle.

Lukia raised her pint glass. 'These are unusual times, Mr Allen. But, here we all are.' Their glasses met with a pure chime.

## Epilogue

Was I deceived? I, the great Morgan le Fay, brought to her knees by one of my own knights? A sworn allegiance to the White Dragon, only to forge a path of his own, Michael Von Lamorak, son of Sir Lamorak. So desperate to please, to impress and inspire, yet so young and callow, all sense of pragmatism overshadowed by ambition and desire. Perhaps too human? A weakness I believed I'd bred out of my followers, perhaps my own example of lust for power and reverence is to blame? This necklace I wear, cursed so many say, poisoning my own thoughts after centuries of wearing it. I told you once that it was my body that bore the brunt of age – this husk, this mortal shell, ripening so gracefully thanks to the blessed gift of Harmonia, allowing me to learn many a lesson through the ages of mankind. Now, as I sit here overlooking the wild coastlines of northern Cornwall, the ruined castle that housed the childhood of the legendary King Arthur Pendragon, I cannot help but wonder whether both my body and mind are beginning to fail me. I call out to my sister, Nimue, Lady of the Lakes and Waters, in hope of glimpsing whatever form she may have taken over these many years. She never responds. Not formally at least. A whisper on a saline breeze soothes me as it is her voice I hear, reminding me I am not alone. Our paths and perspectives on the future forever polarised, but still family. And it will

always be my duty to save our spirits, and not permit the passage of time to allow us to be forgotten, scattered like dust in the winds. She will come to understand. She must.

Somewhere, out there in the depths of the velvet-blue Atlantic, might lie my treasure. My Palladium. Stolen from me aboard a warship that was set to become the terror of the seas. Now a twisted metal wreck, lying in a naval graveyard lost to the pages of history. This is how it shall remain, elusive, for any salvage mission that might take place over these coming decades will most likely remain a secret, to prevent the risk of grave robbers. Quests to search for another fabled wreck, one written about by my dearest Morgan Robertson, pen guided by my own hand, have already begun – in the now divided city of Berlin of all places. Such ambition gives me hope, but hope is a dangerous thing. I must seek sanctuary elsewhere, the familiar territory of my craft, the old ways. The teachings of my mentor, Merlin, spoke of reincarnation, much in the way empires rise only to fall, a cycle and rebirth – Gods and Goddesses share such traits. Pallas Athena, Goddess of Wisdom to all of Ancient Greece, can still walk amongst us, choosing her hosts in similar ways to how my sister might choose her own. This transference is rare, sparse documentation relating to where and how, but through the intellect of Christine Hartley and the knights of Sir Geraint, I may remain a step ahead of the Red Dragon, should they consider my armour chinked and vulnerable. A watchful eye on the Sir Bedivere lineage,

those that have travelled to my shores aboard the *Empress Windrush* shortly after the fall of the Third Reich, shall remain a priority. My visions, the dreams of red mists, iron-rich metal and veils, have indeed become a reality as the Soviet Union rises to meet its opposition in the United States, an intriguing performance born of the wills of mankind...two empires, two superpowers, only one victor. My knights will stand down, await the unfolding of these events, but rather use each misstep by either side as a stone laid towards influence via infiltration – many of my most loyal subjects already escaping the trials of Nuremberg and settling here in Britain under different guises. We are all actors on a stage it would appear, I just prefer to orchestrate.

To quote the words of a British statesman not so long ago, I hold in my hand a piece of paper. A letter, addressed to my good Lady Morgan Worthington, penned by Gretl Braun, sister to the late Eva. She evaded persecution despite her loyal ties to the Nazi regime, and now conceals any sense of pride or emotion over her sister's acts during the closing days of Adolf Hitler's final stand, instead opting for a sterile yet equally heartening account of her newfound life in Munich and the birth of her first child, Eva Barbara, now aged fifteen, named in honour of both her sister and her close friendship with me. This gesture appeased my rage upon hearing it was she that replaced the Palladium with an intricately carved fake, only now willing to share this candidly given the fragility of her sister's mental state and not wishing to upset me or the

Führer at losing the original gift. For all my visions, my apparent clairvoyance, I did not see the thread of friendship blinding me to such a pivotal act. Perhaps the results of such a bloodthirsty war would have remained unchanged, the Spear of Destiny not a relic worthy of the Trinity despite its pious connections – an object of majesty and glory yes, but only to those that follow in the footsteps of its slain martyr. There are many millions that do not, and thus, make it fallible.

The Trinity itself, however, now there lies a true future – a future worth fighting for. My understanding of its power is vague, each of the three items brought together to form the foundations of faith I have been told. Birth, life and death...the infinite cycle for the apex of empires, *religion*. Never has one being held all three, so I have learnt, and until now, the elusive King's Blade has thwarted such chances for me. But even the stars and the planets must align at some point, and when they do, I shall be waiting.

Let the Red Dragon come, led by the offspring of Sir Galahad, challenge me if they dare. For only one of their loyal knights would hold my attention, that which can source Excalibur's location, interpret its mysteries and given time, learn of its timeless need for sacrifice. The noblest and dignified of deaths. A passing those of the Sacred Band knew only too well, if my history serves me, but having witnessed the egregious nature of mankind, such radical purism, now may also be the time to forge new allies from the reawakened Sons of Ares. If

there is one thing the rise of the Nazis has taught me, it is to never underestimate the strength of hate, especially when positioned as a keystone for national pride. No one is born with an enemy, but what rage can be conjured when one is presented with such a potent foe, rage that can be harnessed as channelled and focused power. And for those that believe they are better, I can simply say, you can trap the lightning of the Gods in a bottle. Or in this case, a *blue fire*.

**THE SACRED BAND: DESTINY**  
**THE END**



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