

THE SACRED BAND TRINITY

PART 2

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EXCALIBUR

James MacTavish



Red Dragon

Sir Galahad
(Richard Allen)

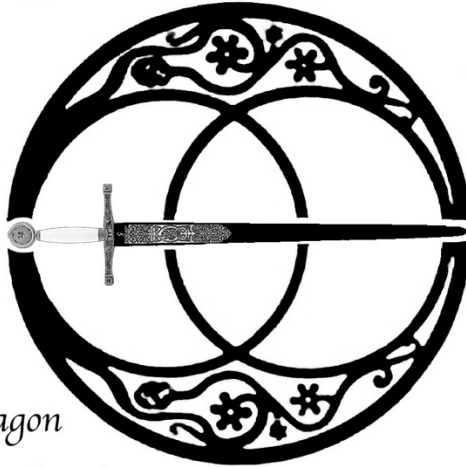
Sir Gawain
(William Wood)

Sir Bors
(Nick Butcher)

Sir Kay
(Karen Milligan)

Sir Gaheris
(Gary Willis)

Sir Bedivere
(Mack Benson)



White Dragon

Sir Lancelot
(Sir Lawrence Worthington)

Sir Tristan
(Tristan Baker)

Sir Geraint
(Geraint South)

Sir Gareth
(Colonel Stephen Thorpe)

Sir Palamedes
(Mohammed Hussin)

Sir Lamorak
(Michael Von Lamorak...dec. WW2)





The Sacred Band
Lions of Leuctra / Sons of Ares

Adam Allen
Iain Donnelly
Graham McCready
150 male partnerships

Chapter 1

Battle of the Somme, Northern France

18th November 1916 AD

‘Are we not Hell’s last issue?’ Craig chuckled as he craned his neck round the stock of his rifle in a vain attempt to see beyond the peaks of mud and mangled wire to the German trenches, desperate for any sign of movement to justify his frostbitten finger on the trigger.

‘Pray we’re not at that point yet lad,’ Duncan joked in response, observing his own breath against the bitter cold air. The two had been stationed in the muddy squalor of the trenches aligned with the River Ancre for what felt like an eternity now, more precise measurements ranging from a few weeks to several days depending on the morale of the soldier whom you asked. British success had reached the Highland Light Infantry some days before, with the 39th Division achieving its objective of capturing the Schwaben Redoubt and holding firm overnight. Despite extremely poor visibility and inclement weather, all could smell the lingering scent of death streaming down from the trenches beyond. Stomachs would twist, emotions would drain, chatter would be reduced to taciturn responses. There were no victors here.

The six-o-clock morning haze prompted a squint from Duncan as whistles to action made their way down the trench. Orders

were spat with ardour concerning King and Country, intended to be spirit rousing, but now stale as the bread the soldiers had been chewing on for over a year. Something about enemy trenches of Munich and Frankfort was bellowed, meaning very little to all around the division, their only true objective being to stand, shoot and try to stay alive.

Craig gripped Duncan's hand in anticipation of the final command, still straining to see through the grey sleet falling in front of them. 'How are we supposed to know where we're going?' he barked.

'Easy. Just walk forward until people start firing at you,' Duncan whispered in Craig's ear, a nervous quiver in each word.

A scramble of well-worn boots began to make their way up the make-shift timber ladders, faces greeted with the chill of the winter air. Fingers tightened around rifles as tentative steps were taken through pools of stagnant water, the occasional slip resulting in an audible splash and curse. Regurgitation of that morning's breakfast was common, especially on the sight of a fallen comrade or the bloated corpse of a horse.

'Do you think we've caught them off guard?' Craig said with a hint of optimism. Duncan did not respond, but scanned left and right as his compatriots moved in an uneven line. The silence was making him feel very uncomfortable. A volley of bullets that burst from the opposing ranks in front almost provided him with some relief, the adrenaline doing its job as shouts were given to cover and lie low. Puffs of red came from both Duncan's sides as two lean soldiers fell face first, one catching

on the coiled wire. Craig continued to hold Duncan's hand, breathing rapidly but not yet in panic as more bullets followed.

'We can crawl through,' he exclaimed. 'Follow me.'

Duncan felt Craig's hand slip from his as he eagerly hauled his way over mud mounds belly down, the soles of his boots soon all Duncan could see.

'Craig. Mate, *wait*,' Duncan pleaded as more soldiers fell from the fire. Several had reached the tip of the Frankfort Trench, furiously aiming their rifles down and shooting at whatever looked or sounded German, some making it into a trench, others falling lifelessly. Craig was now out of sight.

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The stillness of night was approaching fast. Duncan had not dared move from his position of shelter, hands clamped over his ears to drown out the cries of anguish and isolated explosions falling within metres of him, fountains of soil raining down on his back. The air was thick with smoke and gunpowder, packing a subtle heat. He braved a look forward, little of the landscape had changed other than the scatter of unfortunate bodies, atop which thin layers of snow were just starting to cake. The quiet offered enough reassurance to move carefully towards the edge of the Frankfort trench, rifle frozen solid but trigger still poised. He peered down, expecting a bullet through the eye, but thankfully was met by fellow members of his division.

'Welcome to the Glasgow Boys Brigade,' came a welcome Scottish accent from below, arm stretched out in assistance, seized by Duncan.

'What's going on? Have the Germans retreated?' he asked.

'Not a chance,' tutted the short, haggard-looking soldier nursing a wound on his lower right leg. 'Jerry's cut us off. Can't move forward or back. So much for reconnaissance!' came a growl. Men around him struggled to light cigarettes, given the shakes that had set in over the past few hours, many just staring vacantly skywards. Duncan panned around for Craig, lifting the helmets of a few obscured soldiers – breathing or not – for a sign of his presence. Nothing.

'Who's this Craig lad you're after?' the short soldier asked.

'My friend. Country lad from Inverness,' Duncan replied, before giving a vague description.

'Ah, proper Highlander you say? Black short hair? My height?'

'A little taller,' Duncan said mildly so as not to offend on grounds of physical stature. The soldier turned and called for a gentleman by the name of Ben, and a ranked officer appeared, battle worn and dejected, but through the soiled face Duncan could see handsome, typically Caribbean features. The retelling of the search by the soldier pulled the officer's expression lower and lower in sombreness.

'A scar on his forehead, you say? Just above the left eye?' Ben concluded in a warming West Indies accent. Duncan nodded in confirmation. A path was cleared to the wounded and dead,

soft whimpers unsettling Duncan as he stepped carefully around victims, following the officer. Stained sheets lay over bodies, the corner of one stripped back to reveal the punctured torso of Craig, eyes closed, peaceful.

‘The lad fought well, shot at least three Jerries before being struck by the fallout from a mortar shell,’ Ben commentated. Duncan wasn’t listening. Kneeling closely by his lover’s side he gripped his hand while lowering his head to hide any signs of grief. ‘I’ll give you a moment,’ Ben offered.

The jigsaw of memories would take more than a moment to arrange for Duncan, try as he might to focus on the more pleasant ones before the two were enlisted into the Highland Light Infantry. Sunset while fishing in the River Ness, racing fiercely across the tundra of the Cairngorms only to huddle together for warmth in the bitter winter nights. The years of war had taken their toll, yes, but Craig’s fortitude had never waned, even when Duncan’s was beginning to crumble. The thought of now having to face this burden alone twisted in Duncan’s stomach far worse than any bayonet. He wanted to scream, loud enough for all of France to hear, but all he could manage was a hollow gasp starved of air.

‘Lads. Look lively,’ came Ben’s orders as those that could stand leapt to their feet. ‘The Germans ... they’re coming back!’ A few puzzled glances were exchanged as men rallied their rifles once more in disarray, sharply aiming in one direction only to quickly shift to another upon hearing the slightest sound. The whistle of a shell grew stronger before exploding metres away from the seized trench, scattering more charred soil and mud. Another

followed, some men cowering for cover, others now rearing to charge.

Ben bellowed an order to advance upon witnessing a line of German infantry march across the wastelands – several obeyed, many could not, opting to crouch and shoot from their positions in the vain hope they would hit a target. The German advance was not hindered. Ben's body froze, his battalion being mowed down like wheat in a field before his very eyes. His hands clasped around his officer's pistol, but couldn't summon the courage or indeed the strength to even lift it in defiance of blazing German faces aflame with retribution. If there was to be any dignity on this day, it would come from his pistol aimed firmly under his chin, and his own finger on the trigger. Without a sound, Duncan had climbed out of the trench and began walking slowly towards the affray.

Ben was quick to note Duncan's rifle had been left behind, prompting a conclusion of complete capitulation from the young soldier – not uncommon, he thought, as the madness of bloodshed mixed with uncontrollable grief had been enough to drive the most steadfast man to despair. But something was wrong, or perhaps not wrong ... but different.

Duncan walked with his fists clenched, head up, focus forward. His actions had already brought an uneasy pause from his fellow soldiers as they continued to bury themselves within the earth amid the enemy advance. A few Germans had slowed in confusion, some consulting amongst themselves as to the motives of Duncan's manoeuvre. Was it a surrender? A plea for a coup de grace? It was only when he raised his right fist in blue light that the German firing began once more, a few volleys

only at first, but when these failed to penetrate, the rate increased. Sparks of white and blue lit up around Duncan, absorbing each bullet, as he seemed to stand behind an impenetrable shield.

Amidst the bewilderment, Ben called his troops back to the safety of the Frankfort trench, some picked off on retreat but most spared as the German efforts concentrated on the lone Duncan. A well-positioned mortar shell landed inches to his side, enough to unbalance him and bring him to one knee, blood running from his calf. Ben wanted to respond with fire of his own, to stand with the apparent sacrifice, but a firm look back from Duncan behind gave a contrary message. Ben withdrew, urging all to do the same and scatter through the lost ground, only hours earlier taken in victory. He turned and ran just as the rattle of German machine guns began to spit in Duncan's direction – more sparks of white and blue engulfing the isolated soldier.

He turned back one more time as a defiant cry of insubordination came from Duncan, just as another mortar shell coasted through the ashen skies, this time finding its mark.

Chapter 2

Bath, England

27th January 2012 AD

Karen gave three firm thumps of her fist against the solid wooden door of the Allen family home, but got no answer. She tried again, this time using the brass door knock in the shape of a faded lion's head, soon realising it to be even less effective. She glanced up at the three-storey terraced Georgian House, all windows closed. She peered down beneath the steps to the basement hoping to see the soft glow of a bulb, but still nothing.

The chill in the air had her tuck her hands under her arms and curse to the wind over Richard's recent absence. The last time she or William had seen him or his sons was New Year's, when Nick kindly hosted all at The Bear. Richard seemed absent then even when physically present – enough to cause concern within the group. A few failed phone calls prompted William to send Karen round just to check in, if only to get rid of the endless boxes of mince pies they had failed to consume over the post-festive weeks.

'I think he's out dear,' came the sharp and prim voice of his neighbour Mrs Stepson, her limp forcing her to take her own steps to her front door one at a time. She leaned her hunched frame against the iron railings as she dipped her long, crooked

fingers into her bag searching for her house keys. 'Been out for several days now,' she continued, wiping a dripping nose on her worn tartan coat. 'Does come back in the evenings with the two boys...the tall one and the short one.' Karen paused to process whether she was referring to Adam and Luke, not quite able to make sense of the height variance until Mrs Stepson went on to flatter the charm of the Irishman and his cheeky grin. Iain appeared to be making himself at home with Richard and Adam – no sign of Luke though.

'Do you have any idea where they might have gone?' Karen asked.

'Really don't know dear, you know what he's like. Home for days then away for days,' Mrs Stepson shrugged.

OK. Thank you anyway,' Karen replied, making her way down the steps.

'Oh. You know Mavis from across the road?' Mrs Stepson gestured with her umbrella. 'I recall she saw Richard just last week up at Prior Park. She loves to go up there and spend time painting, even on stark winter days like today. Not sure if that helps dear?'

Karen tried to think while Mrs Stepson continued to ramble dismissively about Mavis's watercolours and the state of Richard's orchard in the back garden. Prior Park was the ancestral home of the Allen Family, dating back to Ralph Allen himself, and built with the hands of John Wood the Elder, bloodline of William. The families had been near inseparable ever since. Karen interrupted Mrs Stepson's monologue with a kind thank you as she stepped back into the car.

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The beige gravel drive meandered its way up to the now converted Catholic College, its summit offering picturesque views of its carefully landscaped gardens and the pale stone of Bath City in the distance. Karen pulled up at the entrance – ‘a good time to take advantage of the place during the longer academic break’ she thought, while scanning down the green towards the ornate Palladian Bridge. A smile crept across her face whenever she spotted hints of Arthurian legacy, well into the eighteenth century. She remembered the bridge being Richard and William’s favourite place to meet and contemplate when young, but no sign of him, nor indeed of Adam and Iain.

A thud came from a nearby open window, followed quickly by a groan of pain. Karen swiftly pulled at the main door and hurried towards the open doors of the sports hall. Red crash mats covered the usual wooden boards of the multi-functional space, with Adam and Iain both dressed in knee-length shorts and loose-fitting vests, standing in the centre, both perspiring slightly, Adam rubbing his neck while regaining breath.

‘Again,’ came Richard’s voice from Karen’s side, his arms folded and one foot flat to the wall, a hint of exasperation in the tone. Iain tapped Adam on the shoulder as if pressing a reset button before the two raised fingerless gloved fists ready for combat. Neither bothered to even acknowledge Karen before engaging in quick jabs and low kicks.

'Richard. Is this where you've been these past few weeks?' Karen accused. Richard gave a gentle nod before ordering Adam to keep his guard up.

'What is this? Some Sacred Band fight club you've set up?' she quizzed in disbelief.

'Just training. You and I were no different, if you recall,' Richard rebuffed while shouting another instruction.

'You could have at least given your son a break after all that's happened,' Karen murmured with concern.

'Afraid we don't have time for that, Karen. I'm sure you understand, as does William.'

Iain had left his leg exposed long enough for Adam to sweep it clean from under him, bringing his larger, muscular body to the floor. Adam pinned both arms quickly under each foot then landed a half-hearted punch to Iain's chest. Karen winced as much as Iain did. 'Good. That's one apiece,' clapped Richard. Adam offered his hand to Iain with good intentions, only to have it slapped away by his now irascible opponent.

'Has Gary checked in on you?' Karen asked.

'A little. Not much to report,' Richard replied.

'Doesn't that strike you as suspicious?' Karen pressed. 'The White Dragon must have the Palladium by now, yet we've heard or seen nothing. And as for locating Mack, I know Gary has been searching tirelessly through all his last known contacts – still nothing.'

Richard scratched the stubble of his beard, he looked tired and heavy to Karen, as if his mind had had little chance to switch off since the incident with Mary Cassidy at Tintagel. Karen eased her line of questioning on the subject.

‘How’s Luke?’ she asked.

‘Not bad,’ Richard gruffed in response, while looking towards the floor.

‘Can’t have been easy for him. I heard from Nick that Violet has continued to keep him company. I think she’s quite taken with him,’ Karen softly joked, prompting an incredulous eyebrow from Richard.

Adam hit the mats again once an elbow from Iain caught his groin. He shut out the pain while rolling away and blocking Iain’s heel coming down hard – again, Iain’s leg exposed and swept. Adam struggled to pin Iain down for a second time, instead himself being twisted onto his back, wrists slammed down above his head by Iain’s superior strength. ‘Come on lad ... you’re stronger than *that*,’ Iain teased, bringing his nose within inches of Adam’s as Adam strained. A gloat Iain came to regret, when Adam’s head butted his nose hard, without holding back, causing eyes to water. Adam slid a knee from under him and levered Iain off, quickly about to reaffirm his pin position atop him before Iain raised one hand in submission, his other still clamped over his nose. He muffled his objection to Adam’s behaviour as Richard intervened.

‘Alright, you two. That’s enough for now,’ Richard ordered.

'Jeez! Your son's a real son of ...' Iain spat, still shaking stars from his eyes before judging Richard's expression. Adam offered his hand again in conciliation, this time accepted, hauling Iain to his feet. The two acknowledged their efforts in playful embrace. Karen just shook her head in disbelief.

'So, the plan is Richard gets the two of you to kill each other before Lady Morgan or any of the White Dragon do? Is that the plan?' she tutted.

'Nah, it's only training lass. I've taken harder hits than that,' Iain chirped in response.

'Me too,' Adam immediately followed in defence, managing a slight grin of his own.

'Both of you are holding back,' Richard intervened. Adam and Iain both looked at him with disdain.

'And how do you figure that like?' Iain quipped, hands on hips. Richard turned to a backpack on the floor and unzipped it, removing two broadswords. He whimsically swung one in neat, slashing motions before offering the grip to Iain.

'The Greeks used to train as you two have done – only much earlier of course. Spartans were known to do it best, called it the *agoge*. It meant ...'

'Rearing,' Adam interrupted, taking the second broadsword. 'And the Sacred Band defeated the Spartans at Leuctra. So much for all that Thermopylae three-hundred nonsense.'

'Indeed. But I doubt there would have been a Thebes if it hadn't been for Thermopylae ... and there were more than just

three hundred Spartans present, as you well know, Adam,' Richard retorted. 'Do you know why the Sacred Band defeated the Spartans over a hundred years later?' Iain and Adam drew blanks.

'It wasn't because they were better, it was because they had something to lose,' Richard continued. 'I'd like to quote Plato, but I'm sure my son here would beat me to the ending.' Adam screwed up his lips at losing such an opportunity.

'So, let's end today with a Theban tradition of sword duel, in close combat. First blood wins.' Iain inspected his weapon, running his palm across the edge of the blade.

'Mr Allen, mate. These are *sharp*,' he noted.

'As I said. First blood wins,' Richard confirmed while walking back towards an open-mouthed Karen.

'Richard! What the ...? You can't be serious? You saw how heated it got just now. Either one of them could ...'

'They won't.' Richard confidently cut off. 'They'll want to ... but they won't.' Karen made her unease known, keeping her staff close by her side ready to intervene.

Iain and Adam circled one another for a few seconds, alternating sudden steps forward before dropping back to a safe distance. Adam made the first lunge, side-stepped by Iain, and retaliated with a swing of his own, blocked firmly by Adam's blade. Iain swung again, forcing Adam to twist backwards, allowing the sword to pass overhead before turning

and springing forward with a thrust that just missed Iain's back. Karen edged forward, only to be held back by Richard.

Iain's face grew meaner, a quick two-stroke cut only a hair's breadth away from Adam's torso forced a defensive swipe, joining the two swords and bringing the duo together, both gritting teeth as they strained for dominance. The piercing screech of the slipping blades brought more tension to Karen, Richard still remaining impassive. A sudden kick from Iain broke the impasse, followed by a gutsy bellow as he hammered down another strike – enough to break Adam's sword.

Karen shook herself, startled. Richard for the first time stood upright from the wall as Adam immediately summoned his blue shield in deflection of yet more relentless attacks from Iain. He committed his knee to the ground, still maintaining his conjured defence against an enraged Iain, while sparks flew in all directions.

'Richard, *enough*,' Karen pleaded. 'He's going to kill him!'

Richard drew breath and began to raise his hands to deflect Iain's wrath when a cry came from his son. A piercing blue flame shot from his right hand, grazing Iain's shoulder and causing him to stumble back. Adam stood tall once again, armed both with long, flaming spear and shimmering blue shield, his breathing composed.

Iain responded, summoning a spear of his own and hurling it in Adam's direction, but the shield did its job. Adam returned fire, the spear shattering a mirror behind Iain as he swerved to avoid. Adam threw again, Iain rolled as more blue sparks and glass flew off the walls.

‘Richard!’ Karen shouted, grasping his arm.

Iain conjured up his own spear once more and hurled his whole bodyweight towards Adam, his smaller opponent thrown to the mats, his shield sparking. Another spear Adam brought to his hand, a bolt of blue in desperation as Iain went to plunge his through Adam’s chest, and this time it was Iain’s shield, held at arm’s length, that blocked the move. Iain leaned down with all he could on Adam, his shield fizzing and crackling against the tip of his rival’s spear. The war of attrition was rapidly becoming a stalemate, neither opponent prepared to give. As the two yelled at one another in frustration, Richard finally boomed – ‘*Enough.*’

At first, neither Adam nor Iain would accept the judgement, their eyes fixed on each other, cast in glowing blue, saliva welling through their teeth.

‘Adam, Iain,’ Richard spoke again in a more measured tone. ‘You can stop now.’

The fury began to ebb away from both, the flames evaporating harmlessly. Adam gave out a deep sigh of exhaustion, falling flat on his back as Iain collapsed by his side. The two breathed heavily, drained physically and emotionally. Karen looked on attentively as Richard knelt down beside them both – Iain with his arm draped over Adam, both sobbing quietly.

‘Now you begin to understand.’

Chapter 3

London, England

27th January 2012 AD

The morning sun crested through the cool glass peaks of the City skyline, and Sir Lawrence Worthington, resting his chin on his palm while gazing out from the highest point of the City Hall, tapped his right foot impatiently while intermittently checking his watch.

‘Please be patient, dear,’ Lady Morgan soothed with a comforting pat to the arm. ‘Tristan is a busy man now, you know this, particularly with the year that’s upon us.’

‘May I ask why I am suddenly waiting for him?’ Sir Lawrence growled. He had become accustomed to giving the orders to all in the White Dragon faction, bar only Lady Morgan herself, but at her request, Tristan Baker had been allowed to pursue an element of his own interest, no doubt to keep the eager young knight occupied. But if there was one thing Sir Lawrence had come to know about his wife, it was that there was always an ulterior motive to everything she did.

Tristan burst out of the meeting room doors among a swell of other smartly dressed co-workers and chatter. He made his way instantly over to Sir Lawrence and Lady Morgan, receiving an embrace from the latter.

'My dear Tristan. It's been quite a while hasn't it? How are things going for you?' she asked tenderly.

'I have to say, my Lady, it has been fantastic. Never seen such a buzz of excitement across the City, indeed the whole of the United Kingdom. This is definitely going to be our year,' he squealed with excitement.

Sir Lawrence grumbled, 'It's a sporting event Tristan, one which London has hosted twice before. I fail to see how ...' He was cut short by Lady Morgan.

'Indeed my love, indeed. However, never have the games been set during such unprecedented times ... recession, financial crisis, risk of terrorism. We can bring this city into a new era, one the likes of which no one has seen before, and we don't need blood or wars or famine, only *faith*,' she calmly proclaimed.

Sir Lawrence mused on this. It was certainly a more muted approach on balance than had been adopted by his kin in generations past, but arguably more brilliant. The world had changed, and igniting new empires to topple others was becoming too predictable in a time of relentless media scrutiny and questionable fake news. Social media had given birth to radicals, undermining the White Dragon's traditional points of control through the press – questioning authority, seeking out conspiracies. Perhaps indeed a more productive method of influence was to dazzle an audience with wonder, elevate the mood of an entire nation and showcase it on a world stage. Let British influence become a soft power rather than a militant one.

Tristan continued to ramble until a colleague drew his attention to the next press conference about to begin, allowing him to make his excuses and leave, Lady Morgan wishing him all the best, promising to catch up soon.

'The Palladium? Is this its doing?' Sir Lawrence asked. Lady Morgan dipped her head, placing her hand over her necklace, and gave a slight smile. Sir Lawrence needed no further confirmation.

'Tell me dear, how is Stephen getting on?' she switched.

'Mack Benson has been difficult to track down, even with Sir Stephen's resources. Of the Windrush generation, so, limited information at our disposal. Last we heard he was local to Bristol, but not even the Red Dragon have known his whereabouts these past few years,' Sir Lawrence confirmed.

'Hmmm ... well, do keep me informed, won't you, dear.' Lady Morgan flippantly responded, turning on her heels.

'Where are you going? I thought you wanted to brief Mohammed Hussin about the Palladium? Jordan's capital, Amman, is several hours ahead and ...'

'No need, my darling. Mr Hussin already has the Palladium.'

'What? Since when?'

'Since I dispatched it last week.'

Lady Morgan's casual attitude grated on Sir Lawrence. While he did not dare to question the motives of a sorceress, insubordination from his own fellow knights was enough to

twist his stomach in discontent. He did, however, let the line of enquiry drop.

‘And your ongoing interest in Mack Benson?’ Sir Lawrence pressed again.

‘Just keep me informed,’ Lady Morgan replied. ‘I’m going to visit Professor South, care to join me?’

‘Geraint? That dopey old fool?’ Sir Lawrence sneered at the thought of contacting a pacifist member of the White Dragon, locked up in his library of dusty books and stained parchments. Obsessed with theory over practicality, never once stepping forward to wield a worthy blade for their cause in over forty years. Still, while Sir Lawrence’s time for him had withered over the decades, Lady Morgan had always kept him close, often meeting in private.

‘Very well,’ came Sir Lawrence’s reluctant reply while checking his watch for the umpteenth time. ‘The next train to York will leave in an hour.’

Chapter 4

Bath, England

27th January 2012 AD

‘Check!’ came the chirpy, satisfied statement from Violet as she swept her bishop across the board. Luke leant his head on his fist, only partially involved, then carelessly moved his knight three spaces.

‘Really? That’s your plan?’ Violet grinned as she slid her queen across. ‘Checkmate.’

‘You’re too good at this for me, kid,’ Luke conceded with a slouch in the chair. ‘Not sure I had a plan at all really.’

‘Need to teach you,’ she smiled, while placing the pieces back in their starting points ready for another game she feared would not come. Luke’s interest had faded, as was clear from his intermittent absent gazes out of the window, and incessant scratching of his ear lobe. Despite only knowing him for a few months, Violet had quickly picked up on his mannerisms – the way he slid his hands quickly into his pockets when he was nervous, or like his father the scratching of unshaven bristle on his broad neck when deep in thought. There were other small idiosyncrasies too, like always putting one sugar in his coffee and tasting it before adding another, or when he’d wrinkle his nose at a plate of food placed before him he didn’t like. This

week it was haggis in honour of Burns' Night – Nick going to great lengths to describe its contents before serving it.

The most personal moments were when Violet would knock gently at his door upstairs in The Bear with a hot drink in hand, only to hear him weeping softly inside. There was a second or two before his door opened, eyes rubbed red and voice cleared as if to affirm his masculinity, while warmly accepting the beverage. Over his shoulder Violet could see the room divided, with Adam's neater side filled with yet more history magazines, music and ornaments, whereas Luke's side was bare save for the small photograph of Mary and Jenny he'd kept close for so long now, pinned up on a framed corkboard along with a few other tatty photos saved from his home in Boston. Clothes always scattered untidily across the floor, spare mattress and bedding never made.

One thing that did seem to bring joy to Luke was when his brother would return from whatever activity his father had him and Iain doing, and tossed William's car keys over to him. Amazingly, despite all Adam's flare and resourcefulness as a Sacred Band member, he had yet to master the basics of driving his own vehicle. Luke put this down to Richard's obsessions with what he now called 'barm-ageddon', stealing a regular childhood from Adam, a point he gleefully pointed out to his father to try and provoke a response, failing each time.

William would utter words of caution over the insurance as the two brothers shot out of the pub door, soothed by Karen. Luke barely acknowledged Iain as he seized Adam's arm in haste.

'Foot on the clutch-thing, then into first,' Luke would order, still trying to decipher manual shift himself.

'*Clutch-thing?*' Adam would joke, while pressing too hard on the accelerator, causing the Vauxhall to kick forward, jolting both their heads before stalling. A laugh would follow, together with mockery from William. Second time was always the charm, as the engine settled and the car pulled slowly away.

'Which way?' Adam said.

'Up Sion Hill as yesterday. Only this time no taking off wing-mirrors,' Luke caustically replied.

Aware that the time between the two of them was precious, Adam took the opportunity to probe the thoughts of his elder brother. While in many ways he had the luxury of routine to help manage his own emotions over the passing of their mother, Luke was very much in uncharted terrain. Back in England after twelve years, no immediate friends or hobbies, and certainly left feeling like a spare part in this frantic machine. That was before you even approached the subject of Mary, something not even their father had attempted to broach.

'Think this car might need a tune-up soon. What do you think?' Adam asked lightly to try and catch Luke's interest. Luke just hummed in agreement before ordering Adam to indicate.

'You spoken to anyone back in Boston?' Adam tried again, met only with a shake of Luke's head and yet more instructions, this time over traffic lights.

'What's your earliest memory of Mum?' persisted Adam.

'Arguing with Dad over us,' Luke shot back.

'Seriously Luke. It can't be that. There were good times and you know it,' defended Adam. Luke paused to think while checking blind spots before answering.

'Hot chocolate,' he said.

'What?'

'Hot chocolate. Mom would always make the two of us hot chocolate with marshmallows every night before Dad got home. You used to argue that you had less than I did, but Mom would insist we had the same number. It was only later she realised I was tall enough to reach the jar of marshmallows and take some extra for myself ... you must have spotted me once but she never believed you,' Luke sniggered.

'I *knew* it,' Adam laughed before amending his hands on the wheel back to ten-to-two at Luke's reminder. 'Mine must have been around the same time ... both Mum and Dad acting out the drawing of Excalibur from the Stone of Destiny. Neither she nor Dad could remove it and it was always up to the two of us to pull that plastic sword from a mound of pillows in our bedrooms. Remember?' Adam chuckled, enough to get a rise out of Luke.

'I suppose you think that's all still true?' Luke rebuked.

'Come on, Luke. After all we've seen you're going to question any myth or legend?' Adam incredulous responded.

'Three-point turn it here,' Luke switched quickly. 'Good. Now parallel park without running over that cat on the sidewalk.'

'Pavement. And yes, OK,' Adam teased. A few attempts to align and the car slotted in smoothly. He switched the engine off.

'Forgive me for being direct Luke, but ... are you OK? Not just about Mum, Mary as well,' Adam expressed his concern. Luke stared directly ahead without a hint of expression.

'It's been tough, yes. Tough for all of us. But everyone's been great, you've been great. And Violet ... jeez, can't use the bathroom without her checking on me,' Luke praised.

'Think she's got a thing for you,' Adam smiled. Luke gruffed while politely noting the considerable age gap between the two.

'Speaking of relationships ... how's Iain?' Luke parried. Adam now found himself being the silent one.

'I'm not sure. Really not sure. I can't say I don't care for him ... I do, you know I do. But ...'

'It's moving too fast?' Adam's pause confirmed Luke's guess. 'I get it Adam, I do. I know Dad thinks you've both got something special, and that's important. Your training together – from what I hear it's getting pretty intense. You'll be like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid by the end of it, I'm sure.'

'But ...?' Adam pressed. Luke bit his bottom lip while trying to think of an appropriate response.

'If things are too good to be true ... they probably are,' he concluded profoundly. Adam laughed – now he was sounding like their father.

Luke swung the side door open and checked the car's distance from the kerb. He approved just as Adam restarted the engine – accompanied by that familiar first jolt of the trainee driver that caused the two to jump forward at an angle into the road. The quick horn of a delivery truck sounded as the wing mirror flew off with a crack, tossed several feet down the road. Adam and Luke just stared as the truck continued on arrogantly.

'If William asks, we were not in the car!' Luke proposed.

Chapter.5

York, England

2nd February 2012 AD

Mack Benson was a proud man. When his grandparents arrived in Tilbury Docks with no more than ten pounds in their pockets, they lost little time arranging transport to the nearest hospital and immediately offering their services. His grandfather Robert had dedicated most of his life as a doctor in Kingston, Jamaica whereas his grandmother, Janine, was not only a skilled midwife but also an accomplished guitar player. Her music soothed many a wounded soldier in the South Western Hospital at Lambeth, offering comfort as they adjusted to living in post-war London.

The scars of the Blitz endured, so many were homeless and left without a sense of purpose. Some of the people who came from the Commonwealth Caribbean were put to work in construction, the pale concrete blocks a far cry from the soft, balmy beaches of their island pasts. Despite the desperate times, many were surprised that their ambitions for a better life after years of serving Crown and Country were met with such derision from locals. Robert would recall encounters at the local pub, where drinking time was limited to one quick pint under sharp surveillance from the regulars – a pin could drop. Those were the better days, others would see both him and Janine barred completely. When Mack's father was set upon

while returning home from school by vicious classmates all for the sake of a lunchbox and a miniature toy car, Grandfather Robert knew the time had come to move away from the city and find employment elsewhere.

A sleepy village on the outskirts of York became their new home. Robert took up work at York Hospital with better pay, allowing Janine to stay at home with Mack's father. The summer of 1966 saw England triumph in football's World Cup, the celebrations bringing a final flicker of joy for Robert as he succumbed to lung cancer later that winter. Janine had to return to midwifery, working long hours and frequently leaving Mack's father alone. On his fifteenth birthday, his mother's cycle ride home late that night ended in tragedy when a reckless drunk driver curbed his car and struck Janine's back wheel with force. His father was told it was painless and instant.

Two years of bouncing from foster home to foster home took its toll on Mack's father. He met his mother at a club one evening, described her as the 'the worst best-dressed dancer in the room,' and a year later they were married. Mack was born a good weight in the spring of 1974 and well cared for by his mother in a small one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of the city. He had early memories of playing with his father's walking stick, swinging it around frivolously while trying to emulate the action seen in old Bruce Lee films until an instant when he managed to shatter his Grandfather's urn of ashes resulted in punishment with that same stick by his disciplinarian father.

Ironically, despite his father's fervent desire for control within the family household, it was he who found it lacking. Unable to resist the allure of gambling and the excitement that comes with it, his father lost job after job, no matter how pedestrian and his irascibility increased at a rate matched only by his drinking. Several times as a young teenager Mack would throw himself between his father and mother as a human shield, if only to feel useful. As soon as he became old enough to be independent and had some basic qualifications to his name, he left home to make a better life for himself on his own. He was sixteen, tall, with unblemished cocoa skin apart from a single scar above his left eye, when he had failed to dodge one of his father's hurled whiskey bottles.

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'You never mention your father's or mother's names? Why not?' came the tender voice of Jane. Mack gave no response. She let out a sigh. 'Strange how our families remain with us after such trauma, even when we don't wish them to. Wouldn't you agree?'

'I suppose,' Mack huffed, hands pressed tightly together, staring at his feet, 'my Mother is dead and my Father, God only knows, why should I care?' his guard returned as Jane gave a glance at the cheap plastic clock on the wall approaching the hour mark.

'Of course. Well, time is almost up I'm afraid, Mr Benson. Now, you will remember what we spoke of today, won't you? Be mindful, especially when the temptation of alcohol is strong,

and do write down your thoughts and fears ahead of next week's session. I want to know.' She gave a professional smile while jotting down notes. 'And as always, do call me if there's anything on your mind that simply cannot wait.' She stood up while passing Mack her number, scribbled on the back of a counselling leaflet. Mack nodded in agreement and headed for the door.

'Oh, and please remember your walking stick this time, Mr Benson. It's down by reception,' Jane noted before spotting a small straw doll lying on the sofa next to her. 'Mr Benson ... I believe you arrived with this?' she said just before the door closed. Mack looked back and widened his eyes as if in horror of what he had just done, quickly snatching the doll from Jane's hands, then bowing his head in guilt.

'Thank you, Mrs DuLac,' he stuttered out a whisper. Jane placed a hand on his shoulder.

'It will get easier I promise. Give it time – the answers are there. You just need to find the right questions.'

Chapter 6

Oxford, England

14th February 2012 AD

'I must say, I am delighted you and Sir Lawrence are now taking such an interest in my work,' came the bumbling tone of Geraint South as he stumbled towards Lady Morgan and Sir Lawrence, his trembling hands barely holding the wine glasses upright on the tray. 'This is what now? The third visit in a fortnight?'

'Fourth,' Sir Lawrence snipped, taking a large gulp of red, swiftly followed by a frown of disapproval over its quality.

'Well my dear Geraint, you must know how important it is that we all remain close to one another during this unprecedented time. Trust me, your wonderful research does not go unnoticed by either me or my husband,' Lady Morgan soothed, holding Sir Lawrence's hand.

Geraint twisted the silver ring on his crooked index finger, tracing the engraving of *Albus Draco*. He gave a childish smile. 'But surely my Lady, with the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia in our possession, why such an interest in Excalibur?'

Lady Morgan paused for a second, staring vacantly through her glass. 'It's not personal ... despite what my husband may have you believe. The feud between us and the King of Britons has

long since passed -- I can accept that. However, we have always known Excalibur to possess a unique quality, particularly during times of war. King Arthur knew this, and I am certain the Red Dragon know it. Why struggle to maintain and control balance when there is always a means to undo what we have done?' she said sternly.

'You believe Excalibur to be the cause of so many of the world's greatest empires collapsing?' Geraint asked. 'I thought the necklace was the poison there?'

Caressing the Necklace of Harmonia gently, Lady Morgan gave a weak smile. 'It is true, desire will always rule the hearts of men. Just as love will conquer all before it – but there has always been a third element, an additional cornerstone you may say. A piece of humanity's trinity that has gone unnoticed.'

Her explanations were starting to confuse Geraint as he wracked his brain to process this guidance. 'So, you believe this third piece of the puzzle to be Excalibur?' he concluded.

'I know only what my history has taught me, Sir Geraint. I'm sure a man of your erudite ways will understand,' Lady Morgan smiled. Sir Lawrence raised his usual incredulous eyebrow.

Geraint placed his wine down and stood to attention, straightening his moth-eaten tweed blazer. 'Well, I can certainly share with you both what I have researched over these many years ... both I and my generations,' he muttered while scampering over to his bureau. 'I assume my Lady is familiar with the connection between King Arthur's legendary sword and the line of Bedivere?'

‘We are,’ Sir Lawrence interjected quickly.

‘Indeed. So, the Knights of Bedivere are said to be the only lineage that can locate Excalibur. How they do this does remain a mystery I’m afraid. This is quite unlike the Palladium, which is born from the pain of losing a loved one ... which, may I say, my Lady performed a wonderful task in locating,’ Geraint flattered.

‘So where was it last seen?’ Sir Lawrence interrupted, growing ever more impatient. Geraint flushed.

‘Well, much like the Palladium itself, the location and use of Excalibur remains a mystery.’ He stuttered in the face of Sir Lawrence’s menacing glare. ‘We did believe for some time that it would remain hidden until there was a genuine call for it. This does, as I’m sure you both know, mirror the legend.’

‘When Britain is at its most desperate, Excalibur shall appear,’ Lady Morgan quoted.

‘Correct. But there have certainly been many times over the centuries when our island has faced great danger from all sorts of foe -- from the armies of Napoleon to the plague that was the Black Death – but no empirical evidence exists to prove the use of Excalibur in all these cases. Most of my line believed it to be purely the work of the Necklace,’ Geraint proclaimed, pointing his pencil towards Lady Morgan’s chest. ‘Love and desire. Similar in nature, but two very different animals.’

Lady Morgan nodded in agreement, while casting her eye over a parchment of nineteenth century Edinburgh. ‘And this?’ she asked, tapping her nail across neatly penned text.

‘Ah, that was one theory,’ Geraint wiped his glasses with his sleeve. ‘Many would assume Excalibur to be either buried with King Arthur at a holy site such as Avalon, or Glastonbury as we know it today, or maybe in a lake somewhere nearby – again, according to the legend. But the unearthing of bizarre miniature coffins in 1836 suggested there may have been some form of worship taking place around the famous mound, unconnected to any particular form of religion or paganism.’

‘And the fact that it’s called Arthur’s Seat?’ Sir Lawrence scolded. Geraint again cowered.

‘But nothing of the likes of a tomb has ever been discovered there. Certainly no sword,’ Geraint continued. ‘Whether it was merely an alternative, unconnected form of burial, or witchcraft, no one appears to be sure.’

‘Or we’ve just not been looking hard enough,’ Lady Morgan spoke coldly, still studying the etchings of the doll-like figures. ‘Darling ... how goes our search for Mr Benson?’ she turned to Sir Lawrence.

‘Colonel Thorpe and his men are continuing to search and are hopeful that ...’ he was cut short.

‘We need something more alluring for the Red Dragon. No doubt they too will be searching for him and seeking the same answers we are. Excalibur would be their only defence against us now,’ Lady Morgan exulted.

‘How is my Lady sure they do not have it already?’ Geraint asked meekly.

‘Despite my subtleties in the use of the Palladium these past few months my dear Geraint, I am certain that had Excalibur been wielded, I would have known,’ she replied. ‘Still ... we must celebrate all we have achieved and not talk too much shop.’ Her face lifted at the change of subject. ‘Sir Geraint, you must join my husband and me in London this coming weekend for the opening of the World Wars display at the Imperial War Museum. We discovered some wonderful artefacts and treasures during our salvage in the North Atlantic that most certainly should be shared with the masses.’ She took Sir Lawrence’s arm.

‘Oh. I will of course endeavour to be available, my Lady,’ Geraint bowed, lifting his staff off a pile of dusty books.

‘Excellent. We look forward to seeing you,’ Lady Morgan acknowledged, ushering Sir Lawrence from the room. ‘Ah yes, darling do remind me ... we must have Tristan send an invitation to our most desired guests. I suggest we start with that Gary gentleman from the *Bath Chronicle*.’

Chapter 7

Bath, England

18th February 2012 AD

‘The Imperial War Museum?’ Nick bellowed from behind the bar as Gary presented evidence of invitations to the Maritime Warfare Gala to the group sitting in a circle in the same corner of The Bear pub. ‘Tonight? A bit late notice isn’t it?’

‘Has to be a trap. A ruse of some sort,’ William turned to Richard. Richard remained silent.

‘Are we going to go?’ Karen quizzed. Richard still said nothing, before turning to Iain.

‘What do you think?’ Richard asked, passing his invite to Iain. He scratched his ginger beard all the way to the top of his ear before letting out a deep sigh.

‘Trap most likely, I’d say too,’ Iain concurred.

‘They want something from us. Why else even bother to come into contact?’ Nick continued to growl.

‘Perhaps they know about Mack?’ William proposed. ‘What if they’ve somehow got to him before we have?’ Richard rested his chin in his palm, crestfallen at just the thought. Gary tried to provide some reassurance that even his own leads through various media had resulted in little more than hunches as to

Mack's last known whereabouts since his tragic accident, the best guess pinning him to North Yorkshire. When a man himself is lost, it is difficult for others to locate him.

Iain straightened himself in his chair. 'Perhaps I could reach out to some of my old contacts like, not really many of them close to the Worthington lot now but might still know a thing or two?' Richard gave a nod of approval.

Adam couldn't help but notice his brother's piercing glance towards Iain as he spoke – still uneasy about him, that much was clear. Rather than disagree, Luke simply got up and helped himself to another coffee in a small act of defiance towards the group.

'So, are we going to attend?' Adam asked.

'We will, yes. Let's see what the White Dragon has to offer – we could do with the opportunity to try and determine the latest on the Palladium. But not you, your brother or Iain. Stay here in Bath and follow up on Gary's leads for Mack – Iain is most certainly not to be spotted with us so openly, not after Tintagel,' Richard affirmed. Iain jumped to attention, patting Adam on the shoulder as he passed him to step outside for better mobile signal.

'As if the Wicked Witch of the West won't know about Mr Lucky Charms,' Luke sneered through coffee steam.

'What was that, Luke?' Richard shot.

‘Nothing. Enjoy London,’ Luke retorted as his father threw on his long brown coat and led Karen, William and Gary out. Adam took the opportunity to confront his brother.

‘What the hell is your problem Luke?’ Adam barked. ‘I know you don’t care much for Iain, I get it, but it’s a little late to act like the protective big brother now, don’t you think?’

Luke passively slurped his coffee. ‘I just don’t trust him. That’s all. Call it intuition.’

‘And what would you know about intuition? If it wasn’t for Iain we would never have gotten close to Mary or her whereabouts when captured by the White Dragon. How can you not trust him?’ Adam pressed.

Luke fell silent upon hearing Mary’s name, remained surprisingly composed. ‘He *led* me to Minnie, yes. Did he save her? Did *we* save her? *No!*’ his tone grew more bitter with every word. ‘While you’re off with your new boy toy playing Dungeons and Dragons with Dad, I’m left here being babysat by the grumpy bartender and his precious teenage girl. Each night I wake with nightmares of Min screaming as she fell down that bloody cliff and ...’ Luke’s emotions hit their limit. He slammed the small silver spoon down on the table, causing Nick to jump, almost dropping a pint glass.

Recognising Luke’s hurt, Adam softened. ‘I thought you were OK? When we last spoke in the car ... I, I can’t read minds, Luke. I know it must be difficult, but we are all hurting in some way. Trust me when I say Iain gives me rare comfort in all this. Please believe me.’

Luke shrugged his shoulders before turning his back on Adam without a word and skulking upstairs. Nick gave a look of concern in Adam's direction, Adam deflecting it with a little shake of his head. Violet stood in the doorway just behind him, looking wounded and shocked.

'Sorry Violet. You know he means nothing by it. He's just really upset,' Adam soothed. Violet's lower lip trembled for a short while as if holding back tears, but she quickly recomposed herself.

'I hear him at night. Shouting out Mary's name,' she whispered. Adam put her hand in his. 'But that's not all,' she continued. 'He keeps saying something in his sleep – "*I don't want it. I don't want it.*" – What do you think he means?'

Adam screwed up his face in thought. Could it be the Palladium? Possibly ... but why? There was no logical connection, given that was a burden for Mary and Mary alone, sadly. Something to do with their father's bloodline through Sir Galahad perhaps? Still, why would Mary Cassidy be delivering such a posthumous message? Maybe these were merely the ramblings of a tortured man in pain. This sorry explanation gave Adam more comfort than anything else more visceral he could concoct.

Iain's return indoors brought cheer back to Adam's face, only to drain of colour upon hearing Iain's words of warning. 'I think we've got a problem, kid.'

Chapter 8

London, England

18th February 2012 AD

A chill swept through the air as William looked up to admire the 15-inch guns protruding proudly from the Imperial War Museum entrance. Crowds were gathering in an orderly fashion by the entrance, banners draped over each Doric column proclaiming the success of the recent Atlantic expedition and the treasures found deep on the sea bed and in the wrecks. The odd reporter here and there checked their microphones and tidied their hair in front of cameramen ready to go live, all jostling for the ideal spot. Chatter rose from the queues about lost relatives from both World Wars, stories of survival and fate – many from men and women dressed in full military attire, decorated with a handsome collection of medals and colours.

Gary passed around the four entry tickets. Karen gave Richard a slight nudge to urge the group to fall in line at the back of the queue – but Richard was his typical preoccupied self, scanning across the sea of faces for any sign of the Worthingtons or other White Dragon affiliates. So far all clear.

‘Keep your staffs close,’ Richard ordered.

‘Do you think they will confiscate them upon entry? Particularly given they must know we’re coming?’ Gary enquired.

‘Well, if they don’t ... we’ll get a sense of what they have in store for us I suppose.’ Richard replied with a slight chortle.

Thirty minutes passed before their place in the queue reached the arching wooden doors of the entrance. A clearly unqualified, scruffy-looking security guard glanced at their tickets and simply waved them through, no questions asked. The space opened up into the famous atrium punctuated with the suspended frames of spitfires, hurricanes and Messerschmitts, drawing heads up in awe. A stage had been constructed over at the far side, adorned in suitable navy blue, with a regal oak pulpit taking centre stage. Still no sign of White Dragon activity or familiar foes.

Gary thumbed through the pamphlet given to all on entry. ‘Memories of the Atlantic. 70 years of naval history,’ he read the embossed gold text. ‘They certainly have been busy,’ he pointed to images of relics including steel warship plates, helmets, ammunitions and even ship bells complete with vessel inscriptions. Karen had managed to strike up conversation with an elderly couple that had made the trip from Devon, a frail gentleman with high military rank stood with a walking frame and hunched back next to his wife, her hand placed over his for emotional support as he retold his story aboard HMS Rodney during the early 1940s. Occasionally his plump finger would rise to wipe a tear away from his red-veined cheek as specific memories of loved ones lost would bring a tear or two.

A sharp announcement across the speakers filled the room as lights were dimmed, leaving a spotlight on the stage. A short, tubby gentleman took to the pulpit and adjusted his thick glasses before coughing to clear his throat. He introduced himself as the curator of the museum and made the appropriate welcomes to

dignitaries and esteemed guests, several of whom had gathered just behind him.

Richard's eyes narrowed as he elbowed William and nodded towards the corner of the stage. He had spotted Tristan, grey suited and long blond hair clipped neatly, hand pressed to his ear as if receiving a call or instruction. At the same time, Karen had zoomed in on another somewhat familiar face, though she couldn't quite place it. Tweed blazer, rough moustache, gold chain of a pocket watch hanging casually from the right breast pocket. She tapped Gary on the shoulder before pointing him out – 'Is that Geraint?'

Gary put his hand to his brow and frowned. 'That bombastic sod. Not seen him for a while ... the White Dragon must have really been dusting off the cobwebs to drag him out,' he sneered. That made two rivals, and no doubt Lady Morgan and Sir Lawrence were not far.

'Do we have a plan here?' William asked, while still nodding pleasantly to other guests around him.

'I suggest we make our way round the back of the stage if we can, then split into pairs. You and I will search the ground level, Karen and Gary the upper levels,' Richard commanded, while encouraging Karen to cover up her staff inside her long brown coat. 'If you find any sign of the Palladium, or anything remotely connected, then report back straight away. We'll meet here in thirty minutes – agreed?'

'I doubt very much they will have the Palladium on full display in a glass case somewhere, Richard,' William said, chewing his lower lip at the thought of parting with Karen. She put him at

ease with a wink and a smile. ‘Keep your guard up, my love,’ she whispered in his ear as she followed Gary through the crowd towards the stairwell.

Richard clocked several heavy-duty security personnel dotted around the balcony – a similar presence to those encountered at Tintagel, only no masks this time and minimal firepower. ‘We’ll need to move quickly. If a trap has indeed been sprung, I’d rather not wait until the finale,’ he mused. William had begun sliding his way through the other guests towards the rear of the atrium. Their movement was not going unnoticed, however, not just from attentive guests still trying to hear the curator’s speech, who made disapproving noises at the four creeping closer to the stage, but also the quick glance of eyes from above and prompt raising of palms to ears – they were all being watched.

Behind the makeshift stage were many glass display cases and cabinets displaying many an artefact, all bathed in soft white light. William took a moment to admire several and read their stories as Richard continued to look uncomfortable, careful not to trip over any electrical wires bundled clumsily under the stage boards. Tristan had disappeared, but the voice of Geraint was now heard addressing the audience in high-pitched enthusiasm, greeted with applause every time veterans and their sacrifices were mentioned. He had just broken into a short poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay when William muttered over to Richard, ‘He really does know how to milk this, doesn’t he?’

Richard nodded in agreement as he stared closer at an enlarged photograph of the *Bismarck* wreckage covering a good three metres of wall space, shared with old black and white photographs of named sailors aboard both her and her greatest

triumph in conflict, the *HMS Hood*, a full deck of the latter's 1,400 crew shown above a commemorative plaque to lives lost in the Battle of the Denmark Strait. One photograph featured wealthy German sailor Michael Von Lamorak, fresh-faced with typical slicked-down side parting, proudly wearing the charcoal grey of the Third Reich navy. His chest heaved at the reinforced knowledge that the White Dragon not only possessed the Palladium, but that their followers were indoctrinated to make any sacrifice to ensure its survival.

'Find anything?' William lowered his voice. Richard tapped Von Lamorak's photograph then continued to survey the other artefacts – no sign or even reference to the Palladium, but then Richard hadn't really expected any. But why invite the Red Dragon to such an event and run the risk of confrontation? Was it to gloat? Were Lady Morgan and the White Dragon set to make a statement? In full view of their enemies ...? Not really their style. It was then that a sinking feeling struck Richard's stomach with a queasy sorrow. This was a trap, but not an ambush. It was a diversion.

'We should leave,' Richard said with a chill.

'Why? We said thirty minutes. Doubt Karen and Gary have had a chance to scan the upper levels just yet,' William said.

'This is a trap. But not the sort we were perhaps expecting. We're not the target,' Richard replied sternly. William's face froze – The Bear pub back in Bath, now far less well defended.

'Bath? But why ... why now?' William shook tensely.

'Gary received the invitations to this exhibit directly. The White Dragon must have always been watching him, especially after Tintagel. Suppose they also knew of his actions in searching for Mack? The one knight who would know the location of Excalibur,' Richard proposed.

William thought for a moment. 'True. But how would Lady Morgan and Sir Lawrence know about Gary's recent research into Mack's whereabouts? I doubt even Lady Morgan's clairvoyance is that fine-tuned, and even if it is, why would they not simply track and target him? He is with us, right here, after all,' William countered.

Richard's brow creased in concentration, then his teeth ground with frustration. 'Someone among us is playing games,' he growled.

'What? One of our own?' William spat in astonishment. A sarcastic round of applause came from behind one of the metal pillars, and Tristan stepped out of the shadows.

'Congratulations, Mr Allen and Mr Wood. And indeed, we are so glad you could join us for this special event. We do hate it when generous invitations go unrecognised,' he sneered acerbically.

William readied his staff and pushed Richard behind him, knowing he was the only one wielding a weapon strong enough to repel any attack from a White Dragon Knight.

'Where are Gary and Karen?' William barked at Tristan.

‘Well, upstairs probably – the Churchill War Rooms I think? That was the last our CCTV cameras got anyway. Don’t worry – we’ll deal with them later,’ Tristan gave a callous smile.

‘Why the sudden interest in Mack Benson and Excalibur, Tristan?’ Richard quizzed. ‘Just making sure we don’t get our hands on it this time, I suppose?’

Tristan remained quiet, but angled his staff as a softer tone of voice came from behind Richard and William.

‘Actually, there’s a bit more to it than that, Mr Allen,’ came the pedantic words of Geraint, who having finished his stint on the podium, was carefully making his way down the stage steps. ‘For several millennia Excalibur has been known as the destroyer, bringer of death – even our fabled King Arthur knew this. We of the White have brought upon this world new visions and sought harmony, and each time those of the Red bring about absolute and finite destruction. The cycle continues again and again, as you two sirs of course know well.’ he explained.

‘So you just want it to close the cycle? Ensure the White Dragon is never denied its goals by us ever again?’ William concurred with Richard.

‘That mechanism has its benefits, Mr Wood, yes, but in all honesty my fellow knights, do you not think our good Lady Morgan would have hit upon such an opportunity much earlier on if that was her goal?’ Geraint answered with a touch of sincerity.

The point resonated. The times when Lady Morgan and the line of Sir Bedivere must have crossed paths over the centuries were

indeed numerous, Richard contemplated. Knowing that such an intervention at any point would have severely weakened the Red Dragon's hand, should Morgan have the power to wield such a formidable weapon, why allow such a cycle to continue and why change it now?

'She does love to play games,' William snapped while keeping a firm eye on a circling Tristan.

'Indeed she does. Near-immortality will do that to a being, that much is sure. We knights have the luxury of limited time, so that our descendants may take on our burden, but for Lady Morgan this is sadly not an option,' Geraint spoke softly while opening the left side of his tweed blazer to reveal his own staff sewn within.

'You saying she's getting bored?' William continued to provoke, staff rising ever higher. 'Forgive us if we don't offer sympathy for the millions she's slaughtered over the years.'

'No sympathy needed, my friends,' came a sardonic jibe from Tristan as William and Richard backed into the wall. Richard curled his hand over the trigger of the mounted fire extinguisher while holding Geraint's gaze. He gave a quick elbow to William together with a quick wink before wrenching the extinguisher from its base and hosing Geraint down in a thick cloud of choking grey smoke. Geraint staggered back, dropping his staff and coughing heavily as William and Tristan's blades connected with a sharp spray of sparks. The two swords struck rhythmically blow for blow as Richard tackled a stunned Geraint to the ground, using his superior size and weight to pin him down. A few concerned mutters came from the other side of the stage as

guests questioned the commotion, the curator doing his best to reassure.

Guards had begun to amass along the upper levels, guns in hand and swiftly making their way down the stairwells. As William and Tristan danced around the exhibits, ducking and diving energetically while occasionally clipping blades, Richard yelled over to his companion for cover as reinforcements burst through the side doors. As aim was taken by several guards, William broke off his engagement and slammed his sword into the ground, releasing a momentary brilliant and blinding white light. Focus returned to the space, Tristan shaking the bright spots from his eyes while Geraint let out a sigh of relief. Richard and William had gone.

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‘What was that?’ Karen said, as Gary rummaged fruitlessly through some of the old wartime desks on display. ‘It sounded like an explosion?’

Gary stepped back into the main corridor and pulled out his staff, Karen covering his back with hers. Seconds later the museum alarm sounded, with calls to all visitors to make their way outside in an orderly fashion. The sound of controlled panic from guests could be heard from the main atrium.

‘It must be Richard and William. They’ve been *found*,’ Gary muttered.

‘Or they’ve sprung the alarm? Maybe our thirty minutes was a little optimistic?’ Karen mused as she looked around for an alternative exit. She pointed to the fire escape stairwell as their only option. ‘Come on. Time to go.’

‘What about Richard and William?’

‘They can take care of themselves,’ Karen reassured him as she tugged on Gary’s sleeve. She flung open the stairwell door and was greeted by the sound of the guards’ feet stomping down the metal steps. A quick glance down and the two fancied their chances more going up to the roof than heading back down to the main entrance. ‘There must be a ladder up to the top. *Let’s go,*’ Karen shouted back at Gary, quickly ascending the first flight.

They made it to the second floor, Gary starting to run out of breath just a little, when another side door swung open and two guards bolted out, guns at the ready. Neither managed a shot as Gary levelled his staff over his shoulders, thrusting one blunt end into the gut of one guard and catching the jaw of the second. Karen frantically began to backtrack in assistance as another two guards appeared from the doors. A single shot was fired, only to pierce a fellow guard as Gary held him up like a human shield. His staff transformed into a blade and sliced neatly through the shooter’s mid-riff, splashing blood on the crisp white paint of the bannisters.

‘Gary!’ Karen cried.

‘Go ... Go. I’ve got this. Get to the roof. Find Richard and William,’ Gary ordered as he grappled with a beefy suited guard, arm wrapped around his throat forcing him to choke on

his own words. Karen reluctantly turned and took the second flight of stairs – a single guard appeared, no gun but twice her size, with a deep purple scar blotched on his cheek. He made his lunge with a bare-knuckled fist, cracking the wall where Karen had stood before her quick step aside. She rounded her staff wide to make firm contact with the guard’s waist – barely eliciting a response from the behemoth. She flew in again, two firm hits on the chest – only just enough to force a slight retreat, but also a condescending grin from the haggard and torn face of her opponent.

‘Come on sweetheart. Let’s see that fancy magic knife of yours?’ the guard mocked as he crunched his fist into his palm. Karen backed off before lowering her staff.

‘Aww, what’s the matter? Don’t want to play, little girl?’ the guard cackled before taking a sharp intake of breath and bulging his eyes. He brought his fingers to his neck and felt the warmth of his blood run through them, then over the tip of a small dagger. Karen curved a smile over her face. ‘There’s nothing magic about that one,’ as the guard fell to his knees and tumbled down the stairs.

She made it to the top escape door, direct access to the roof. She slammed her shoulder hard into it, it wouldn’t budge. She tried again, still no luck. She kicked firmly several times but only managed a shudder from its frame.

‘Perhaps a sword will do it, Mrs Milligan?’ came a cold voice from behind her. She spun round to meet the gaunt and imposing figure of Sir Lawrence, suited in lapis blue with an

uncharacteristic open white shirt, his hands reverently behind his back. She raised her staff.

‘You didn’t seriously think I was going to make it that easy for you and Richard, did you?’ Sir Lawrence smiled, taking small steps towards Karen. ‘When you trap rats, it’s unwise to turn your backs to them, even for a second.’

‘Why did you bring us here? What did you want, Larry?’ she stood firm.

‘My dear, this was no exhibition of victory, far from it. Although I’m sure that’s what you all thought when Gary received the invitations. You are welcome by the way. No, we haven’t achieved true victory yet.’ Sir Lawrence paused a few feet from Karen.

‘And what is true victory for the White Dragon, Larry? When all six of us are dead?’ she snapped back.

‘Good heavens no. We’re a family, a bloodline – a vital one at that. No my dear, I don’t want to see our Round Table die, rather have it join together once more as we did so many centuries ago. As noble as the acts of our own fellow Michael Von Lamorak was aboard the *Bismarck*, as were those of your revered Sir Percival, such a waste of an Arthurian life. We cannot afford to argue with each other interminably, what would be the point?’ Sir Lawrence opened his arms in embrace, revealing his cane at the same time.

‘Is that what Lady Morgan wants? A family of knights once more? That’s not how I recall history,’ Karen argued, backing away against the door.

‘She only wants what’s best for all of us. And for that, we need your help,’ Sir Lawrence spoke barely above a whisper. Karen looked down, trying to block out the struggling voice of Gary from the floors below. Her mind worked hard, she had to ask the question.

‘You want Excalibur? Why?’

Sir Lawrence tilted his head. ‘Richard and William asked the very same thing only moments ago.’

‘What have you done to them?’ Karen’s composure broke, she gripped her staff intently. Sir Lawrence reached out a hand.

‘Come with me Karen, and I promise you we can explain everything.’

Karen pondered for a moment, thought of her beloved William captured, possibly dead. Richard as well. Gary battling perhaps in vain below her – it was a tempting offer, if not for the vivid images of Mary Cassidy falling to her death off the cliffs of Tintagel forcing their way to the forefront of her mind. She sucked in a lung full of air and transformed her staff to steel, slicing through the roof door behind her and sprinting across the roof of the museum. ‘So be it, Knight of Kay,’ she heard Sir Lawrence burst.

Karen crouched behind a roof vent catching her breath. The footsteps of Sir Lawrence were getting louder as he approached. ‘Karen, please. Don’t run from us, from *this*. You and the Red Dragon generations have been running your entire lives, enough now. Join us. Let us be as one again – the Round Table once more,’ he echoed. She remained motionless,

shrugging her brown plaited ponytail off her shoulder and wincing as she rubbed the sore bone socket.

'You realise this game is over, don't you? Colonel Thorpe and his men will be in Bath right now, only Nick Butcher, Son of Sir Bors and Richard's young son standing in the way. Hardly a fair fight. And quite the research your colleague Gary back there has been doing, I hear. Closing in on the location of Sir Mack in such a time of dire need. Very ... very, *predictable*,' Sir Lawrence taunted, his reflection against a metal grate displaying both his signature swords to Karen.

Her fears were realised, as she was sure they had also been for Richard and William. This was a trick, a diversion to lure them away from their sanctuary just at the right moment to pick up the scent of Mack Benson. But how did they know when to strike? How could they have known about Gary's research? Karen was confident these same questions would have been coursing through the heads of both Richard and William right now too ... if they were indeed alive.

'I find York to be the most beautiful place,' came an unsettling tone from the ornate stone balcony on the edge of the roof. Karen turned to see the slim figure of Lady Morgan, silver dress billowing carelessly in the mild breeze.

'Eboracum I knew it as. Was only a small outpost back in the times of the Roman Empire, of little significance other than to keep watch over my people. But Yorkshire itself was most wild, mounted with yew trees, its three peaks of grace watching all that stood around,' she continued, seemingly aware of Karen's

presence without even needing to look. Surely she turned on her high heels and faced Karen directly.

‘I was born there you see ... with my sister. Deep in the Gills of rock and water. We were worshipped, we were loved, and we were *feared*.’

Karen ventured on to her feet and calmly approached. ‘What more do you want, Morgan? You have the Palladium once more; you have the Necklace of Harmonia. You can have your balance as you’ve always done – is this not enough?’

Lady Morgan bowed her head, the jewel of the necklace pulsing red. ‘It’s different this time. These past seventy years have given me plenty of time to contemplate, what I have done wrong, how we can fix it, return things to how they once were. A better world for all of us,’ she purred.

‘You mean another new world order? Morgan, this never works and you know it. It comes and goes like the tide, it is no more than a game to you but innocent lives get lost – it is not balance, it is *murder*,’ Karen accused with fervour.

‘I have been playing a game with an essential piece missing all this time though, haven’t I? Like a chessboard without a king – how can one truly win when there is no final blow?’ Lady Morgan countered.

‘You mean Excalibur? That will not save you – nor has it ever really saved us or all that serve the Red Dragon way. It only has the power to destroy, to terminate, to sever a limb so infected that you have no choice,’ Karen protested.

‘You are quite correct, Mrs Milligan,’ came Sir Lawrence’s cool chords from behind, both swords lowered. ‘But surely its power can only really be measured by the size of the limb severed, can it not?’

Karen shot glances at both, not knowing whether to put up a defence or merely contemplate the conundrum presented to her. What size empire could be raised in the shadow of so many throughout history before it, that could test the might of Excalibur? Indeed, the Palladium itself. Her thoughts were broken by the sound of more gunfire within the museum and the chilling screams from guests outside.

‘My dear, it sounds like your friends are running out of time. I don’t know who of your quartet is left, but our offer to you still stands. Will you join us? Will you join us in this unprecedented future for our people? The Knights of Kay and the Knights of Bedivere will make fine additions ... even if the Knights of Sir Galahad, Bors, Gaheris and Gawain did not see what we could until it was too late,’ Sir Lawrence urged, pushing forward one step with every word.

Karen’s intuition, combined with the heated rage of processing the possible death of William, spurred an adrenaline-fuelled flight response – she had chosen. She plunged her sword into the roof to bring forth incandescent light ready to conceal her escape to the far hanging ladder on the far side, but the moment was frozen. The summoned white light switched to a misty shade of green and catapulted Karen back against the stone balcony columns of the roof edge, Lady Morgan’s emerald eyes shimmering as she lowered her hands, her magic overpowering anything Karen had to offer.

Sir Lawrence shook his head in disappointment as Karen struggled to her feet. 'Not the answer we were hoping for, Mrs Milligan' he said solemnly.

'Mack will never tell you the location of the Excalibur!' Karen cried with desperation. 'He doesn't even know where it is. Hasn't for years. Whatever your plan is, Morgan, you are doomed to fail.'

A smile cracked the powdered foundation on Lady Morgan's face. 'He has lost so much, Mr Benson – yet he has still to witness true sacrifice,' she mused. Karen's eyes grew wide with wonder as if an answer had been floating before her all this time. A solitary blade came down from above, she instinctively blocked it with her own, only to wrestle for a second as Sir Lawrence's second sword pierced up through her chest. She gurgled iron-rich blood in her mouth before closing her eyes and toppling from the roof.

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Screams were heard from outside as guests squawked over the actions they witnessed from high atop of the museum. William and Richard had barged their way out of the main entrance and blended in with the crowd, chins on chest to avoid recognition. Both tried to decipher the maniacal ramblings of those around them and what sounded like a hostage situation, with someone being thrown from the roof. Richard urged William to keep moving away from the scene, but William was determined not to leave without Karen, feet rooted to the spot on the edge of the crowd.

'We don't have time for this, Bill. We'll get clear and contact Karen and Gary immediately after,' Richard pushed. William did not answer, still scanning left and right over people's heads for a glimpse of Karen's brunette plait of hair. The shattering of a front first-floor window as two bodies came crashing down into the hedges below prompted more gasps. Several good Samaritans made their way over to assist, only to be met by a grumbling Gary shaking leaves and shards of glass from his hair, quickly concealing his sword by turning it back to a staff, and hurrying away from the scene. Richard and William caught sight of him heading towards the Lambeth North Underground Station so they took off to intercept.

Around the corner they found a heaving Gary doubled over against a red phone booth, cuts across his face and neck, heavily bruised.

'You hurt?' Richard asked urgently, addressing the wound on the side of his ribs. Gary moaned out a stoic 'I'm fine,' before asking about Karen.

'We thought she was with you?' William said, panicking. Gary lowered his head, still trying to cope with the pain. Richard pulled Gary's arm around his shoulder and hauled him up, ready to stagger down the steps of the Underground Station, but William had turned and raced back to the museum.

'Bill ... *Bill*. Oh for hell's sake!' Richard spat as he tried to keep pace, dragging a wincing Gary with him. He caught up just by the edge of the museum's front lawn, the crowd of guests split by a rush of paramedics and lit by the flicker of blue ambulance lights. Fluorescent yellow jackets could be seen tending to a

body, spread-eagled face-down immediately to the left of the main entrance. Despite Richard's warning, William charged at the sight of the brunette plait lying motionless.

Pushing several morbid voyeurs aside and hollering Karen's name, William reached her side. He clasped her hand, lower lip trembling, desperate for her to make a sound, a movement, anything. The paramedics continued to assess Karen's limp body, turning her steadily onto her back and readying all necessary equipment, but their faces said it all. William could only comfort her with a gentle caress of her cold, ashen cheek, trying not to notice the blade wound in her abdomen and its connotations.

Karen's blue eyes flickered open for a few seconds as she strained up to kiss William on his lips, croaking out a final word. *'Sacrifice.'*

Chapter 9

Bath, England

18th February 2012 AD

‘How soon?’ Adam fretted, as he took to one of the windows of The Bear, angling his neck to survey all he could.

‘No clue, lad. My contact was just another waiter for the Worthingtons, like I was, but he always had his ear to the ground,’ Iain said timidly. Adam calculated that should the White Dragon wish to make a move, and a solid number of Red Dragon counterparts had been lured away to London, then this would be an ideal strategy of divide and conquer, but two contradictions persisted. Why not make a spectacle of strength and take on all of the faction? Especially with both the Palladium and the Necklace now once again in the hands of Lady Morgan after seventy years. Equally, why make the battleground here in Bath? It was too understated for the White Dragon, with no guarantee his father and his colleagues would accept any invitation to the capital. What else were they looking for?

His rumination was broken by Luke, holding a wooden crate found in the cellar. ‘This was all I found,’ he said with a heavy sigh, as the lid was removed to reveal two shotguns, one sawn off midway, a handful of shells and a loaded magnum with clip.

‘Can’t see us fending off an army with this,’ he folded his arms with a shake of his head.

Evening was drawing in early, the tame sunlight washed from the sky in an inky black ... still quiet as the streetlights flicked on to attention. Luke suggested barricading the doors and windows front and back as a precaution, setting about moving the heaviest of the furniture into position with Iain. Adam called both his father’s and Karen’s mobile but only got voicemail, concluding that the signal was possibly limited within a London museum. Violet trotted down the stairs amid the commotion, printed papers in hand and looking pleased with herself, the look quickly turning to concern. ‘What’s going on?’ she enquired. Adam tried to distract her by taking the print-outs from her hand.

‘What’s this?’ he asked.

‘Well, one of Gary’s leads from the *York Press* had been given an invite to that same event at the Imperial War Museum tonight. Chose not to go due to his mother being unwell. Anyway, apparently this contact is quite the Arthurian nut, reads all sorts of legends and stuff – not sure he knows about Gary himself but still ... hey, is that my dad’s gun box?’ she switched mid-sentence. Adam manoeuvred himself between the box and Violet’s view as casually as he could before encouraging Violet to continue. Her mouth remained open with no sound. ‘Violet? Go on ...’ Adam prompted.

‘Oh. Sorry. I called this contact at the *York Press*, Carl Bishop. Once I got him off the subject of some guy called Thomas Mallory and *Mortar Des Arthur* or something...’

'Le Morte d'Arthur,' Adam corrected.

'Yes. That. Well, he's been studying the origins of the Holy Grail for years apparently, its origins, myths and creation. Thought most of this was in religious texts but this Carl chap didn't seem the church-going type ... more a conspiracy theorist or something. Lots of those going round ...' Violet rambled. Adam tried to bring her back to Mack Benson and his location.

'Of course ... sorry,' she continued. 'Mr Bishop has been seeking some emotional support of late, probably due to the illness of his mother. He sees a certain therapist, a Mrs Jane DuLac, and had noticed another client attending who fit Mack's description.'

'Not much to go on there, Violet,' Adam tutted.

'No, no. There's more. This client carries a walking staff, like Dad and all the others. And a small doll,' Violet picked up her speaking pace and pointed to the print-outs. 'The doll itself is small, carved from wood and dressed in a plain cloth – looks almost like voodoo if you ask me. But Mr Bishop claims they are very similar to ones found in Edinburgh in an excavation nearly two hundred years ago.'

Adam turned the grainy black and white print out around in his hands a few times, squinting his eyes. It was certainly true that there had long been speculation about Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh being a site of worship for many an indigenous Celtic religion, its igneous rock bulge named after its connections to the King of Britons himself. However, more recent evidence suggested these dolls, found scattered across the site, were more in connection to the death of sailors lost in the North Sea,

a lasting tribute by their mourning widows, rather than any form of ritual sacrifice.

‘So ... this Carl Bishop believes Mack to be close to this therapist? Suppose it would make sense, given his own hard times of late, losing both his wife and child in a car accident so I’ve been told. Although we all thought his only comfort was at the bottom of a whiskey bottle,’ Adam pondered. His comments about the incident made Luke’s ears prick up, a stinging reminder of what happened to Mary and Jennifer – as well as the coping mechanisms of their own mother. ‘Sometimes it’s all we have,’ he snorted as he lifted a leather wing-backed chair on top of a table in front of the main pub door. Adam fell silent.

Iain had worked his way across to Adam and Violet’s side almost unnoticed, and began scanning the print outs. ‘Do we know where this therapist is in York?’ he asked. Violet gave a quick nod as she pointed to an address scribbled in pencil at the top of the page. ‘So ... I’m guessing we need to call Mrs DuLac right away then?’ he proposed, with a scratch of his ginger beard.

‘Maybe not,’ Adam countered. ‘If the White Dragon aren’t aware of this yet, us calling him might just give them the lead they’ve been looking for. Despite his lapses in judgement and unbalanced mind, Mack has done a good job of keeping low these past seven years ... from both us and the Worthingtons. Reaching out to him now could be exactly what Lady Morgan wants.’

Iain looked dissatisfied with his partner's response, claiming time was short and every moment they spent without Excalibur was an extra moment their enemies had to find it themselves. Violet stepped out of the verbal conflict and stood by Luke, who flippantly remarked 'Lovers' quarrel' with a roll of his eyes.

'Hey. Where's my dad?' Violet suddenly bristled. All three men stopped and turned to one another, then towards the bar. In all the commotion, Nick had disappeared, Luke being the last one to see him as he unlocked the door to the cellar. Violet jumped over the bar and called out to him several times.

Iain leaned in to Adam and Luke and asked casually, 'Why is it Mr Butcher never joins Richard and the rest of the Red Dragon group when they venture out?' his voice sounding both critical and sleuth-like.

'Because of Violet. He's the only one with a younger child – not worth the risk,' Adam confirmed. 'Besides, he's not one for fighting anymore.'

'Looks like young Miss Butcher can handle herself,' Iain noted with the same incredulous tone. He busied himself, once more moving furniture, giving grunts and heaves.

Luke whispered to Adam 'You don't think ...? Nick I mean?' Adam shot a judging glare back at his brother.

'I thought you were suspicious of Iain? Now you think Nick, after all this time serving our father, is a traitor?' Adam snapped. Luke recoiled, but raised both eyebrows in thought before returning to help Iain. Adam was left chattering his teeth, as he often did when presented with a moral dilemma.

Nick's beefy frame appeared from one of the back rooms, face flushed red. 'Found it!' he celebrated, holding his trusty walking staff. 'Knew it was in that coat cupboard somewhere.' he followed with a grin, wiping cobwebs off its sides.

Adam gave a reassuring smile. 'You remember how to use that, right?'

'Look son, I might be a little old and overweight, but trust me, we Knights of Sir Bors are always the strongest fighters. Ask your father,' Nick bellowed with a hearty laugh, swinging his staff from side to side. Adam took his word for it, then asked him to help move the Pac Man machine in front of the window.

'So ... how much White Dragon company are we expecting?' Nick growled eagerly, doing most of the lifting.

'Hard to say. Not sure if any at this stage. We're working purely on Iain and his contact.' Adam breathed heavily, dropping the arcade machine into place. 'Either way, it might be best if Violet ...'

'If I do what?' Violet spurted, leaping back over the bar and quizzing her father as to where he'd been. 'You going to tell me this is all too dangerous? That I should retreat to a friend's house? Thanks. I am seventeen, you know,' she grumbled. Nick placed both his big hands on her shoulders and politely reminded her of the passing of her mother and the grief they both endured, careful not to sound patronising. Iain interrupted the tender moment with a sharp warning shout as three Land Rovers suddenly pulled up metres away from the pub's entrance. Out stepped familiar black-clad figures complete with masks and guns. Adam counted at least a dozen

– enough for the five of them inside to make a stand against. That was until Luke spotted four or five more men approaching the rear of the pub under cover of darkness. Then the first volley of bullets came.

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Shards of glass and puffs of torn fabric flew inwards as gunfire rallied outside. Adam, Iain and Luke crouched down below the windowsills, Nick rolling underneath a table while gesturing to Violet to stay behind the bar. A few bullets caught the upright bottles of liquor above Violet's head, showering her with fragments and liquid – she let out a few screams before taking cover beneath the solid oak frame of the bar stand.

Adam ventured a peek out of the shattered window the moment the firing settled. The brazen figure of Colonel Thorpe stood back from the action, staff tapping impatiently on the ground, moustache twitching. He grimaced before bellowing 'Nick Butcher. Adam Allen. Whoever else might be in there. Your time is up. Please step outside so that we may discuss this like the gentlemen we are.'

Adam turned to Nick, ears still ringing from the gunfire, communicating only through looks. Nick's return glance and steely eyes answered resolutely – then came several shots from within the pub. Luke had gotten his hands on the magnum from the box and let off a few rounds in Colonel Thorpe's direction, catching him and his men quite off guard. One shot popped close to the Colonel, making its mark on the bonnet of his Land

Rover, and enough to make him scowl. His large nostrils flared with anger – ‘*Fine.*’

Another volley of bullets crashed against the front of The Bear, this time with increased intensity. ‘They’re coming in from the back garden,’ shouted Violet from her vantage point.

Luke shouted over to Adam and Iain. ‘You two going to do something or just sit there?’ Iain responded by summoning his blue-flamed spear and turned swiftly to hurl it through the window above. The contained explosion threw two men off balance, but lacked accuracy.

‘I can’t get a clear shot,’ Iain cursed. Adam surveyed briefly behind his conjured shield, deflecting a few bullets before realising their position was hopeless. The smashing of rear windows could be heard as men began to pour their way inside.

‘Let them come,’ Nick ordered. ‘Open the doors.’

‘Are you *mad?*’ Luke snapped.

‘*Do it!*’ Nick ordered again. Iain reached up and twisted the iron door handle to the main entrance, creaking it open. The gunfire stopped.

‘Adam. Get to the back – protect Violet. We can hold them from here,’ Nick commanded. Adam noted the front guard of troops had begun to cautiously approach the opened front door, creating a small bottleneck. He bolted for the bar and tumbled over, landing next to Violet and bringing his shield up to cover them both. ‘I forgot how cool that was.’ Violet beamed while still breathing heavily.

One black hooded guardsman intrepidly entered through the main door, not noticing Iain and Luke hidden either side. Iain was about to strike before Luke raised a finger to his lips to encourage patience. A second man entered, then a third, slowly panning out over the split-slate floor tiles. Nick winked at Iain and Luke, then erupted from beneath the table and thrust his staff into the ground, emitting the brilliant blinding white light. The trio of men shouted amongst themselves, aiming carelessly all around as Iain lanced one through the gut with his flung spear and Luke shot the other two in the fleshy backs of their thighs, followed by firm cracks of the gun butt to their heads. Colonel Thorpe's bellows could be heard from outside as he urged caution to his remaining men. More bullets peppered the walls and across the ceiling, bringing chandeliers clattering down.

Adam spotted one of the rear men tiptoe his way across the hallway. He dropped to his side and threw a spear of his own, catching his target and hurling him back against a framed picture. He fell to the floor, out cold. Two more men rallied to the assault, firing all around the edge of the bar, Adam still deflecting where he could as he returned to Violet. They couldn't stay put.

Violet reached up to the wooden crate just above and pulled it down – shotgun capsules scattered round them both. She picked up the sawn-down gun and frantically loaded both barrels, Adam quite amazed at her familiarity with the weapon.

'Move aside,' she barked to Adam as she pushed past him.

'Violet ... *wait*. Bloody hell,' Adam stuttered, trying to follow. She made her way over to another doorway and perched low by its frame, not five metres from the two intruders. 'When I say so ... take these guys out,' she snapped. Adam was close to responding with *you're the one with the shotgun* but one look at Violet's frozen but determined face showed her understandable internal conflict between defence and killing. He waited for her instruction. '*Now*,' she shouted as she pulled the rusty trigger, the force enough to toss her back a few steps, but as she intended, missing her would-be assailants. The shot was aimed firmly at the electrics box just to the side of their heads. In a dazzle of sparks, Adam sprinted towards the two men, landed a firm punch to the chest of one and a kick to the abdomen of the other, finishing by butting both their skulls together, knocking them out cold. He shook the adrenaline out from his limbs as he heard the cries from Iain and Luke out front.

'Go help them,' Violet said. 'I'm OK here.' She dug two more shotgun shells out of her pocket and Adam sat her trembling body back down under the doorframe. Luke was lying on his back behind an upturned table, fidgeting with the cocking mechanism of the magnum and cursing amidst the onslaught of bullets, with Nick on the far side in a similar situation.

'Where's Iain?' Adam panted.

'Out front. Guy's a mad one, I'll give you that,' Luke gritted his teeth. Adam's heart skipped a beat as orders from the Colonel still echoed from the front, the occasional soft blue light of a Sacred Band flame casting across the room, immediately followed by the white of a knight's blade.

'He can't stay out there. He's got nowhere to go,' Nick shouted across.

'There's another shotgun behind the bar, Nick. Try to get to it,' Adam shouted back, reeling his head back in as bullets came too close. He got to his feet.

'Where are you going?' Luke spat, finally loosening the magnum cartridge and letting a few more rounds off. Without pausing Adam charged out through the main entrance, shield held high, his brother screaming his name as he left. Iain had managed to corner himself between one of the Land Rovers and the brick wall of the car park, eyes winced shut, fresh blood oozing from his thigh. Adam ducked behind a nearly collapsed, bullet-riddled picnic bench as he desperately tried to assist. He was spotted, and two of the armed men turned their fire upon him. A shot grazed the edge of his shoulder, toppling him back, shield blinking out. He took a deep breath, tried to get up to his feet only to see the round tip of a gun loom over him, the piercing gaze of the guard closing in for the kill. A blue flame sailed passed the man, missing him by inches, breaking his concentration. His aim turned ninety degrees, only to be met with a more accurate spear hurled by Iain straight into his midriff, the flurry of blue cinders a momentary relief for Adam.

All guns were on Iain now, the protection of the Land Rover failing as its wheels deflated. Adam could just make out the crop of ginger hair rising from the bonnet as Iain appeared to make his last stand. His weary complexion came into view, arms raised and head bowed towards Colonel Thorpe, all guards still on point. Thorpe lowered his own blade for a moment, at first accepting Iain's surrender – 'Very noble, Band

Warrior,' he quipped, then gave a nod to the nearest armed guard. Iain screwed his eyes shut, but felt Adam's lips pressed firmly, passionately, against his. He felt both warm and at peace, as if suddenly complete. His defence could be lowered and it wouldn't have mattered, but strangely, as their stubble rasped off each other's, a surge of energy emboldened both. A vibrant blue circle radiated in front of them, bringing all before it to the ground like a shockwave, every bullet fired repulsed. Only when their lips parted and they looked upon one another did they realise both their arms were outstretched towards Colonel Thorpe's men, a defiant gesture that had magically turned the course of the affray to their favour. Only Colonel Thorpe now stood, sword shining brilliant white, brow crinkled in astonishment.

From inside The Bear, Nick had spotted his opportunity to engage one-to-one with his fellow knight. He charged out into the forecourt and swung his blade towards the Colonel, who just had time to counter. The two went strike for strike, Nick showing surprising vigour for his overweight frame compared to the more athletic Stephen, his rage fuelling him and bending the Colonel backwards over the bonnet of another Land Rover, swords screeching in high pitch as they slid against one another. A scream came from inside the pub that snapped Nick's attention – it was Violet.

Adam and Iain rushed back inside, Nick caught off guard as Stephen kicked his kneecap hard and threw a cheap punch to his groin, buckling the big man over. Every instinct would have been to finish his rival then, but unexpectedly, the Colonel scampered for the driver's door, revved the engine hard and

sped hastily in reverse onto the main road, tyres spraying gravel as he roared away. Nick remained breathless on the ground – ‘Violet!’

Luke was found inside the hallway where Adam had left Violet, a small cut to his forehead but otherwise just shaken, magnum still in hand but spent. He gave a solemn shake of the head to his brother in failure – Violet had been taken.

Chapter 10

York, England

20th February 2012 AD

No matter how many chewing gums Mack crammed into his mouth, the lingering spirits from the night before remained hanging on his breath. He rinsed his mouth with warm water from the men's bathroom in a last-ditch attempt, spat, then patted his chin with a mucky roll-down hand towel. He attempted to tame his wiry black hair in the mirror before returning to the reception waiting room.

This was his seventh visit to Mrs DuLac. The counselling sessions had been going well, albeit only relieving the immediate symptoms of depression. Mack had worked on this mindfulness, often sitting quietly in his deck chair on the small patio outside his home, listening to the world pass by, or by popping on headphones and slowly moving from room to room with Bob Marley and the Wailers. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. He had done as he was told, writing down a list of fears, although he struggled to get past the first one. All the others appeared insignificant, probably because at the top of the list was not only a fear, but also a regret. How can one correct a fear that had already become a reality, he thought.

The door to his left opened and a familiar gentleman entered the small waiting room, headed straight for the reception, but

acknowledged Mack as a regular with a bob of his head. 'Same time in two weeks, Mr Bishop?' the young receptionist asked, as she tidied some papers behind the desk. Mr Bishop gave a gentle grunt of approval before looking back at Mack, his glare casually moving between Mack himself and his walking staff. A smile crept across his face upon seeing the small doll held tightly in Mack's hand, before leaving. Mack's name was called by Jane DuLac before he had a chance to fully process.

'So ... how have you been these past few weeks? Not had any calls from you, so that's reassuring,' Jane said, leading Mack up the stairs to her consulting room. Mack was checking his breath quickly behind her, then wrapped the mangled chewing gum into a tissue with a disguised cough.

'I've not been too bad,' he said. 'By the way ... that gentleman you were just seeing, the casually dressed chap with the torn jeans. Mr Bishop, is it? Has he been coming to you long?'

Jane paused as she held open the door to her room. 'For some time, yes, although you'll appreciate I can't discuss other clients, Mr Benson,' she quietly reminded.

'Of course. I didn't mean to pry.' Mack settled on the couch.

'Anyway, I'm more interested in you. Is that your list?' she reached out, taking the tatty piece of paper from Mack. 'Hmmm ... looks like you struggled past the first point?'

'Never been too good with homework,' Mack confessed.

'Well, that's not really the disappointment you might expect it to be. This top point is a common one. Not really a fear as such though,' Jane said softly.

'Because it's already happened. I get it.'

'Yes and no. You are correct that not being there for your loved ones is a fear, but relating it to a specific event in the past ...'

'It is a regret. Yes, I understand.'

'And we all have regrets. Just as we all have fears. But whereas fears we have to try and overcome, regrets are history. We can only learn from those,' Jane smiled, crossing her long legs and placing her notepad on the top of her knee.

Mack shuffled to try and get comfortable, which was always a challenge when feeling so completely exposed. He cleared his throat a few times, stalling for time as he resisted the urge to pull painful memories from the back of his mind.

'What do you remember about your parents, Mack?' Jane quizzed. A familiar question Mack thought.

'Only their arguments and my father's drinking.' he said with a squirm. 'My mother had it rough, especially the nights when my father's drinking was bad.' He pointed to the small scar on his forehead -- 'I'd say both of us had it bad, really,' he managed a small chuckle.

'Do you think they did the best they could?' Jane proposed.

Mack thought for a second. Despite his father's vice for gambling, he was certainly a grafter. Not many parents could

hit rock bottom so many times and pick themselves up for the sake of their family's survival. Many would have simply given up or relied on state benefits, but his father was too proud.

'I suppose so, yes,' Mack finally confessed.

'And you ... did you do the best you could?'

This caught Mack off guard. A shaky intake of breath and bow of the head resulted in an assured 'No.' Only to be followed by a quick 'Yes' and then a more unbalanced 'Maybe.' He placed his hands over his face in frustration.

'I haven't learnt. You say we should learn from regrets but I haven't. I *didn't*. I am my father. I drink, drink to escape from my problems, and it cost me my wife and daughter.' The emotional flood overwhelmed Mack with an outburst of tears.

'So you keep running?' Jane remained professional and poised. Mack shrugged with a snuffle. 'Did your father and mother ever talk to you about a sense of duty?' she switched to a more inquisitive tone. Mack struggled to recall. Only the odd childhood conversation between his parents about friends in need and being abandoned, his mother usually being the one laying the blame on his father, but he'd always assumed this was connected to wider family back in Jamaica.

'Perhaps a burden of duty?' Jane suggested. 'A pressure to conform?'

Mack could certainly relate to that, even from his grandparents' first arriving in Britain and feeling so alone and isolated. The only way to find friends was to be like everyone

else. It took several generations though, and is still not complete even today. 'We all did ... still do in fact.' Mack stated.

'I'm not talking so much about race and social cohesion here. Something more,' Jane pursed her lips, drummed her fingers across her notepad. 'That doll you carry – what is it?'

'My daughter, Anne-Marie. She had it when she ... when I ...' Mack couldn't finish the sentence without tears breaking once more. 'The accident,' he choked out.

'The car accident that took your wife Shanna, and your daughter Annie-Marie when she was only five. Please say it Mack, don't hide,' Jane pushed. Mack wanted to scream at her, but could only whimper and sob.

'The doll is all I have left of her. The wreckage burst into flames when it flipped, I was thrown clear but couldn't get back in time. She was crying, I couldn't get close. I *tried*,' Mack spluttered uncontrollably.

Jane sat upright, her character switching again as if indifferent to Mack's suffering. 'It's an unusually warm day out, shall we continue this outside in the garden?' she suggested. 'Feel free to bring that walking stick of yours.'

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Shabby French doors led out to the small communal garden, flanked by the car park on one side and a tired slatted fence on the other. Jane took a seat by a circular stone pond adorned with a somewhat cheap-looking statue of a lady carrying a

hydria, water only just trickling out from its spout. Mack wasn't sure whether to take a seat next to her or simply stand, given this was all feeling unusual.

'Well, this is pleasant.' Jane said, tilting her head back to absorb the sun. 'What was she like? Anne-Marie?'

Mack almost didn't want to engage with such a raw subject, but managed to answer with the simple adjective 'sweet.' He elaborated after some thought. 'Very happy. Full of the joys of spring you could say. But feisty, just like her mother,' he began to smile just a little.

'Tell me, when did she get this cute little doll?' Jane asked, admiring the small wooden carving, simply dressed but with childlike eyes and lips drawn on its splintered face.

'That was mine, when I was young ... didn't draw the face on though. Before that, it was my mother's I think. Family heirloom you could say,' Mack replied.

'Hmmm. Same as your walking stick I would imagine,' Jane commented. Mack became defensive, pulling the staff to his side and deliberately turning away.

'This was my father's, yes. Dumped it on me, along with the doll when he returned to Jamaica after my mother ran off with another man. Done with it all, he said. Never heard from either since.' a flicker of rage came to Mack's eyes, extinguished in a blink. 'Why?'

‘Strange to see a man in his late thirties use a walking stick, especially when there’s no limp,’ Jane mused. ‘Does it make you feel close to him?’

‘I suppose.’

‘Yet you still won’t tell me his name?’

Mack sighed in resignation. ‘Lucian. His name is Lucian, still inebriated somewhere in Kingston I believe. And before you ask, my late mother was called...’

‘Grace,’ Jane interrupted. Mack looked stunned.

‘You knew them? But ... you can’t be much older than me?’

Jane raised an eyebrow and mocked, ‘I do age well.’

With his interest piqued, Mack broached the next obvious subject. ‘So you know this is not just a walking stick?’

‘Indeed I do.’

‘And you know my bloodline?’

‘I do.’

‘So why have you remained silent all this time? A knight descended from the Round Table can’t be your usual clientele?’

Jane leaned forward to stretch her back. ‘The line of the Knights of Bedivere has a very unique role in its lineage. Its generations often tortured by grief and temptation, their minds unhinged. It’s why you and your father are in many ways so alike - but whereas Lucian refused to forgive himself, despite rising to his feet again and again, you might just be able to.’

Mack pondered. 'When I heard my father and mother arguing over letting people down, it wasn't just my family in Jamaica, was it?'

Jane fell silent for a moment, then placed a hand on his knee. 'I've seen so many of your descendants over the centuries Mack. All incredibly proud men and women, loyal too. But all with their problems, arguably tested to the very limits of suffering through some cruel twist of fate. Some forgave themselves, others did not.'

'And those that did not?' Mack asked.

'Let's just say it would have been much quicker to right the wrongs,' Jane whispered. 'You've been at war with yourself for so long over what happened that night with your wife and daughter, such a terrible accident. But how can such a force of incredible power reveal itself to someone that is not a peace with themselves?'

No history or mythology lesson was needed for Mack to determine what this force was, or what it could do in the wrong hands. He slumped back on the bench, his brain a whirl of thoughts. 'I don't think I'm ready for this, Jane. My father certainly wasn't, nor was my grandfather.'

'*Grandmother*. It was *Janine* who carried the Bedivere bloodline. As sorry as your grandfather's condition was, the bodies of knights are almost immune to nature's chronic illnesses. Less so to scripted events,' Jane casually remarked.

'Scripted?' Mack asked.

'It was the height of the Cold War. Your counterparts didn't want to risk this tussle of superpowers coming to an early conclusion, even if not a war of their own making. Sadly, Jane was a target,' Jane confessed, lowering her head in reverence.

'The White Dragon murdered my grandmother?' Mack gasped.

'As I said, it is quite a force your family must choose to contend with. A force capable of bringing peace to all, but in the wrong hands ...' Jane tailed off in conclusion.

Mack tried to settle his racing mind. So many years of blame, while all the time subconsciously aware of his duties to his Red Dragon kin, but afraid to fail. To call up the greatest force in the land only to prove unworthy of wielding it. Striving to become the hero only to be revealed as the villain. Even now, he felt unsure of himself. What if this remorse had actually been serving a purpose, as it did for his father? He could only ask out loud – 'What if I'm not ready? For Excalibur.'

Jane stood and stepped towards the trickling fountain, managing a little grin as she playfully splashed her hand in the shallow water. 'No one ever is. Finding King Arthur's fabled sword is only part of the journey however ... it was born of blood. Blood is *precious*,' she riddled.

Mack walked over to her, but did not sit beside her this time – a sense of urgency spread deep into his veins. 'How do I find it? Its location?' he asked. Jane remained transfixed by the pool of water, while reaching up to Mack's hand and pulling it down to meet hers, submerged in the cool waters.

'If you truly are at peace, you'll see it soon enough,' she said quietly. Mack closed his eyes, only to open them again and stare at the small pool. He retracted his hand with haste, shaking droplets over the flagstones.

'Thank you, Mrs DuLac. But I need to be going. Some old friends I need to see,' Mack said authoritatively.

'I know ... and our hour is pretty much up anyway.' Jane smiled. 'Oh, and don't forget Anne-Marie's doll.'

Chapter 11

Bath, England

21st February 2012 AD

Nick embraced Richard with a hearty, lingering hug before Adam could get close. Probably for the best, he thought, as Nick's broad figure almost collapsed in Richard's arms, face buried into his friend's chest, weeping softly. 'We'll find her. I promise you we'll find her,' Richard comforted.

William seemed hardened like stone as he brushed past both Adam and Iain and entered The Bear. Luke attempted to engage him in conversation but was rejected. 'We're fine by the way,' Luke snapped with a sting, still nursing his head wound with a balled-up tea towel. Adam raised his hand in an attempt to settle his brother, then turned to Gary.

'Think you've dislocated this,' Adam said, tending to Gary's floppy right arm.

'That'll be the jump from the window,' Gary moaned as Iain slapped him hard between the shoulder blades, resulting in a loud bark of agony. 'My leads on Mack. What did you find?' he focused, while shaking the pain from his face.

'Violet was researching. Before all this she had followed up on a Mr Bishop?'

'Carl – from the *York Post*?'

'Yes. She said he'd possibly met Mack through a counselling service of some sorts.'

'Figures. Mr Bishop was never the most stable of individuals,' Gary coughed out, still pinching his shoulder.

'There was more. Violet said he had been researching Arthurian mythology – *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory,' Adam continued.

'An obviously starting place for a novice I suppose,' Gary said.

'Possibly. But it was more than just a coincidence I think. Have you ever met this Mr Bishop? Did he ask about your staff?' Adam questioned.

'A few times at conferences, yes. And I always told him it was to aid a dodgy hip. Appeared to work,' Gary replied. Adam cast a sceptical look towards Iain.

'I'm not so sure it did,' Adam countered. 'He picked up on the same style of stick with Mack, that and a small child's doll.'

'A *doll*? What's that got to do with anything?' Iain asked. Gary fell quiet, then stood purposefully, aided by a deep breath to mask any enduring pain before limping over to Richard. 'Not to be a downer here lad, but if Violet had all this information on Mack's whereabouts, chances are the Worthingtons and the rest of the White Dragon have it too by now,' Iain said forlornly.

Luke slid over to the two of them, taking a seat on the bullet-riddled picnic bench.

‘Quite the light show you two put on out here,’ he scoffed. Adam pulled the tea towel from Luke’s head to inspect the wound further.

‘Good work by you too, Luke. Never thought you were such a pro with a gun,’ Adam smiled.

‘Who in America isn’t these days?’ Luke forced a joke, his brother not quite sure whether to laugh or frown disapproval. ‘Sorry about Violet. I tried to stop them but ...’

Adam put a firm hand under Luke’s jaw and pulled him close. ‘You did all you could.’ Richard made his way across finally, offering an embrace of his own and a shake of Iain’s hand. Their stories were exchanged, Adam gripping the side of the bench in anger at the news about Karen, but suppressing his own desire for revenge by turning his thoughts to William.

‘Where is she now?’ Luke enquired.

‘Still in London. We had to leave immediately after the skirmish at the museum, it was just too risky,’ Richard bowed his head.

‘Sure William thanked you for that one, Dad.’ Luke said, returning the towel to his cut. Richard conceded the hit and headed into the pub to find his closest friend, as Gary leaned over to the three.

‘The doll. Whether Mack realises it yet or not, might well be significant,’ Gary began to lecture. Adam interjected with Violet’s own research on the connections to Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh and the excavations that had taken place there and

found dolls of a similar description. Gary gave a reassured look in agreement.

‘The Line of Bedivere is the only line that can locate Excalibur, trusted by King Arthur to throw the sword back into the Lake from which it came, into the hands of the Lady of the Lake,’ Gary continued to pontificate. ‘But, as Mallory told correctly, the temptation for Sir Bedivere was initially too strong, and he couldn’t part with it. King Arthur knew this and saw through his charade ... knowing that hurling a magical sword into a pool of water was not exactly like skipping stones. Upon confrontation by the dying King, Sir Bedivere confessed and went back to the Lake, this time disposing of Excalibur correctly, the Lady of the Lake there to receive it as King Arthur expected.’

‘So ... that’s why we need Mack. To find the Lake into which Excalibur was thrown,’ Iain stated. ‘But ... if we know Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh is a likely location, why not just head there now?’

Gary cast an incredulous look at Iain’s direction. ‘If only it were that simple. When the excavation first took place in 1836, many of us tried to make the connection. Descendants from both Red and White bloodlines made the pilgrimage ... but much like the regular archaeologists who have excavated the site for decades since, found nothing. Only empty caves. Simply knowing a possible location of Excalibur doesn’t mean you can necessarily *find* it.’

Luke looked at the ground pensively for a moment before proffering a comment of his own. ‘Are you telling me that for however many thousands of years, with all this Palladium

nonsense the White Dragon has been getting up to, not one of Sir Bedivere's descendants has tried to trace Excalibur? That makes no sense.'

Gary concurred. 'Excalibur has indeed been traced by descendants of Sir Bedivere, yes. And been wielded. You are talking about an ancient power here though, that same power that almost corrupted Sir Bedivere himself. Many of his line have tried to trace its location only to fail, others have found it seemingly without even looking. Our understanding has always been that in order to locate such a weapon, the descendant must be of stable mind ... something the line of Sir Bedivere has often struggled with,' he explained.

Much of this clicked with Adam, Iain and Luke. A tragedy like the one Mack Benson had endured would no doubt make him an unlikely candidate to find Excalibur, despite technically being the only one that could. A bloodline perhaps cursed with misfortune right from the outset, if only to prove they could bring peace to themselves before offering it to the wider world.

'The doll. What's so special about the doll?' Iain continued to quiz.

'That excavation Violet spoke of, it unearthed around seventeen small dolls carved from wood. These were believed to be some form of sacrifice, in their own way, an offering to what is presumably still the Lady of the Lake.' Gary answered.

'So seventeen dolls, that means seventeen summons of Excalibur over all these years?' Adam suggested, while counting through his head the approximate number of Palladium and

Necklace of Harmonia destruction cycles this might have prevented.

‘Indeed,’ Gary nodded. ‘As I’m sure you can figure out, there have been many times when both the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia have been used to great effect by Lady Morgan and Excalibur has not been wielded, but when Britain, arguably the entire world, has needed it most – the sword has answered.’

‘Including World War Two?’ Luke asked, perplexed. Gary reminded him that the Palladium was lost with the *Bismarck*, perhaps throwing the White Dragon’s plans out of sync on that occasion and leaving Lady Morgan rudderless for the decades that followed ... only for it to be raised by his own girlfriend Mary Cassidy. The realisation caused Luke to turn his back on the conversation upon hearing Minnie’s name again.

‘There have been times after World War Two when it seemed that the Palladium was perhaps being used, but when you think of the empires since, things have been remarkably, well, *balanced* – the United States, against the USSR, against China. All a little too fragmented for the White Dragon to assume complete control, but no doubt holding some sway with the Necklace and Lady Morgan. Plenty going on to keep their hands dirty,’ Gary proposed. ‘The last known use we had heard of was likely World War One. The seventeenth incarnation of Excalibur if you will. Bit of conjecture from sources on that one.’

Certainly a war to end all wars that one, Adam thought. An endless attrition going nowhere with catastrophic loss of life – millions and millions. More the White Dragon style. A sound

mind during such destruction must have been a tough ask for whoever was the descendant of Sir Bedivere during that time.

There was the ring of a phone from inside The Bear. Before anyone else could act, Nick had barged his way inside and scabbled for the black receiver buried under smashed crockery. His grinding teeth and subsequent spitting of hatred down the line revealed who was likely to be on the other end. Nick threw the receiver hard at the wall, shattering it into its component parts before kicking a bar stool over in an explosion of rage. Richard, still trying to comfort William, turned his attention to Nick.

‘What did they say?’ he assumed the bearer of the message to be the White Dragon. Nick struggled to relay it.

‘That slimy, good-for-nothing, son-of-a-bitch Tristan. He had my Violet. I could *hear her*. She was scared. If they lay so much as a finger on her ...’ his sentence drawn to a close by more tears.

‘They won’t,’ Richard reassured. ‘What did they say, Nick? Where is she?’

‘Edinburgh,’ came the smooth but slightly flustered voice of Mack Benson, standing firmly in the doorway. ‘They would have taken her to Edinburgh.’

The team turned to face Mack, some scanning him up and down in surprise, others looking more relieved. ‘I’m sorry Richard ... it has been too long, I know. I just hope I am not too late now.’

Chapter 12

York, England

21st February 2012 AD

The day had finished early for Jane DuLac as her last patient wrapped below the hour mark due to childcare issues. She never liked the term ‘patient’ though, sounded too clinical, too impersonal. It was as if she were treating those with a rare disease or ailment that was only to affect the few as opposed to the many. The fragility of the human mind was a curse that did not discriminate, and to try and compare this to unfortunate physical illnesses seemed wrong in her eyes. The approach to treatment was different, deeper, far more complex. She was tempted to take her pen to the top of each ‘patient’ form and erase the term and simply leave a forename and surname – only to think better of it when considering the bitter repercussions she would have to endure from her fastidious receptionist.

She got to Mack Benson’s report and cast her eyes through her notepad. Very sparse annotation for an hour’s session – those were the best kind. It didn’t provide much comfort when she replayed her time with him again through her head, trying to recall previous encounters with the lineage of Sir Bedivere over her many centuries of guidance. While there were always similarities in the foundations of each descendant, the personal challenges and apparent threats to society were always unique

in some way. Mack was no exception here, but Jane never dared to underestimate the unpredictable shifts in nature. Things rarely happen the same way twice.

She bolted upright in her chair at the firm knock on her door. Surely she hadn't missed anyone at this hour? A glance at the cheap plastic clock mounted on the wall reminded her to purchase a more accurate one that wasn't constantly running ten minutes slow. The knock came again – 'Coming ... *coming*,' Jane muttered just loud enough to be heard, fully expecting the dumpy frame of her receptionist to be standing behind the door, enquiring about her hours next week. Surprise ran over her face when greeted with the elegant and sleek poise of a tall lady, dressed in a snow dust coat from neck to ankle, sharp black high heels pointing out from below.

'Dear sister. Hope I am not intruding,' came Lady Morgan's crisp voice. 'I was just travelling north, and realised it has been such a long time since we last spoke.'

Jane pulled her moth-eaten beige cardigan tightly around herself, tucking her hands under her arms as if sensing a tangible chill in the air. 'Not at all, sister, please come in.' The two figures stood in the centre of the small room, Lady Morgan surveying all around and making quaint observations. 'Why, might I ask, are you travelling further north?' Jane asked.

'Oh, you know my husband. Always needs to be somewhere other than home in London. Life of a politician I guess.'

'A politician?' Jane asked incredulously

‘Why yes of course. Surely you’ve not been so engrossed in your day job as a ... what do you call it? a counsellor? ... not to keep up with current affairs?’ Lady Morgan turned with a steely gaze.

‘Well. You and the Knights of Lancelot have taken so many forms over the years dear Morgan, I struggle to keep up,’ Jane quipped and resumed her seat.

‘As have you my dear Jane. Still, it’s comforting you never strayed too far from the lake, *our* lake’ Lady Morgan replied. ‘I must confess I too miss the wilds of Yorkshire. London for all its technological advances always renders me emotionless, as do its people. Dull, witless shadows of former greatness, the greatness you and I once knew. Remember?’ Jane twisted in her chair while continuing some paperwork, offering only a courteous smile of acknowledgement.

‘That said, what a golden age could be upon us now. A true new era that could reshape this world beyond anything you or I have ever witnessed,’ Lady Morgan continued with an injection of animation. ‘So many centuries wasted, Jane. So many futile attempts to dine at the feast while eventually having to settle for the scraps from the table. A divine trinity firmly in the grasp of us spirits once more.’

Jane’s eyes moved up to meet her sister’s, vivid green striking pale grey. ‘What is it you’ve really come to ask me Morgan?’ she said without expression. Lady Morgan knelt before her and took both her hands.

‘Dearest sister, we have quarrelled for too long. Don’t you see, the Lady of the Lake must be at one with the Lady of the Rocks

and Trees. Mankind has lost its way to false gods, idols of the weak. We can claim it back once and for all,' she spoke with passion. Jane bowed her head.

'Morgan, this world will be forever reinventing itself, shedding its skin – be it at our desire or mankind's. King Arthur knew this, so did many of his Knights of the Round Table. We live, we die. That is the natural order of things. Our hope should be that each passing generation learns something from the one before,' Jane pressed, pulling her hands from Lady Morgan's.

'You and I do not die, sister. We will remain, and are here to be *worshipped*,' Lady Morgan snapped up to her feet and turned her back in frustration. Jane put down her pen and gave a heavy sigh.

'You wish for me to reveal the location of Excalibur, is that it?' she asked.

'You think me a fool, sister? That I know not of the lineage of the Knights of Bedivere? Mack Benson and his troubled mind? No. I know exactly where I must travel,' Lady Morgan growled.

'So, why are you here? This can't have been the first time you and your White Dragon Knights have learnt of Sir Bedivere's generations and their wielding of the King's Blade?' Jane posed. Lady Morgan turned slowly back to her but said nothing, leaving Jane to draw her own conclusions. 'Ah. You've found out that you cannot wield it yourself perhaps?' she closed.

Lady Morgan remained still, a timid crack of a smile but little more. She opened her mouth to speak, only to think better of trying to engage further with her sister. She stared pensively

out of the window as splashes of rain tapped the panes. She uttered:

*'Those that know love, but feel its true pain,
Shall watch their empire be born once again.
Those that are cursed, but destined to lead,
Will first taste desire, followed by greed.
So goes the circle, the rise and the fall,
Spare the King's blade, by whose hand loses all.'*

Jane sat quietly as her sister drew back to the room and faced her directly – 'Will you not help me, my sister, Lady of the Lake?'

'Have you actually loved anyone enough to *understand* the true pain of losing them, my dear sister? Can you bear the sacrifice of so much?' Jane answered, while fixing her gaze on the glowing ruby-red pendant round Lady Morgan's neck. 'Forgive me, but I do not believe you to be capable of parting with anything,' she said softly.

Lady Morgan tightened abruptly, closing her eyes as if in capitulation to the truth. A sudden clench of her jaw and a sprig of freshly splintered thorn wood shot from beneath her sleeve straight into Jane's chest. Her sister sat impaled on her chair, breath slowing but still calm. She gave a warm smile to Lady

Morgan before sighing her last and dropping her head to one side. Her skin grew moist, beads of water pooling together as her body became pure water, trickling down to the floor as if spilled from a glass, until nothing remained of Jane.

'Some things I can part with,' Lady Morgan cursed without remorse.

Chapter 13

Bath, England

22nd February 2012 AD

Richard took the time to sit beside Luke and place a comforting hand on his knee. He felt the mild tremble. The winter sun had just been setting, tinting the skies over Prior Park in bands of orange and pastel pink.

‘How are you doing?’ Richard asked. Luke breathed deep and swallowed hard, then gave a grunt with a few quick nods. ‘You handled yourself well back there, Adam sounded impressed. Not sure I approve of your apparent knowledge of firearms, however,’ his father teased.

Luke turned with a half smile, then scratched the bandage crossing his forehead. ‘Damn, this thing is itching like crazy. Better not leave a scar.’

‘Doubt it. Anyway, what’s wrong with the odd scar or two? Makes for great discussion with the ladies,’ Richard laughed as he pulled up his shirt, displaying various wounds of the past, each with its own story and memory.

‘So what now?’ Luke posed. Richard’s face became its usual stern and serious self.

‘Mack has told us the location of Excalibur, so we travel there,’ Richard answered.

'All of us?' Luke turned to the floor. Richard paused for a moment and returned his hand to his son's knee.

'You need not come if you don't wish to, Luke – to Edinburgh. It's easy for me to forget that only three months ago you and your mother were living peacefully in Boston, well away from all of this. I've dragged you back into this world, and you have paid a heavy price – first Elaine, then Mary. I never really gave you the option to return back to America, or even asked you what you wanted to do. I suppose by keeping you here I thought ... well, I thought I might make up for the errors I made as a father all those years ago,' Richard choked a little.

'I'd hardly say it was peaceful back in Boston. Mom and I had our dramas too. You should have seen her with the remote control to the TV. Fierce as ...' Luke mumbled some curse words. His humour did lift Richard's heavy face at least. 'But seriously, Dad. I want in. Minnie gave her life for this, as did Mom. OK, it's *barm-ageddon* – flippin' knights and witches and magic swords. End of the world because of some statue and a piece of fancy jewellery. But, for all your differences, Mom believed you, Dad – and so does Adam,' Luke spoke with purpose.

Richard felt a swell of pride and patted his son's back – 'Barm-ageddon?'

'Yeah. Like mixing the words *barmy* and *armageddon*.'

'I get it. Adam told me,' Richard gave a chortle. 'Very clever. Might even catch on.'

‘Told you what?’ Adam interrupted, stepping out of the stone arch doorway. Richard waved the comment off. ‘Think you might be needed inside Dad – Gary, Iain and I are doing our best to keep things calm but it’s getting a little bit like a mid-morning chat-show in there between Mack and Nick.’

‘Figures,’ Richard said, getting to his feet. He could hear the bickering from the open window and jogged back in with urgency. Luke followed Adam, deliberately holding his younger brother back by the arm.

‘You want to explain what all that was about back there at The Bear?’ Luke asked.

‘What?’ Adam looked puzzled.

‘You and Iain. It was like a bomb had gone off.’

Adam tried to recall exactly what did happen in the heat of the moment. All he could remember was throwing himself at Iain and kissing him like it would be the last chance he had. The next moment, they were the only two standing. ‘I really don’t know ... wish I could tell you, bro,’ he confessed.

Luke didn’t look convinced, but conceded. ‘You two might want to keep that little trick in your back pocket should we all face mortal danger once again,’ Luke scoffed.

‘You going to tell me where you learnt to use a gun?’ Adam quipped as they walked back inside. Luke raised an eyebrow.

‘I told you. Who in America doesn’t these days. *Call of Duty* helps too you know – ever played it?’ Luke smiled.

‘No.’

‘Ah. Too busy doing the real thing no doubt?’ Luke continued mockingly.

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ Adam responded softly. And this was true – given that despite all his confrontations from a premature age, he had yet to actually take a life. Certainly not intentionally. The surge of strength and power that came from him and Iain was enough to cause genuine alarm, however; to see a scatter of bodies flung back without apparent control. He wondered whether Iain felt the same, and wanted to raise it directly with him – but now was not the time. A part of him felt foolish even broaching the subject with another Sacred Band member – trained killers, and Iain likely being one of infinitely more experience.

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A make-shift teachers’ common room had housed the Red Dragon for the past twenty-four hours. Gary had been doing his best with colleagues from the local press and publications to feed alternative stories in an attempt to deflect the true nature of the violent acts being reported from The Bear pub earlier. Everything from arson to local hooliganism was suggested as he paced frantically up and down, mobile in hand. Richard had reassured him that the White Dragon counterparts had almost certainly responded in the same way ... the last thing they needed right now was overt attention from the media. Besides, when you infiltrate the highest levels of government, cover stories undoubtedly become your forte.

Mack was slumped in a cheap-looking armchair, face buried in his hands as Nick pointed an incendiary finger in his direction and spoke with venom. Accusations of 'Where have you been all this time?' and hypotheses of 'If you had gotten over yourself and shown up earlier none of this would have happened.' – the grief and worry over losing Violet ripping his composure apart. William had remained quiet in the corner, chin resting on fist in deep contemplation, while Iain leant against the far wall, tapping his boots together impatiently, occasionally sticking up for Mack only to be taken aback by one of Nick's blistering verbal assaults.

'Enough. All of you,' Richard boomed. 'We don't have time for this.' He pulled up a rickety stool and took a seat. 'Nick, we will find Violet. We know where Morgan and the White Dragon are going and they will almost certainly be taking her there with them.'

'What makes you so sure?' Nick grunted.

'Because of the very man you're so eager to chastise right now,' Richard responded, pointing to Mack. 'The Imperial War Museum was a ruse as suspected. But not in the way we thought. Morgan and Lawrence didn't want us dead, not just yet anyway, merely out of the way so that they could take the lead on the real prize.'

'Excalibur and its location?' Adam proposed.

Richard nodded. 'Morgan for all her gifts cannot trace or uncover Excalibur, only the line of Sir Bedivere can do that. She needed Mack, and unfortunately Gary's good work was ahead of the game in terms of locating him.'

‘And if this worm hadn’t stayed hidden all this time ...’ Nick began to rant at Mack once more, only to be silenced again by Richard. ‘We all have our demons Nick ... how each man choses to conquer them is down to them,’ He defended.

‘Violet was following up on my research, yes. But how did the White Dragon know that?’ Gary questioned. ‘For all they knew, the four of us in London could have bottled it and given the game away.’

‘Did Karen *bottle it*?’ William’s harsh tone came from the window, the first spoken in what seemed like an age. Gary recoiled and apologetically raised a palm.

‘No. Of course none of us would have bottled it and given up any intelligence as to what we may have known about Mack’s whereabouts – the White Dragon would have certainly known that. But someone more vulnerable, like Violet? We gave them too good of an opportunity not to strike here in Bath and take what they could. We left her all but defenceless ... or so they thought,’ Richard sighed.

‘An all too common theme with you, Richard,’ came a hot-headed spurt from William. ‘First Sami in Birmingham all those years ago, then Elaine, now Karen and Violet. Quite the record you’re clocking up!’ he erupted, thumping his staff down on the floor with purpose. Adam moved himself to his father’s side in protection, but Richard stood nobly to confront him.

‘Say what must be said, old friend,’ Richard encouraged. ‘I know how much Karen meant to you, as Elaine did to me. I cannot predict the outcome of such events, none can. I can

only do my best, which is my duty,' he said with a quiver in his voice.

'Well, your best isn't good enough. Not anymore,' William sneered and smashed a lamp on a side table with his staff before angrily storming out of the room. Gary beckoned William back, but Richard allowed his closest friend to leave of his own accord, filling the room with a near-suffocating tension. Adam tried to refocus.

'But how could they have known Violet knew anything about Mack? That Gary had given his leads and research to her?' he continued to question. Silence fell as looks shot in all directions before settling on Richard once more.

'Somehow they found out,' Richard said with a resigned tone.

'You mean someone squealed.' Luke spat, sowing discord. Adam was quick to furrow his brow in displeasure at his brother's accusation. His thoughts turned to Luke's mention of Nick earlier, and the hint of mistrust, but surely now that was out of the question even for the most twisted of minds? Iain would be next ... the newcomer to the pack, no real background, and formerly within the circle of Lady Morgan and Sir Lawrence Worthington, but he had certainly proved himself worthy of the cause since then. Gary perhaps ... with his considerable list of contacts among the press, maybe mingling with the wrong crowds? A true journalist by nature, having to witness and interrogate all sides before reaching a verdict? No. These were dangerous thoughts, and certainly not worth entertaining right now. Thankfully, his father vocalised what he could not.

'I am not here to judge anyone or cast aspersions. Now, we must all do what we believe to be right,' Richard announced. 'We must assume the White Dragon know what we know and will be travelling to Edinburgh with full force. Violet will be with them and will be used as a bargaining token.'

'For what?' Nick uttered, holding back tears.

'For Excalibur, Nick. Mack's work is not yet done.'

Mack leaned back in his chair and regaled the group with stories about his time with Jane DuLac, her rich wisdom and knowledge of things no one could possibly have known. Much of it perplexed his colleagues, but he concluded on the line that locating Excalibur is 'only part of the journey,' appearing to concur with Richard.

'She said something of the sword being *born of blood*?' Mack stuttered.

'Like a sacrifice?' Gary suggested. Mack unveiled the small doll he had kept safely in his coat pocket, causing Gary's eyes to widen and prompting him to pull up an email from his contact Carl Bishop on his phone. 'Look at this image of the dolls unearthed from Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, they match this one.'

'But I've had this in my family for ages. My daughter Anne-Marie used to play with it. As did I, and my parents before that and ...' Mack trailed off as if a penny had dropped.

‘Perhaps as far back as when any of us could last determine when Excalibur had been summoned? Perhaps World War One?’ Richard asked.

‘So, we’ve got to give this voodoo-looking doll in sacrifice? Then we get Excalibur?’ Iain said with scepticism. ‘Doesn’t sound like the required bloodbath to me.’

‘Blood is *precious*,’ Mack said quietly to himself.

Richard pulled out his own phone and rapidly swiped through his contacts. He tapped on one and muttered ‘Come on ... *Come on*. Pick up,’ under his breath.

‘Who are you trying to call?’ Adam asked.

‘Graham. Graham McCready. Old colleague from way back – runs a gay bar in Edinburgh,’ Richard replied, frustrated at the prompt for voice message.

‘Seriously? Don’t tell me ...’ Adam began to ask.

‘Yes. Sacred Band. And knows others too nearby that might assist.’

‘Ever heard of him?’ Adam asked Iain. Iain shook his head.

‘Not on the Sacred Band Grindr app then?’ Luke yawned, now complaining about a headache and the thought of having to travel by road for eight hours to reach the Scottish capital. Adam growled, Iain gave in to the humour.

‘Damn it. No luck,’ Richard hung up in angst. ‘We’re going to have to travel up there tonight.’ Luke threw his hands up in the air and collapsed into one of the chairs. When he had said he

wanted in, he at least wanted to get some sleep before each epic confrontation.

‘This time we all go, right?’ Adam forced.

‘We do. Gary, go and get William ... try the Palladian Bridge in the front gardens, usually the best place to start. Adam, Luke, Iain – take my car. Luke, you’ll find a pistol under the passenger seat.’

‘Fine. But I’m driving. Unless you want to lose a wing mirror or two?’ Luke groaned, snatching the keys from his father’s hand.

‘You didn’t lose the wing mirror again, did you?’ Iain poked fun at Adam. Adam brushed his way past him in discontent. ‘You can always try an automatic you know,’ the mocking continued as the three left.

Richard turned to Nick and Mack and gestured to both their staffs. ‘Be ready for anything,’ he warned. Nick was already chomping at the bit at the thought of encountering his daughter’s kidnappers.

Gary stumbled his way back into the room looking flustered. ‘I can’t find William anywhere. His car has gone.’

Richard let out a heavy sigh of regret.

Chapter 14

Edinburgh, Scotland

22nd February 2012 AD

Bright-coloured liquor bottles caught a ray of sunlight coming in through the tops of the street-facing windows of Scottie's Bar, a narrow Georgian terrace overlooking Holyrood Park. Much smaller than its more established counterparts within Edinburgh's famed pink triangle, but happily keeping its head above water with brisk weekend trade after four years of business. The name Scottie's came from the dog owned by Graham's first partner Walter – an unashamedly stereotypical Highland Terrier complete with tartan beret and scarf. A picture of the beloved dog hung proudly over the bar just above the till. It was Walter who convinced Graham to enter into the hospitality sector after years of working in basic administration for the Local Council. Walter owned the townhouse, using it as a messy art studio, and had slowly watched the street around it transform into bustling nightlife during the Nineties. While the downstairs and cellar areas were transformed into a bar, Walter continued to use the upstairs for his own creative pursuits right up to his passing at the age of fifty-six. Graham couldn't bring himself to part with any of the canvasses Walter had painted, and some of the less risqué ones had made their way down to the bar to liven up the ageing décor. Each one vibrant in tone irrespective of its subject, a contradiction often

said about the painter himself – reserved, unassuming. A contradiction Graham still mourned.

The buzz of the telephone interrupted a wipe down of the bar top as Graham bent his lean frame over some crates of canned drinks to catch the receiver. The voice from the line was instantly recognisable.

‘Richard? Why it’s been a while m’lad. How you keeping?’ came his soft Border accent. He paused for a moment to shout a request for silence over the hum of the vacuum cleaner mixed with a Depeche Mode song to Fernando, a young Italian student who had been lodging with him for the past year, eager to help out. ‘Sorry about that, Richard ... always something going on here. Must be the same for you I’m sure. So, how is everyone ...’ His chatter trailed off and his face grew still as the news was broken, one terrible sentence after another, by Richard Allen. Graham’s delicate fingers twisted the cleaning rag between them, as he tried to control his startled breaths. Fernando stood patiently opposite, vacuum cord tangled around his feet, waiting for a go-ahead that never seemed to come.

‘I see,’ Graham’s dry throat managed to croak out after several long minutes of listening. ‘Here? In Edinburgh? Well, I know we always had our suspicions, Richard, but I never thought ...’ the conversation was cut short once more. Graham’s eyes caught the inquisitive look from Fernando and gestured for privacy, ordering him to pack the vacuum away before turning his back.

‘But Richard ... I’m really not sure how many I can find at such short notice. Not around here,’ Graham stuttered. ‘Yes, of

course I know a few. How many? Twenty or so I guess. All ages though, some like me who've not seen battle for many years and ... well, yes, I can try of course. How serious is this, Richard?'

Another pause while more information was absorbed, a hand brought over the mouth to try and hide an audible gasp upon hearing the fate of his friends Karen Milligan and Elaine.

'Richard – I am so sorry. You never said anything, any of you. I've of course seen news articles about the recent events in London at the Imperial War Museum and had my suspicions once the Worthingtons were mentioned, but never would have thought ... yes, yes I understand.' His mind raced to keep up. 'There are some regulars you will remember, the couple from Leith – one's a vet and the other a lawyer. Still in pretty good shape. Then there's the two new strikers from Celtic FC, one was injured during the game with Inverness a few weeks ago but you know how quickly we heal. Very short notice for footballers though ... yes, I get the priorities Richard, I really do but ... Ok, I will try. How long do we have?'

Graham gave an almost apathetic sigh. 'You know, why is it that such apocalyptic events always happen at weekends? Remember the Falklands in 1982? Bit of a scramble over nothing,' came the melodrama McCreedy was renowned for. He quickly reined it in after being stung by Richard. 'Yes I get what's at stake. But you will need to brief me properly, or at least William Wood can ... what do you mean he's not with you?' Graham snapped down the line. 'Great. A Red Dragon knight gone rogue over revenge. Wouldn't be the first time that ... sorry, sorry, Richard,' he curbed his discontent before

descending into a prickly exchange. 'I will meet you all here. Gather who I can. I assume you have a plan...? Well, we can discuss that when you arrive. Yes Richard, I will remain sharp as always, you know me. Take care – all of you.' He hung up, but his hand lingered on the receiver for some time after.

Graham's blurry head swung back, only to be met with Fernando's keen face once more, causing Graham to jump in shock just a little. 'Vacuuming is done, Sir,' said an ever-attentive Fernando. 'Shall I wash down the tables next? I've not had a chance to take a look at the karaoke machine yet but I'm sure if I ...' His eagerness was brought to an abrupt halt by Graham's raised hand.

'We won't be opening this weekend, Fernando lad,' Graham said, sounding despondent. Fernando looked puzzled. 'Why not, Sir? You sick? You not look so well huh?' came a concerned reply. Graham waved it off.

'There's something else I need do, Fernando. It's very important.'

'Ahh, like family yes?'

'Yes, you could say that, m'lad.'

'Is there anything I can do, Sir?'

Graham looked pensively out of the window as the sun began to set over the jagged peak of Arthur's Seat, casting a deep shadow. 'Yes, yes there is Fernando. But you must listen very carefully.'

Chapter 15

Edinburgh, Scotland

23rd February 2012 AD

They needed more, Colonel Stephen Thorpe thought. More men, more weapons, more everything as he paced up and down the hallway. The White Dragon had arrived that evening, Lady Morgan accompanying Sir Lawrence via a detour to York as planned. But no Mack Benson. The Knight of Sir Gareth was fully expecting to incur the wrath of both his masters upon sharing news of his failure to subdue the smaller contingent of Red Dragon members in Bath, doubtful even the capture of Violet Butcher, daughter of the Knight of Bors, would prove worthy bounty. His prisoner had remained largely silent during the trip north, refusing food or drink with a snappy temper. Teenagers.

Thorpe's experience at The Bear pub had left him shaken though. An arsenal seemingly wiped out through the power of just two born into the Sacred Band, in partnership. Forget guns and bullets, he wanted *explosives*. Enough to bring the entire volcanic mound of Arthur's Seat down if he had to – entomb them all in rock and bring this sorry mess to an end once and for all. He was relieved to hear such a request was granted by Sir Lawrence when he and Lady Morgan convened in the upstairs quarters of Dundas House in the heart of the city. It was as if such a request had been foreseen and considered wise

by Lady Morgan at least, perhaps anticipating a greater force than just the regulars associated with Richard Allen.

Tristan and Geraint were the last to arrive. Tristan glued to his mobile phone as always, whereas Geraint busied himself with old texts and manuscripts concerning Excalibur, insisting he be heard by Sir Lawrence and Lady Morgan. In amongst the commotion Tristan peeled his phone away and handed it to Sir Lawrence – Mohammed Hussin on the other end from Jordan. Snippets of dialogue were picked out by the Colonel, mostly gibberish, but Sir Lawrence sounding upbeat and full of praise for the Knight of Palamedes. The Palladium was safe ... for now at least. Quite how the rest of Lady Morgan's plans would play out was still, as always, a mystery.

'Where's our young guest?' Sir Lawrence enquired.

Stephen pointed to a thick oak door, sealed shut. 'Not said anything useful or constructive,' he groaned.

'She doesn't have to,' Sir Lawrence commented. 'We just have to wait.'

'Hostage situation?' Thorpe asked.

'More of a trade I believe,' Sir Lawrence replied.

Things became clearer for Thorpe. After failing to secure Mack Benson, the Knight of Bedivere and the only one capable of unlocking the location of the legendary sword, they would need a bargaining chip. Young Violet was that chip – her life in exchange for Excalibur's location. The Colonel began to feel a little more at ease when Lady Morgan interrupted the two and

gifted Stephen with an uncommonly warm smile. ‘You’ve done very well, Colonel,’ she soothed.

Thorpe loosened his military collar and cleared his throat. ‘Thank you my Lady ... and again, my sincerest apologies for not executing the task in Bath to my full potential. There were circumstances that could not have been ...’

‘Please Stephen, do not fret. What’s done is done, and what was meant to happen always does. Ensure our guest is made comfortable, Larry, won’t you. And ...’ Lady Morgan paused, as if suddenly remembering something, or distracted. ‘And, could you have Tristan just watch the main entrance to the house? I sense we could be receiving company a little sooner than expected,’ she mused as she glided between the two men.

‘Did you wish to speak with the captive, my Lady?’ Colonel Thorpe asked. Lady Morgan turned and simply shook her head with indifference. Her face read loud and clear, mercilessly even – *parenting was a weakness*.

Just before Geraint scuttled his way up to her with yet more incoherent stories and ramblings, Lady Morgan cut back to Stephen. ‘The explosives, Colonel. Feel free to do as you wish.’ Thorpe stood to attention and headed outside just as Sir Lawrence beckoned Tristan over, having to interrupt yet another phone call.

‘Yes, Sir Lawrence?’ Tristan uttered, split between two conversations. Sir Lawrence took the phone from his hand and hung up for him, leaving Tristan open-mouthed for a few seconds.

'I need you outside by the main entrance,' Sir Lawrence ordered. Tristan took a quick look through the window, noticing the darkening of nightfall and the distant roar of thunder. He cowered.

'What for? Surely we're safe here?' he protested. 'Thorpe has enough men to keep watch and defend if necessary. Granted he cocked up a bit in Bath but that's hardly likely to happen here.'

'Tristan. Just do it,' Sir Lawrence closed down the discussion. 'And keep your guard up, please.' He said no more. Tristan patted down his neat, fitted suit and frowned at the thought of spending hours out in the rain as the thunder grew louder.

+ + +

Despite the rain drilling into the paving stones and rooftops, the night was still. Tristan spotted the odd couple dart for safety from the torrent, either into open restaurants and bars, or simply to shelter under thinning trees. He rolled and rubbed his eyes frequently, and could have done with a nap. He came close to dozing off, leaning against the entrance column, only to be woken by the startle of a bolt of lightning that momentarily highlighted every nearby landmark under its spotlight. He tucked his arms under his coat, staff held between his legs as he shook the droplets of rain from his hair. An unfamiliar crash from around the corner of the house caught his ear. He brought his staff up to his chest and with trepidation moved out of the grounds into the street. The crash came again, stronger this time and more focused, leading him to a

small side street behind one of the restaurants. Bins were over-stuffed with boxes and food waste was giving off a putrid smell, wine and beer bottles carelessly lying on the ground. The crashing sound became a rattle, forcing Tristan to shine a torch forward. Nothing. He wanted to shout out the obvious but thought better of it, preferring to stand firm, when the rattle came again and the culprit revealed themselves as an opportunistic red fox, damp ginger fur and hazel eyes catching a glimmer of torchlight. It froze for a moment before scurrying off in fright. Great evening, Tristan thought. As he turned, a tall, stocky shadow now stood between him and his exit back to the main street.

‘And you are?’ Tristan barked, twisting his light over to the hooded figure. A bowed head slowly lifted to reveal the tortured face of William Wood, soaked but expressionless.

‘Well, well. Lady Morgan read you like a book, Knight of Sir Gawain,’ Tristan sneered, taking small steps towards his opponent. ‘If this is the Red Dragon’s idea of an ambush, I must say, it’s a little disappointing,’ he provoked.

William remained silent, his look fixed on Tristan. The absence of a riposte from Wood itself was unnerving Tristan, enough to raise his staff prepared for combat.

‘I’ll confess, it was so good of you and your fellow knights to accept my invitation to London. It’s true, that the daft gunslinger Colonel Thorpe didn’t exactly conclude matters with your friends in Bath the way we’d hoped, but still, up there, we have our prize,’ Tristan gestured to the top floor of the building and a lit window where Violet was held. ‘It will have to do. Had

it been me in charge down there, I'll tell you now there would be far fewer of you to worry about,' his tone became bitter and incendiary. William still refused to take the bait.

Tristan lowered his staff and turned to his pocket pistol instead. 'Ah. I see. Do you just want this to end? Does losing a fellow knight make you question the very meaning of existence? Our purpose as descendants? Well William, Knight of Sir Gawain, I am happy to reunite you with your beloved Karen, Knight of Sir Kay, right now if it suits?' he clicked and cocked the barrel. Finally, a response came from William, standing up as tall as he could, staff held diagonally across his chest.

'I know you are without honour, Mr Baker, always have been and always will be. But for me, and for Karen, I would like to think you can do your descendants proud and fight me the old way,' William's voice was without inflection or emotion. Tristan lowered his pistol and accepted the challenge. His staff mirrored William's and his left foot was placed behind. 'The old ways are coming to an end Mr Wood. You'll all soon see.' The staffs became blades and they matched each other's blows in a shower of sparks.

The swipes were clean and formal between William and Tristan. Both hands firmly on the hilt as the blows came from both above and below, each one deflected and countered. Tristan gave a smart turn on one foot and landed an elbow into William's rib cage, causing him to stumble back and recompose, not giving Tristan enough time to finish his opponent. Their swords locked in a cross, both men clenching their jaws, teeth grinding as lightning lit both their faces. A vengeful fury awoke in William, resulting in Tristan collapsing to one knee. Another

bolt of violent light from the skies and William brought his forehead down, slamming into Tristan's nose in a spray of blood and rain.

Baker winced while writhing on the ground, barely keeping a hold on his sword. Wood raised his blade high above his head and plunged it down, splitting the slate stone of the pavement as Tristan evaded by rolling to the side. William swung again, cracking a drainpipe as Tristan ducked. The follow-up swing was successfully blocked, but thrown with such force that Tristan had to step back, breathing heavily. William was gripped in a haze of fury, appearing oblivious to any physical toll on his body, and acting out of an endless fire of strength and determination. But he never spoke, never stopped for breath. A final upward thrust of William's sword tore through Tristan's defence, slicing his shoulder as he fell to the ground once more.

Tristan grimaced as he tried to nurse his wound. He knew it was over. 'Do you yield?' William asked, the tip of his sword aimed directly at Tristan's throat. A rebellious notion of defiance entered Baker's mind and he impulsively reached to his waist for his pistol and fired. William read the move and blocked it by summoning ethereal light from his blade, enough to deflect the bullet away. Tristan was granted a chance to turn and run as he heard Wood's booming shout -- '*Coward*' -- ringing in his ears.

William gave chase across slippery streets to Princes Street Gardens, Tristan still within sight, any occasional onlooker hastily pushed aside. Quite where he was headed William couldn't determine, it was of no consequence. His legs were not going to tire, nor his arms, nor his resolve. He dodged the trams to the sound of hooters and horns as he spotted his rival

nimbly jump over the fencing towards the Scott Monument. A hiding spot perhaps? If indeed Baker thought he'd manage to lose Wood in the sprint.

The small visitor hut's door at the foot of the monument was broken open when William arrived. Looking up, he could just make out the shine of a knight's blade one level above. He moved inside the tight, spiralling corridor and leapt up the stairs two at a time. He reached the first level, cautiously scanning the panorama of the city, any hiding spaces revealed to a degree by the ongoing lightning storm. All clear. He continued up another level and repeated the process – still no sign of Tristan, only the shadows of intricate carvings toying with William. The stairwell became constricted as he continued to ascend, knowing any strike in these confines would be foolish ... perhaps what his enemy wanted. He drew his first heavy breath upon reaching the platform of the third tier, the expanse of Edinburgh laid out in front of him. Then Tristan made his move.

Like a guillotine, Baker's sword came down from the side of the platform exit, little more than arm span of width in which to manoeuvre. Tristan grunted angrily as he sent a flurry of swings and swipes of his blade in William's direction, mostly meeting stone. William tripped on his heel and fell back, his sword skipping from his hand and balancing precariously on the platform's edge. He kicked an advancing Tristan hard in the groin before lunging for the pommel, just slipping a finger into it before it fell. He remained floored as he swung the blade around low to snip the tendons of Tristan's heels, crumpling the man to his knees in agony.

Returning to his feet and kicking the transformed wooden staff away from its owner, William hauled Tristan to his feet by the scruff of his suit collar and pressed him hard against the railings. Baker could only whimper at what was soon to follow. With a heave, Wood threw his counterpart over – a single scream faded out as his body crashed 200 feet below. ‘For Karen,’ William justified.

He gave a shake of his head, ridding himself of blame and rage as best he could. He turned to return to the stairwell when he felt the sharp prick of a needle in his neck. He blinked in confusion as he pulled a tiny dart out, then collapsed on all fours. Through the railings he could just make out the broad figure of Colonel Thorpe at the base of the monument, his moustache twitching in what was now only a soft drizzle. Then all faded to black.

Chapter 16

Edinburgh, Scotland

24th February 2012 AD

Richard banged harshly on the door of Scottie's Bar. Dawn had just broken, with Luke rubbing the little sleep he'd had from his eyes. 'Remind me again why we couldn't have flown up here?' he groaned through a yawn.

'Bit too high risk,' Adam replied with a stretch of his own, having been cramped in the back of a car for nearly twelve hours. The truth was, they had taken the long route north – mainly to avoid detection but also to stop in York at Mack's request. He was concerned about Jane DuLac and wanted to check in on her. The same young receptionist looked flustered upon their arrival, stating that Mrs DuLac had not been in at all yesterday despite numerous calls to her apartment. The group did all they could to question her about her last known whereabouts, but the receptionist held firm in her duty not to share anything beyond her statement to the police. Richard called time on the visit, coming to his own conclusions. They were too late.

The lock clunked from behind the door and Fernando poked his head through. 'Yes? We are not open today,' came his broken English. The look Richard gave him was sufficient to push the would-be doorman aside. Graham McCready came trotting

down the stairs, swiftly ordering Fernando back to get teas and coffees for his guests. 'My apologies Richard, of course Fernando wouldn't know you from ... well, you. Young Master Allen,' Graham joked mildly, shaking Richard's hand warmly and nodding to his son.

With introductions and thanks out of the way, the full scenario unfolded. The colour bled from Graham's face with every sentence Richard uttered, the familiar melodramatic gasp and biting of fist towards the end of the briefing.

'Excalibur? After all this time? Why now?' McCready fired questions in rapid succession.

'To complete the fabled Trinity finally,' Richard replied. 'Seventy years of being without the Palladium likely gave Morgan some good thinking time.'

'The Palladium? You think the White Dragon have it?' Graham adjusted the cuff of his flamboyant Hawaiian shirt, its garish colours bringing a quizzical look from Luke.

'The exhibition in London at the Imperial War Museum. Celebrated more than just the Battle of the Atlantic,' Richard confirmed.

'The German battleship wreck. Of course. Treasure lost to the oceans, beyond reach. But how did you find that out? I mean to say, it's not as if the Red Dragon has not been looking for it all this time also. Remember the Falklands? We were sure that...'

Richard interrupted Graham with swift response – 'Yes, yes. I know my friend. False lead ... as was many an incident over the

previous decades between the USA and USSR. Turns out Morgan was quite happy to let those events unfold naturally so to speak – provided the White Dragon was profiting in some way. As you said, it gave our adversary quite some thinking time. And to answer your question ... we had some help in locating the Palladium too.'

Luke shot a fierce glance towards his father, not unnoticed by Richard. He went on to elaborate about his elder son's connection to Athena's reincarnation, Mary Cassidy, and the events at Tintagel. Graham attempted to lighten the mood with a crass comment – 'Women, huh?' – but Luke's stony silence stung their host.

'Well. I have as it would happen been putting my lodger to good use. Fernando has taken a few trips over to Arthur's Seat in the evenings just to report,' Graham commented.

'And?' came Mack's keen response.

'Not a lot I'm afraid, son of Bedivere. While there has been some unusual, non-tourist style activity around there relatively late at night, there's nothing to suggest a major military or government-led intervention. If indeed that is what you were expecting,' Graham elaborated.

'Might not need to be,' Gary chimed in. 'Probably want to keep all of this low-key – although I doubt the White Dragon will leave anything to chance.'

Richard nodded in agreement before asking about William. Graham had no answer. No engagement with the Son of Gawain and no sign of his whereabouts.

‘And our back-up?’ Adam asked. ‘Other Sacred Band members?’

‘As I said to your father, Master Allen ... this was very short notice. However, a few have answered our distress call.’

‘How many?’ Iain pressed further.

‘About fourteen as of yesterday evening. Don’t expect the strikers from Celtic FC though. Flaky at best. You know how footballers are ... one paparazzi shot near a gay bar and they consider their careers finished,’ Graham snorted.

‘Does that number include you and Fernando?’ Luke asked with a casual raise of an eyebrow. Graham looked both flattered and offended in equal measure.

‘While I am of course quite a catch Master Allen ... at the ripe old age of sixty-six and eight months, Fernando is a little out of my league. And inexperienced in such matters,’ McCready confirmed.

‘No powers huh? Fair enough. But you’ll fight, right?’ Luke continued. Graham scanned the wider group, awaiting a defence that never came.

‘Richard, dear friend. Are you honestly expecting me to fight? Why, as much as I believe in this cause of course, I think we can both agree my fighting days are long behind me,’ he pleaded. Richard tried to settle his friend, reminding him there was no substitute for wisdom, and Graham was one of the oldest Sacred Band members he knew. His direction was all that was

really required here. Gather and command. Be prepared for anything.

At that very moment the telephone rang, an eager Fernando leaping to the receiver. His back to the group, trying not to interfere, it was clear that he was struggling with the nature of the conversation. Graham excused himself with a self-deprecating shrug before intervening. 'Just can't get good help these days.'

'So, what do we do now?' Nick asked, tapping his staff somewhat impatiently on the side of the table. Clearly his mind was focused elsewhere, on the wellbeing of Violet.

'We'll just have to go up to Arthur's Seat. Let Mack take stock and see what happens from there,' Richard sighed.

'That doesn't sound like much of a plan, Dad,' Luke tutted. 'Especially if we're expecting a siege like we experienced in Bath. That Lord Kitchener-guy turning up with dozens of armed soldiers.'

While caught off guard at his son's knowledge of the historical figures of World War One, Richard held firm in the belief that Graham's back-up would balance the odds. If not ... then all the group could do was try.

Mack was noticeably uncomfortable in his seat. 'Richard ... I know my place in all this but I have to tell you now – I can't be sure of what I am meant to be doing. It is not as if my ancestors gave me any form of instruction guide on Excalibur or how to wield it. Yes, I may be able to see its actual location, but being able to find it is another matter. You said yourself, many an

Arthurian knight has tried this very spot over the years and returned with nothing.’ He gripped his daughter’s doll tightly.

‘Well, at least seventeen of your predecessors have managed it,’ Gary interjected. ‘I’m with Richard. We need to go up there and check the whole place out. Maybe something will come to you.’

‘Like a bullet?’ Luke scoffed, slurping the remains of his coffee.

Fernando tiptoed his way over to the group and whispered to Richard. ‘Mr Allen? Richard? Graham has asked for you...the phone Sir?’ Nick drew a conclusion faster than Richard could and barged his way behind the bar before Richard could stop him, seizing the phone from Graham.

‘Where’s my daughter you *scum*? Who ... who is this?’ Nick seethed down the line. Richard tried to wrestle the phone off him as Graham stood back with his hands high in submission. Richard finally got his way, pressing the receiver close to his ear but failing to recognise the voice he heard.

‘I was trying to tell your friend, Knight of Sir Bors, here that the voice is encrypted Richard. Doubt you’ll be able to tell who it is?’ Graham noted.

‘But they *knew* we were here. That’s all you need to know.’ Nick continued to protest as Gary and Mack tried to pull him away.

‘Is this place well known?’ Iain muttered to Adam amidst the turmoil. Adam shook his head, admitting to being a little alarmed that the White Dragon would know exactly when to

call Scotties and why. Richard tried to focus, asking the odd probing question.

'Divide and conquer is a useful tactic, Sir Richard. I would have thought the Red Dragon would have learnt that by now,' came the somewhat incoherent cackle over the line.

'Is Violet Butcher ok?' Richard demanded.

'Violet Butcher is fine. As is your friend, Mr William Wood. For how much longer we cannot guarantee,' the voice threatened. Richard closed his eyes remorsefully upon realising the result of William's reckless actions.

'What do you want?' Richard asked with restraint.

'The same thing as you, Sir Richard. Only we, as you know, lack the proper resources to acquire it. Please join us on the mound at sundown tonight ... and be sure to bring Sir Mack Benson with you.' The line went dead.

Richard faced his comrades. 'It's happening tonight. They have both Violet and William,' he sighed.

'Not great odds, Richard,' Gary confessed. Richard turned to Graham and requested he continue working on contacting as many Sacred Band members as he could, and lead them to Arthur's Seat that evening. Graham bowed reverently and shot back upstairs.

'We'll need to engage them no matter what. So let's just live with that for now,' Richard commanded. Nick shook Gary and Mack off his arms, tempted to storm outside and curse the sky in rage, but satisfied himself with kicking a bar stool over, much

to Fernando's alarm. 'We'll head up there later this evening. Alone.'

'And then what?' Adam pushed.

'Then we wait,' Richard said.

Chapter 17

Edinburgh, Scotland

24th February 2012 AD

The frost was beginning to cover Arthur's Seat come sundown. Mack's boots slipped a little on ascent as he tried to survey his surroundings, partly expecting sympathy of some sort just for setting foot on the mound, but so far nothing. Richard, Gary and Nick all followed, all but Richard carrying their staffs and putting them to good use hiking over the terrain.

Mack had never really taken the time to admire his own staff, its ashen but smooth carving coming just to shoulder height, wood from the Glastonbury thorn serving to disguise its true purpose, the knight's blade. The staffs had been passed down in each generation to those sons and daughters that carried the bloodline of each of the remaining twelve knights who served King Arthur at his fabled Round Table. According to legend they were forged by the wizard Merlin himself, and rumoured to be unbreakable against all foes, save Excalibur itself. Although Mack never raised the subject during the Red Dragon's trip to Scotland, he was dying to ask Richard more details as to how he came to be without his own staff...for a knight to lose such a prized possession is close to the ultimate shame, and in generations past, could well have led to premature ending of the knight's life. Whatever this power was that was wielded by the young American lady, it was a worthy adversary – and

merciful enough to spare Richard, Knight of Galahad, and his pride.

Upon reaching the summit, it was quiet. Uncomfortably so. Twinkling stars began to punctuate the clear night sky, reflected upon Edinburgh's own glittery cityscape. Richard had instructed Adam, Iain and Luke to circle the opposite side of the mound as a precaution. Check for any sign of ambush. When they arrived over the peak only moments later, a slight relief set in.

'Well. Where the hell are they?' Nick flared.

'We didn't see anyone on the way up here,' Adam noted. 'You think the White Dragon is tricking us again?' Richard gave an incredulous look, then asked for patience.

Mack was experiencing an unusual sense of both calm and panic, not sure which one to believe. A gentle whisper carried on the breeze... 'Daddy. Daddy you *came* ...' in a tone not unlike his daughter's. It was enough for him to call out her name several times, catching the attention of the group.

'Mack? Do you hear something?' Gary asked.

'I'm ... I'm not sure. Possibly, but ... it can't be.' Mack stuttered. 'Anne-Marie?' He walked over to a rocky outcrop and knelt down, his ear close to the ground.

'Great. Our saviour is starting to have a breakdown again. Perfect timing,' Luke spat in the opposite direction, fingers wrapping around the holster of his pistol. 'Am I the only one not getting a good vibe from all this?' he added.

Adam and Iain both turned to Richard. 'Maybe Luke's right. We've been caught out like this before Dad ... perhaps we should wait for Graham's back up?' Adam concluded. Richard contemplated the question, then took one look at an ever-increasingly frustrated Nick and again requested patience.

The voice in Mack's head grew stronger. It was Anne-Marie. He was sure of it, even if those around him doubted. He placed his hand on the rocks and tried to focus on it, scrunching his face up in desperation. A vivid flash of the car accident, his wife Shanna sat by his side, Anne-Marie playing with the doll in the back seat, came to him unforced. The instinct was to run, switch the mind off and not linger a moment longer ... but this was the test. The test Jane DuLac had spoken of that plagued the Bedivere bloodline. Face your pain and guilt or run, the outcome would determine your state of mind. Mack stood firm, placed the doll down, and the rocky outcrop split open wide, revealing a small stairwell going deep down into the mound itself.

'Mack? What's going on?' Richard broke his steadfast demeanour to rush to his friend's side as Mack jumped back from the newly appeared crevice.

'Think you may have found it,' Iain smiled, helping Mack to his feet. 'Shall we just go in like? Getting an Indiana Jones feeling here.'

A mist that was not present before suddenly appeared from behind the group, low hanging but dense. The chill was instant, and the crackling of frost was heard underfoot. Single footsteps at first, then more.

'My sincerest gratitude to you, Mr Mack Benson, Knight of Sir Bedivere.' Lady Morgan's voice echoed in the mist. 'For all my powers, you will know that I cannot locate King Arthur's tomb or be granted access. But you, you and your kind, that is a miracle. That is my sister's magic.' The mist lifted slowly to reveal Lady Morgan, shimmering in flowing silver as always, accompanied by Sir Lawrence.

'The very first Knight of Bedivere cast Excalibur away upon request from his King. At first, he could not perform such a task, could not bear to part with such power. He lied to his King, stating the sword had indeed been thrown back to where it came from. But, when he described how the event unfolded, it became apparent to the King, as he lay stricken on his deathbed, that the event had not taken place. For the Lady of the Lake was not mentioned. Sir Bedivere of course repented of his mistake and then, well, the rest is legend,' Morgan lectured.

'Jane DuLac.' Mack shouted. 'What did you do, you *witch*?'

'My sister had served her purpose, as she has tried to do over so many of your generations Mr Benson. Sometimes succeeding, sometimes not. For so long I could concede to her purpose – that of balance and harmony. What I would try to control, she would always counter. But we are not the only spirits of this world...as you well know, the great kingdoms of Greece and our heavenly brethren held powers of their own. Forces that when combined, had the ability to shift the very fabric of life itself. It took a true visionary to make such a combination happen.'

‘And you’re that visionary, Morgan?’ Richard mocked, stepping forward. ‘Blood and chaos is not enough for you? The Palladium and the Necklace not quenching your thirst?’

Lady Morgan’s lips narrowed in thought. ‘I have always admired how you, the Red Dragon have loyally served King Arthur, even when it was clear he could only see half the picture. For I care not for blood and chaos as you call it ... I am very much on your side, Knight of Galahad.’

‘It doesn’t look like it from where I’m standing,’ Richard rebuffed.

‘Indeed, nor was it for Karen Milligan I would have assumed.’ Lady Morgan deflected. ‘I do not wish to see more death come to the Knights of the Round Table, Sir Allen. As I shared with Mrs Milligan, we are of the same world, the same people.’

Mack’s eyes narrowed upon hearing the same words that had been spoken to him by Jane DuLac. He wanted to speak, but could not find words of his own as Richard continued to step closer. ‘I agree, Morgan. So, let us settle this. Where are William and Violet?’

With a wave of her hand Lady Morgan cleared the mist to her and Sir Lawrence’s side, revealing both the captive William and Violet flanked by Colonel Thorpe and Geraint South, sword blades across their throats. William had a small bruise on his cheek, Violet appeared unharmed.

‘As promised,’ Sir Lawrence spoke firmly. ‘Now, for your end of the bargain ... Mr Benson, shall we?’

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The stony path was lit by a few torches casting dim light from behind, almost suffocated by the stuffy air that had not been vented for some considerable time. The four armed guards that accompanied Lady Morgan and the White Dragon cohort were visibly uneasy, probably no more than basic guns-for-hire sorts, Adam thought. They were constantly trying to shake some life into their torches as the darkness encroached upon the group's descent, occasionally cursing their instruments and always quick to raise their rifles at the first creak or crunch of rocks underfoot.

There was little to distinguish this legendary tomb from any other cave – no ornate carvings, inscriptions or anything remotely connected to the burial of the King of Britons. Geraint however was clearly in his element, pausing frequently to inspect every slab of slate, every scar on the paving, every drop of moisture dripping from deep roots. Violet and Nick hugged each other as if they were never to see each other again, William and Richard walked slowly side-by-side, not speaking a single word.

'Look. Up ahead!' South pointed with glee and trotted down the remaining steps. The narrow corridor opened up into a cavernous bulb, air clearing ever so slightly. The odd shard of light piercing from the ceiling above focused on a solitary hawthorn tree, fully matured but not yet in bloom. The damp and strangled light seemingly provided just enough sustenance to keep it alive.

'Is that ...?' Gary began to ask.

'A Glastonbury thorn, yes.' Richard pre-empted.

'So, that could well be ...' Gary again tried to question.

'The possible resting place of King Arthur. Yes.' Richard followed.

Luke took in the surroundings with a squint of his eyes. 'Looks similar to the place in Glastonbury where you took Mary,' he noted. Richard nodded in agreement as Geraint turned to make his address.

'This is one of only a few sacred places in Britain known to have served our great King. Glastonbury is a well-known pilgrimage site of course, as is his birthplace Tintagel, but those who are familiar with the Welsh Celts of the Votadini would know they took refuge from invading Anglo-Saxons much further north in England and the borders of Scotland,' he announced proudly. 'The text of Y'Godiddin was right.'

'What's 'Y'Godiddin?' Iain whispered to Adam.

'Celtic poem. Supposedly one of the earliest mentions of King Arthur in the native language. It describes a battle between Welsh Celts and Picts of Britain, and a warrior, but not the King himself. The suggestion is though that whoever wrote the poem clearly had witnessed Arthur and his Knights in battle at some time,' Adam tried to summarise.

'So who was the warrior?' Iain pressed.

'Unclear. Might have been a descendant of one of the Knights, maybe even Sacred Band – it does, after all, mention both spears and swords,' Adam replied with a shrug.

Sir Lawrence took several steps forward before staggering back as loose pebbles fell below. 'Have you happened to notice there is a ravine between us and our goal, Geraint?' he sneered impatiently, looking down into the abyss, just making out a thin sliver of running water below. Colonel Thorpe crept over to survey for himself. The gap was a good five or six metres wide, with no obvious narrow point to cross.

'We'll need a ladder of sorts,' Thorpe suggested. He gestured to two of his guards to return to the surface and fetch the required equipment. Lady Morgan crouched down by the edge and gave a weak smile.

'I believe one of us can cross now' she spoke softly, then turned to Mack. Eyes widened, Mack stepped back, hands up in protest.

'*Whoa*. I might have found this place, Lady Morgan, but if you're asking me to take some sort of leap of faith, *forget it*,' he snapped.

'Faith is overrated,' Lady Morgan countered and reached for his hand. 'I may understand the earth, but my sister understood the water and the air. This knowledge I believe she shared with you, blood of Sir Bedivere. Come,' she beckoned. Mack glanced at Richard, and was granted approval. He inched forward to stand by Lady Morgan's side.

'What am I supposed to do exactly?' he asked with a sigh.

‘Feel what you did to reveal this place. It is as much your home as it is the Lady of the Lake’s and the King’s. You and your ancestors need not be afraid,’ she supported, encouraging Mack to crouch down with her. She pulled both his hands to the sharp edge of the crevice and whispered the words ‘Be at peace.’

With a deep breath, and closing his eyes, Mack tried to settle. He brought the happiest memories of his daughter and wife to the forefront of his mind – bedtime stories to comfort Anne-Marie when she couldn’t sleep, lazy autumnal walks in the forest with Shanna, the first time he had met her in a crowded coffee shop on Tottenham Court Road. Then, uncontrollably, images which he was not familiar with came to the surface – comforting faces that were not of his making, but somehow feeling like family. An English naval officer dressed in Tudor clothes, an American Unionist soldier, and a young infantryman caked in trench mud as explosions and bullets rained around him. They had all been here before.

Mack’s eyes shot open as he fell back from the ravine, all around him quiet – he was alone. He looked across at the Glastonbury thorn still shimmering delicately in the faint light, only now supported by a dense fog stretching to his feet. The deep crevice was shrouded. He stood, and placed one foot gingerly in front of the other, slowly making his way over to the tree. Despite his mind telling him that at any moment he would fall to his certain death, he persisted, each footstep feeling solid. He didn’t take his gaze from his destination, the rough bark of the hawthorn coming ever closer until he was within

inches of its base. The fog cleared, he dared to look down – he had crossed the ravine.

The shouts from the two guards sent by Colonel Thorpe broke Mack's concentration. He looked back across and saw the ladder being stretched out in a bridge. 'Hey ... *hey!*' he shouted, much to the astonishment of the remaining group.

'Mack? How did you get over there?' Gary yelled.

'The fog ... it was, well, it carried me across,' Mack replied.

'What fog?'

'The ... the fog. All around? Did you not see it?'

The group all looked at one another incredulously, aside from Lady Morgan, who just smiled. 'You're home,' she mouthed in secret.

Chapter 18

Battle of Amiens, France

9th August 1918 AD

There was no way forward. Roads were blocked in all directions. Word had reached the line that the American Doughboys had made progress on Chipilly Ridge to the north, and with any luck would hold firm until nightfall. For the British 32nd Division however, it was a standstill.

Captain Ben Benson sat slouched up against a still evergreen tree, cupping his cigarette to shield it from the cool breeze that had already cost him three matches. He inhaled deeply in success after finally striking a light. Several orders had been passed down from high command over the last few hours, each one contrary to the previous. Advance. Stand down. Move to the north, south, south-east. Many of his men had simply resorted to spinning their bayonets on the ground and deciding on the best direction of movement depending on where they pointed. Probably about as much logic, Ben thought.

He'd managed to spend four months back in England the previous year, discharged after becoming sick with a nasty plague that had ravaged his former division and even picked off several of the soldiers. This was doing very little for morale, low as it was already, and it was decided to ship the ailing back home to recuperate. Ben at first was reluctant, feeling as if

somehow he was abandoning those he had come to care and respect the most – but upon realising he was being returned to the front as soon as he was fit enough to do so, tearing himself away from his fiancée was more torture than anything he had endured over the past three years fighting on the Continent. ‘Promise you’ll come back to me again,’ was his only order now, the only one worth caring about.

That wasn’t entirely true of course. For during his period of convalescence he was visited by an unusual stranger. She first appeared while he was in hospital just outside Dover, a nurse it would seem, attentively mopping his brow as the fever took hold. On a daily basis she would sit by his bedside, gentle smile and calming voice. At one point Ben even mistook her for his fiancée, which must have caused a bit of a stir when he babbled on about knowing love and feeling true pain, empires born again and something about a ‘King’s blade’. Ben was certainly no poet, and his fiancée reminded him of that fact once the fever had broken. Unusually, what should have felt like a dream remained at the forefront of his mind.

The nights that followed had Ben muttering in his sleep. Unlike many who returned from war, these were more gentle musings rather than horrific accounts of atrocities past that crippled many a veteran. His fiancée would shake him awake every now and again, asking him what he’d seen and why he felt he was ‘destined to lead,’ and who Duncan was. Ben had few answers, and never broached the subject of fallen comrades. He would always settle back to sleep in the end, arm wrapped around his fiancée’s waist, occasionally feeling the playful kick through her belly and content in a future of fatherhood.

‘What’s in Edinburgh that requires you so badly?’ his fiancée asked one rainy afternoon. Ben again had no real answer, but made up a little lie about a special reconnaissance meeting for which he was selected. He was never any good at lies, and she nearly always saw right through them, but it was the best he could offer. She kissed him softly on the lips as a reminder of her love. He left that very afternoon, and returned but two days later. Ben shared nothing of the trip with her, although he made an excuse for the small wooden doll he had kept in waiting for his first child, lost it on the train back to London – but promising to carve a new one. Later that month, his orders were given to return to France, only weeks before his son was born.

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There was a zealous bellow from one of the soldiers in excitement that the Division was set to begin moving forward once more along the Canadian front. Ben hauled himself up and clicked his aching back, having lain on the long wooden staff he’d brought back with him.

‘I think we’ve got this one, Captain,’ spoke an eager soldier with a grubby face, Ben guessed barely twenty years of age. ‘They say the Yanks over at Chipilly have held all night, even managed to advance. Jerry’s on the run!’

‘Perhaps,’ Ben nodded, stubbing out his barely burnt cigarette, his own experience in such matters damping any glimmer of hope. ‘Move on with the remainder of the division, will you. I’ll be with you shortly.’

'Where are you going?' the young soldier asked.

'I'll just be a moment.'

'Not scared are you, Sir? Come on ... you were at the Somme. Piece of cake compared to that I'm sure.'

'Off you go, cadet,' Ben's voice hardened as he watched the soldier skip off ahead with the rest of his men. How simple it was for the young to endure sacrifice, to obey orders without the slightest hesitation or question as to why. They would charge at enemy lines, be mowed down like wheat in a field by machine gun fire, blown to pieces by mortar shells – all in the name of King and Country. Such a sacrifice, but not knowing what that sacrifice was for made it all the more bitter to watch. The line between bravery and naivety was as close as the trenches themselves.

Ben stepped back behind his tree and crouched down. Eyes clenched shut as he tried to shut out the world around him – distant explosions, pulses of gunfire, acrid smoke in the air. He focused on Duncan, his straining shoulders holding off the German fire as he retreated, that final glance before the cloud of earth and flame obscured all sight. Every soldier, of every nation, knew how to die for their country, that much was engrained ... but to die for love, that required much, much more.

A bugle horn was heard, followed by a rallying cry. More explosions and gunfire - Ben was sure he was exactly where he needed to be, alone. A silver blade now rested in his hand, light and not particularly ornate – but strong ... strong enough to surge through his body unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

He shook, both in fear and delight. The slightest nudge would unbalance his composure. He focused on his fiancée, his boy, his family back in Jamaica, on Duncan. The words came to him as easy as reciting his own name:

*'Those that know love, but feel its true pain,
Shall watch their empire be born once again.
Those that are cursed, but destined to lead,
Will first taste desire, followed by greed.
So goes the circle, the rise and the fall,
Spare the King's blade, by whose hand loses all.'*

Without hesitation he held the handle high above his head and drove the blade down into the ground with force. The white light burned through his eyelids, but flashed by in an instant. There were seconds of calm as his eyes slowly opened, his hands now empty. The echo of soldiers' cries slowly returned all around him, but oddly, he was at peace. He turned to face and stand with his men as he had done so many times before, rifle in hand – he would see his bride and son again.

Chapter 19

Edinburgh, Scotland

24th February 2012 AD

'Seriously. How did he get over there?' Luke protested. 'Did anyone see how he got over there?' The rest of the group had no answer, as if in the blink of an eye Mack had moved from one end of the crevice to the other.

'Just keep your hands on the ladder,' Adam instructed as he crawled his way across carefully. 'This thing moves quite a bit, so don't try and show off,' he added. Iain had brazenly made his way across already and stood firm on the other end to anchor it. Colonel Thorpe's two men pressed down hard to stabilise it as Lady Morgan, Sir Lawrence, Geraint South, Gary, William and finally Richard scurried across. Nick held the arm of Violet tightly, requesting her not to follow, although one look at the grizzly faces of the Colonel's men made him think otherwise. 'Just don't look down, sweetheart' was Nick's only advice.

Mack had stood attentively staring at the thorn tree, as if he was seeing something the others were not. The hawthorn's roots were rough and aged, except for a single sapling sprouting fresh blooms, nestled between a crack in a large, weathered stone glistening with dew.

‘So, what now, Mr Benson?’ Sir Lawrence enquired. ‘Do you know where Excalibur is?’

Mack turned to all, the weight of expectation bearing down upon him from every look. He couldn’t think, not in the way he had just done to conjure up the bridge of mist. His mind was a scramble of thoughts once again, each wrestling for attention.

‘I...I don’t know. There appears to be nothing,’ Mack confessed. Sir Lawrence cast a disapproving look towards Lady Morgan. She remained silent.

‘You wouldn’t be lying to us now would you, Mr Benson?’ Sir Lawrence drily asked. ‘That would be most unfortunate.’

‘Back down Larry, he doesn’t know,’ Richard defended, puffing his chest out ready for confrontation. Sir Lawrence brought the tip of his walking staff up to Richard’s chin.

‘Now, now Richard ... let’s give our fellow knight some more time shall we? After all, we’ve come so far now, it would be a shame to ruin this age-old alliance between us all by having to show a display of force,’ Sir Lawrence threatened. The clicks of Colonel Thorpe’s mercenaries’ guns could be heard from across the ravine. ‘Mr South ... any suggestions?’

Geraint had remained largely quiet, but had poked and prodded his way around the great thorn tree in hope of answers. ‘This place has known old magic, Sir Lawrence, the likes you and I have likely not witnessed before. Perhaps our Lady Morgan can interpret?’

The hand of Lady Morgan reached out and touched the bark of the hawthorn. She whispered and muttered nonsensically before quickly withdrawing her hand, as if burnt or cut. Sir Lawrence heard her let slip the words '*True sacrifice*' and '*blood is precious*' as she turned to the group and gave a nod to Colonel Thorpe, then pointed at Violet.

Thorpe seized Violet's wrist and wrenched her away from Nick's side, dragging her screaming to the foot of the thorn. Nick drew his sword in rage and would have swung at the Colonel had it not been for the pistol aimed squarely at Violet's chest. 'I really wouldn't, Mr Butcher – unless you want a hole a foot wide in your daughter's chest,' Stephen sneered.

'What do you want, you hag?' Nick spat as Gary and Richard struggled to restrain him. 'You've got to take the life of every innocent to prove your point? Is that it? You're a cursed soul. Hell awaits you!'

Adam had raised his glowing blue shield in anticipation of an attack, Luke with his hand hovering over his holster, Iain remaining remarkably subdued. William had not taken his gaze off Lady Morgan, but more bizarrely, Lady Morgan had reciprocated ... as if the two of them knew something the others did not. A brief switch in her focus to Colonel Thorpe with a tilt back of her head, and the Colonel fired. Drops of crimson red splashed over Mack's face, but it was William who lay motionless on the ground.

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Violet stood frozen in horror and shock as her father rushed towards her, wrapping his big arms around her, both hearts pounding. Richard and Gary jumped to William's side in aid, Richard holding his dearest friend in his arms as Gary clamped both his hands on the welling blood. Mack watched as William brought a palm up to Richard's face and strained out the words 'Sacrifice. For *Karen*.' His eyes closed peacefully.

The next moments were a blur for Adam. William's last breath and his father's cries of anguish summoned both spear and shield in his hands. Luke's pistol was raised and ready for retaliation, Gary was back on his feet, sword already in motion towards Colonel Thorpe. None of them were as quick as Mack however, whose hand had wrapped around the single fresh sapling of the thorn and wrenched it out from between the rocks. The brilliant blade of Excalibur was revealed and slit through Stephen Thorpe's throat neatly. The hulking frame of the Colonel crumpled to the ground without a sound.

All cowered, dazzled by the incandescence of Excalibur's light, reflected in the eyes of Mack as he trembled, sucking in air in short bursts. Sir Lawrence lowered both his blades at Lady Morgan's request as she moved slowly towards the Knight of Sir Bedivere.

'Splendid! Your destiny is revealed, Mr Mack Benson. You have witnessed sacrifice in its *flesh*,' she whispered eagerly as she cast a look down at William's body. 'A sorry but worthy candidate was the Knight of Sir Gawain. What else did he have to lose now the beloved Knight of Sir Kay had passed? But you, now you know the *true* meaning of sacrifice. As did your ancestors before you. Worthy of revealing the King's blade.'

She stepped closer to Mack, posed and controlled. 'Now you may release this burden, knight of Bedivere. Your work is complete. Let us end all this suffering, this madness, this death ... unite Arthur's Table once more as we should have done long ago.' Her arm reached for Excalibur's hilt. Mack twisted away. A stern look emboldened his freshly awoken face.

'You'll never wield it Lady Morgan. You...you can't,' Mack wheezed, his energy seemingly draining with every word, Excalibur growing heavier and heavier in his arms. 'It serves only ... to *end*. Not to *grow*. Not to create.'

'Oh but it can, Mack. It *can*. You know not of its place in the Trinity. The very foundations of magic. Of creation itself. We can change the very fabric of this world, of time ... imagine, being able to see your wife and daughter again,' Lady Morgan tempted with persistence. 'Give it to me. Give ... me ... the ... *sword*.'

'Don't listen to her lies, Mack,' Richard shouted as he made a lunge for the blade. His arm locked under Mack's to pull him away from Lady Morgan's charm, instantly sharing the surge of power through Mack and buckling to his knees. Adam instinctively moved to help his father, but before he could reach him a bolt of blue flame shot across the crop of his head and struck Richard in the midriff. Adam's face froze in shock. The spear was not from his hand. A shriek from Luke was heard from behind and in the corner of his eye he saw his brother being pushed off the edge of the ravine by Iain.

'Iain. What are you doing?' Adam blurted, not knowing which way to face.

'The only thing that's right, m'lad. I'm sorry,' Iain spoke without expression as the blue spear was conjured once again and directed at Adam. Through gritted teeth, Adam's shield went up and he prepared for immediate engagement. The commotion had distracted Mack, allowing Sir Lawrence time to rush to Lady Morgan's side and plunge one of his blades deep through his chest. Mack stumbled back, letting slip his grasp on Excalibur and releasing it to Lady Morgan.

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At first, Lady Morgan appeared overwhelmed by the King's blade, head bowed low, barely keeping its tip off the ground. Sir Lawrence and Geraint stood to both sides, looking perturbed as their lady let out a sinister cackle, which then became a yell. 'Now ... is ...our ... *Time*,' she laughed maniacally, prompting concerned looks from Sir Lawrence. 'This land will be united once more. The *Old Ways* have returned to us,' she continued to cry, the Necklace gleaming bright red in contrast to her ashen skin.

Richard crawled over to Mack's body, wincing in pain from Iain's wound, but shook his friend's body with some hope of revival. It was not to be. He turned to Gary, looking equally hopeless as he sat by William's blood-soaked corpse, then to his lone son Adam, circling Iain with tears in his eyes. What had become of them? He panned to Gary's left and the heavy boots of Colonel Thorpe, motionless. Flickering on the big man's belt was a small device, a simple switch mounted on top – the trigger for the rigged explosives, Richard thought. He slyly slid

his weary body over to Stephen's, reached out and unhooked the device. The Worthington's plan was a sound one -- retrieve Excalibur from its resting place, then destroy all evidence of its existence once and for all. Any future would-be descendants of the Knights of Sir Bedivere would remain as lost as Lady Morgan was without the Palladium, and as fortune would have it, many Red Dragon adversaries would be entombed in the process. Richard turned to Sir Lawrence and held the trigger high. It got Sir Lawrence's attention.

'Richard. Don't be a fool. You'll kill us *all*,' Sir Lawrence shouted. Richard bared his teeth as he staggered to his feet, the wound inflicted by Iain burning across his chest. Nick held Violet tighter than ever, transfixed on his leader, not knowing whether he was bluffing or not.

'Whatever hell awaits us, Larry ... I'd welcome it over the one you'd dare create,' Richard spat, thumb hovering over the flickering green button. Iain's focus moved from his Sacred Band opponent to Sir Lawrence, and appeared comfortable to stand by his side in defence, shield up and spear at the ready.

'Please Mr Allen ... don't do this. We can co-exist together -- our lady has a new world to offer us and ...' Geraint South stopped as Richard shot a fierce glare his direction, further signalling his intent. Lady Morgan remained composed, still showing signs of strain in her pale arms as she lowered the mighty sword. She took several deep breaths, as if the toll of simply holding Excalibur aloft was becoming too much to bear. Tip planted on the ground, she turned to Richard.

‘Sir Richard ... I would never have envisaged such gallantry from the Knights of Sir Galahad. To crush everything and everyone you love in rabid loyalty to your beliefs, and those of your beloved King Arthur. But trust me, your King was not all he seemed ... not the benevolent ruler tales would have you and the Red Dragon believe. Let me show you. Let me show you all the true meaning of the Old Ways, and then, then you will see what has truly become of this world – and why it is your duty as Knights of the Round Table to change.’ she spoke carefully and with precision. Richard appeared to almost entertain her offer of a truce for a second, the silence split by a single gunshot and a yelp of pain from Iain, clutching his calf. Luke popped his head up from the edge of the ravine, torso flopped over and fingers digging in deep, pistol still smoking – ‘got you, you arsehole!’

The return of the commotion saw Gary back away and regroup with Adam, tugging on the young man’s arm, urging him and his brother to retreat across the ladder. Luke hobbled over, hand pressed firmly against his knee. The two brothers looked over towards their father, his face said it all. No more was needed of them – they had to go.

‘Come on Adam. It’s an *order*. Let’s *go*,’ Luke struggled to believe his own words as he tugged on Adam’s sleeve. Gary beckoned Nick and Violet towards the ladder, Geraint summoning his sword in an attempt to stop the two, only to be met with a solid punch in the jaw from Nick as he passed, taking the smaller knight off his feet and landing heavily against the rocks.

‘Adam ... *now*,’ Luke screamed again, with less restraint this time. Adam continued to wrestle with his conscience, his glare

switching from his father to a crippled Iain and back again. He couldn't flee, not now. He ran to his father.

Chapter 20

Edinburgh, Scotland

24th February 2012 AD

Richard gripped his son's arm as he slid back down to a seated position. Adam inspected the cauterised wound across his chest, Iain's spear finding just the right mark as always, a little right of the centre, scorching the upper lung. His father inhaled deeply but with little effect.

'You must go now son. Nothing more need be done ... protect your brother. I've got this,' Richard wheezed desperately. Adam held back his tears while in plain view of Iain Donnelly, still down on one knee defending Sir Lawrence, completely silent apart from the occasional grunt of pain. Lady Morgan swept closer to Richard, managing Excalibur no more fluidly, but neatly stepping over the bodies of Mack and Colonel Thorpe. Adam instinctively rose to his feet and conjured the bold blue shield, shining brighter than ever as it reflected his beloved partner Iain.

'Don't take one step closer, Morgan,' Adam cursed, blue flame channelling to his spear hand.

'Please young Adam. You do not understand. Not in the same way your lover Iain has grown to. You can both still be together, as Sacred Band warriors as you always have been. Don't needlessly throw away your lives so recklessly,' Lady Morgan

tried to soothe. Adam still stood firm, still desperately trying to process all the lies and secrets his partner must have shared with the White Dragon as their spy since the day they first met.

‘Master Allen. I won’t ask you again,’ Lady Morgan grew more severe as she stepped ever closer. Adam salvoed a warning with a blue-flamed spear straight at her feet. She stopped before giving a forgiving smile, then continued to walk closer. Another spear was thrown, this time with more intent – the sorceress held up a glowing green palm deflecting it away. Still she proceeded forward, until within striking distance of Adam. He pushed his shield forward, only to have it split into blue cinders by a single bolt of Lady Morgan’s green energy. He staggered back into his father’s arms.

Lady Morgan’s face was a mixture of impatience and fatigue - holding Excalibur continued to take its enormous toll. She recomposed herself, bringing her grey eyes back to Adam. ‘So be it.’ Her slender body summoned all its strength to try and raise the blade, confronting the sorceress with a fierce resistance. Richard coiling his arm over his son’s chest, Luke’s shouts of alarm slowly dying out. Then came a piercing scream from Lady Morgan herself. She stumbled backward amidst a whirl of white and green light, Excalibur dropped by her side as she buried her face in her hands hysterically. Violet now stood between them, the Necklace of Harmonia clutched in her hand, wrenched from Lady Morgan’s neck. She had pulled free from Nick’s protection to sneak up close and leap brazenly on the witch, snatching the ruby red jewel from around her throat. Peering through the mist of light Violet caught a sudden glimpse of Lady Morgan’s face through her guarding fingers ...

more haggard, wrinkled and aged than anyone would have known. It was as if life itself had been drained from her in an instant.

Violet stood stunned, unaware that Sir Lawrence had charged to the defence of his wife, both blades in motion. Adam pulled Violet to his side and brought his shield of flame up to meet both the swords of Sir Lawrence, gritting teeth hard as he struggled to hold his ground. 'Violet ... *Go,*' he yelled. She fled back towards the ladder and Nick, knocked off her feet by a spark of blue flame hurled by Iain.

Luke acted quickly, sprinting past Nick and Gary and pulling Violet close. Another spear thrown by a frenzied Iain sailed over the pair's heads, bringing down loose rocks and debris, causing them both to stumble. Violet fell hard, the Necklace tumbling from her hands.

'Violet ... *come on,*' Nick shouted at his daughter. Luke pulled her up once more and threw her towards her father as they began to make their way across the ladder bridge, Gary secure on the other side. Luke held back, ready to charge back and support his brother and father, only to be met with a sharp bark from Richard.

'Luke ... get out of here. Help the others,' Richard pleaded before landing a strong kick to the gut of Sir Lawrence in aid of Adam. Luke bit his lip in angst, but obeyed. He scrambled across the shaky ladder safely over to Gary, Nick and Violet – then the explosion came.

The four spun round to look back across the crevasse, Adam now squaring off against Iain, Sir Lawrence's blades wielded

above a subdued Richard, and Geraint South slowly regaining consciousness and fumbling his way towards the red jewelled necklace dropped by his feet. Rocks began to rain from above, small at first then larger and more frequent. The entire cave was collapsing. 'We have to *leave*,' Gary yelled. Luke tried to aim his pistol towards any target to help spare his brother and father, but the very foundations upon which he stood were giving way. He had no choice but to retreat.

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'Dad!' cried Adam as he heard his father's scream when Sir Lawrence's blade dug into his side. He tried to break off engagement with Iain but his opponent was having none of it. Iain landed the sole of his foot on Adam's kneecap, twisting him down to near submission – only a quickly conjured shield blocked the following spear from piercing between his shoulder blades.

Still fumbling in confusion, Geraint held the Necklace of Harmonia in his hands. He shouted to Sir Lawrence of his success, raising the jewel high. Sir Lawrence bellowed orders to him to get out immediately as more of the stone ceiling came down. Like a frightened rat, South retreated across the ladder, jewel in pocket.

Lady Morgan continued to scream uncontrollably, face still covered as she rolled in convulsing green light. As keen as Sir Lawrence was to finish Richard with the death a knight deserved, he could not ignore the suffering of his spouse. He

retracted his blade from Richard's flank, blood dripping from its tip. 'You'll die soon enough, Knight of Sir Galahad,' he sneered.

Turning towards Lady Morgan, Sir Lawrence took both her arms, squinting at the radiant light emitted through her fingers. 'My love. We must leave. You must endure,' he hurried as large boulders crashed all around them.

'The sword ... the *sword!*' Lady Morgan continued to cry. Sir Lawrence frantically surveyed the floor, noting Excalibur's still glimmering white handle close to Iain's feet.

'Donnelly. Get the *blade!*' Sir Lawrence barked. Iain was still locked in combat with Adam, but blocked a well-timed punch from his opponent to score with one of his own. Adam crumpled to the floor, allowing him enough time to snatch the sword's guard, but the energy flowing through him caused him to scream in agony.

'*Useless!*' Sir Lawrence growled towards Iain, still tending to Lady Morgan.

'I'll retrieve it. *I'll retrieve it!*' Iain spat at such dismissal. 'Get the Lady out of here. *Albus Draco!*'

Sir Lawrence recoiled, gave a short nod, then turned to a barely conscious Richard. 'You see, Sir Allen ... my followers' loyalty shall endure. Let's see how yours fare.' Richard cast a look of disdain towards the son of Lancelot, but teased a smile in retort as he watched Sir Lawrence hobble his way across the ladder with Lady Morgan. 'Good luck, Larry,' he sighed his last. Sir Lawrence turned briefly back to look at his fallen foe, a swell of regret surging up from within, cut short by Lady Morgan's

squabbling. 'Lawrence. Get us out of here ... it's time to *end this,*' she cursed.

Chapter 21

Edinburgh, Scotland

24th February 2012 AD

Luke was waving frantically from the far side of the ravine, his forearm attempting to shield him from falling debris. He could see Adam over on the other side, a faint blue shimmer flickering. He was wounded, but able to stand.

‘Adam. Get over here,’ Luke bellowed, narrowly avoiding a large chunk of rock that fell, clipping the edge of the ladder and causing it to buckle midway. ‘Adam ... *quickly*. The ladder won’t hold much longer,’ he shouted again. His brother roused himself to his feet, but remained focused on Iain and his failing attempt to grasp Excalibur. The pain and effort was clear across Iain’s face, but he was managing, just. As he began to limp his way across to the ladder bridge, Adam signalled Luke to leave.

‘Go ... You guys, get out,’ Adam fired over.

‘Not without *you*,’ Luke shot back. Iain was wincing as he crouched down, preparing to cross, Excalibur in tow.

‘Protect Violet and the others, Luke. Stop Lady Morgan and Larry,’ Adam shouted again, preparing his spear. Luke knew there was no arguing with him now, and as the exit from the cave began to crumble, he turned and ushered Violet, Nick and Gary up the stony stairway, with Violet protesting.

Each step Iain took across the ladder was laboured. Blood still oozed from the bullet wound on his leg. He was determined to fulfil his commitment to the Worthingtons though, and even if it killed him, he *would* retrieve Excalibur. He could see the exit just ahead, the shine of Sir Lawrence's and Geraint's blades swiping fiercely against Nick and Gary's as they fought for first rights to the stairway – Lady Morgan swinging the conflict in their favour with a desperate gasp of her powers, blinding the two Red Dragon Knights momentarily. His allies scurried up to freedom. Then, in an instant, Adam leapt and landed only feet ahead of him on the ladder, which shook violently, causing him to lose balance.

Adam hauled himself up, face bursting with emotion at first then quietly settling. 'Why? Why, Iain?' were the only words he could muster.

Iain straightened his muscular frame, patted the dust from his ginger stubble and spat out what he could from his dry mouth. 'Why? *Why, you ask?* You think you're the noble one, lad? The one fighting for justice? The Sacred Band sworn to protect? What exactly are you protecting? Some statue? A necklace? This sword ...?' Iain blustered, barely able to wave the tip of Excalibur's handle in Adam's face despite every ounce of strength he could muster. 'What about protecting your own?'

'What do you mean?' Adam's face showed puzzlement.

'I mean your own people. The Band *itself*. Across the bloody world homosexuals are hated. *Persecuted*. Condemned to death. All in the name of *religion*. We could change all that –

we have the power to do so, yet we've stood by and done nothing. *Nothing!*' Iain's temper boiled.

The ladder was slipping. Soon the entire cave would collapse. Adam tried to stand firm but Iain's perseverance was forcing him to step back. Part of him wanted to fight, another couldn't bring himself to.

'You ... you can't blame religion for this, Iain. That's *madness*.' Adam retorted.

'Tell that to my parents. Those bastards that disowned me for who I was. Tell it to all the others that have suffered the same fate. Those who now have no one,' Iain growled, inching closer.

'You didn't have no one Iain. You had *me*,' Adam's voice quivered slightly. Iain paused.

'I did. And I could still do ... if you would just join me. Let the witch do what she has promised to do. Forge a better life for us, a better world. We could be happy,' Iain offered.

'You can't trust her, Iain. Surely you can see that? She and the White Dragon care only about themselves. Look what they've done over the centuries. *Millions dead*,' Adam pleaded as he reached the end of the ladder.

'We're born to be better lad. Better than all of them,' Iain said calmly. 'You going to stand in my way? Or be by my side?' Adam looked timid for a moment, contemplating. His eyes narrowed and his shield was summoned. Iain had his answer. 'So be it,' Donnelly twisted, attempting to use the mighty

Excalibur to slay his partner, but the sword refused like a stubborn cart horse.

A series of boulders crashed from above, smashing the ladder bridge in two. Iain jumped the last few metres and tackled Adam to the ground. His superior weight was enough to pin Adam down as he landed two firm punches to his jaw. In a daze, Adam shook the blows off and a surge of adrenaline wrenched one of his arms free from under Iain and threw a hard punch back. Iain fell to the side.

Adam skilfully rolled over and tried to lock Iain in a sleeper hold, straining to keep the squeeze as Iain coughed and struggled. Excalibur was dropped as he threw Adam over his shoulder and pounded his midriff with his elbow. A quick knee from Adam struck Iain on the forehead, knocking him flat on his back. Excalibur was lying between the two breathless opponents.

Clutching his rib cage, Adam was the first to recover. He stumbled over to the gleaming blade, stretched out an arm for the handle. Iain read the move and tried to throw himself between them, only succeeding in pushing the sword closer to the edge of the ravine. It balanced delicately, both men holding their breath as a lone rock plummeted down and tipped the blade over, falling deep below into the subterranean river. A slight splash was heard as it landed, followed by Iain's anguishing scream.

Adam held his breath for a moment, trying to take in what had happened. He was brought back to reality with a thumping fist from Iain to his right cheek, all the rage of his partner behind it.

Iain pinned Adam again, wrapped both hands around his throat, crushing his windpipe. Iain made little sound, other than a whelp of pain that appeared more emotional than physical. Adam felt his eyes closing, darkness creeping across his vision. He could just make out the bloody bullet wound on Iain's thigh and forced a hand free. He plunged his thumb as far as he could into the bullet hole. This time the noise Iain made was most definitely one of physical pain, enough to loosen his grip and leave Adam choking for breath.

The two rolled again, then again. Rocks landed either side. They had moments left. Iain made his final intent clear when the blue flame of a spear ignited and was thrust into Adam's collarbone, and he yelled in pain. 'Don't make me do this lad.' Iain sneered, with some level of guilt.

'You won't stop, will you?' Adam whimpered.

'You know I can't. You know I won't,' Iain leaned in close, almost to the point of locking lips.

'I do know,' Adam uttered softly, resigned. He head-butted Iain on the nose and slid from under him. Cursing, Iain hurled himself at Adam once again, this time finding only a blue spear of Adam's splitting through his chest. As the spear dissipated, Iain fell into Adam's arms.

'Well ... well played, lad. Well played,' Iain coughed out through the blood dribbling from his mouth. Adam couldn't respond. He had no words. He could only hold him close as he went limp in his embrace. He rocked his lifeless body gently as he sobbed.

Chapter 22

Edinburgh, Scotland

24th February 2012 AD

A milky white moon lit the night skies as Sir Lawrence, Geraint and Lady Morgan surfaced. The rumble of the collapsing cave grew louder, and patches of soil and rock from around Arthur's Seat began to give way.

'We need to get off this mound,' Geraint panicked.

'No. Not until we have Excalibur,' Sir Lawrence barked, holding Lady Morgan close. He saw Luke emerge, coughing and spluttering, Violet over his shoulder. Nick and Gary soon followed. 'Where is it? What have you done with the sword?' Sir Lawrence shouted, raising his two blades.

'We don't have it. None of us do. And it looks as though that ginger rat of yours has failed – dick!' Luke spat as the stairway was slowly swallowed by the earth. Sir Lawrence lowered his weapons, sighed heavily, then pushed away any remorse.

'Appears your beloved brother has done what his people are born to do ... die trying.' Sir Lawrence snipped. The remark was enough to send Luke into a frenzy, reaching for his pistol.

'Say that again, you *scum*. Come on. Let's see your little knives deflect a few rounds huh?' Luke pulsed in anger, barrel aimed

squarely at Sir Lawrence. Gary and Nick were still catching their breath as Violet grabbed Luke's wrist and begged him to stop.

'Please, Luke. You're not a killer. Don't do this. It's not what Adam or Richard would have wanted,' she whispered gently. Luke trembled with rage, but slowly lowered the gun.

'Wise young lady,' Lady Morgan growled, still not completely steady on her feet. 'Quite the knight I see in you my dear ... perhaps, perhaps even *more*,' she muttered curiously.

'You stay away from her,' Luke threatened. With a flip of Lady Morgan's hand, a green spark struck the pistol from Luke's grasp. He pushed Violet behind him as Nick and Gary readied their swords.

'It seems we are at quite an unusual juncture here, my fellow knights. You with no Excalibur, myself now wrestling with my own conscience. At first, the Red Dragon was a necessary adversary ... now, I fear you have served your purpose. I suppose there is no longer any point trying to convince the remaining few of you to join us? To join me in forging a new destiny together?'

The Red Dragon's silence gave Lady Morgan her answer. 'Very well. It is as I said ... time to *end this*.' With these chilling last words she reached towards the sky, green beams of light glowing from her hands, then thrust both palms downwards, emitting a line of green fire. Spiralling from it came the forms of two dragons, writhing and entwining as they soared high into the deep black night. 'I'm truly sorry, Red Dragon Knights of King Arthur ... but you left me with no choice,' she closed as Sir Lawrence and Geraint fled from behind.

‘What in the name ...?’ Gary stuttered, staring up at the conflagration. The beasts’ heads roared and snapped at one another, then focused on the quartet in front of them. One dragon lunged at Nick, a swing of his blade just enough to fend it off, but inflicting no damage.

‘What do we do?’ Violet cried as Luke continued to push his way in front of her in her defence. Gary shouted to Nick – ‘Knight-Light ... *now,*’ Nick nodded as the two thrust their swords into the ground to cast the familiar brilliant white light in an attempt to repulse the green flame. It halted the advance of the dragons, but only for a moment.

‘*Again,*’ Gary yelled. The white light shone once more, longer this time. The green flame retreated, only to advance with increased ferocity upon the fading of the swords’ brightness.

‘We can’t hold it. Not just the two of us,’ Nick panted, still swiping his sword haplessly at the licking fire. ‘*It’ll burn all of the city.*’ One of the dragon heads lunged down towards Gary, singeing his shirt and toppling him over. He rolled frantically on the grass to put out the fire. Another head swung for Nick, he caught it with his sword but the force was enough to burn his arm and toss the blade from his grip. Only Luke and Violet now remained standing, as the two dragons drew back, ready to strike together.

‘Come on then!’ Luke bellowed, arms stretched open invitingly, Violet gripping his waist. The beasts thundered down in sync, only to be rebuffed by a circle of blue flame – Adam standing defiantly with a shield raised between them and the threat.

‘Adam? You’re ... *you’re* ...’ Luke squeaked in a mixture of joy and astonishment.

‘For now yes. *Move,*’ Adam ordered as the heads snapped again, too close for comfort. ‘*Retreat* – I won’t be able to stop them again.’

‘We have to fight. This thing will destroy all of Edinburgh if we don’t.’ Luke said. ‘There’s got to be something we can do.’ The group huddled, Gary and Nick back with their swords holding firm, Adam with shield and spear ready as the two dragons lifted themselves higher once again. Roars became deafening, heat unbearable. This strike would surely be the last.

The sky blinked a different colour. What was once midnight black scarred with green became a wash of blue. Tongues of flame shot over the group’s heads, at least a dozen or so. Each one found its target on the thick burning necks of the dragons. They flopped and moaned out softer cries.

‘Get behind the line, my friends,’ Graham McCready shouted.

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Adam had never witnessed a sight quite like this before. A solid band of blue shields wielded by twenty or so Sacred Band members, standing proudly at the base of Arthur’s Seat. They joined together in harmony, like a true hoplite division from ancient Greece ... a few members chanting the immortal words of Thebes ‘We are *Lions*. We ... are ... *Lions*’.

'Move,' Graham ordered again, as the conjured beasts began to rally once more. *'Gary, Nick. Your assistance if you please.'* Gary and Nick slipped between the flanks of the Sacred Band and split to either side. Adam took his place in the centre next to two Band members, both wearing Celtic Football attire.

'Crescent formation,' Graham shouted. The blue shield line curved to form a horseshoe. *'Let's lure these bastards in.'* The dragons were obliging, eager to surge forward and try and break the wall. Burst of green flame poured from both their mouths as the Sacred Band held shields high, some men buckling at the knees under the searing heat. Once the fiery breath was spent, the Band retaliated with their spears, all in unison, thrust into the heart of the serpentine necks.

'Now,' Gary shouted to Nick as the two raised their swords again and brought forth the cleansing white light. The two gritted their teeth as they maintained the incandescence for as long as they both could bear. Snarls and snorts came from the dragons as the combination of spear and sword began to overpower them. The fires flickered, little more than embers before disappearing from sight completely. Only scorched grass remained.

Adam collapsed to his knees, aided back on his feet by Luke and Violet. Nick and Gary wrapped arms around each other in relief before shaking Graham's hand in warm gratitude. *'Didn't think you'd come, to be honest,'* Gary said.

'Well ... it's rare for Richard to be wrong. Mind you ... do you remember the Falklands...?' Graham began, only to be reminded by Nick that the comparison was now widely known.

'Where ... where is Richard?' Both Gary and Nick hung their heads, leaving Graham with his face in his hands.

'His sons? His poor sons? What will become of them?' Graham whimpered as he looked over at Adam and Luke, heads buried in each other's shoulders, Violet her usual comforting self.

'They'll work it out,' Nick said. 'They'll need to.'

Chapter 23

Edinburgh, Scotland

25th February 2012 AD

The sun rose just below the Forth Bridge, the rusty red of its steel girders blooming to life as the shadows were lifted. Luke and Adam sat quietly on the shoreline. Neither had spoken more than a few words.

‘Sorry about Iain,’ Luke boldly broke the prolonged silence. ‘Contrary to what you might have thought ... I actually thought he was a decent guy. Until ... well, you know,’ he hinted. Adam gave a weak smile.

‘Do you think Dad knew? About him? About his loyalty to the White Dragon?’ Adam asked pensively. Luke looked troubled at the thought.

‘Why do you think that?’ Luke questioned.

‘Just a thought ... from our days training in Bath. That encouragement of love and anger. When we sparred, it was almost uncontrollable. For both of us. Maybe he didn’t know the extent of Iain’s treachery, but ...’ Adam pondered.

‘But enough to bring out the best in you perhaps?’ Luke finished. Adam replied with a shrug. ‘Cruel stuff ... but that was Dad.’

'You know he cared about you too, right?' Adam noted. Luke furrowed his brow with incredulity, but conceded he always felt like no matter how dire or extreme each situation was, their father did have both his sons in his heart. What happened to Mary Cassidy was no fault of Richard's, perhaps it was their family's fate to have her come into their lives. And there was no running from fate.

'So....what do we do now?' Luke gave a stretch. 'Not sure Gary and Nick can endure much more ... Nick especially, given what's happened to poor Violet. With Dad gone too, can't say either of us are experts in Arthurian magic and legends. Oh ... and the whole reason for coming to Scotland, Excalibur, we don't have that either.' He let out a heavy sigh.

'No. But nor does Lady Morgan or the White Dragon. So whatever she had planned is no longer an option ... at least for now,' Adam stated.

'They still have the Palladium though. And that Necklace thing. Two out of three ain't bad.' Luke said. The Necklace of Harmonia had been racing through Adam's mind ever since he witnessed Lady Morgan's response to Violet's intervention. While it seemed implausible to suggest her powers were the direct result of the gift of Ares, God of War, it certainly appeared to wound her in a way few had in the past. Perhaps the sorceress did indeed have another weakness other than Excalibur.

'Guess we'll just have to figure it out. Gary will still have his sources ... and there's always you and me.' Adam forced a smile.

‘Only I’ll still need to be the one behind the wheel,’ Luke gave a laugh as he wiped a few tear streaks away from his eyes. They stood to leave, but as they turned, Luke froze, as if suddenly gripped by something.

‘You OK?’ Adam asked, hand on his shoulder. Luke turned back and looked towards the glistening River Forth. ‘What is it, Luke?’ Adam pressed. Luke moved closer, right to the edge of the riverbank, then sprang back in fright as Mary’s arm broke through the water’s surface.

‘Holy ... Minnie? Is that *you*?’ Luke stuttered in amazement.

‘Hi hun. Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,’ Mary said with an almost ethereal tone.

‘Are ... are you real?’ Luke whispered gently.

‘Sort of ... not sadly in the way that might benefit you, however,’ Mary gave a modest grin. ‘Please don’t worry yourself though, I’m quite at peace. Hi Adam – sorry to hear about your father.’

Adam stood in silence, still twisting his head around what he was seeing and hearing. ‘What ... what are you exactly?’ he enquired.

‘You remember Jane DuLac? Mack Benson spoke of her – always closest to the lines of Sir Bedivere. Otherwise known as ...’ she was cut short by Adam.

‘The Lady of the Lake. Yes, we know,’ Adam hurried.

'Well, sadly her sister Morgan slew her ... at least, she thought she did, but elemental spirits never really die, not while people continue to believe in them. To follow them, if you will. Their powers can be traced back to the dawn of time itself, not too dissimilar to the gods of Greece, Rome, Egypt. They may fade, but are never completely extinguished,' Mary explained.

'So you're not really dead? There's a chance we can save you?' Luke said with excitement.

'Doesn't work quite like that hun. Sorry. But ... my sacrifice served its purpose.' Mary replied.

'How so?'

Mary revealed from behind her back the glistening sword of Excalibur, gleaming as if newly forged. She handed it to Luke. 'True sacrifice always has its purposes, my love. You will come to know that. Take it,' she insisted.

Luke stood hesitantly, having seen the blade's overwhelming power over Lady Morgan and Iain Donnelly. What could he possibly have to offer that could make him worthy of such a formidable weapon. 'Surely Adam should ...' he uttered.

'No Luke. It is yours,' Mary pressed again, offering the handle.

Luke turned to Adam, and was met with a nod of approval. He gripped the handle gingerly and screwed his eyes shut, ready for a surge of pain like nothing he'd experienced before. But there was nothing, like holding a baseball bat back at home in Boston. Effortless.

'I don't understand. I thought only Mack could ... y'know, because of his lineage and all,' Luke quizzed, admiring the blade.

'You're your father's son, Luke ... a knight of the line of Sir Galahad. That carries its own unique strength. Wielding the King's blade requires more than just strength, however ... it requires an *understanding*. It requires...'

'*True sacrifice?*' Adam interrupted, bringing forward thoughts of both William and Mack, together with Karen's final words. Mary gave a smile, and in a blink, was gone.

'Min ... *Minnie*.' Luke cried. 'Where did she go?' he splashed in the shallows of the river. Adam pulled him back to the shore and watched Excalibur resume its form as the single Glastonbury Thorn sprig, now hardened and taut into a smaller version of the walking staffs carried by the other Arthurian knights. 'What the hell does this mean?' Luke continued to fluster.

Adam turned and looked across the river. 'It means we have a chance.'

The Sacred Band Trinity – Excalibur : END

PART.3 : GRAIL

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