

THE SACRED BAND

SEVERANCE

James MacTavish



Knights of the Round Table
Red and White Dragon united

Sir Galahad
(Luke Allen)
Sir Bors
(Violet Butcher)
Sir Gaheris
(Gary Willis)
Sir Geraint
(Geraint South)
Sir Palamedes
(Aisha Hussin)



The Sacred Band
Lions of Leuctra / Sons of Ares

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

Prologue

My name is Damasichthon. Those that have come to know me call me simply Damas. You are not likely to mind, given there are few that do. You need not concern yourselves just yet though – as you will come to.

Why? A logical question. I shall answer by stating that I will bring about change, change that I believe to be much needed. I can assure you that I am no radical, however, for I have certainly seen enough of those in my time to learn that the louder one shouts, the louder others shout back. That said, what I have come to recognise is that it is the wrong people that have come to know power in this world. The disloyal, the rapacious, the judgemental. I was raised in a time of Gods and Goddesses, when Gods and Goddesses were to be feared, not just worshipped. What you prayed they would grant you could just as easily be taken from you should you stray from the righteous path. Now, such straying incurs no wrath, only wealth it would seem. To have belief in this modern age appears little more than a whimsy, an identity no better than a brand to make others aware that you adhere to a doctrine – I know there are several now – and that doctrine is what makes you a good person. While I have certainly witnessed acts that support this notion over many, many years, it has become clear that so many are hiding behind their faiths. It is no longer the case that those that do not keep their own word, or

even practise or abide by their own doctrines, suffer the penalties. Instead, they ensure others endure such penance, and those that work this system the most effectively are those that have come to know power. To know control. They consider themselves rivals to the Gods and Goddesses now, and thus fear no consequences. Trust me though, they are not Gods or Goddesses. Let me explain.

I was born one of fourteen. I had six brothers and seven sisters. When our mother, Niobe, married our father, Amphion, we became tied to the cursed bloodline of Thebes. My siblings and I would often talk about whether Mother knew of the tale of the Theban founder Cadmus and his wife Harmonia, their fate and the fate of those that followed. Amphion was different, she used to say, and try to settle us with talk of how our father charmed her with sweet music he had learnt from Hermes. 'The Gods will always favour our house and our legacy,' she said. Once she even claimed Father was a son of Zeus himself, and as such those upon Mount Olympus would do us no harm. She was always so confident. Still, to rear all fourteen children required a strident touch, and one could forgive her for being boastful of her maternal achievements.

Then came the festival of Leto. Shall not be forgetting this one in a hurry. It was a spring morning, cooler and crisper than usual for the time of year, the sun at its highest, uninterrupted by clouds. The people of Thebes had gathered as they had always done each year to pay homage to Leto's two divine children – son Apollo and daughter Artemis. One

providing us with the radiance of the sun itself, vital to the yield of a strong harvest, the other, first lady of the hunt and honoured by those Thebans charged with bringing blood-rich meat through our walls, lighting their path with the glistening of the moon.

My siblings and I stood at the foot of the Citadel of Cadmea next to our father, my brothers dressed modestly in red silk, my sisters in blue. I remember looking across to the Temple of Eros, its final stone only just laid in tribute to the brother of our founder's queen Harmonia, not two months prior, its first occupants being Thebes' frontline soldiers and strongest warriors. They stood in pairs, hand in hand and fully armoured save their traditional shields and spears. Some were bruised and scarred, either from battle or perhaps just training – my father forever reminding my brothers and me that qualification would require the highest of recognition both physically and academically, worthy of the legendary Hercules and his local-born lover Iolaus themselves. We would all have to learn to take a heavy punch during wrestling lessons, then be prepared to throw a heavier one back, if we were still able to stand. The life of a Sacred Band elite was not for the weak-hearted.

I remember piecing together the significance of Eros and his mischievous arrows of passion and love when Mother swept past me like a wave of gold. Jewels, bracelets and rings of every colour sparkled in the light of Apollo's gift, her dress loosely fitting over the shoulders before cascading down her back like a river of freshly minted coin pooling at the

heels. Her arrival incited some cheers from the crowd, each one widening my mother's smile. Some, however, muttered their disapproval at such a lavish and extravagant display on such an occasion where humility was the tradition. My father caught her arm.

'Niobe. What is the meaning of this?' I heard him curse. 'Today is a day to be equals. All of us to kneel at the feet of Leto's children, and pray for their blessing to our lands.'

'Which is exactly what I intend to do, my love,' Mother replied, a casual wave to her audience in gleeful recognition of their adulation. 'Surely the Titan Leto would welcome the efforts I have made as your queen in celebration of her children's gifts to us?'

'This is not wise, and you know it, Niobe.' Father tightened his grip. 'I doubt very much this has anything to do with honouring Leto's children. Need I remind you that our favour with the Gods is hanging by a thread after your own father's actions. We should always...' Mother wrenched her arm away with force.

'We should always *what*, Amphion? Live in fear? Fear of deities that have long since left this world, and you know it,' Mother bristled. 'Time for the Greek people to see that their own creations can take care of themselves and care not for suppositions.' She took care when taking the first few steps of the Citadel's entrance towards the temporary stage so as not to ruin her dress. 'And don't you ever mention my father again,

Amphion, you hear me? Whatever mistakes he made, he's paid for them countless times over.' She turned away.

'Indeed. I hope you too can learn to tread water as quickly, my dear,' Father uttered beneath his breath, deliberately keeping a step behind her and casting weary eyes towards the heavens. We should all have heeded the warning of my grandfather, Tantalus, and his evil deeds that incurred Zeus' wrath. Landed himself in deep water – literally – for an eternity, tormented by perpetual thirst and hunger. So my father told me at least. Mother always denied it, despite what Grandfather allegedly did to her brother Pelops, but denied with such a fervent rebuke that it led me to believe she was hiding a concealed truth, a pain, and a hankering for revenge. Another story for another time.

The crowds quietened when Father took centre stage. He gave the customary blessing to Apollo and Artemis, thanked their mother Leto for granting Thebes the gifts of her two children – cue eye roll from Mother – and signalled the sacrifice of the two goats in their honour. All appeared well for another year. That was, until Mother took to the stage for her own blessing, as every Queen of Thebes was expected to do. Whether it was the earlier altercation with Father or some deep-rooted aggression that was akin to a caged lion that had suddenly realised the bolt of the gate had been left open, I'll never know what possessed her that day. I recall it went something like this:

‘What folly is this? To prefer beings whom you never saw to those who stand before your eyes! Why should Leto and her children be honoured with worship rather than me? My own father was received as a guest at the table of the Gods; my mother was a Goddess. My husband fortified and now rules this city, Thebes, the greatest of all Greek cities that has ever been and will be. To all this let me add, I have seven sons and seven daughters, yes, *seven* apiece!’ She gestured to us all, my brothers and sisters crestfallen with embarrassment. Yet she continued. ‘Have I not cause for pride? Will you prefer to me Leto, the Titan's daughter? With her *two* children? I have *seven* times as many. Fortunate indeed am I, and fortunate I shall remain! Will anyone dare deny this?’

Her outburst was met with stony silence from the crowd, and the ashen face of my father. What was once a brilliant spring day turned to chill and shadow, the warmth of the sun dimmed before our very eyes. Then the arrows came, and they certainly were not born of Eros. I looked over my shoulder towards my brother on my left, Ismenus, the splint of an arrow protruding out of his gut. He foamed at the mouth, eyes weeping blood, an instant sickness. Before I could act he had fallen to his knees, then finally to his chest. My youngest sister, Cleodoxa, was standing the farthest from me, and now the only one of the Niobids I could see still on their feet. Her look of horror met mine across the neat line of our fallen siblings.

Mother screamed. Father ordered the Sacred Band into action... the only ones that came to my sister's aid and my while the crowds fled in panic. Nothing, however, could be done – Leto had spoken, her children Apollo and Artemis answered, extinguishing my mother's defiance.

I stood at the foot of Mount Sipylus for many days – there are in fact times when I still find myself there, clutching my sister's hand. The Weeping Rock as it has become known now, the mercy my sister and I begged for to ease the suffering of our mother in her grief, to have her transformed into stone and no longer feel pain in every breath. In return, we as her last surviving children agreed to bear her sadness for the remainder of our lives... and long lives they have proven to be.

Consider it our final curse – immortality. We watched our father take his own life, our beloved city of Thebes fall to King Philip II of Macedon, the Sacred Band exterminated by his son Alexander the Great. We witnessed his empire spread across the continents like an unstoppable plague, charged by powers long held within the walls of the Citadel of Cadmea and bestowed upon our former rulers by Athena, only to fall due to the lust and greed that consumed so many great men. How I longed for the return of purity, of devotion and selflessness within

mankind – as of the day the arrows of Apollo and Artemis rained from above and the finest warriors of Thebes stepped forward to protect the king’s children. They died to the last man on the fields of Chaeronea, each lover prepared to die for the other in duty. Such stands of bravery are rare today, and the practices of those men reviled by the majority as new Gods took the spotlight.

Oh, how I’ve yearned to intervene over these centuries. To put a stop to the persecution of those that have proven themselves the more valiant and courageous in my time, to cut out the rot of scapegoating by those weaker and lacking in moral fibre. Alas, such is the curse upon me and my sister I dare not incur further punishment from any God, new or old. So we waited, we observed, we listened. We heard of tales from the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus upon his last days in Eboracum, England meeting spirits of water and stone native to those lands... sharing stories of powerful statues that create empires and necklaces that maintain life so often at great cost. The era of knights came not long afterwards, a time of long-dormant magic reborn at the hands of the King of Britons and his loyal subjects. I hoped this was the time of change... but no, they too ended up fighting each other over opposing views of the world. I will confess to having sided somewhat with the White, not the Red, despite a loyalty of a new Sacred Band’s fealty to the latter. A chance to remould society and let the *worthy* take command. I held back in hope, as did my sister, only to watch it fail.

So, I find myself at the foot of the mountain once again, my sister Cleo – wanting an abridged name of her own these days – stood by my side with the one remaining relic we have of our sorry origins. A single arrow, fired by Apollo himself into one of my sisters, taken by Cleo that day of the murder. Cleo clings to it even now, unwilling to let me even touch it. We have both come to know its power, however, and what it could unleash on humanity. I've watched feeble men attempt such tricks before over the years, and confess to being impressed by their results. For ultimate power does not require sacred statues, cursed necklaces or even magical swords. Only *fear*.

Chapter 1

Liverpool, England

27th February 1999 AD

It had been standing room only since the train departed from London's Victoria Station, a few alighting at Birmingham only to be replaced by twice as many making their way back north. If it weren't for the smell of lager and sweat that filled the carriage, Damas would have said he was comfortable, having found one of the few remaining seats. He squeezed his elbows in as tightly as he could so as not to disturb the older lady sitting next to him busying herself with *The Times* crossword, her wrinkled face creasing more and more with each question she tackled. A sigh of relief and satisfaction came upon finding the correct answer and filling in the letters with a chewed biro. Damas smiled to himself when he quietly noticed that four down was incorrect.

Truth was, he wasn't paying much attention to anyone else aboard the train, apart from one particular gentleman. A rough-looking fellow, no more than in his mid-twenties, Damas would have guessed, pot-bellied and unshaven, crew-cut hair and crooked teeth. He had stood for the whole journey with three other friends, seemingly unable to string a sentence together without profanity or a high decibel level. With each

gulp of lager their tone became more aggressive, and those around them cowered, unwilling to protest at their behaviour. A lone mother was forced to twist her shoulders around her infant son as one of the men spilt his drink across the table while trying to enact a memorable scene from the football match that saw their side lose two-one. The jeers from the group, focused on unnecessary yellow cards and biased refereeing, as was typical from spurned fans, together with accusations of buggery among Chelsea players and linesmen secretly wearing women's clothing over the weekend.

The train slowed upon its approach to Liverpool Central, and the slurred, off-key chants of 'You'll Never Walk Alone' began. The men were the first to disembark, shoving their way through the carriage, letting out the occasional belch. Damas stood and placed his hands in his denim pockets. As he did so, the elderly lady next to him asked whether this was the last stop, before commenting on Damas' considerable height and build. 'Could a big lad like you please be so kind as to bring my luggage down from the overhead storage? It's the plastic one with wheels on, and sunflowers,' she said with a soft smile. Damas slow-blinked with his deep brown eyes and gave a warm smile in return as he hoisted the trolley down from above with ease. 'Oh, thank you very much, young man. Not as strong as I used to be, I'm afraid,' the old lady shook her head while patting Damas on the arm.

‘Me neither, madam,’ Damas replied in jest. He was quickly distracted as he scanned for the group of men through the window, spotting the turned-up collar of one gentleman in particular and the large number nine on the back of the shirt. ‘Do excuse me, madam, must make my connecting train to Edinburgh, it leaves in half an hour and we’re already a little behind,’ Damas said calmly.

‘Oh, Edinburgh is a lovely city. My sister lived there for years,’ the old lady continued.

‘As does mine,’ Damas began to rush. ‘I must be going now, madam. By the way, your crossword, you might want to check four down. I think you’ll find the answer is *Acropolis*.’ The old lady gave a puzzled look at her paper and tapped the individual squares. It did fit. When she looked up, Damas was gone.

There was no connecting train of course. Damas was on his way to Edinburgh to see his sister though. She’d been working for several years now at the Edinburgh Medical School based out of the university there, and he liked to see her every chance he could. His small antiques shop on Portobello Road in London had certainly kept him busy over these past few months with all sorts of peculiar items turning up for valuation.

It always gave Damas such pride when he could enlighten an owner with the provenance and antiquity of an heirloom, sometimes going back many hundreds of years. Equally though, a quiet moment of humour when some useless bric-a-brac was presented as either a Ming Dynasty vase or an original Picasso. Forgeries had become a speciality for him, as had his less-than-subtle method of delivering such deflating news to their owners.

The lout and his group had managed to stumble their way down an alleyway and into a queue for a nightclub. The four jostled for position, one throwing up against the wall then quickly wiping the evidence away with the back of his hand. Damas watched from the main street as each man was patted down by the doorman – a few homophobic comments made as the doorman’s hands moved lower – then each was let in. Damas felt the pocket on the inside of his jacket. He paused in composure for a second, hand still fixed inside. It was risky. He knew it was. On this occasion, he did not care. He took his place at the back of the queue.

The doorman folded his thick arms when faced with Damas. ‘You alone?’ he gruffed. Damas picked up an accent.

‘Are you Armenian?’ Damas enquired. The doorman’s black eyebrows instantly rose.

‘From Yerevan, yes. How did you know?’ the doorman replied.

‘Spent some time there,’ Damas stated, lifting his arms obligingly ready to be searched. ‘My family came from Turkey.’ The doorman interrupted his search of Damas before he got to his chest. A frown spread across his face. ‘Yes sir, I know... 1915 genocide and all that. Still, we can look each other in the eye and recognise that when it comes to conflict, both our people have had to bow and scrape to these arses here in England over the years, right?’ Damas gave a cheeky grin while nodding in the direction of the four men just admitted, now crudely trying to chat up and grope the young blonde collecting coats. ‘What do you say, sir? I promise that should there be any trouble from me, I’ll make sure it’s those pricks you just let in that are on the receiving end.’ The doorman took a step back and looked Damas’ considerable frame up and down – his honey skin and tight black hair not too dissimilar to his own. ‘Like looking in a mirror, right?’ Damas pushed playfully. The doorman sighed and ushered him through.

Fluorescent neon glow sticks and the pounding sound of trance music greeted Damas. He coughed briefly in the stale air, picking up the sweet aroma of marijuana and nicotine through the dry ice smoke. Bodies bumped into him clumsily as he tried to make his way to the bar, where he could just hear the gentleman from the train in the midst of conversation with the other three. Obscenities still flying, alcohol splashing, cigarette ash flicked in any direction he pleased. ‘Bloody Chelsea defenders are all poofers! Everyone knows that,’ the gentleman sparked. ‘All of ‘em, back there in the changing rooms ‘aving

a go at one another. Never mind a yellow card for a foul, what about a red card for the lot of 'em? Queers.' Damas slid over towards the men just as one left the group to take a piss.

'Don't get fingered in there mate by some Chelsea scum. Watch your back,' the same lout cackled. 'Hey, Gavin. How'd that chant go again? The one you sang during the match?' he shook his cigarette at one of his friends.

'Which one?' his friend replied.

'Y'know. "Best sit down, while Chelsea's around, or you'll get a dick right up your arse!"' he laughed. His friend made little corrections to his rendition as the other spat his beer out trying to contain his amusement. Damas signalled to the barmaid for a bottle of Becks, shutting out the 'Oi, Oi's' from the men as the brunette stooped over to open the fridge and left little to the imagination beneath her cropped skirt. 'Hey darlin'... wanna get me a bottle or two while you're down there? Maybe something more?' the gentleman cooed. The barmaid responded with a firm middle finger. 'Aww... piss off bitch!' was shouted across the bar, followed by the butt of a half-burnt cigarette.

'You might want to rethink your technique, sir. If indeed your plan is to attract the young lady,' Damas spoke directly to the lout. The man glared, mouth partially open, placing his beer down.

'Who the hell asked you?' he sneered. 'What are you anyway? Look like a Paki or something?'

'Greek,' Damas replied, sipping at his bottle.

'Oh yeah? Well go back to your doner kebab shop and we'll be out in a minute, mate. I'm starving,' the man chuckled.

'Doner kebab is Turkish. But close,' Damas teased.

'Whatever.'

'Besides. By the looks of it you could do with a new Liverpool strip, and the larger ones are usually more expensive, I hear,' came Damas' biting remark.

'You what, mate?' the man switched demeanour despite a giggle from his two friends. He pushed one to the side to get in close to Damas. 'Say that again... you Greek cunt.' His hands gripped the collar of Damas' denim jacket. Damas gave a soft smile, then immediately took advantage of the man's proximity, kissing him briefly on the cheek. He was shunted back aggressively as the lout wiped his face. 'Bloody queer!' he spat. He bunched his fingers into a fist and threw his weight behind a punch aimed squarely at Damas' jaw, but it never reached its target. Damas caught it in the palm of his hand, effortlessly absorbing all its anger and force.

'Not a problem, sir, I can't say you're my type either.' Damas pursed his lips, the lout looked stunned. A sharp pain struck the side of the man's ribs, he choked for a moment, then cast his eyes down to Damas' other hand. Fresh red blood oozed over his exposed belly and dripped to the floor. Before he could react, he felt every muscle in his body spasm and jolt, bile flooded his mouth, followed by acrid foam. He collapsed to his knees, clutching his swelling throat. It caught the attention of his friends as they fussed around him, then more people came to his aid as he jerked violently on the floor. One tried to pin him down, only to be showered in a coughed-up spray of blood, the scene enough to trigger screams of panic from onlookers.

The doorman burst in and ran to the flailing man, ordering his friends and others to make space. He clipped Damas' shoulder en route and was stopped by him with surprising strength. 'I really wouldn't waste your time, Armenian. Save it. You'll never know how much of it you'll have left,' Damas whispered. The doorman gave a quizzical look as he felt the grip on his arm ease, noting a small stain of blood welling through the chest pocket of Damas' jacket. He watched his well-built frame casually head out into the rainy street and disappear from sight. When he looked back to the floor, the gentleman was motionless, eyes glazed and lifeless.

Chapter 2

Bath, England

29th February 2020 AD

There was the post box on the left. Just on the corner before Sion Hill. It was always a welcome sight for Adam Allen, as he knew he had only one kilometre to go. Problem was, it was all uphill, and a seasonally bitter-cold morning. He'd already tripped over two kerbs and managed to slide across the slippery paving stones just outside Bath Abbey – even got caught up in a dog lead for a few minutes. Was not expecting his best time today.

He despised jogging – considered it akin to walking but not taking the time to admire the view. Everything ached, trying to move a heavy, muscular frame like his. The first few attempts to scale the hills around Bath had Alex follow him in a car in case he collapsed. It happened once, after a severe bout of cramp in both quads. His uncle drove him back to Prior Park, then later that afternoon made him repeat it with a ten-kilogram backpack on. Adam of course protested, so his uncle went with him. That was a mistake.

‘How can a man in his mid-fifties be out-performing a guy in his early thirties?’ Alex mocked, stretching ahead. Adam was already red-cheeked and puffing hard. ‘You want to stop? Leader of the Sacred Band!’ Humiliated, Adam continued through the pain. If his late father Richard was a hard taskmaster, his uncle appeared determined to continue his brother’s legacy and then some.

The past eight years had offered Adam chances to understand his father and wider family in ways he’d never thought were possible. He considered himself thankful for that. His uncle and he would talk late into the evening and often into the early hours of the morning discussing Adam’s father, his upbringing, how he met his mother Elaine through a shared love of both learning and teaching. The close ties between the Allen and Wood families over the many years, and of course the Butchers. Adam did at least feel a sense of peace knowing that his parents took pleasure in what most would consider normal ways of life – dates, parties, get-togethers and the like – not just crusades for swords and statues that had plagued much of their children’s lives, especially of late.

Not to say these subjects didn’t crop up, and more than just from time to time. Adam found it impossible not to ask his uncle about his experiences of becoming a Sacred Band member when he first realised Richard’s support or apparent lack thereof. Alex skirted around these details for many months at first, but slowly warmed to his nephew,

offering up pieces of deeper personal reflection one at a time, then allowing Adam to draw his own conclusions. Powers unique to the Sacred Band manifested when Alex was sixteen, typical many say, with his brother Richard actively encouraging engagement with others sharing similar experiences – all with the purpose of repelling any malicious motives of the White Dragon knights and their leader Lady Morgan, *the Morgan le Fay*.

‘I remember the incident in Birmingham. The young girl that drowned in the canal up there, something to do with an arranged marriage that went terribly wrong,’ Alex said one evening. ‘Your father was obsessed by it, having learnt from our grandmother, your great grandmother, about the reincarnation of Pallas Athena through humans even to this day. A tale told to both of us dating back to King Arthur himself and his wife Lady Guinevere – she too seemingly carrying a similar reincarnated curse following the passing of her sister at the hands of Sir Lancelot. Or something like that...’ he would scoff.

‘My great grandmother would tell you this story?’ Adam asked, confessing to knowing little about her or her understanding of the Arthurian connections within their family.

‘Oh yes. It was she that pushed our father, Todd, to bestow the gift of the wooden staff to Richard - the Sword of Sir Galahad,’ Alex replied.

‘So my great grandmother carried the Sir Galahad bloodline?’

‘Indeed – wasn’t open to Todd about it until later in his life, was always the young *men* that went to war, that did battle, different era. It was though around this time and during Richard’s trips to Birmingham that our mother became ill. I recall the strain Richard placed upon your own mother, Elaine, and the whole family for that matter. I was having to support both her and your grandmother and grandfather at that point – trips to hospitals for emergency lung scans and blood work...then baby scans for Elaine.’ Alex shook his head in recollection.

‘Baby scans? With Luke?’ Adam figured. His uncle nodded.

‘That’s what really drove Richard and Elaine apart, not just the passing of your grandfather. Richard never appeared that interested in raising your brother, more concerned about his duty as leader of the Red Dragon. By the time you came along a few years later, Elaine was terrified the same fate that led both her and Luke to feel abandoned would repeat itself for you,’ Alex continued, opening up another bottle of beer. ‘Your father knew that the bloodlines of Sir Galahad and his friend Sir Gawain – the Wood family – would likely carry a Sacred Band son, so he and Elaine managed as best they could to keep you and Luke together... maybe to correct the wrongs Richard and I made growing up. Who knows?’

Sadly their efforts didn’t work, Adam pondered. Separated from his brother Luke as he travelled to Boston with his mother – Elaine clearly not able to cope with their father’s stoic conformity to family duty. ‘Elaine only wanted what was best for you boys,’ Alex reassured with a

hand to Adam's shoulder. 'She thought at least one of you could live a more regular life in America.'

'Uh-huh. Didn't exactly work, did it?' Adam quipped.

'No. But at least your mother was prepared. Who would have thought the legacy of Pallas Athena would have found its way to your brother's girlfriend? What was her name?' Alex began to lighten the mood as best as he could.

'Mary. Mary Cassidy. Luke used to call her Minnie,' Adam joked, taking a sip of beer, not knowing whether to refer to Mary in the past tense or not, given recent experiences. Best leave that for another evening, he thought. He readjusted his position on the leather armchair, a favourite spot of his dad's, just in front of the log fire at the family home. 'So... what about you, Uncle?' he asked bluntly.

'What about me?'

'I mean, you. Your story. You know quite a bit about the rest of our family, more than I would have expected. Why didn't you come forward earlier? Dad must have asked?' Adam queried.

'Not once. I think he knew I wanted nothing more to do with it all. Not after your grandmother died. Sure, I knew of the Sacred Band and our place in the legends – defenders of the Palladium, three hundred of the bravest warriors the world's ever known, alive and well to this day thanks to the Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain bloodlines. But no one, not one

person, not even my own brother, ever asked me what I wanted. Where I felt I belonged. What if I didn't want a partner for life? To fight what I saw as an invisible enemy in the White Dragon for mythical relics that over the centuries had become more meaningless to me despite both mother's and my brother's warnings,' Alex sighed. 'Throughout most of our lives, nothing substantial had really changed, the world appeared relatively peaceful – certainly no sightings of monsters or magic – only regular mankind at each other's throats. So, I thought I might as well fight real enemies to freedom and democracy, and so on and so on, rather than live in a fairy tale.'

Adam sat back in his chair, letting the squeak of the leather settle. 'You didn't believe in the Palladium? Or the Necklace of Harmonia? Their influence over global affairs by the White Dragon for so many centuries?' he asked.

'Well, I did once. And even Excalibur at the hands of the Benson family. Lovely folk – great cooks too. Jerk chicken became a favourite of mine and your father's,' Alex joked.

'You met Mack Benson's family?'

'Only a few times. Had a lot of issues, not just finding legendary swords but settling into British society in general. Windrush, weren't they? The Allen and Wood families did their best to make them feel welcome... for obvious reasons.' Alex put his feet up on the sofa.

'So, when you joined the army...' Adam continued.

'The marines.'

'Marines – my mistake. Did you feel you had more purpose?'

'You're beginning to sound like your father now. If not that, my PTSD counsellor,' Alex snipped playfully. Adam put his hands up in apology. 'It's fine, boy. Yes, for a short time I did. Until you realise that even without interference from the likes of Arthurian sorceresses and knights of the Round Table, humanity can still bugger things up! The Gulf War was a shit-show... for six long months, we scrambled around the desert in defence of oil, uranium and God-knows-what. Morale was ebbing away with each passing week as rumours came about weapons and arms trading between both sides effectively prolonging the conflict... profiteering politically and economically. Same myopic agenda of 'them versus us' that stokes national pride. It wore many a soldier down.' He began to rub his tired eyes. 'Then came the civilian casualties.'

Adam leaned in closer. 'You don't have to talk if you don't....'

'No, it's fine. No different to usual shrink sessions. Just saw a lot of it towards the end in 1991, both sides to blame of course. No one spared. I had a close teammate, a commando name Alistair, used to perform patrols together late at night. When we returned we tried to stay in touch, especially given we both appeared to be struggling with the same issues upon release. Night-terrors, sweats, anxiety in public spaces, that

sort of thing,’ Alex said with a casual shrug. ‘I later found out for Alistair, it was more severe – the Americans even gave it a name... ‘Gulf War Syndrome’... something to do with the pills given to soldiers to help protect them from a potential use of nerve agents, so I was told.’

From having spent many a night now under the same roof as his uncle, Adam related to the restless nights of which Alex spoke. Before the sun broke, he would press his ear against the bedroom door and occasionally hear muffled whimpers uttered in a dream by Alex – cries for help. He never opened the door. He never asked, nor did he have to. The only time he felt afraid for his uncle’s health was an incident shortly after they reunited. Alex lay napping in a similar position to where he lay now on the sofa, only to begin to mumble in his sleep before jolting upright and hurling a blue-flamed spear in sudden fury, accompanied by screaming, then soft weeping. Half of one of his father’s bookcases was incinerated, promptly put out by Adam with the bucket of water by the fireplace. He tried to console his uncle and lower his blue shield, but his words never penetrated. As quickly as the incident began, it was over.

‘Where is Alistair now? Are you still in touch?’ Adam said.

‘No. He died a few years back. Self-inflicted, I heard. Not surprised.’ Alex stared up at the ceiling. Adam fell silent. ‘Cheerful stuff for an evening in, huh, boy?’ his uncle broke a smile through his coarse brown beard. ‘Let’s go down to The Bear. Pleasant enough evening, and could do with one of those toasted sarnies Violet makes.’ He lightened, reaching for

his black bomber jacket, his heavysset chest and arms filling it out like a second skin as the zip went up. 'Can train later tomorrow, just in case I have one too many,' he said, smiling.

'You always say that. Never happens,' Adam grinned.

The first thing Adam always noticed upon entering The Bear Pub was the picture of Nick Butcher and his late wife just behind the bar – he guessed taken shortly after the two were married, judging by the big man's more modest waistline. Violet Butcher had since made the entire establishment her own, while mindful to keep many of the features so close to their parents, such as still no round tables.

Beth continued to assist from Cardiff, The Blue Hare pub going strong and twinning with The Bear when it came to reviews, menus and special offers. Violet had the trump card of dragging down the old karaoke machine from what was once Adam's old sleepover room, her father having refused it so many times in the past, given his ardent dislike of singing outside of a rugby match. It proved a hit with university students on Tuesdays.

‘Little early for you gents, isn’t it?’ Violet beamed, trying to balance a tray full of empty glasses. ‘Decided to give Adam a reprieve from training tonight, Alex?’

‘I’ll have him up early tomorrow morning, mark my words.’ Alex winked back.

‘Consider them marked. Quiet in here tonight, so sit anywhere.’

Alex positioned himself as close to the television perched high in the corner as he possibly could. His head shook despondently at the sight of some watershed reality TV show. ‘Mind if we change the channel, Miss Butcher? Match of the Day is on the other channel,’ he shouted.

‘You’re in Bath, Alex. We don’t do football and you know it,’ came the critical tone of Violet echoing from the basement. Alex gestured to Adam to toss him the remote, Adam obliging, considering the programme choice the lesser of two evils.

‘Did you know two of the strikers from Celtic FC are Sacred Band?’ Adam feigned interest, siding more with Violet on his view of the sport.

‘Uh-huh,’ Alex replied, barely registering the comment as some early scores flickered along the bottom of the screen. ‘Mind shouting me a pint?’ he passed a few coins in Adam’s direction, barely enough for a soft drink. Adam rolled his eyes.

‘Your uncle leave his wallet behind again?’ Violet asked incredulously.

‘He did. And there was nothing in it anyway so why bring it?’ Adam smiled.

‘Fair point. He’s keeping you company at your dad’s old place at least. I popped by the Roman Baths yesterday, paid my respects and all for Richard. Would have been sixty-one, right?’ Violet wiped two glasses clean. Adam nodded. ‘Can never remember how old William Wood was, want to say about the same age. Karen Milligan I know was younger... Mack Benson, heaven only knows.’

‘A little younger than Dad from what I can gather from Uncle Alex.’ Adam counted the coins in his hands. ‘He’s been telling me quite a bit over these past few months.’

‘Finally opening up? That’s good to hear,’ Violet said.

‘Sort of. A little restrained on details concerning his personal life but that’s to be expected.’

Violet raised an eyebrow. ‘Still experiencing the bad dreams?’ Adam looked to the floor. ‘Not burnt down any more of Richard’s books I hope. Never know when we might need them again,’ she chuckled, picking up her wooden staff.

‘You practised much recently with that?’ Adam inquired.

‘A little. Getting used to the transformation from wood to blade... really have to concentrate though. Not sure how Dad and the others managed

it so effortlessly,' Violet confessed, giving the staff a little swing. 'Is it the same with you and the blue fire?'

'In a way. Always seen it as a power that comes forth exactly when you need it most. You do need to visualise it though, almost palpably in your mind. The stronger the feeling and emotion, the more intense the result.' Adam inspected his left forearm, deep in thought.

Violet placed both hands on the bar, taking time to catch Adam's eyes. 'Feeling and emotion, like the partnership your dad spoke of. Any developments there?'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't turn to stone with me, Adam Allen. You know what I mean,' Violet toyed. Adam cracked a smile, then shook his head. Her eyes saddened. 'Tragically, I've known you long enough to tell you're telling the truth,' she confessed. 'Have you even tried?'

'Not really.' Adam now deliberately turning away.

'Still sore? From, well, you know.' Violet had learnt to avoid mentioning Iain Donnelly by name.

'No.'

'Now I know you're lying,' Violet blurted before offering an apologetic pat on the shoulder. 'Don't you think it's looking a little odd that you're

technically in command of the Sacred Band and you yourself are without a lover?’ she pushed.

Adam seized the two freshly pulled pints. ‘Uncle Alex doesn’t have one. Besides, there are only ever three hundred Sacred Band members alive at any one time, if legend is to be believed, and all those up in Edinburgh are taken. Leaves both of us at a bit of a loose end, doesn’t it.’

‘There’s Chris isn’t there? He’s still single?’ Violet shrugged.

‘I’m not dating my father’s best friend’s brother, Violet. Not just for the sake of a partnership. Besides, it doesn’t work like that,’ Adam fired back. ‘And before you ask, no, not Fernando either... he’s not Sacred Band anyway.’

Violet put her hands up in capitulation. ‘All right, only trying to help. Speaking of the Sacred Band’s secretary, have you been in touch with him recently?’

‘Fernando? Alex and I spoke with him just last week... all appears well. A few issues in Commonwealth countries that still live in the dark ages over homosexuality and scouting for any would-be recruits that might have been brought up there in suppression, but other than that, fine. He’s doing a good job.’ Adam slurped the foam off his pint. ‘Anyway, on to your love life now. The scene here in Bath doing much for you and the ladies?’

'Ha. There is no scene here in Bath, you know that. Besides, far too busy running this place,' Violet deflected. The phone rang from the back room, prompting her to tuck the grubby dishcloth into her pocket in a hurry.

'If that's Fernando, please don't call him the Sacred Band secretary. He hates that,' Adam yelled down the corridor as she left. Violet playfully acknowledged. The pints were placed down in front of Alex, who already had his face in his hands looking at the score between his beloved Liverpool and Watford. Probably still better than reality TV on the other side, Adam thought.

Violet could be heard laughing from out the back. Only one person Adam knew that could bring out the giddy schoolgirl in her. She soon squealed with excitement, then hung up. Bounding back up to the bar she called over to Adam. 'That was Aisha. She and Luke have some great news. Call your brother now.'

Chapter 3

Edinburgh, Scotland

1st March 2020 AD

'Nemo me impune lacessit' Damas inspected the inscription above his head as he exited the castle. The Latin phrase always stuck with him after every visit to the Scottish capital, the notion of retribution in the face of persecution. No one provokes me with impunity. In the common tongue – push me, and be prepared to be pushed back, harder.

He glanced at his watch, it read 4.35 pm. He said he'd be meeting his sister at 5.00 pm sharp in George Square Gardens – a brisk walk down the Royal Mile would be needed to make it on time. Cleo held little patience for tardiness and Damas could do without a lecture today – and a lecture would be exactly what he would receive in punishment. His little sister had made Edinburgh her home for many years now, settling neatly into the world of academia at the university in the early 1990s as a student of biology, then moving to post-graduate status within the renowned School of Medicine, where she remained to this day as an associate professor. Whereas Damas remained fixated on the past and both their histories through the collection and study of antiquities, his sister proved more progressive, a trait Damas admired. He discussed

with her once long ago why she had developed an interest in the medical sciences, fully anticipating a connection to the death of their siblings at the hands of poison-tipped arrows from the Gods of their time. Her response, citing the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his famous literary detective as fictional alumni, caught him somewhat by surprise. Still, she had always been more welcoming of modern tales than he.

‘You’re late,’ Cleo snapped, sitting cross-legged on a park bench, tapping her watch, coffee-coloured eyes judging.

‘By five minutes,’ Damas replied, taking a seat next to her. ‘You know I always like to see the castle when I’m visiting.’

‘I do. And I am forever reminding you that like all historical sites, they rarely change over time,’ his sister quipped, offering him a Polo mint.

‘Unlike science. Go on, say it. Get it out of your system,’ Damas prompted. Cleo raised a shoulder in acknowledgement. ‘How goes the research?’

‘Same as always. Latest medical breakthroughs failing to keep pace with Mother Nature. Sooner or later these mortals will realise that nothing is eternal. Still, I admire their grace in their failings,’ she replied with a sigh.

Damas shifted closer. ‘Has anyone ever asked you? Quite how you... you know.’

Cleo's brow creased. 'How I what? Look the way I do after so many years? Can't say anyone has, no... and even if they did, the answer would be "good moisturiser" probably,' she laughed. 'Why? Have others begun to suspect you, Brother?'

'I don't believe so. One of the benefits of being surrounded by antiques is that people are more interested in the age of the thing being sold, not the seller,' Damas confidently replied. 'That being said...' he pulled out from his inner coat pocket a small newspaper clipping from *The Liverpool Echo*. 'Take a look at this.'

Cleo studied the article – *Family search for son's alleged murderer ends* – a few paragraphs long, complete with a picture of a rough-looking youth in a football shirt. The detail noted the twenty-seven-year-old's death in a nightclub back in February 1999, an autopsy suggesting sudden cardiac arrest, but witnesses described an altercation with a Mediterranean gentleman moments before. She remained silent as she folded the clipping and passed it back.

'Our youth can have its benefits,' Damas claimed. 'That and our lineage, of course.'

His sister suddenly looked uncomfortable. Damas was prepared for the moral lecture when it came. 'Brother, after all these many centuries spent here amongst our grandfather's creation, you still harbour a sense of superiority. Has it ever crossed your mind that your way of thinking is exactly what is prolonging our curse? Why we continue to live out this

interminable existence? Why Zeus and his children have yet to lift the curse on us and allow us to join our brethren in the heavens where we belong?’ her voice cracking with emotion.

Damas scuffed his boots on the gravel path and muttered under his breath ‘Zeus’ children – the real murderers.’ Apollo and Artemis, slaying their brothers and sisters and bringing unbearable grief to their mother and father. Why would he wish to share a heaven with them? Be a rabbit escaping the wolves only to find shelter in the nest of an eagle? No. There was a better way, a more just way, and he and his sister could live the rest of their lives out in such a world. Right here. ‘The artefact. What have you learnt, dear sister?’ he asked.

‘You mean the arrow?’ Cleo’s eyes narrowed. ‘Well, it is as we suspected. Cast from Hellenic metal and the wood of the laurel tree and...’

‘I meant its biological composition,’ Damas interjected. Cleo paused with concern.

‘It has a toxicity, yes. Would explain how the football fan died so dramatically when you... when you did what you did,’ she explained with a forced gulp. ‘It remains sharp to this day, I cut my own finger handling it once.’ Cleo pointed one index digit to the other. Damas held her wrist.

‘No wound? Like the man at the nightclub?’

‘No. The weapons of the Gods do not leave wounds. Probably how you managed to escape retribution for your little act of vengeance.’ Cleo wrenched her hand back.

‘And you are not sick?’ Damas posed. Cleo gave a firm shake of her head.

‘Must be the curse placed upon us both. Certainly, being the grandchildren of Zeus didn’t help our brothers and sisters, did it? So don’t go getting all euphoric at your demi-god status, Brother,’ she scorned. ‘Personally, I wish it had infected me. Put an end to all this.’

‘Don’t speak in such a way, Sister,’ Damas comforted. ‘There is hope for us both yet, with or without the Gods. Tell me, could you isolate it?’

‘Isolate what?’

‘The toxin itself.’

Cleo shuddered, muscles tensed. ‘With a bit of time. Yes. It’s very malleable, in fact... almost like a first-generation common cold,’ she croaked a reply.

‘How long?’

‘Weeks. Little longer perhaps. But...’

Damas gave a judging look towards his little sister. ‘But what? Suddenly overcome with a sense of moral superiority yourself, Cleo? After

everything you and I have witnessed over these centuries? Mankind devolving into the very worst of creatures, far more wretched than Zeus and all his kin could ever have foreseen?’ His tone became sharp. ‘Titan Prometheus, mankind’s sculptor, was meant to have the gift of foresight. Did he predict such a failure? A society where the very bravest and mighty are brought down and kicked into the dirt in the name of new Gods? Those very people that rushed to our aid, Mother and Father’s aid that fateful day the arrows rained down upon us? How long before this same society comes after me, your own brother, simply for being who I am?’

His temper began to overwhelm Cleo, she cowered back. She knew Damas was right. The very warriors that stood proudly in defence of their father as King of Thebes, their kind had lost their way in this world. Not through any fault of their own, but because of those far weaker who had wielded fear as such a formidable weapon, to further a different cause. Texts of supposed faith that were likely written by their own hands, intended to persecute and defame to ensure a majority of power. No evidence or justification – only deflection from their own desire for control. She and her brother had recently lived through a decade that saw these same tricks applied by those in power... a ‘gay plague’ it was called... and still adopted today as a means of societal poison, of segregation and intolerance. Her brother would march, campaign, crusade alongside many of his own. It made only a modest impact. Now, the political landscape was shifting again – each country, each continent,

each religion cementing reasons for why they should have enemies. This time, there was not a sacred statue or cursed necklace in sight... nor a sorceress and her cult of knights. She looked to the horizon and the city landmark that was Arthur's Seat, recalling the events that many a report described as an *uncommon display of northern lights in Scotland...* if only they knew the truth. No, this time, such injustice was of mankind's doing – and the Gods, new or old, had done nothing.

'You want it isolated further, don't you.' Cleo fixed her stare upon Damas. He nodded, then smiled. 'I'll need DNA. Blood, tissue, skin... something.'

Her brother stood and straightened his coat casually. 'And you shall have it, dear sister. If you would be as so kind to direct me to a particular location within this pleasant Athens of the North. Scotties' Bar.'

Chapter 4

Bath, England

20th March 2020 AD

A knot tightened in Adam's stomach – the very thought of becoming an uncle at the age of thirty-two. It eased swiftly though as his brother kept talking, letting his excitement at becoming a father bubble down the line. 'You on Skype?' Luke asked energetically. 'Course you are... need it for your Band mates. Switch over.' Adam flipped up his laptop screen and tapped away impatiently at the small green icon. He missed the days of traditional phone conversations, disliking how webcams distorted his face somehow.

Luke appeared, hazy evening sunshine in the background overlooking Amman framed by the stone arches of the veranda where he sat, coffee in hand. Adam could hear the faint sound of the adhan through a crackly speaker, his brother reminding him what time of day it was out there, and the excuse for Aisha's absence. Once the second round of congratulations had passed, and the obligatory baby boy versus baby girl debate ending in a stalemate, the two felt free to discuss themselves after a few months' lapse in contact.

‘Commando Alex still got you sweating blood?’ Luke sniggered. ‘What is it now? Towing monster trucks I suppose?’

‘Boxing,’ Adam laconically replied.

‘Ah, always saw you in some sort of *Rocky* montage,’ Luke laughed.

‘Doubt Bath could double up as Philadelphia,’ Adam jostled back. ‘Got a few bruises for my efforts, mind.’ He lifted his shirt to reveal the discoloured skin on his abdomen.

‘Well, you look bigger. Surprised the local rugby club hasn’t called you in as a ringer. Still throwing fire-spears with the rest of the Sacred Band?’ Luke asked.

‘When I can. Bit difficult to get up to Edinburgh regularly but Fernando and Chris appear to be holding the fort well. Not as if those members we have on the books stay that local anyway... only a few couples in and around the city,’ Adam shrugged.

Luke put on his more serious face. ‘Speaking of couples...Violet tells me...’ Adam immediately cut him short.

‘That I’m still single. Not you too. Just had a lecture about that from Violet. I’m fine. Honestly,’ Adam retorted. Luke held both hands up, resigned. ‘As I said to her, Uncle Alex is without a partner too and he manages just fine.’

‘He’s not the leader of the Sacred Band though, is he.’ Luke pursed his lips. Adam tensed for a moment upon hearing a similar line of enquiry from his brother as came from Violet... his ability to lead the warriors that had renewed strength in pairings, when he himself had yet to fulfil such an oath successfully. He again buried the thought. ‘Still, Violet herself is footloose and fancy-free I hear too? No luckier in love than you, bro,’ he joked.

‘Too busy running The Bear she says.’

‘Cop-out if you ask me. Must meet loads of people in that job – front of house and all. That and the fact she is a descendant of a Knight of the Round Table... got to impress the ladies, surely?’ Luke challenged. ‘You seen her in action yet? With her father’s sword, sorry, *staff* yet?’ he smiled.

‘She practises, she says. Getting the hang of it. Must be difficult, given the circumstances under which she inherited Nick’s legacy. I don’t think the Butcher family was particularly astute at teaching their next of kin the art of the knight’s blade... more the aim of a shotgun I think.’ Adam rested his chin in his hand. ‘I do wonder though...’

‘Wonder what?’ Luke leaned closer to his webcam.

‘Nothing. Just, the encounter with Lady Morgan upon Mount Sinai, and when she broke the Necklace of Harmonia with Excalibur. Something

happened, I'm sure of it. Something unexpected.' Adam was lost in thought.

Luke struggled to recall the encounter with Morgan le Fay, his memory appearing as a swirl of rocks and flame that day. But a snippet remained in the forefront of his mind, the shattering of the Necklace and the bright-red light that lingered for moments around Violet's body, as if channelled by Excalibur itself. It was possible that the energy surging within the Necklace and its jewel had some sort of impact on her... quite what, he wasn't sure. The only thing that concerned him was that Violet appeared fine, better than fine in fact – a newfound sense of confidence from having gone on her own journey of self-expression and identification. He was proud, and knew all of the Red Dragon knights, present and past, would be also.

'What do Gary and Geraint make of it? Of Violet I mean?' Luke's thoughts triggered a sensible suggestion to his brother. 'Between them they could, I don't know, examine her?'

Adam raised his eyebrows at the thought, then expressed displeasure at Violet becoming some sort of mythological science experiment for Willis and South. He dismissed the idea, citing Mary Cassidy and the Pallas Athena reincarnation obsession from their own father Richard as a solid enough excuse to close the matter. 'Good point,' Luke concurred.

'I'm sure anything that requires attention will be seen to by Gary and Geraint. The knights of Gehris and Geraint are getting along like a house

on fire at the moment. Never would have entertained that in over a century of Arthurian feuds,' Adam said. He went on to note the smart pairing of Gary's journalistic connections to Geraint's prowess as a historian when it came to political posturing. Recycling of ideas, opinions, far-right and far-left standpoints on the democratic spectrum... all witnessed far too frequently of late. It would appear that even without fabled relics such as the Palladium or the Necklace of Harmonia, history was destined to repeat itself.

'At least Aisha has the Followers of Palamedes under control,' Luke brightened. 'She's kept them well out of any instability here and turned them to humanitarian efforts. Neighbouring countries are in desperate need, as I'm sure you know.' he concluded with a yawn and a stretch. 'Sorry. Long day.'

'Get used to it, you'll soon have a baby keeping you awake all night screaming,' Adam mocked. 'Violet suggested you and Aisha might be coming over to visit?' Luke nodded, with diaries aligned for Easter, provided he could get time off from the local English language school and she could settle up some final meetings at the British Embassy. Still made Adam smirk at the notion that his older college drop-out brother was now a teacher, of all professions. Perhaps he had more of their mother and father in him than he gave him credit for. The two gave their good evenings and goodbyes as the webcams blinked off.

From the window of his old room at The Bear, Adam could see the comforting view of the limestone skyline, lit up in pastel vanilla as the streetlights began to switch on. For someone who had spent so much of his youth travelling to different parts of the globe, often at the request of his father out of duty to the Red Dragon, he rarely had much chance to admire his home city. These past eight years had given him much to contemplate, every aspect of what made him truly happy and what was merely a diversionary tactic deflecting the harsh realities of life. He was getting older, and just like his brother, would need at some point to shift his focus away from the Band of warriors he was sworn to stand by and towards a sense of meaning in his personal life. A more intimate meaning. A lover.

A stamp of feet outside the door could only mean one thing – Violet had more news. She threw herself into the room before straightening her blouse, which had clearly shrunk in the wash. Adam could hear the voices of Gary Willis and Geraint South downstairs, completely forgetting it was a regular Friday catch-up for everyone. ‘You and I are going to Wembley! England versus Italy friendly,’ Violet squealed.

‘Violet, I thought you only followed rugby? That’s football!’ Adam gave an incredulous look.

‘I don’t care... it’s Wembley. And besides, I do follow football... I just pretend I don’t, given its taboo in Bath and all,’ she beamed. ‘It’s the last

Friday of the month. Gary scored the tickets after Geraint's article made *The Times* or something like that, I really wasn't listening.'

'No surprise there,' Adam joked. 'Can you at least tell me when it is?'

'I just told you. Last Friday of the month! You see, Alex is right, you are overworked, Adam Allen. You need a break. That's why we're going,' Violet instructed, pointing her finger. 'I could do with one too... Beth has agreed she'll run The Bear that night.'

'If it's Italy then surely Fernando would rather...'

Adam began.

'Not from Edinburgh – too much travel. Look sharp, Master Allen... and try to find something that at least looks like it might represent England,' Violet bit back.

Adam was out of excuses.

Chapter 5

Edinburgh, Scotland

20th March 2020 AD

‘Milo has scored again!’ Fernando called down the bar in Chris Wood’s direction. ‘Two-nil to Baltic,’ he grinned.

‘Celtic. For the hundredth time, they are called Celtic,’ Chris huffed, face in hand. ‘Take it Tommy assisted as always?’ Fernando confirmed with a perky thumbs up. Chris slurped the last of his pint while contemplating just how many of the football duo’s teammates had figured their relationship out by now. They of course kept quiet about it, and made certain their appearances at Scotties’ were infrequent, despite wishing to be kept informed as to the Sacred Band’s activities. Fernando had, to his credit, worked wonders in digitising Graham McCready’s old, tatty notebook of addresses and out-of-date phone numbers into a simple e-mailing system, secured and held private as best he could of course for this age of online hacking. The levels the media will go to in order to secure a salacious slice of gossip these days was outrageous, mobile phone hacking being the latest to be exposed. Both Milo and Tommy hence refused to hand over their numbers, but kept a healthy social media presence and devised with Fernando a code should they ever be

needed. Chris preferred to remain ignorant of any such responsibility – aged fifty-four, greying at the temples and sagging a touch around the waist, he considered himself a fossil when it came to shiny, new online technology. Colleagues back in London all had their Instagram, Twitter and Facebook accounts, many quick to declare their financial successes for the day in the form of laconic statements such as ‘crushed it’ or ‘through the roof’ followed by pound signs or a wacky selfie picture at their desks. Chris hated the way he looked in photos, so the concept of purposely framing yourself in one never found his favour. As for emojis, well, to summarise the breadth and depth of human emotion into a sole smiley face just seemed crass.

The door rang open – early for a customer, Chris thought, looking at the clock behind the bar. He paid little attention when the gentleman took the stool one away from him and beckoned Fernando over. ‘Ah, Mr... erm?’ Fernando screwed his eyes tight, desperate to remember the gentleman’s name.

‘Zethus. Mr Zethus. Please, no need to apologise, hardly a regular here,’ the gentleman winked.

‘Ah, indeed Mr Zethus. Did you want your usual? Guinness?’ Fernando asked.

‘Well, when in Rome as they say,’ the gentleman replied coyly, his hazel eyes striking a blush across Fernando’s cheeks. Chris gave a subtle shake of his head in disapproval before Fernando had the chance to flirt back.

‘It’s Irish,’ Chris chilled towards the gentleman. ‘Guinness is an Irish stout.’ The gentleman playfully slapped his palm to his forehead.

‘My deepest apologies... this is Scotland, isn’t it. So much travelling recently, hard to remember which part of the United Kingdom I’m in half the time,’ the gentleman joked.

‘Well, another tip... never let an Irishman think you believe their country to be part of the United Kingdom. You’ll pay for it,’ Chris snipped in reply while tugging his mobile from his pocket.

‘You don’t sound Irish, sir. Did I cause offence?’ the gentleman asked.

‘I’m not, no. Just a warning is all.’

‘English?’

‘From London, yes.’

‘Ah, what brings you to the Scottish capital?’ the gentleman turned towards Chris with a genuine intent in conversation, it appeared. Chris wasn’t really in the mood for casual chat, let alone potential advances, but one bold look at the gentleman’s smooth olive complexion against brash black stubble, solid neck and shoulders and he allowed himself a little playful leeway.

‘I travel here on occasion with work. I’m a stockbroker, London and Edinburgh are the main financial centres here,’ Chris said with as much

confidence as he could muster to mask his visit's true purpose. It worked, he thought.

Guinness in one hand, the gentleman's other was offered in greeting. 'I am Damas. I am here on business too. From Athens,' his tone more formal.

'Chris – pleasure. Athens you say? Love it there. Not been for years now. Always wanted to go back. Your English is very good, I must say.' Chris accepted the handshake, not breaking eye contact.

'Ah, I've travelled all around the world in my lifetime. Consider myself most fortunate. But have to say, Britain is one of my favourite places. Its people, its places, its... acceptance,' Damas replied.

'Acceptance?' Chris raised an eyebrow.

'Why yes. I mean, look where we are now,' Damas laughed, showing the bar with a sweeping arm. 'Not many places like this back where I'm from, my little home village in Greece.'

'It does get busier,' Chris chuckled, looking at the floor. Now he felt like he was the one flirting.

'Oh, I'm sure it does. I've actually heard quite a bit about this place from my sister. She works over at the university, has done for years,' Damas explained. 'Always good to see her when I'm here.'

'What sort of business are you in?' Chris tried to lower his voice.

‘Antiques. I assist in valuation. As you can imagine, the work can take me from continent to continent.’ Damas took a sip of his pint.

‘You must know your history then?’

Damas contorted his body back towards the bar, uncomfortably. ‘I do Chris, I do. And isn’t it strange how it so often repeats itself? The same mistakes made over and over by the same people. Laughable really.’ He took a large gulp of Guinness and wiped his mouth. Chris suddenly felt out of his depth in the conversation, he could only shrug. ‘Still, things can always surprise you, right when you least expect it.’ Damas turned his gaze back to Chris.

‘I suppose you’re right.’ Chris shuffled awkwardly on his stool, unsure as to whether he was feeling flattered or under scrutiny by the welcome stranger. His mobile beeped, a Facebook message from Fernando in the other room – three-nil to Felt-tip – followed by a smiley face emoji. Chris toyed with the idea of shouting his correction to the auto spell failure, given Fernando’s close proximity and wholly unnecessary use of a mobile phone, but capitulated and simply messaged back ‘CELTIC. Idiot.’

‘You popular this evening?’ Damas enquired.

‘Huh? Oh, no. It’s the young Italian barman. Doesn’t yet know the Scottish football clubs that well by name. Perils of social media,’ Chris clarified.

‘Fascinating how something so quiet has become deafening of late,’ Damas stated. Chris looked perplexed. ‘Social media. No sound or sight, nor feeling even. Yet commands your attention, especially the young. One message or video clip can bring the world to its knees, start a revolution in some cases, but never needs to show its face. There was a time when wars were won on land, sea and air... by soldiers, warriors, heroes. Now it’s done by the smallest, weakest of creatures cowering behind a computer screen. Honourless.’ Damas was trapped in his own thought, spoken out loud as if Chris was erased. Wood sat silently for a moment, digesting the message, its resonance reaching a part of him he thought he’d sealed away – the Sacred Band. Fighters, defenders of the sacred statue that was the Palladium, the three hundred that lived today to serve tomorrow, and each other. So long at war against foes like the White Dragon faction, preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice, as Chris had the privilege of witnessing of late. What was their place in the world now that such perils were vanquished? The Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia both destroyed, the Red and White Dragon united as one in the process. Was this no longer an age of heroes? Of warriors like them? Perhaps in trying to prevent the likes of Lady Morgan Worthington and her visions of a New World Order, they might just have *created* one. He shook the thought from his mind.

‘Sure there will always be a need for heroes. They might not look the same though,’ Chris proposed.

Damas raised his glass, which now held little more than foam. *'To true heroes'* – he embellished Wood's quote and their glasses clinked in accord. There was a force behind Damas' glass, however, catching Chris off guard as the rim of his shattered, releasing shards into his fingers. Chris flustered, clamping one hand atop the other to stem the flow of blood.

'I'm so sorry. Please, let me help,' Damas fussed and offered a crisp white handkerchief to Chris' wound. He pressed it firmly to soak up what it could, but Chris' grimace of pain was a signal to stop. Fernando hurried in with a score update, and instead found himself scurrying around for the first aid kit.

'It's not that bad, honestly,' Chris said, clenching his jaw slightly. 'Hell of a grip you've got there, Mr Zethus.' He tried to soothe the embarrassed Damas.

'Quite. Well, I think I've caused enough commotion ahead of formal opening hours so I will leave you both be, if you're sure everything is all right.' Damas took to his feet. 'I will stop by tomorrow, good sirs, and do let me know, Mr Wood, if you need any further medical attention... my sister not only works at the university, but in the School of Medicine as fortune would have it. Sure she would push you to the front of the queue,' he beamed before placing a comforting hand on Chris's shoulder and seeing himself out.

'Don't think it needs stitches.' Fernando inspected Chris's bloody hand. 'Big drama queen,' he mocked. Colour began to return to Chris' pale face, scorn now etched upon it as he snatched the bandages from the green box. 'Not quite the ending to the chance encounter you wanted, I guess, huh, Mr Wood?' the Italian gave a grin. The latest Celtic FC score line caught the corner of his eye and he bolted to the television. A shunned Chris left alone to nurse his wound. He tightened the bandage, mercifully slowing the bleed that was oozing its way through. In a moment of clarity he furrowed his brow – *Mr Wood* – he thought to himself. He looked behind at Damas' silhouette fading from the window. He never recalled giving the gentleman his *last* name.

Chapter 6

Wembley Stadium, London

27th March 2020 AD

It was cold, and Adam was queuing. Combined with standing room only on the train from Bath to London, this trip was already feeling like a mistake. At Violet's insistence, he'd managed to find a red and white scarf in a local charity shop. That was about as passionate as he was going to get sartorially ahead of the game. He glanced upwards beyond Wembley's impressive steel arch, noted the rainclouds and gave a lingering sigh.

'It has a roof. Don't worry,' Violet chirped, sorting the tickets. Adam scoffed, tucking his hands under his arms. Ninety minutes, he kept thinking, that's all... he could manage that for Violet's sake. The seats were decent, at pitch level just behind one of the goals. After a debate over who should take which and Violet requesting a change after a considerably overweight man with little regard for personal hygiene melted into the seat next to her, all took to their feet for the national anthems of Italy, then England. Even in his apathy, national anthems always stoked the blood in Adam, especially when bellowed by all those around in unison. It filled the stadium with a proud, rousing acoustic, a

little discordant vocally from the tone-deaf contingent of supporters behind but enough to satisfy for a precious few minutes. The whistle blew.

'We're playing in white, right?' Adam teased Violet, receiving a jab in the ribs for such mockery.

'If the England players get close to this goal in front then you can cheer, for the first forty-five minutes at least,' Violet joked back. It didn't take long before the decibel level increased as England advanced, a shot fired wide into the crowd. Excitement ebbed away, followed by applause for the early gambit. Italy then held possession for what seemed like an eternity. Violet joined in the frustration that had spread across the stand. The shaking of heads, the tutting disapprovals, the occasional jeer at the referee. Adam feigned interest for the first few minutes, but when a second strike by England rattled the goal bar in front, he did confess to becoming quite engrossed in the action. Maybe not such a bad evening out after all.

An Italian forward fell. Looked like a trip by an England defender to Adam, a view opposed by many around him it would appear, as the jeers became fiercer and more undignified. A free-kick was given to Italy, it sailed over the far goal. More sighs of relief. From then on that same Italian forward was cursed, boos echoing each time he got the ball to his feet. A touch unfair, Adam thought, but still. It was only upon the player's second fall closer to the penalty box that Adam started to

become uncomfortable. The language behind had turned sour, personal. Violet took a sharp look round at the rowdy bunch behind and opened her mouth to criticise, Adam politely reassured her that there was no need. 'I'm sure one day, a gay player will prove them wrong,' he said. Violet smiled warmly, but picked out of the crowd to her left a couple of supporters wearing neutral colours. They hadn't cheered or shouted much at all throughout the first half, despite looking Mediterranean. He was clearly feeling the cold a little in a smartly stitched windbreaker jacket, she with what looked like a hand-knitted matching woolly hat and gloves, long tawny coat and boots. The couple chatted and whispered quietly to themselves, pointing occasionally and smiling. Tourists most likely. The gentleman, however, clearly took issue with the foul language coming from behind, firing looks like daggers in the boisterous crowd's direction. Like Violet had been with Adam, his accompanying lady was soothing any would-be confrontation. The half time whistle sounded, nil-nil.

'Where are the gents?' Adam inquired. Violet directed him to the back of the stand just past the entrance, still watching the couple to her left, who were both on the move. Shuffling past, Adam brushed shoulders with the gentleman, gave a swift apology, the gentleman offered a courteous nod. His lady partner followed, both continuing their looks of disdain at the England fans behind them as they made their way up the stairs.

‘You were getting angry, weren’t you?’ Cleo linked her arm with Damas’. Her brother clicked his neck to the side. ‘I don’t know why you come to these matches, you know remarks like that are commonplace, but harmless.’

Damas looked pained at Cleo’s assessment. ‘Harmless?’ he spat. ‘Words are like knives, dear sister, perhaps worse in that their inflicted wounds linger through the generations. What a child hears from its parents is almost certain to stain the mind. Passed down like a torch, so eager to burn. And you call it *harmless*?’ Cleo rested her head on her brother’s shoulder apologetically. ‘Let’s change the subject. Please share with me your work, Sister. How has it progressed?’

Cleo nervously took a look around, then revealed a small vial of opaque liquid, golden in colour. She hesitated before passing it over to Damas. Forlorn, she asked, ‘Is this what you believe is right, Brother? What Mother and Father would have wanted? The Gods...’ Damas snatched the vial.

‘Don’t give me another lecture, Sister! The Gods... the Gods have long abandoned us and this world. Left it to decay and fester while they live their eternal lives up on high. No. We can salvage it, Cleo, you and I. Allow those that are worthy to inherit for once, and thus create a better

land. A true golden age, as Zeus and Prometheus did once, but failed. This time, we can control who wields the fires of life,' he commanded. He took time to inspect the vial more closely. 'And its resistance – did the blood I gave you work?'

'The sample of blood from the Sacred Band warrior you provided could be isolated, yes,' Cleo replied. 'However, there is no guarantee of immunity, Brother. This is science, not myth,' she affirmed. 'Are you certain of your motives, and the risks they carry? A golden age might consist of just you and me if misjudged.'

'Then you and I will become the new Adam and Eve, won't we,' Damas retorted. His sister remained unconvinced. He needed more to sway the argument. 'Please, take my hand, Cleo.' He opened his palm, she held it gently. 'Feel what I have felt for millennia, witness what I've seen, share what I have experienced.' He encouraged her to close her eyes. The bond between the Niobid children was well known, each able to empathically feel through touch and focus. It was both a gift and a curse bestowed upon those born of a Greek God bloodline – the very Gods themselves unable to hide secrets from one another, least of all, the almighty Zeus. This same trait found its way into their demi-deity offspring, and sadly in the case of the Niobids, fear and anguish were emotions forever present in the fate of their siblings. Cleo's eyes moistened as a hundred memories soaked in rage flooded from her brother's mind into hers. She trembled, anointed with that same rage

built upon many lifetimes of hurt, persecution and grief festering within Damas. She could bear no more and prised her hand free. 'You understand, yes?' Damas stood firmly. He turned to the vendor stall serving bottles of water, caps removed, noting the same England fans that had spent much of the game spouting obscenities. 'I could do with some water myself.' Damas slid the vial up the sleeve of his coat. 'Wait for me here.'

Adam had found himself in another queue again, waiting his turn at the gents. Any enthusiasm for the evening stemming from the first half of the match was evaporating fast. He looked in all directions to avoid any unnecessary eye contact with strangers and to avoid small talk, until a handsome-looking gentleman by the water vendor caught his eye. He recognised him from the seats not far from where he and Violet sat, then recalled the attractive lady accompanying him. Likely off the market. If his brother Luke were here he'd be certain to be egged on by talks of bisexuality and not jumping to conclusions... Adam after all was attending with a female *friend*, not a partner. But the relationship between the gentleman and his lady appeared more intimate, the interlocking of arms, the snuggling of her head against his. A write-off, sadly, Adam convinced himself. No harm in subtly admiring from afar though. Another skill Luke had taught him.

It was at that point Adam spotted something peculiar. The gentleman was shifting ever closer to one of the boisterous supporters propped up against the vendor bar, stubbornly refusing to move. Amidst the banter the gentleman shoved the supporter from behind, confessing it was an accident. There was a moment of bitter looks exchanged between the supporter, his rowdy friends and the gentleman, accusations of drinks spilt and adequate compensation. The gentleman kindly offered his own bottle of water to the supporter and re-joined the queue without any further aggravation. The banter continued.

Violet's text buzzed in Adam's pocket – three minutes to kick off again. The queue for the gents was still long so he decided to call it quits and hold on until the second half, surely it would be quieter then. He began to make his way back to the stands when the screaming began.

A crowd had already formed around the supporter, who had collapsed to the floor. His friends looked confused and desperate as they tried to control the convulsions; some began to shout for help and medical assistance. Adam had some basic first aid training and sprang into action, forcing his way through the masses to reach the stricken victim. What he saw was unlike anything he'd ever witnessed. Skin blotched, deep purple colouring, blood weeping from the eyes and mouth, an uncontrollable cough that was slowly being strangled out by the

tightening of chest and throat muscles. Specks of blood began to cover those kneeling closest. They backed away at the request of two paramedics that had made their way through at the same rate Adam had. A flurry of oxygen masks and needles followed, the supporter's position changed numerous times to ease his breathing, but everyone could foresee the inevitable outcome.

Above the panicked cries from the paramedics desperate to resuscitate the supporter, Adam watched the gentleman and his partner, their faces like stone. One pulled the other calmly away from the commotion and towards the exit. Adam followed.

'Adam? What's going on? The match is about to start... wait, what happened?' Violet interrupted his path and saw the situation unfolding behind. 'Is that man OK?'

'No, he's not. We need to go. Now.' Adam tugged on Violet's arm.

'What? Why?'

'I think there's been a poisoning.'

'Seriously? What makes you think...?' Violet gripped her staff tighter as Adam interjected.

'No time to explain, just follow those two up in front.' He pointed to the backs of the gentleman and lady. Violet recognised them instantly as the couple who had been sitting nearby. No sooner had the two given

pursuit than the gentleman looked back over his shoulder. He realised they had been made. He muttered into the lady's ear and the two split into different directions. 'I'll follow him, you watch her,' Adam ordered.

The corridors of the stadium began to empty as fans made their way back to their seats. Adam saw the gentleman trot down a stairway towards ground level and continued to follow. He found himself in one of the lobbies, only a few people milling around, but no sight of his target. He waited patiently by one of the pillars until he was the only one left.

'Something I can help you with, sir?' came a voice from behind. Adam detected a Greek accent. The gentleman appeared from the farther side of the lobby, casting an imposing shadow over the England mural of lions spread across the floor. 'Three lions on their shirt they say, isn't that right?' the gentleman expressed. 'I say, there isn't a lion amongst them. Amongst any of them.' Adam moved a few steps further forward, ready to hold his ground. 'I apologise, sir, my name is Damasichthon. You may call me Damas, my friend.' He opened his arms wide in greeting.

'I don't consider us friends. No offence,' Adam sparked back.

'Of course. Not yet anyway. Still, I believe we have much in common, Mr Allen.' Damas cocked his head inquisitively.

'How do you know me?' Adam stuttered somewhat clumsily.

‘I’ve watched you for some time. All of you for that matter. The devil makes work for idle hands, as they say.’ Damas took a few steps closer. ‘Son of Richard Allen, or is that Sir Richard Allen of the Knights of Galahad? I can never quite recollect all the knights of the Round Table and their lineage. There have been so many in my lifetime.’

‘You’re lifetime? How old...?’ Adam was cut short.

‘Very. Very is the answer, Mr Allen,’ Damas replied, cracking a smile. ‘And the blessing of living such a long life is knowledge. Knowledge of those around you, what they stand for, and ultimately, their value.’ He brought his hands together and gave a modest bow. ‘I believe you and your kind have fought valiantly these past few centuries, as have your knights. Granted, there have been some internal quarrelling as to the future of this world, but what families are without their squabbles? Provided the objective remains one of prosperity for those worthy, neither Red nor White would falter.’

Adam paused upon hearing such identification of the Dragon factions as they once were. An implausible sense of understanding for any individual outside either the Round Table or the Sacred Band. Perhaps he was of the latter, but something was amiss. ‘And you know who is worthy?’ Adam challenged.

‘I do,’ Damas shot back.

'The man upstairs, choking on his own blood. Was he not worthy?' Adam scratched further.

'You and I both know he wasn't – and so many like him. Not to worry though, for the wheels of change have been set in motion, and trust me, it will be to your and your Sacred Band's benefit.' Damas returned to his beguiling grin.

'You know of the Band?' Adam quizzed again.

'More than you, I dare say, Mr Allen,' Damas replied.

'Then you'll be aware we have no time for those who try to play God.' Adam flared, striking up an aggressive stance.

'Not those that aren't born of one, no,' came the contorted response.

Adam was tired of games now, his shield summoned in bright blue flame. 'Tell me what you did. One way or another I will find out... but I would prefer it not to end violently,' Adam offered.

'Name me any radical change that did not inflict violence,' Damas smirked, unfazed. Adam hurled himself forward, shield high, two kicks in quick succession, both skilfully dodged by his opponent. A fist was thrown, again dodged by Damas, another low kick skipped over. Of the final flurry of punches launched by Adam most were blocked with ease bar one, which caught Damas squarely on the jaw. He buckled to his

knees. 'Impressive.' He shook the blow from his head and returned to his feet. 'My turn.'

Adam raised his shield once more, each blow from Damas blocked but felt throughout his body. If he was Sacred Band, this was no usual tactic – all brute force, little skill. Near unbearably strong, however, and relentless as a machine. Adam was repelled by the melee, just levering a knee to Damas' midriff to separate the two. He had no choice but to conjure a spear. Sharp blue fire flew from his hand towards Damas, it struck his right arm causing him to twist in the air and land harshly on his side. Adam advanced, holding a second, aiming down at Damas still on all fours. 'Enough. Tell me what you did,' he demanded.

A mild laugh came from Damas, rubbing his arm. In a flash, his hand seized the tip of the blue flame spear held by Adam. It burnt, that much was clear from the teeth Damas gritted to contain the pain, but he remained composed and came to his feet once more. 'You should know better than to use a power gifted by the Gods against them,' he sneered. Adam withdrew his spear in fright.

'You are no God,' he protested.

'So sure, are you?' Damas replied. 'There was me thinking the Sacred Band of Thebes was well versed in its ancestral history.' Adam retreated a few feet.

‘Whatever you are, we in the Band are many. You will be stopped,’ Adam blustered with whatever confidence he could muster.

‘I am counting on it, Mr Allen. But sorry to inform you, I am not alone.’ Damas shot a glance to his side as Cleo clamped both hands on Adam’s shoulders and hurled him into the wall. Winded, Adam regained just enough strength to stand and bring forth a shield. ‘My sister, Cleodoxa,’ Damas introduced sarcastically. Luke’s lesson reverberated like never before in Adam’s mind.

‘What do you want?’

‘The same as what you want, Adam. To see the just inherit this world. I can imagine by now to whom we refer when we say *the just*. Believe me, I wish there was another way, but our long service of life here has proven to both of us that there is not. And despite the numerous opportunities presented over these many years, the potential omnipotence contained within those gifts of Mount Olympus – sacred statues, cursed necklaces and so on – no one individual or movement had thought to harness the most destructive of mortal emotions. The God that bestowed your very strength, as the owner of the waters in Thebes that powered the Sacred Band, his son is woefully neglected.’

Phobos, Adam thought. Greek deity of fear and son to Ares, God of war. The well from which the Sacred Band and Theban founder Cadmus first drank, rekindled through his own Sir Galahad bloodline and that of Sir Gawain upon their quest for the Palladium, somehow wielded by these

two siblings? How? And what of their own heritage? His mind raced while still attempting to focus on his opponents as they closed in.

‘Please, Adam. We do not wish to fight the leader of the Sacred Band. Quite the contrary, we’d rather hoped you would join us. You and your kin. Be a part of our shared future,’ Damas tried to persuade.

Damn it, Violet, where are you? Adam winced at the thought of having to take on both adversaries, spear and shield summoned, prepared for such engagement nonetheless. Cleo made an advance first, gingerly stretching out her own hand. ‘Please, Adam, listen to my brother,’ she advised. A swift swing of a familiar wooden staff clocked her on the breast, flinging her back a good few metres, sharply into a pillar.

‘Trust me, he’s not the listening type,’ Violet blurted, wooden staff transforming into the blade of Sir Bors. As relieved as Adam was to receive belated backup, Violet’s appearance transfixed him. Her sword glowed deep red, unlike any weapon held by the Arthurian knights, a fiery tone matched by her pupils. It was a display that had equally caught the attention of Damas, his mouth partially open, desperate to utter words, but none came. ‘I suggest you and your girlfriend back off.’ Violet’s famous temper flared – it was as if Nick Butcher had somehow channelled all his most ferocious qualities directly through his daughter. A formidable and welcome ally, but alarming also.

‘Correction, young lady. My sister.’ Words finally came to Damas, still curious. ‘And you... why, you are most *interesting*.’ He circled in

curiosity. Cleo had scrambled up and returned to his side, for a moment ready to pounce like a cat upon a mouse in retaliation, only to hold back in equal bewilderment. The two women refused to break their focus on one another right up until the sirens of an ambulance and several police cars were heard outside the venue.

‘Come, Brother, what’s done is done. We must leave,’ Cleo insisted. The sight of the authorities making their way to the doors forced Adam and Violet to conceal their own weapons and do little but watch the siblings bolt for the exit, Damas promising to find the two again when circumstances were more favourable.

‘Yeah, you’d better run,’ Violet yelled, having to be restrained by Adam.

‘Come, Violet, we need to go too,’ Adam cautioned, looking at the growing numbers of police surrounding the stadium. A disproportionate show of force for a single fatality, he thought, but the hysteria from the floors above had not subsided. ‘We need to get back to Bath... and speak with Gary and Geraint. Urgently.’

Chapter 7

Bath, England

28th March 2020 AD

‘How strong?’ Geraint South enquired. Adam rolled up his shirt to reveal the purple bruise along his side. ‘No, I mean on a scale of one to ten, one being your regular-strength man, ten being god-like?’ South pushed his glasses higher up on his nose, dismissing Adam’s wince as he hid his battle wound from view.

‘God-like? What the hell are you talking about?’ Alex spat towards Geraint. ‘They were at a football match, not on some Greek mountain top or whatever.’ Adam’s uncle had made his contempt for Geraint’s fastidious historical questioning well known on several occasions, preferring the more fact-based research of Gary Willis as opposed to mythological hokum. He buried his face in one hand while beckoning Violet to get him another drink from behind the bar.

‘Need I remind you, Mr Allen Senior, that you and your kind are far from your average men. I would think it odd that your nephew, a Sacred Band warrior, was so easily defeated by a regular football thug, wouldn’t you?’ Geraint defended. Adam shot a frown in his direction at the

accusation of being *easily* defeated. Violet leaned between him and Alex, one pint set down in front of his uncle, and water before him.

‘They certainly were not regular, if that’s your insinuation,’ Violet chimed in. ‘Neither the man nor the accompanying woman.’ Adam could see her jaw tighten upon mentioning the altercation with the second foe, together with whatever power it appeared to unleash within the young Butcher.

Geraint rattled his fingers on both arm rests, muttering through his thoughts. Not just one, but two mysterious potential assassins. Siblings. Well versed in Greek deities and with an apparent vendetta against the world, unlike anything he had witnessed during his time serving under Lady Morgan Worthington and the White Dragon, and certainly not utilising the same tactics. ‘Tell me more about this apparent poisoning you saw?’ South probed.

‘It happened so quickly. The man, Damas, seemed to switch his own water bottle with that of the victim. All harmless at first but...’ Adam froze.

‘What? Was there something about the target himself?’ Alex enquired. Adam began to nod when Violet interjected with a blunt opinion of her own. The language used, the incitement of hatred from the victim and his mates, the general ugliness of the scene. ‘Nothing new there then for football... maybe the guy got what he deserved.’ Alex picked up his pint. His brutal assessment unlocked Adam’s own train of thought... the

words used by Damas, of who was deemed *worthy* and those that weren't. All to the Sacred Band's *benefit*? This sounded like a war, a call to arms not entirely without precedent, sadly, for Adam and his kind. A cold sweat broke out on his skin.

South took to his feet and retreated to the safety of his books in the corner. He'd managed to fashion a small makeshift library for himself in The Bear for just such occasions, figured it would be sensible if he was to spend a day a week away from his parchment-filled abode in Oxford. 'What were the names again? The siblings?' he asked.

'Damasichthon and Cleodoxa.' Adam tried to settle himself with a sip of water. 'Said we had much in common... and both appeared knowledgeable on the lineage of King Arthur's knights, what's left of them anyway.'

Geraint thumbed through one of his mythology books, still muttering, much to Alex's chagrin. 'Brother and sister, vengeance and vendettas' he repeated over and over before landing on a page. 'You said the man, Damas, he knew of the Sacred Band?' South asked.

'More than me, apparently,' Adam replied bitterly.

'Did either of them mention anything about their own lineage?' Geraint pushed. Adam and Violet both looked at one another and shook their heads. 'Hmmm.'

‘He said he was old. That’s all,’ Adam replied with a shrug, noting the increasing frustration from his uncle. He knew Alex’s tactic would be to head off in hot pursuit of both, with all members of the Sacred Band if he must, to snuff this evil out before it had a chance to spread. *Spread* – now that very word jarred his nerves... such a violent fate meted out upon the victim, a rank poisoning faster than cyanide but more biological in its nature. Why the mention of the Gods of Greece? Any legend involving them usually involved sheer force and power as opposed to sly poisoning. Those mortals that stood against them were punished, pure and simple, but by means so cruel as to serve as a warning to others not to challenge. Livers pecked out by eagles every night, chained to a wheel of fire or plunged into a watery depth to be held for eternity in a state of starvation and thirst. A nasty plague, while historically not uncommon of course, was not really their style.

‘Niobids!’ Geraint gasped. Adam, Violet and Alex stared back, waiting for elaboration. ‘Queen Niobe, of the House of Thebes. She had fourteen children – seven boys, seven girls – and incurred the wrath of Apollo and Artemis for spurning their mother, the Titan Leto, upon her day of honour. Their father, Amphion, was allegedly the grandson of Zeus, and one of the early rulers of Thebes, following its founder Cadmus.’ Geraint paced up and down furiously.

While Violet and Alex continued to look at each other, tempers ticking higher, Adam sat upright. 'Wait... Queen Niobe lost all her children, did she not?'

'Some texts say yes, others suggest that two were spared so that Leto and Queen Niobe were at last even with their children. Those remaining, a brother and sister, possibly cursed to endure the suicide of their father and the incarceration of their mother in solid rock,' South continued.

Mount Sipylus, Adam recalled, on the coast of Turkey. On it, a rock shaped like a cowed woman, weeping some say. Locals referred to the site as the Weeping Rock, in recognition of Queen Niobe's despair. Yet more tragedy striking the rulers of Thebes – the curse of housing both the Palladium and its counterpart, the Necklace of Harmonia. He had to raise both objects with Geraint to satisfy his curiosity.

'Not likely – this was a different sort of punishment. Not born of either the Palladium and its empire forging abilities, nor the cursed Necklace of Harmonia. That said, one of the last supposed owners of the Necklace was none other than the war-mongering General Phallyus of Phocis who obtained it while sacking the Temple of Apollo in Delphi – clearly not a fan of the God or Thebes' newfound reverence towards him – shortly before King Philip II of Macedon put an end to his shenanigans over the Third Sacred War, around 350 BC. Possibly the future king of Greece came across the jewel and, well, decided to pass it on to one of his own

infamous generals.’ Geraint waved his hand didactically, as if back in a lecture hall.

Alex slammed his empty pint glass down on the table. ‘So... what are you saying, South, Sir Geraint, whatever... that my nephew was attacked by some sort of demi-god and goddess, both thousands of years old and wanting to kill off all of humanity because of mummy issues?’ A flash of blue flame shot across his knuckles, a sure sign his uncle was about to lash out uncontrollably. Adam gently lowered Alex’s spear arm and suggested Violet bring a second glass of water. No more alcohol.

Geraint admitted to having no firm answer. While the unbearable grief of parental loss could drive individuals to commit heinous acts, if they were who they claimed, they would know an act of merciless homicide was never going to undo the work of their superiors. Their mother and father would not be brought back from their fates. Was this merely a statement? If so, what sort?

‘What if it isn’t to target all of humanity?’ Adam theorised. ‘Damas said he and I had things in common, and that he knew the Sacred Band... obviously, if born of the House of Thebes. He wants the *worthy* to rule.’

‘Very high and mighty of you, Adam.’ Violet returned with the requested water for Alex. ‘So you think that only you and the Sacred Band will be spared from Damas’ and Cleo’s plans? Doesn’t leave either of them with much, does it? Not exactly a catalyst for a gene-pool either... three hundred men that aren’t exactly inclined to have children of their own,

no offence,' she sighed, taking a seat. 'Besides, we're all talking about the god-like powers these two supposedly have, but have yet to see anything other than a gross, thick-headed footy fan get sick and kick the bucket. Poisoned? Most likely. But unless Damas and Cleo are set on opening up their own soft drinks company I doubt they'll make much of an impact.'

'They could target the water supply?' Alex's brain immediately switched to belligerent strategy mode. 'Now that's something that has worked over the centuries. Forget myths and fable, toss a stinking, disease-ridden horse over the castle walls of your enemy and let nature do its work. Spares the lives of many a soldier.'

'Now you're just being dramatic,' Violet snapped.

'Have you seen the news?' came the familiar but firm voice behind the group. Gary Willis pulled off his worn boots and shook the raindrops from his waxed jacket in a fluster. 'Might want to hold that very notion in mind.'

Chapter 8

London, England

1st April 2020 AD

All twenty chairs around the galley table were taken. A full house, Ana noted – most unusual for a Wednesday morning briefing. Still, with so much activity taking place between the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Whitehall this past weekend, it came as a relief to see so many faces – some familiar, government officials and such, others less so, all clearly concerned and looking sleep-deprived. A suited gentleman, thin grey hair and weathered skin, took the head of the table and fiddled with the focus of the projector while making a quick welcome. He introduced himself as government. Ana could have guessed, but when domestic security titles began to fly coupled with incendiary terms such as *biohazard* and *chemical warfare* it was as if all her worst fears had been realised in a heartbeat.

‘This here was the gentleman admitted to Guys and St Thomas’s Hospital immediately after the incident at Wembley arena on Friday. He was pronounced dead on arrival; his family has been informed of course,’ the government official declared, clicking to the passport photograph of a Mr Barry Lester, a twenty-six-year-old estate agent

from Coventry. ‘Witness statements and medical evidence suggested a poisoning, rapid in onset. Likely time of death was no more than five minutes after ingesting the substance. Now, what has proven both interesting and concerning is the result of the autopsy...’ The gentleman was interrupted by a white-suited woman, bob haircut and thick-framed glasses.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Hall, but before we get into the details of an autopsy, surely announcing the name of the poison used would be useful for all of us?’ the woman asked sternly, standing up. Heads nodded in agreement around the table. ‘A simple blood test could determine this immediately.’

‘This is the very issue, Dr Winter, we cannot yet identify the substance,’ Mr Hall replied. Dr Winter cast an incredulous look. ‘I’m serious, I’m afraid. It is not manifesting like any poison or chemical we’ve encountered before. Please, let me continue...’ Dr Winter resumed her seat. ‘The autopsy. It was clear that Mr Lester had seemingly been suffering from a severe bout of pneumonia, or some similar condition. See here, the internal study of the lungs, inflamed tissue and constricted alveoli – typical of such an ailment.’ Heads again nodded at the grizzly image projected. ‘But Mr Lester’s family protest there was nothing wrong with him before attending the football match, not a hint of a cough or high temperature. This is concurrent with statements from his friends in attendance. One would think with this amount of

inflammation, at least signs of breathlessness would have taken hold before arriving at the venue,' Mr Hall began to conclude.

'So, we're back to the poisoning theory.' Dr Winter stood again. 'So? If not something we ourselves can identify, who can?' Countries with known histories in such behaviour were suggested – Russia, North Korea, even the Chinese – all dismissed by Mr Hall.

'Unfortunately something more unusual is now being reported. I must stress to everyone in this room that what is about to be discussed must remain within these walls until more research is done on the pathogen.' Mr Hall spread both his hands upon the table, taking time to fix his eyes on each person in turn before him.

'Pathogen?' another suited gentleman asked suspiciously.

'Yesterday, three more were admitted to their local accident and emergency departments, all complaining of similar shortness of breath, dizziness and disorientation, even the same spitting of blood. Two remain stable, one critical. All were in attendance at the match on Friday and from reviewing their seat numbers, quite likely had come into close contact with Mr Lester,' Mr Hall elaborated. 'This morning, I received news that possibly six more have been admitted to hospitals in and around London displaying similar symptoms... all six had also attended the same match at Wembley.'

Silence fell upon the room. Dr Winter broke it with a single word – ‘Circumstantial’ – with a fettered sense of hope. Mr Hall looked despondent.

‘Then we are talking about biological weaponry?’ came from the same gentleman who questioned the notion of a pathogen. ‘With a potentially rapid onset and virulent spread?’ his speech quickened. ‘What bloodwork do we have?’

Mr Hall pointed to Ana. ‘Dr Braithwaite shall be leading this investigation. All samples will be making their way to her team by this afternoon. Unfortunately, we can do little to control the press and media around this issue, with some reporters already having interviewed relatives of the sick and drawing their own conclusions. This, therefore, has the potential to spiral out of control unless we can deliver reassurances on behalf of the UK Government.’ Mr Hall was again interrupted by a young lady entering the room, a receptionist, passing him a note. She whispered her apologies for the intrusion while tiptoeing out. Mr Hall read the note with a heavy sigh. ‘We have two more casualties. The critical patient and one of the two declared stable died this morning. The other has been moved to an ICU. Declining rapidly.’ He screwed the note up tightly in his hand. ‘Dr Braithwaite, how quickly can we expect an evaluation on the bloodwork?’

Ana took a deep breath. ‘My team will be able to assess it within a few hours of receiving the samples, Mr Hall. However, I must ask... what

levels of precaution should we be taking? My team will wish to know. I wish to know.’ She held her voice steady.

‘Whatever you consider suitable, Doctor.’ Mr Hall threw the balled up note on the table. ‘I expect results by six o’clock this evening before I brief the Cabinet.’

‘I may require more time, Mr Hall. I have not yet spoken to my superiors at the LSHTM nor my wider team and...’

‘I have already cleared it with your chain of command, Dr Braithwaite. Please begin immediately. The samples will be with you the moment you return to your desk. You are dismissed,’ Mr Hall directed.

Ana took one final look around the table, at the stony faces, desperate for some support from one of her colleagues, indeed anyone, but it never came. She swallowed hard as she left the room.

Chapter 9

Bath, England

1st April 2020 AD

It was the headline on every news channel – BBC, ITV, CNN, Sky. Geraint lowered Gary’s hand holding the remote to bring the merry-go-round of morose reporting to an end, settling on Channel 4. Same story, slightly altered figures of infection rate and mortality from the incident being described as a terror attack in Wembley Stadium just days before. Seven people now confirmed dead, all with similar symptoms. A ‘severe respiratory disease’ was the layman’s term used, akin to pneumonia, swift in its action once the coughing and wheezing had set in. Prognosis of death, once infection had taken hold, was approximately one week, some medical professionals had stated, others claimed it was shorter. It was clear that whatever this illness was, scientists were still grappling for terminology that was both accurate, but not alarming. What was evident, however, was its spread – two hundred and fifty admissions to accident and emergency departments over the weekend in London alone, with isolated cases as far north as Newcastle, and even across to the continent, with confirmations in Rome and Florence.

Geraint frantically scribbled down as much information as he could in his Moleskine notepad, intermittently consulting his mythology textbooks and scratching at the cuffs of his tweed blazer, a sure sign that the knight was becoming increasingly agitated. Alex turned to Gary, arms folded, puffing up his biceps. 'Please tell me you don't believe this, Mr Willis. Some demi-god with homicidal tendencies? You work in journalism... there has to be a more logical explanation,' he asked.

'Trust me, Mr Allen, when you work in journalism, the job isn't to find the logical, more the exact opposite. Served me well so far.' Gary tapped the top of his wooden staff, gaze fixed on the TV screen. 'Adam, Violet. Did these two individuals give anything away as to where they might reside? Where they have been or might be heading next?' Adam shook his head, Violet tried to think while being absorbed by the developments unfolding via the media. Four more cases identified in the past hour, three from the UK and another in Italy.

'He said I was interesting,' Violet croaked. 'Damas, I mean. Why would he say that?'

Adam looked her up and down, paying special attention to her own staff. 'Your actions were unusual, Violet. Clearly caught this Cleo character off guard,' he confessed.

'You're welcome,' Violet said, winking back.

‘How do you mean unusual?’ Gary interjected. Violet tried to describe her summoning of the knight’s blade, its strength and feeling. Adam felt her words were too modest and pale in comparison to what he had witnessed, so he fleshed out her description.

‘Vibrant red was the blade, Gary. Combined with a flamed shield not unlike my own or that of any other Sacred Band member.’ He spoke over Violet, her look instantly becoming sour.

‘Strong enough to repel a potential demi-god?’ Geraint squeaked up from behind one of his textbooks. Alex grunted at the repeated insinuation of deity status.

‘I wouldn’t say repelled. Caught off guard more like,’ Adam replied. Violet’s temper was starting to boil. ‘I’m telling you, both Damas and Cleo had real strength, the likes of which I’d not encountered even through those of either the Sacred Band or the Round Table. I think we got lucky.’ He lowered his head with a hint of guilt.

‘No. You got lucky, Adam! Lucky I showed up to save your sorry ass.’ Violet was piqued. ‘And as for this so-called unusual, or interesting power of mine, I’m telling you I can handle it. Whatever it is, I can control it. It’s mine, you understand?’ she wagged her judgemental finger at the group, from Adam to Gary to Alex, then made a stormy exit, outside door slamming and rattling the pint glasses behind the bar.

Gary let out a sigh before casting a piercing look at Adam. 'You better apologise, Adam. We don't need this right now,' he requested. Adam grudged having to apologise for merely stating what he believed was the truth, but obliged and followed her. 'And mean it, please,' Gary demanded as the door closed.

'She's a fiery one, that Violet.' Alex loosened his stance, hands back in pockets.

'Just like Nick. Her father,' Gary noted.

'Hell hath no fury,' Alex quoted, cracking a smile. 'Adam mentioned something did happen to Violet though, during that event upon Mount Sinai and Lady Morgan Worthington? Something to do with that necklace?' he continued as Gary turned the volume up on the TV. More figures coming in by the minute, six more fatalities.

'Huh? Yes. Well, possibly... we were never sure. The Necklace of Harmonia was destroyed by Violet Butcher during that battle. Luke said he saw something happen, maybe a transference of sorts through the blade of Excalibur. Hard to recall as I'm sure you can appreciate, but Violet seems to be fine and well.' Gary shunned Alex, desperate to focus on the subject in hand.

'Violet wielded Excalibur?' Alex asked.

'Uh-huh. Briefly,' Gary's half-hearted reply came, as he took Alex's seat.

‘And destroyed a necklace that was, if I’m not mistaken, forged by the Gods of Greece?’ Alex persisted. Geraint noted Harmonia’s connection to the God of war, Ares, together with a brief synopsis of the forging of the Necklace for Cadmus’ wedding day. A cursed day for the House of Thebes and arguably all those that chose to wield the power of the Palladium for fortune and glory. Alex squatted between the two knights, interrupting the notes and papers being passed back and forth. ‘Do you not think, gentlemen of the Round Table, and believe me I’m by no means an expert on this, that young Violet there might just be something a little more than *unusual*? Forgive me, but I for one have never known of a female sharing similar powers to that of a Sacred Band warrior... who of course are men... *and* be of the lineage of one of the remaining twelve knights of King Arthur. Or however many of you are left,’ Alex stated with a touch of flippancy. It was a proposal that captured Willis and South for a moment. A daughter of Ares, not a son like the traditional Sacred Band. Same-sex attraction accepted, child of Sir Bors and a manifestation of hybrid-style powers. It was, as Damas himself confessed, *interesting*.

‘You want an apology, right?’ Adam meekly crept up and sat by Violet’s side on the picnic bench out front. Violet just grunted, carving neat circles in the grave by her feet with her staff. ‘You know, I forget it was

eight years ago we all sat in this pub holding our breaths as Colonel Stephen Thorpe, the legendary Sir Gareth, and his men laid siege to the place. That day you were taken captive. I remember beating myself up so badly afterwards,' Adam mused.

Violet lifted her head, looked straight forward at the odd car zip by. 'Donnelly. That's when you kissed Iain Donnelly and became turbo-charged or whatever the Sacred Band calls it once you bond,' she said. 'Can imagine what happened next with the Irish bastard must have really messed with your head. I know.' She placed her hand on his briefly, then quickly withdrew it.

'Actually, it wasn't that that caused the remorse that day,' Adam continued. 'It was more I knew I'd failed. Failed you. I said I would protect you, and I didn't, did I? In fact, Luke did a far better job than me during our time in Edinburgh upon Arthur's Seat – he'd have taken everything for you, from a bullet to raging green fire spewed from dragons.' Adam let out a soft laugh, recalling more snippets from their encounter with Lady Morgan. 'There was me, so obsessed with the wrong man, I almost took my eye off those that really mattered.'

'To be in love is to be obsessed. I often think, anyway,' Violet said. 'Might be why I've avoided it for so long. An unnecessary distraction.'

'My father never used to say that. In fact, you know he encouraged it in order to obtain the best out of me. I would say you and I might require the same lesson now, Mrs Butcher.' Adam dared to put his arm around

Violet's shoulders. Her icy demeanour melting slightly, she weakened and leaned into his chest. 'Share with me again, when you brought forth your father's blade, and fought Cleo, what did you feel?' Adam tenderly enquired.

Violet remained silent for a moment. 'Desire. Passion even. I don't know.' She pulled away and rubbed her cheeks. 'I've felt it only once before, no, twice,' she stuttered. 'When Aisha hugged me goodbye at the airport as she and Luke left for Jordan to start their new life.' A tear formed in the corner of her eye. 'Then when I...' she choked.

'When you shattered the Necklace?' Adam completed. Violet nodded, promptly wiping the tear away. 'It does make some sense you know. Harmonia was the goddess of just that, peace and accord. Ares was her father, but Aphrodite was her mother, and with that must come friction between pain and beauty. Isn't that what love is, after all? Pain and beauty?' his hand now slid its way to hers. 'Combine that with what that Necklace represented in its wearers, lust and passion – life's true driving forces.'

'If you're about to say I too am a demi-god then I might just clock you one, young Allen,' Violet chuckled through her emotion. 'And you won't be able to do anything about it because, well, I'm *interesting*.' She broke into her welcome laugh while mimicking Damas' comments in a gravelly voice.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it. Usually when I get punched I deserve it,’ Adam quipped with a grin. ‘But I would suggest you save your strength for this Cleo character. I don’t think we’ve seen the last of her and as you saw, I can’t take on both of them. Kinda need you, Sir Bors,’ he smiled.

Alex shouted from the front window, catching Adam’s attention, synced with Violet’s mobile buzzing with a BBC update. ‘Over a thousand critical cases of the unnamed virus now counted in the UK.’ Luke and Aisha were on the phone.

Chapter 10

London, England

5th April 2020 AD

There was a sting behind each of Ana's eyes. She tried to rub it away, blinking several times and rolling them up and down. The fatigue had truly set in. The dazzle of her computer screen burning patterns into her vision coupled with endless trips to the microscopes to examine samples had left them feeling raw. She searched through the top drawer of her desk for eye drops, catching her own scent – two days since she had a shower. Most unpleasant. She wondered whether any of her colleagues had noticed, only to be relieved at the thought that most had been trapped under the same roof for the past week, some even resorting to sleeping under the tables in the canteen for a few desperate hours before resuming their relentless analysis.

What a specimen this was. The blood samples had, as Mr Hall had promised, arrived at Dr Braithwaite's desk a mere minute or two upon her return from the session. She had already informed three members of her pathology team to assist in any containment isolation, two of whom were experienced, one a trainee but not lacking in enthusiasm. It was the trainee in fact who first noticed the molecular structure of the

virus was not too dissimilar to the common cold or flu, with the same receptor-binding mechanism of rhinovirus strands through inhalation. The initial symptoms of infection were now identified as coughing, wheezing, sore throat and general malaise. Then came the fever, evidence suggesting rapid onset post initial low-grade symptoms of just forty-eight to seventy-two hours – as high as 40 degrees combined with chills, shivers, sweats and in the most severe of cases, seizures. A simultaneous attack on the respiratory system followed, akin to pneumonia as first suggested. More concerning however were the statements now coming in from those recognised as life-critical, the swelling numbers of victims reporting manifestations of bubonic plague not seen on such a scale since the 14th century. Necrosis of the skin, boils, enlargement of lymph nodes and expelling of blood and mucus. It was made absolutely clear from the first few hours of such identification that all employees of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine were to be suited and sprayed upon entering and leaving the laboratory – a process that robbed Ana and her team of precious time.

That was to be her excuse to Mr Hall and his government sycophants for the lack of progress. She needed more resources, more sophisticated technology from around the world – the United States, India, Switzerland, China even. She had asked repeatedly, only to be bluntly refused each time on account of the outbreak's sensitivity for international relations. But cases were rising, fast. In the UK alone the figures topped ten thousand by the week's end, with over two hundred

and fifty fatalities confirmed. North America announced an apparent spike in both New York and Chicago late on Friday evening, with over five thousand across Western Europe. The difficulty lay in identifying any sort of pattern of infection, aside from close contact. Early Thursday morning news had reached Ana and her team of a family in Naples that had all contracted the disease, one member having attended the football match and flown home immediately after. The virus had spread, first to the eighty-year-old grandmother, dead within days, then to the mother and father, now both in critical care at their local hospital, the original match attendee of course – deceased six days after the match – but his younger brother, a life-long asthmatic, seemingly unharmed. A lone survivor amidst such turmoil. He became quite the sensation for the uncensored online press... *Il ragazzo che viveva...* or *the boy that lived*, streams would say. Some cited a miracle from the heavens, others questioned the legitimacy of science. All the medical community wanted was the bloodwork.

Dr Braithwaite was far from fluent in Italian, and had to rope in an old research fellow from undergraduate days that had since returned to Milan before she made the online call with scientists from the Agostino Gemelli University in Rome. The conversation started in a blur of rapidly spoken local dialects, only universal medical terms being absorbed by Ana before urging her colleagues to slow down. ‘Please, Signor Rossi, could you backtrack a little? You said this is not the same as the bubonic

plague?’ Dr Braithwaite hung her head low, attempting to hide any signs of exhaustion.

‘Sì, Signora Braithwaite. It is, as you may say, too evolved for anything like the... *Morte Nera*,’ Doctor Rossi explained in broken English. Ana needed no translation for his comparison – the Black Death. But, *too evolved?* She questioned further. ‘A new virus. Antibiotic resistant it would appear, but somehow, how do you say... *selettivo*,’ the doctor added. The translation came back as *selective*. *Selective how*, Ana asked in response. Rossi interlocked his fingers and switched back to fluent Italian for convenience.

‘He says, there’s a biological selection of the virus. This is very, very early days he stresses, but they have already noted some correlation between those that are getting infected and those that appear not to,’ Ana’s colleague translated the fast-paced discussion.

‘A biological selection? What do you mean? I know of no virus that biologically selects its victims. Granted there have always been some of different origins that could be at greater risk, but I never had much time for socio-demographic stats and conjecture,’ Ana confessed. ‘What is the foundation of this analysis?’ she followed with a sceptical tone. A flurry of more Italian swept across a failing internet connection, Ana straining to interpret any word she could before the translation began again.

'The young man from Naples... the boy that lived. He was homosexual. Worked for a regional gay magazine,' Ana's colleague proclaimed, pursing his lips with incredulity.

'So what? Surely Dr Rossi doesn't believe that sexual orientation is determining the victims of this virus? That's completely...'. Ana simply threw her arms up in the air in protest. 'Look. This is not the eighties, Dr Rossi, we need no political agendas or scapegoating, not now. Not in this current climate of potential civil unrest. You must have seen the news? This has the potential to spiral out of control if we don't provide honest, hard facts. Do you understand? *Capire?*' she stormed. The translation was made, more fiery Italian was salvaged back from Dr Rossi.

'He says there's more than one case. Not just the young man in Naples. His colleagues in Prague, Budapest and Madrid have made similar suggestions. Only this morning a doctor from Johns Hopkins University ratified a local claim in the United States,' the colleague delivered to Ana.

'This is preposterous. Get him to send me the full analysis of his work and tell him and his so-called colleagues to keep this absolutely to themselves. Not a word to be uttered to any tabloid, online blog or gutter press, got it?' Ana spat. Her colleague spoke back to Dr Rossi in sharp bursts, he nodded in agreement then parted with a simple 'Ciao.' The connection was terminated, leaving Ana alone with a black screen. She headed for her emails, clicking the refresh button several times in

anticipation of Dr Rossi's imminent message. Every minute that passed provided another layer of comfort to Ana. This was a joke of some sorts. Not in the slightest bit well-formed or in good taste. She began to relax, still contemplating her formal response back to Mr Hall due any minute now. Then her email pinged with one new message.

Chapter 11

Bath, England

8th April 2020 AD

Adam had urged his brother not to travel, not while Aisha was pregnant. But there was no deterring the two of them, not while the hysteria was mounting over this new illness that had insidiously been sweeping across the globe. It was now confirmed that each inhabited continent had at least one confirmed case of the virus referred to officially as XENO-20 because of its unique form when compared to similar seasonal strains of the common cold and influenza. While it was certain that leaders from around the world were doing their utmost to contain any unnecessary panic, once the media got hold of the latest statistics of infection and casualties – one hundred thousand cases and death tolls crossing the thousand mark within a single week – the damage had been done.

Inside his Volkswagen Polo, he fiddled with the cracking radio, which had never worked properly since the day he bought the third-hand car from a regular at The Bear. With most mainstream radio stations obsessed by the outbreak, the last thing Adam wanted during his drive over to Heathrow was more hyperbole. Words such as ‘crisis’ and

‘unprecedented’ jangled his nerves, but more frightening were those such as ‘inexplicable’ or ‘irrational’ – disasters can be managed, provided you stemmed the cause somehow. Until such time, it was akin to trying to capture smoke.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?’ Violet asked from the open window.

‘Best not. Let’s keep travel to a minimum,’ Adam replied, giving the front tyre a kick.

‘I know you don’t like travelling on the motorway when it gets dark.’ Violet gave a warm smile. Adam brushed off her concern. ‘Be sure to stop if you get tired.’

‘I’ll just let Luke drive.’ Adam looked at his watch in a hurry.

‘Always in a rush.’

‘With good reason.’ He started the engine on the second attempt.

‘Really need to get this thing serviced,’ clunking into reverse gear. ‘Do me a favour Violet... keep an eye and ear on the news – the proper news I mean, not social media – for any mention of Damas or Cleo. I have a strong sense they aren’t going to remain hidden for long with all this.’

Violet tilted her head in thought. ‘They didn’t exactly appear to be the quiet type, did they,’ she said. ‘Amazed they haven’t put their hands up already.’

'I know... which is what concerns me,' Adam said. 'Sure Gary and Geraint will be keeping tabs on all reliable channels.'

'What about the Band? Have you informed Fernando and Chris?' Violet shouted just as Adam was moving off.

'Speak to Uncle Alex. He'll manage it. See you in a few hours.' Adam pulled away with a jolt. As Violet returned to the bar, Gary jogged down the stairs, frantically tapping away at his laptop with sighs of frustration.

'Violet, is your wifi out again? I can't get any signal,' he moaned, handing the tatty device over to her. 'Guessing you've changed the password or something?'

'Nope. Still *Excalibur1*,' she smiled. Gary cast an incredulous look while reaching for the TV remote and turning the volume up. 'Helps if you switch the wifi on, Mr Willis.' Violet flicked the small switch on the side. 'There. Wait...'

'What?'

'You've got an email from Fernando.' Violet squinted her eyes. 'Does he usually email you?'

'Sometimes. Is Adam cc'ed?' Gary took the laptop and opened the mail. 'Doesn't appear to be. Strange.' Gary scanned his eyes through the brief message, creasing his brow towards the end. 'Fernando and Chris received a phone call this morning, from a chap called Damas.'

‘What? How did he know to call there?’ Violet snapped.

‘Not sure. But whatever was discussed, Fernando and Chris thought it best not to inform either Adam or Alex.’ Gary scratched the dark stubble under his chin. He checked his mobile, running on fumes. ‘Can I use the landline?’ he asked, already making his way behind the bar.

‘Why would Fernando and Chris not speak to Adam? Especially if Damas or Cleo had been in touch. Adam and Alex have warned the Sacred Band about them – I heard him on the call the moment the two of us returned from Wembley. They would have...’ she zipped up on seeing Alex Allen step through the front door.

‘Adam left for the airport?’ Alex patted his jacket free of the drizzle that had started to fall outside. ‘He won’t like driving in these conditions. Not on the M4,’ he chuckled. Violet gave a stilted grin. ‘Where’s Mr Media and Bookworm?’ Alex’s pet names for Willis and South.

‘Gary’s just on the phone. Want a beer?’ Violet worked hard to suppress any gossip, much against her nature. Alex nodded as he took his regular seat in front of the TV and cursed at the ongoing news coverage of XENO-20, cynically likening it to a mere ‘case of the sniffles’. She heard Gary talking in the background, straining to pick up any words while pulling Alex’s pint. The receiver was hung up firmly and Gary reappeared.

'Press after you again for another news story about this little cough or whatever?' Alex shouted over his shoulder, shaking the battered TV remote into life to change channel. Gary blanked him.

'Well? What did Fernando say?' Violet whispered.

'This Damas fellow. He's asked to meet Adam, in Edinburgh.' Gary's face drained of colour.

'For what? A rematch?' Violet questioned.

'Sort of.'

'You're kidding! Why not just ask him face to face? Coward,' Violet dismissed. Gary breathed deeply.

'It's not as simple as that. Whoever this Damas guy is, he knows the inner workings of the Sacred Band. Their structure, their hierarchy, their rituals,' Willis replied.

'Rituals.'

'Yes. In order to lead the Sacred Band, traditionally there was a challenge laid forth. Similar to the *agoge* with the Spartans. The two strongest men would fight for the right to lead, sometimes against their own partners – the winner would then command the entire force of three hundred,' Gary explained.

‘But the Sacred Band were leaderless for years until Adam came along. Let’s be honest, as wonderful and kind as Graham McCready was, he was more of a secretary than a leader. Surely Adam did enough during our efforts at Mount Sinai to prove his worth?’ Violet protested. Gary hung his head. ‘Anyway, what business is it of Damas’. He was strong, but not Sacred Band. Adam would have known.’

‘He did say he was old. *Very* old. Perhaps he knows more about Adam and his fighters’ legacy than any of us realise,’ Gary considered.

‘So what if it is a challenge. What does that actually mean?’ Violet asked, wiping the head off the freshly pulled pint.

‘I’d need to speak with Geraint. He might know more... but if based upon ancient Theban tradition, you’d be looking at an honourable fight between two Sacred Band warriors, the remaining fighters in attendance to ratify the decision and then swear allegiance,’ Gary said, unable to hide his frustration at his powerless mobile containing South’s number. ‘My charger is upstairs. Let me call Geraint and ask.’

‘What should I tell Alex?’ Violet spoke softly.

‘Nothing. For now at least.’

It was a relief to see his brother and Aisha had travelled light. Adam's car probably couldn't make it above fifty miles per hour with three people in it, let alone several suitcases. Luke had buzz-cut his hair shorter since he last saw him, an odd choice given the clear difference in temperature between the Middle East and Britain this time of year. Aisha, four months gone, just displayed a slight bump on her belly disguised by a loose-fitting hoodie.

'Managed to get the staff through customs again. You would have thought ever since the September 11th attacks a moderate-sized piece of wood would be seen as a weapon of mass destruction,' Luke chirped from the driver's seat, fiddling with the dashboard dials. 'Bro, how old is this car?' as he pushed a button he thought was air conditioning, only to switch the fog lights on.

'It moves, doesn't it?' Adam snapped back.

'Barely. Hardly a benchmark for a car, is it? You should see back in Jordan, everyone drives the latest BMW out there. Ridiculous.' Luke struggled to get comfortable. 'So, how's things?'

'Could be better. Seen the news?' Adam checked his mirrors.

'Trying not to,' Aisha said from the back seat. 'What do Gary and Geraint make of it all?' she asked.

'Hardly their area of expertise, is it, babe? It's a virus, not a magic statue,' Luke huffed.

‘Come on Luke. After what your brother and Violet saw at Wembley? Palladium or not, this is no ordinary disease, right Adam?’ Aisha fired back.

Adam measured his response, trying to articulate what little evidence the group had managed to piece together about the Niobids, the estranged brother and sister pairing, and the brutal encounter between Damas and Cleo.

‘More hokum then,’ Luke sighed. ‘Where all these mythical descendants keep coming from is what I want to know. And why do some remain quiet for so long when others can’t seem to shut the hell up?’ he said crassly.

‘Maybe each of them is hoping the other will do their jobs for them,’ Adam replied. ‘Perhaps when Lady Morgan and the White Dragon failed, it acted as a conduit for others who craved a similar destiny?’

‘Now you’re sounding like a comic book, Bro,’ Luke sneered. ‘Still, after all that we’ve been through, wouldn’t be the most outrageous statement I’ve heard.’

Adam missed a gear, the engine protested and he gritted his teeth but avoided a stall. ‘Damn it,’ he muttered, much to Luke’s amusement. ‘No. I don’t want you to drive, I’m fine,’ he snapped, noticing the evening light grow dimmer. ‘To answer your question, Aisha, very little from Gary and Geraint... other than the legend of Queen Niobe and her children.

Apollo and Artemis's wrath upon them and another cursed family of Thebes.'

'You think this Damas and Cleo have a direct connection to Queen Niobe? As Luke said, descendants of some sorts?' Aisha asked. Adam gave a shrug. 'Maybe not even descendants? I mean...' she thought aloud.

'As in the actual children? Very well weathered if so, hun.' Luke raised his eyebrows.

'So was Morgan le Fay,' Adam reminded them. 'Albeit with some help from the Necklace of Harmonia.'

Aisha sat back on the torn seats and stretched her arms out. 'Doesn't really make sense to deliver a plague upon the earth, does it? It all appears very biblical, but who would be left? Can't be many deities to share the spoils. Maybe not even us as knights of the Round Table,' she gave Luke a nudge on his shoulder.

'Perhaps that's all Damas and Cleo want. A world filled with what they see as perfection.' Adam fussed over windscreen wipers as the rain began to come down hard, blurring his view of the road.

'Hear that, Aisha? We're perfection,' Luke purred as he ticked the right handle to spring the front wipers into life, winking at his brother.

'Perfection is a quest with no end,' Adam grunted in agitation.

Luke gave a smile, having finally found the closest thing to ventilation for the car. 'Jez, it's like I'm sat next to Dad.'

Chapter 12

London, England

8th April 2020 AD

‘Thank you for agreeing to do this, Paul.’ Dr Braithwaite prepped a needle while her protégé slowly rolled up the cuff of his white shirt. ‘I’ll need to keep this off the record. If you don’t mind.’ A concerned look crossed Paul’s face.

‘Are you on to something, boss?’ Paul offered his forearm.

‘Not sure. Hold still,’ Ana replied.

‘The call you had with Milan. You’ve not spoken of it – ouch,’ Paul winced from the prick of the needle. ‘Not to anyone in your team. Why?’

‘Sorry. I meant to yesterday, you know how these things go. We’re all falling behind.’ Ana focused on transferring the blood to a vial, shielding her from eye contact. ‘Well, maybe not you, trainee and all, but you’ll soon get used to government orders changing by the minute during circumstances such as this.’ She dabbed the pinprick with a cotton bud. Paul had impressed with his early detection of the virus structure, precociously lecturing Ana’s two more seasoned team members on his

discovery, much to their irritation. He'd been shunned as a result for the last few days, prompting him to ask Dr Braithwaite whether an apology was in order. She advised him never to apologise for moving forward when others are standing still – echoing advice once given to her by her own mentor. It was during this conversation Paul had first spoken to her about his private life, choosing not to share it openly, and firmly standing by his decision despite Ana's reassurances. His Nigerian upbringing had shackled his sense of purpose for much of his youth, and despite growing in confidence as a young man, he chose his moments carefully when declaring his sexual preferences to those other than friends. Dr Braithwaite grappled with mixed feelings of sadness and privilege while listening to her student. Considered a friend, but powerless to shift perception.

Paul did, however, present an opportunity now. As uneasy as Ana felt about turning the trainee into a laboratory rat, the email from Dr Rossi had not left her mind. She needed proof. Tangible evidence of some kind ahead of any summation back to Mr Hall and his board... something she was already falling behind with each passing hour. She packaged the vial carefully in a transparent bag and scribbled some rough notes on its label. 'There. I'll let you know how I get on.' She forced a cheerful demeanour.

‘You’re not going to tell me, are you?’ Paul recovered his arm. ‘Look, I know I’m new around here but I’d like to think you can trust me. Perhaps I can assist?’ he began to plead.

‘Trust me. You’ve done enough, young man,’ Ana replied sincerely. ‘That said, once I’ve heard back on this, you’ll be the first to know. Our secret. Right?’ she smiled. Paul nodded and slung his rucksack over his shoulder. ‘Get some rest, you’ll need it,’ Ana reminded as the door closed behind him. She sat quietly and in silence, a brief glance at her watch as the evening set in. Another restless night would ensue if she didn’t examine the sample immediately, she knew it. Damn. The familiar chemical smell came from the bright blue latex glove box. If there were no conclusions by 10 pm then that would absolutely be it for the day, she promised herself.

It didn’t take more than thirty minutes. Quite remarkable. Ana clicked through the droplets one by one. The isolated virus, XENO-20, sampled from the contaminated blood of victims, was eradicated almost instantly upon mixing with Paul’s blood. An instant T-cell reaction unlike anything she’d ever witnessed. The virus was smothered by lymphocytes in an accelerated adaptive immunity pattern – no sooner had it arrived in the blood than it was expelled. She darted her fingers across Dr Rossi’s email on the opposite screen, cursing under her breath at the poor Italian to

English translation, but gleaming enough to mirror her findings. She remained agitated. This was not enough.

Tightening the tourniquet around her upper arm, Ana drew blood from her own arm. There had to be a more plausible explanation, a more natural form of selective immunity. Moments later her heart sank deeper as her own sample went the way of the victims. Dr Rossi had expressed instances in Prague, Budapest and Madrid, as well as the Americans... but no further emails or messages had reached her over the past forty-eight hours, nor had there been any attempt to leak such an accusation to the media. Perhaps Dr Rossi and any wider members of the medical community were deliberately keeping tight-lipped on any such discovery, she thought, fully aware of its consequences. She sat deeply back into her office chair, breaking the dizzy spell that came over her. More subjects were needed – Paul and the young man from Naples could potentially be verified, but the cases from Johns Hopkins University and across Europe remained vague. She pulled her keyboard close and frantically typed an email back to Dr Rossi, cc'ing in her translator. She was about to punch the send button when the subject line of Dr Rossi's original email caught her attention – *Urgente: peste eterosessuale*.

Chapter 13

Bath, England

9th April 2020 AD

Luke and Aisha had arrived back in Bath late last night – no thanks to Adam’s timid driving, Luke was quick to point out when Violet demanded to know why the two had retired to bed so soon upon returning to Bath. Jet lag played its part, especially for Aisha, fussing about the precious cargo she was carrying. Just one mention of the baby was enough to switch Violet’s mind into maternal mode and the two chatted for over an hour on the phone about baby names and potential sexes. Adam and Uncle Alex were quick to remind him that the bloodline of Sir Galahad almost certainly meant Luke’s firstborn child would be male, the question was whether he would either inherit his father’s sword or, should there be a vacancy in the natural limit of three hundred, the power of the Sacred Band. Aisha shunned such a notion as being a relic from a time before people thought women could be knights, and that there must have been some leading ladies that took up the Sir Galahad and Sir Gawain mantle over the centuries.

Luke yawned his way through much of the discussion, but hadn’t really given the subject much thought. As giddy as he was with excitement at

becoming a father, the responsibilities passed through the generations and weight of expectation from both his own brother, the remaining knights of the Round Table and the Sacred Band itself following the heroics of his father Richard was enough to zap the joy out of parenthood. It wasn't as though he hadn't considered such a task of course, more convinced himself that the threats his family had faced over the centuries were to be far less common now, surely? After all, how many dads would get the chance to tell their children a bedtime story that involved wielding the magical blade of Excalibur and destroying a cursed statue? Just when he came to the climax of the story and teased his kids as to its validity – just a story, or real? – that's when Aisha would come in and either remind him that his legendary exploits involved a good deal of help from friends, or clip him round the ear for embellishment and getting the children too excited ahead of bedtime. He played with the visuals in his mind, sparking an inner smile.

There was no excuse this morning though. Violet was banging on the Allen door at 8.00 am sharp, as she had promised. With Adam and Alex up at some ridiculous hour for training, Aisha groaned and rolled over to the far side of the bed, stealing most of the duvet from Luke. 'You're answering that, Galahad!' she croaked through her raspy morning throat. Luke rubbed his eyes in front of the bathroom mirror and threw on the same clothes from the flight over, trying to look somewhat presentable. He managed to open the door on the third ring of the bell.

There stood Violet, not beaming with pleasure as he expected though, flanked by the stern looks of both Gary and Geraint.

‘Morning, Violet. Sorry, we thought it was only you popping by.’ Luke straightened his posture in front of his two fellow knights. ‘Gary, Geraint – great to see you, how’s...’ Gary gave the briefest of embraces to Luke then slid right past him, not saying a word. Geraint followed, not even bothering with a hug of his own.

‘Sorry, Luke. I wanted to tell you and Aisha during the call last night but didn’t think it the best time.’ Violet warmly put both arms around Luke’s waist and pulled him close. ‘At least let you and Aisha get some rest, right?’

‘Someone died?’ Luke asked.

‘No. Well, not quite,’ Violet cautioned. ‘Where’s Adam and Uncle Alex?’

‘Finishing their eighties fitness montage,’ Luke grinned. ‘Every morning at 5.00 am apparently, must know the drill by now. Why?’

Violet remained quiet, first watching Gary and Geraint make some space on the kitchen table, whispering and muttering to themselves as they so often did, then catching the eye of Aisha trotting down the stairs in a blue silk dressing gown, the night still creased on her face. The two embraced tightly, exclaiming how much they’d missed one another and all the usual pleasantries. ‘What’s going on?’ Aisha said upon noting Willis and South.

‘Beats me. Violet?’ Luke prompted.

‘Mrs Hussin, knight of Sir Palamedes. Good morning, my dear.’ Geraint bowed before Aisha. She could never tell whether the senior gentleman was joking or not with his predilection for formality, it all seemed a little quaint, but she playfully responded with matching grace.

‘Sir Geraint. Lovely to see you again. Still indulging your talents I hear? Many a good press article written between you and Sir Gaheris over there,’ Aisha flattered.

‘Yes, yes – all right everyone, enough. What’s going on?’ Luke interjected. ‘Why do you need to see Adam and Alex so urgently? Please tell me it’s not to do with this flu bug that’s doing the rounds because that’s absolutely ridiculous. I told Adam that only a few days ago and...’

‘Told me what?’ Adam asked, appearing from behind in a sweat-soaked black vest, hair matted down, knuckles raw and a smear of fresh blood across his upper lip.

‘What the hell have you been doing, bro?’ Luke gasped.

‘Just boxing. Told him to block but he didn’t.’ Alex wrestled with his boots before prising them free. ‘Actually quite a tame session. He’s getting much better. Your father would have been proud.’ Luke gave no reply but folded his arms in disapproval. ‘Ah, Mr Media and Bookworm. To what do we owe the pleasure?’

Aisha couldn't help but let slip a giggle at Alex Allen's juxtaposed disposition. Gary snuffed it immediately by switching on the television for the BBC news. Headlines reading as they had done for the past week or so, the XENO-20 death toll climbing into the many thousands across the world and infection rates cresting the million mark.

'I knew it!' Luke spurted. 'You think this disease has something to do with us knights, don't you? Seriously, how can that be? I don't remember anything being said about a plague coming down from the heavens in any Arthurian literature or tales Mum and Dad told us.'

'What about Greek tales?' Geraint kept his head low in a dusty book.

'Oh, do enlighten me, Mr South.' Luke tossed his arms high and made a move for the kettle. 'Anyone else want a coffee while we listen to this?'

As Gary and Geraint set out the scene with the story of Queen Niobe and King Amphion of Thebes, their children slaughtered by Apollo and Artemis – poisoned where they stood in a shower of arrows – then fleshed out by Adam and Violet's encounter at Wembley with the ones called Damas and Cleo, all Aisha could do was grip Luke's hand hard until both hands turned white.

‘So, what’s his play? Damasichthon?’ Adam tilted his chair back. ‘We know he and his sister Cleodoxa bear one hell of a grudge. That he certainly appears to understand the legacy of the Sacred Band – which would make sense if his own lineage is to be believed – but why make themselves known now? And why like this?’ he pointed to the news feed.

Luke slurped his coffee. ‘Hold on. Are you actually confirming this Damas guy Adam and Violet fought at Wembley is the *original* child of Queen Niobe? That’s one good set of genes if so. Absolutely no relation to Lady Morgan I presume?’

Gary shook his head and turned to Geraint for support. ‘It wouldn’t appear so, no. Certainly no use of the Necklace of Harmonia to prolong life, that’s for sure,’ South said with a nod in Violet’s direction. Violet turned away bashfully.

‘I meant to ask Violet, Adam mentioned that you’ve recently been displaying... ouch!’ Luke shot a glare towards his brother following the sharp kick under the table he’d received.

‘The best we can suggest is that both siblings have been waiting for the right opportunity. Perhaps the connection to the old White Dragon is not so far-fetched... but when it failed...’

‘When *you* failed, you mean,’ Alex interrupted Geraint mid-sentence.

‘Indeed Mr Allen, when *my* brethren failed with Lady Morgan’s plans for unleashing the trinity, perhaps that was the final straw,’ Geraint conceded. ‘Clearly though, they had a backup plan of their own. One that relies not on the mystical, but the scientific.’

‘So we need a scientist?’ Aisha suggested. ‘A micro-biologist of some sorts to help us understand what it was Damas and Cleo released at the football match and how it is spreading so quickly. Gary, you must know people in London that can help?’

‘A few, perhaps. I have already tapped some sources in government and within the medical community. As you can appreciate I’m sure, none are willing to be too forthcoming given the media panic that’s brewing at the moment,’ Gary sighed.

‘Still think it’s the water supply. Would make sense.’ Alex impatiently drummed his fingers on the table. Aisha promptly put her glass of water down.

‘I really don’t think so, Uncle. Why stage such an open release of this strain if you could clandestinely release it into a local treatment plant?’ Adam questioned. ‘I think Damas and Cleo *wanted* this to be public.’

Reading Aisha’s concern, Luke asked, ‘Do we know anything about how this actually spreads then? Is it just like a common cold or what?’

‘Would appear so. With a very rapid infection rate and tragically high mortality,’ Geraint replied.

‘Any survivors so far?’ Violet asked with a glimmer of hope.

‘None that have been reported. However, we might get some more answers to that very soon.’ Geraint looked towards Gary. ‘Is that not correct, Sir Gehris?’

Adam could always tell when Gary was the bearer of bad news, his teeth would clench behind his lips making his nostrils flare. ‘What is it, Gary?’ he put Willis out of his misery.

‘Damas has been in touch with Fernando up in Edinburgh. He wants to meet you,’ Gary said, releasing a deep breath. ‘It’s to do with the *right of leadership*.’

‘The *what?*’ Luke asked.

Alex bolted to his feet. ‘The right of leadership? That Greek fossil has the cheek to claim leadership of the Sacred Band after all this time hiding in the shadows not doing a damn thing to assist either the Red Dragon or his fellow warriors fallen across the battlefields? On what terms?’ he spat.

‘To answer your question, brother, the right of leadership is a duel between two Sacred Band warriors. The winner is entitled to lead the Band.’ Adam cast a still look.

‘But Damas is not a Sacred Band fighter, is he? How can he challenge you?’ Luke insisted.

‘Violet asked the same question.’ Geraint closed one book and promptly opened another. ‘While Damas is not Sacred Band, no, he was – or still is – a prince of the House of Thebes through his parents. He can, therefore, request the right to lead, given the Band’s loyalty to the king and queen.’

‘No. No way. The Sacred Band would never accept it. Adam has led them for eight years and proved himself at Mount Sinai, he owes nothing to that pretender to the throne,’ Alex continued to rant.

‘But Mr Allen, the rules of the Sacred Band are sacrosanct. If there is a challenge...’ Geraint stood firm.

‘I don’t care about ancient rules and by-laws, Mr South! This is not up for discussion,’ Alex fired back.

Adam looked distant from the entire conversation. Luke shuffled his chair closer to his and whispered to him – ‘Adam, you know you don’t have to prove anything. This sounds like a ruse. Don’t do anything stupid.’ Adam remained trapped in thought. Amidst the ongoing feud between Geraint, Gary and Alex he found his voice.

‘Did Damas say when? When does he wish to meet?’ Adam spoke with intention. The two knights and his uncle ceased their squabbles, Aisha and Violet froze. Luke twisted away in regret and buried his cheek into his palm.

‘As soon as possible, Adam,’ Gary answered.

‘Where? Edinburgh?’ Adam asked, without a flicker of emotion. Gary nodded. ‘Fine. I’ll inform Fernando and Chris that I’m on my way.’ He stood and went to leave, his uncle blocking his path immediately.

‘I can’t let you do this, Adam.’ Alex took a firm grip of Adam’s shoulders. ‘If you...’

‘If what, Uncle? If I lose? Is that it? What’s the purpose of training me so hard if I am to back away from such a challenge?’ Adam pushed Alex away with force. ‘I should be tested, I must earn my right to lead the Sacred Band like every other before me. That’s what my father would have wanted and expected.’

Alex knew he could argue no more. He hung his head and stepped aside, Adam storming up the stairs and slamming his bedroom door harshly enough to rattle the very foundations of their home.

‘You don’t believe he’ll yield do you?’ Geraint asked Alex softly. Alex tucked his hands under his arms and gave a shake of his head before retiring quietly to the lounge.

‘Well, this all sounds like a massive confidence boost for my brother!’ Luke looked around at each solemn face. ‘Why don’t you think he can win? Get shot of Damas once and for all?’

‘He just might, Master Allen,’ Geraint replied. ‘And there isn’t a Sacred Band member more up to the task than your brother, believe me. But,

should he fail, we stand to lose so much just at a time when we really cannot afford to.'

'So? It's a gamble, we all know that. Adam might lose the fight, the duel or whatever you want to call it. But look at it this way... an engagement with Damas might help us understand his plans, the purpose behind all of this. Plus, we're assuming even if Adam loses the Sacred Band will follow Damas – quite unlikely don't you think?' Luke proposed.

'True. But whom else will they follow if Adam loses and doesn't yield? Which knowing your brother he won't,' Geraint said.

'They are loyal. They'll follow Adam regardless.' Luke confidently downed the last of his coffee.

'You cannot follow a dead warrior, Luke. A duel without yielding will be to the death,' Gary informed him.

Chapter 14

London, England

10th April 2020 AD

There was a noticeable twitching of fingers, clearing of throats and deep inhalations – no words though. Dr Braithwaite pulled the projector cord from her laptop and remained silent herself, her attention firmly on Mr Hall. It only took a few moments before his look of disdain was vocalised.

‘I’m sorry, Ana. This is just nonsense... dangerous nonsense at that. After one full week of research, this is what you’ve come to inform us? That the virus is somehow targeting only those with heterosexual tendencies? Ludicrous. I’ve no choice but to remove you and your team from this project and reassign,’ he sneered.

It was the response Dr Braithwaite anticipated. While hurtful to be criticised so openly in front of esteemed colleagues and governmental staff, such a conclusion was certain to be condemned and ridiculed. Her professional career was at stake, as indeed was the reputation of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and those on her team. Which is why she had prepared a counter-argument.

‘Does the WHO know of Dr Rossi of the Agostino Gemelli University?’ she retorted. Mr Hall turned for advice to the WHO representative present, and the gaunt-looking gentleman with ageing speckled skin gave a brief nod. Ana thought as much, knowing the doctor would hardly be able to keep this to himself as discussed only days ago, not when corroborating evidence was springing up from elsewhere across the globe. ‘I take it he was dismissed for sharing a similar theory?’

The gaunt gentleman locked his hands together uneasily. ‘Dr Rossi is a brilliant biologist. Fabulous work in tackling mutations in cholera epidemics through Asia and the South Pacific as well as what we believed to be a resurgence of smallpox in Russia only last year following an explosion in a laboratory... but as you said, Mr Hall, this particular analysis was deemed inconclusive, given the small sample of test subjects,’ he declared.

‘Test subjects?’ Dr Braithwaite enquired.

‘Correct. While the concept appeared far-fetched, given Dr Rossi has not been the only medical professional to suggest such a theory, the WHO did authorise a secondary review of the findings. As noted, all inconclusive,’ the gentleman replied.

‘Forgive me sir, but inconclusive is not the same as *beyond doubt* is it? My own test subject...’ Ana paused for a moment, fearing her breach in protocol by calling upon Paul would be met with scorn from her audience. She quickly rephrased – ‘... a test subject I heard of proved

empirically that the blood of a homosexual male not only held natural immunity, but actually *destroyed* the XENO-20 pathogen. With a little more work we could maybe develop a vaccine if a wider sample was reached and...' This time it was Mr Hall that raised his hand in objection.

'Might I remind you, Dr Braithwaite, of the political implications of what you are proposing. Leaders from around the world do not want to be told that one small proportion of their society is naturally immune to such a disease. Better we state that everyone is both a target and a threat than sow the seeds of division.' Mr Hall's statement was met with approval from the WHO representative and others around the table. 'Besides, this societal group is notoriously ill-defined, is it not? Of course, it is beyond argument that sexuality begins at birth, but the spectrum of sexuality is... well, shall we say, *broad*. Are we stating that only homosexual men are excluded? What about homosexual women? Bisexual individuals – do they only have *half* the immunity? Pansexuality results in *double* the immunity?' he continued to hypothesise.

Ana gave an exasperated sigh. 'Surely then we need to perform more tests at least. It might be our only chance. I understand entirely the sensitivities around this notion, Mr Hall, but surely we can all agree that all avenues need to be checked, then checked again for a more conclusive outcome.' She reached for the printouts of emails she'd received from more isolated sources. 'This cannot just be coincidence.

These cases both I and Dr Rossi are being alerted to, from the Czech Republic to Hungary...'

'There are always those with agendas, Dr Braithwaite. Even within our community egos can run riot, scaremongering can be seen as a way of being seen and recognised for controversial propositions. You might be too young to remember the AIDS crisis of the eighties, but the moment the press got hold of the notion that such a pandemic was intrinsic to the lifestyle of a select few, the net result was rage, confusion and chaos.' Mr Hall stood firm.

'And eventually justice. Would you not agree?' Ana fired back. Mr Hall's judgemental expression returned.

'Dr Braithwaite, if you have nothing more to add then you and your team are dismissed. We shall reconvene tomorrow with additional input from WHO representatives and advise the UK Government in due course. Thank you for your time.' Mr Hall closed his folder and slotted it neatly into his briefcase. His phone vibrated on the table, he pinched between his eyes in apparent despair. 'Do excuse me.' He shook the irritability from his voice and chirpily answered 'Minister. How are you?' and left the room.

Ana caught the arm of the WHO representative as he walked past. 'Sir. These test subjects you spoke of... where did the trial take place?' she asked.

‘Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore,’ he replied in a hurry.

‘Dr Rossi spoke of a contact there. A contact that might have supported the theory? What happened?’ Ana thumbed through her papers trying to find the correct email print out.

The gentleman looked disgruntled. ‘I’ll spare you the time, Dr Braithwaite. It was a Doctor Russell. Very well regarded specialist, at one time,’ the gentleman muttered.

‘At one time?’ Ana quizzed.

‘Been self-medicating on morphine for years. Many of his colleagues knew of it, but they shielded his reputation. This, however, was a step too far.’ The gentleman took a brief look at his watch. ‘I really must be leaving, Dr Braithwaite.’

‘But... so, he didn’t conduct the primary trial?’ Ana persisted.

‘No. But the university did, with an alternative medic. They also followed up with collaborations through China and Russia.’ He pushed his way past.

‘Wait. China and Russia?’ Ana blinked in disbelief. ‘A proposal like this and you shared intelligence with the Chinese and the Russians? Why not the Japanese or Australians? What about the Hungarians, Spaniards or Czechs...?’ she shuffled through her papers for shreds of evidence. The gentleman placed a solid hand on her shoulder.

‘Dr Braithwaite, you and I both know that despite characters like Mr Hall out there our game is non-political. I cannot sit here in good faith and sanction such a notion that would be completely unheard of in the history of medicinal science. It’s beyond the capabilities of any world power no matter how nefarious their intentions. We must work on a practical study, that is our field, the WHO must guide research based on the best facts available. Otherwise, exactly what governments fear might just become a *reality*. Before you realise it, we would have more than just a health crisis on our hands.’ He reduced his voice to a whisper.

Mr Hall re-entered the room, face pale and clammy, still gripping his mobile. ‘Yes, Minister. I understand, completely. Give me twenty-four hours. Thank you.’ He shut his phone and gave a look filled with thunder towards Ana. ‘Aside from Dr Rossi, whom else have you discussed your proposal with, Dr Braithwaite?’

‘No one,’ she said defensively. ‘I cannot vouch for Dr Rossi though... he spoke of an article in a local gay magazine from Naples, that’s all, however. Why?’ her look darted between Mr Hall and the gentleman.

‘We have six mainstream tabloids and numerous social media outlets trending an article written by a Mr Zethus. No medical background, but he claims he knows the source of the virus.’ Mr Hall grappled with his composure.

‘The actual *source*? That would imply...’ the gentleman couldn’t bring himself to finish.

‘Precisely. Why do you think the Prime Minister and countless others are now striking out demanding answers? This is exactly the sort of leak we were trying to avoid,’ Mr Hall responded. ‘Damn newspapers and their headlines!’

‘They won’t buy into this surely?’ the gentleman tried to reassure.

‘The death toll is rising daily, infections more so. What better way to have your papers fly off the shelves and get a bit of click-bait to some celebrity weight loss product than a health scare that’s off the scale?’ Mr Hall’s tone became uncharacteristically bitter. ‘We’re going to have to push back hard immediately on all this. How quickly can we get the WHO board assembled?’

‘I’ll call them now.’ The gentleman brought his mobile to his ear and bolted for the door.

‘Mr Hall... this Mr Zethus, what do we know about him?’ Ana had to ask.

‘Nothing. As I said, no medical background or training.’ Mr Hall kept his gaze on the WHO representative through the glass, itching for his response.

‘So, why the big panic? As you said, plenty of egos out there right? Attention seekers?’ Ana stung back. ‘This can easily be discredited.’

Mr Hall must have felt that he'd given away nothing as his impatience got the better of him and he took to tracing the movements of the gentleman outside. Ana held her papers close to her chest.

Trying to discredit the *truth* was the real danger here.

Chapter 15

Bath, England

11th April 2020 AD

The creak of floorboards from just outside the bedroom door alerted Luke that his brother was up. He reached for his phone while trying not to disturb Aisha's deep slumber – she'd had a restless few nights with worry, most uncharacteristically so, but was always quick to blame her hormones. With such a defence, Luke felt uncomfortable questioning her.

His phone was busy with news feeds from throughout the night. More infections, deaths and lockdowns across major cities. He clicked on one pop up from what appeared to be a reputable site providing coverage from the UK Government, discrediting any notion of a 'gay immunity' to the XENO-20 virus. The name Mr Zethus was mentioned several times in the comments sections, most quick to criticise his theory as little more than attention-seeking slander and minority opportunism, while a handful of others seemingly relished the concept and that the prospect of a straight plague was somehow a form of justice for the ill will that continued to exist against the gay and lesbian community. The farther down the comments went, the more obnoxious the language became.

Luke silenced his phone as the buzz of a text from Violet came close to waking Aisha. He nuzzled the back of her neck to soothe her back to sleep.

Adam had one hand on a glass of orange juice, the other wrapped around his phone when Luke found him in the kitchen.

‘Coffee?’ Luke asked. Adam responded by pointing to the jar of teabags, playfully reminding Luke of the breakfast ritual for the English. ‘You seen the news?’ Luke followed.

‘Trying not to. Impossible to ignore, though,’ Adam said, pulling away from his mobile.

‘This Mr Zethus... you don’t think...?’ Luke began.

‘Quite possible. You remember what Geraint said about Queen Niobe of Thebes? She was married to King Amphion, whose brother according to legend, was Zethus – both sons of Zeus himself,’ Adam replied, fetching milk from the fridge.

‘Bit of a clumsy surname for someone that should be trying to keep a low profile,’ Luke queried while working his way around the kettle. ‘How do you switch this thing on?’

‘Plugging it in helps,’ Adam assisted with a sigh. ‘And who said Damas wants to keep a low profile? He’s set the stage, now it’s time to entertain the crowd.’

‘But if his cover is blown, he and his sister will have every authority in the world hunting for them. Doesn’t make any sense this early into the game,’ Luke said, taking the seat opposite him.

‘What if the two don’t plan on doing this alone?’ Adam asked. Luke gave his brother a bewildered look. ‘An entire community of people sidelined, smeared, tarnished for who they are. Over the decades, accused of spreading diseases and impure doctrine, now potentially in a position to fight back against oppressors. A catalyst to rally, to take a stand and speak up and judge the other side for the first time. It could become quite... appealing.’ Adam poured the boiled water.

Luke’s expression of bewilderment switched to concern. ‘Bro, forgive me but haven’t you heard rhetoric like this before?’ he flinched a little as Adam’s body suddenly stiffened. There was a second or two of silence that felt like an eternity.

‘Indeed I have... we all have. But the rest of the world might remain ignorant, and at worst, angry. You and I, our parents, the knights of the

Round Table, we hold the inside track on such matters – but everyone else that feels they've been wronged? What about them? Tolerance in society is a fragile thing, Luke, it takes only the slightest tip and carnage ensues,' Adam replied in a steady tone.

'This is what Damas wants, isn't it. Some form of Project Fear campaign,' Luke spoke his thoughts out loud.

'And with a possible army of warriors by his side to defend his actions, aggressively if needs be,' Adam noted, stirring in some sugar.

'The Band? That's why Damas wants control of the Sacred Band? With them on his side...' Luke posed.

'Quite a defence. Wouldn't you say?' Adam took a sip of tea. 'No pressure on me then.' He tried to soften the hardened look on his brother's face.

Luke reached across and seized Adam's wrist. 'Adam, this could be very risky. More than risky. If you... well, if Damas gets what he wants...' His brother pulled his arm away.

'Great pep talk, Brother. Thanks.' Adam looked away.

‘You know what I mean. Suppose everything Gary and Geraint claim is true, that this Damas guy is some sort of demi-god, centuries old. That is going to make him a formidable opponent, but more so, quite the charismatic leader for the Sacred Band. Especially with an objective such as this.’ Luke couldn’t control his emotions any longer. ‘I know the Band is loyal to you, and its members surely wouldn’t follow such an act against humanity, but there are – as you so often remind me – codes of conduct?’ he struggled to find the right words to describe the indefatigable fealty of the three hundred warriors.

‘I do know that, Luke. They will follow whomever has the right to lead, which is why Damas has challenged. And yes, he will be formidable, but what sort of leader would I be if I didn’t meet his challenge? I’d be no more than a husk of a leader in the Sacred Band’s eyes,’ Adam protested. ‘Besides, it’s not like we haven’t encountered one another before... this time, I’ll be prepared.’

‘You had Violet last time.’

‘And he had his sister. This time, at least it should be fair.’

‘I’m not sure fair is what Damas has in mind...’ Luke froze as a loud thud came from directly above both their heads, followed by Aisha’s groan

and strained cries. The brothers bolted from their seats and rushed straight up the stairs.

Only the heavy whites of eyes could be seen from those unfortunate enough to find themselves at the Royal United Hospital in Bath. The enforcement of face masks in response to the contagion was meant to offer some measure of reassurance against contamination, as was the overpowering, sterile smell of disinfectant and antibacterial gels across every ward. Violet had already rubbed her hands raw twice with hand sanitisers since arriving, whereas Alex went about collecting as much information as he could through pamphlets and other literature advising against the spread of XENO-20. He would read an opening paragraph, tut in frustration several times, then toss each print aside and accuse it of being vague and sensationalised.

Adam had sat patiently outside the private room where his brother and Aisha had been for the past hour. Several specialists had been in and out carrying clipboards layered with notes and spreadsheets. He'd opened his mouth to ask a question several times, but felt guilty for making any such interruption. It was clear these past few weeks had stretched every doctor, nurse and consultant to the limit, emotionally and physically.

Many were working forty-eight hour shifts straight to help manage the influx of patients displaying sinister symptoms, all the while not knowing what they could be doing themselves to protect their own loved ones. There were shortages of beds, medicines, intensive care equipment – and perhaps most vitally, staff. Whether through genuine sickness or fear, the National Health Service was slowly being starved of expertise. These conditions made it all the more astonishing that Luke and Aisha had been treated with such care and attention – whatever had happened to Aisha, it wasn't reflecting the trend of this deadly virus. That was all the reassurance Adam could give himself.

A short, stocky nurse slid out of the room and quickly closed the door behind her. Adam and Alex stood as she beckoned the two over. 'Are you relations to Mr and Mrs Allen?' she asked gently, head fixed on her papers.

'I'm Luke Allen's brother, yes. This is his uncle, Alex,' Adam replied, coming close to correcting the nurse as to Aisha's proper title, Mrs Hussin, but somehow, Mrs Allen had a more comforting ring to it.

'You may go in and see your brother and sister-in-law, Mr Allen. Please be sure to wash your hands before you do,' the nurse replied, now almost robotically. 'I am sorry,' she added with all the compassion she

could without letting her composure slip. Adam darted into the room before Alex could even ask a single question.

Aisha was sitting up in bed, face buried into her knees, silent, her hand clamped within Luke's. It was clear his brother had been crying, scarlet circles pressed high on his cheeks, nose running. He prised his hand free of Aisha's and wrapped his arms around Adam, squeezing the breath out of him. Adam brought both hands to his back as warmly as he could, all the time looking at a broken Aisha over this brother's shoulder. He chose his moment carefully and whispered in Luke's ear. 'What happened?'

'She lost it,' Luke croaked through tears. 'The baby.' His hug constricted Adam further. He allowed it. Tighter if Luke wanted. Whatever was required.

Alex stormed into the room, quickly followed by Violet immediately rushing to Aisha's side. The same question was asked by the brother's uncle, only aloud this time. A growling, harrowing cry from Aisha gave Alex his answer. Luke released Adam and returned to her side. With Violet on her other, Aisha struggled to know which direction to throw herself in her despair, finally opting to fling her body back hard against the headboard and bellow at the ceiling. Adam ushered his uncle out of the room and closed the door.

'Sweet Jesus,' Alex muttered into the ground. 'Is she going to be all right?'

'There was a lot of blood, but physically, yes it would appear so,' Adam tried to clear his throat. 'We need to find one of the doctors.'

'Good luck with that. They're all running around like headless chickens in here at the moment.' Alex folded his arms with a huff. Adam scouted for the nearest white coat he could see walking past and seized their arm.

'Sorry sir, can I help you?' the young male doctor stuttered, startled. Adam would have guessed he was perhaps too young to have completed medical training, his face twisting with nervousness.

'I've seen you go in and out of this room. Mrs Hussin... I mean, Mrs Allen. Mrs Aisha Allen. What can you tell me?' Adam demanded. The young doctor scrambled through his notes, beads of sweat forming across his brow. 'It's OK, take your time,' Adam tried to settle.

'Mrs Allen sadly suffered a miscarriage, Mr...?' the doctor recomposed himself.

‘Mr Allen. I’m his brother. Yes, we both know that. But why?’ Adam shot back.

The fresh-faced doctor gave a subtle shake of his head. ‘These things tragically happen, Mr Allen. I appreciate it is difficult to understand.’ He took a few steps back. ‘Please do see Mrs Allen and your brother – Luke is it? – and offer my condolences. Most importantly, your support. They will need it.’ He made his excuses and hurried down the corridor.

‘Doesn’t help us much, does it?’ Alex clenched his jaw.

‘But she’s...she’s a knight. Line of Sir Palamedes. Carrying the child of Sir Galahad. A miscarriage would be unheard of,’ Adam fussed.

‘Surely not impossible though. Must have happened over the centuries to the Round Table lineage?’ Alex suggested.

‘Did our father ever once mention such an incident?’ Adam retorted. Alex answered with a shrug. ‘No. Something is not right here.’ He caught in the corner of his vision the same young doctor returning in haste with two nurses, entering Aisha’s room. Adam and Alex could hear the shouts of anger and protest from behind the door, mostly Luke’s. They headed back inside.

‘Get out! Get out, all of you!’ Luke spat, frantically waving his arms at the medical team that had descended upon him and Aisha. ‘Leave us. Now!’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Allen, but we must isolate her immediately. She’s tested positive,’ the young doctor desperately tried to explain.

‘She’s not infected with XENO-20. She can’t be. Look at her. She has no symptoms.’ Luke shunted the doctor away from Aisha’s bedside. Adam managed to wedge himself between the two while Alex tugged at Violet, who had already put her fiery temper on display for the nurses.

‘We just need to take every precaution, Mr Allen. Please. I know it’s difficult. Can I also suggest that you and your immediate family get tested also,’ the doctor insisted as a weeping Aisha was wheeled away in her bed, Violet still shouting fiercely. At any moment Adam could see the situation escalating to a point where he and his uncle would need to show more than just physical strength to contain Violet’s blade. A familiar glimmer of red flashed in her pupils, fingers coiled around her staff. Alex held her arms firmly behind her back, his own eyes beginning to pulse blue in anticipation. Adam turned his attention to Violet, framing her face in his hands and speaking as gently as he could. ‘Listen to me Violet, not now. This is not what Aisha would want. Breathe.’ The spark of red slowly ebbed away, her grip on her staff loosening.

Luke stormed past behind his three guests and made for the door. 'I've got this. Go after your brother,' Alex ordered.

'Luke. Wait. Where are you going?' Adam echoed down the corridor.

'I'm going to finish this,' Luke growled. Adam's jacket was laid atop the water cooler, he dug through the pockets for the car keys, finding only mint wrappers. He stretched out an open hand towards his brother. 'Give them to me, Adam. *Now.*'

'Luke, come on. What can any of us do right now? We need to think,' Adam pleaded.

'You think. It's what you're good at. I'll act. Keys!' Luke brought his face within inches of Adam's.

'Look, Aisha might be infected with this virus. But, as you say, she has no symptoms. Maybe the fact she is of a knight's bloodline is somehow shielding her. You, Gary and Geraint as well,' Adam tried to explain.

Luke looked unfazed. 'Then I'll be fine against this Damas guy, won't I? While you, Uncle Alex and the rest of the boys in blue safeguard your integrity and traditions, I'll kill the cursed son of a bitch!' Drops of spit

landed on Adam's face as he spoke. 'You're not the only one with skill, brother, with power.'

Adam brow creased. 'If you're talking about Excalibur, Luke, I don't believe that's sensible. Or indeed right.' He held his ground. 'You don't know what you're dealing with here. The King's Blade...' he got no further, Luke had slid his hand behind him and pulled the keys from his brother's rear pocket. He gave them a little jingle in front of Adam's nose.

'We'll see, won't we? If Excalibur is as you and Dad so often said, death, then I can think of no other individual more deserving of its edge than Damas Zethus. If you want to come with me and try to stop me, fine. Get in the passenger seat and come with me back to Bath.' Luke turned on his heel. 'But... I thought you had a boxing match to go to? Never know, maybe you'll beat the demi-god and we'll have nothing to worry about. But I doubt you'll finish the job somehow,' he lashed out.

'Killing Damas won't bring your son back, Luke,' Adam replied without thinking, burning from his brother's callous remarks. They were enough to halt Luke for a split second, his spine contorting, but he did not dignify such a barb with any further comeback. He walked away, throwing the double doors of the ward entrance wide open.

Adam felt his mobile ping from beneath his belt. Fernando had left a message – *Methil Docks, Fife. Tonight at nine o'clock.*

Chapter 16

London, England

11th April 2020 AD

While most of the capital was still in the early hours of the Easter bank holiday weekend, Paul was restless. The call he'd received from Dr Braithwaite while scarfing the last of his cornflakes triggered giddy excitement. He tossed the bowl into the sink and grabbed his rucksack, almost forgetting his house keys while charging for the door.

A new blood sample in from a hospital in Bath, Ana had said. Infected, according to the best possible tests available at least, but asymptomatic. Over twenty-four hours had passed and still nothing, she claimed. Only tragic news was the loss of her baby, four months into term. What a rollercoaster of emotions, Paul thought – to bear such grief, but also be considered a medical marvel. Hopefully, she could be the key to saving millions... but the only life she would be concerned about was the little one taken from her so cruelly.

The streets were awash with reminders and warnings pertaining to XENO-20. Every bus station, billboard and digital display from Holborn to Camden Town advised distancing, face coverings and monitoring of

symptoms. There have been incidents during the night across London... Paul had heard police sirens pierce through his bedroom window just about every hour. Shouting and screaming, the sound of glass being shattered, perhaps even a gunshot or two fired. He'd pushed the corners of his pillow into his ears and screwed his eyes shut – if he could not hear it or see it, it didn't exist. The scars on the high streets however were unavoidable. Window displays exploded out into the pavements, signage torn down, bins overturned and scorched with either flares or lit Molotov cocktails. It was a war zone, only with no well-defined enemy. At least that was what Paul thought. A quick detour through Tottenham Court Road to get a coffee brought him to the edge of Soho Square, only he could walk no further. Three police cars stood in his way, lights flashing, yellow and black tape stretched from lamppost to lamppost. A serious incident, that much was certain. A murder? A hit-and-run? At such times anything was possible.

Paul crept to a nearby tree and squatted down, straining to hear any snippets of dialogue between officers and their radios. He heard little, but noted the dripping spray paint sprawled across the nearest gay bar – *filth* – written in deepest black. The bar itself looked upturned, tables and chairs lying broken and splintered outside, clear signs of forced entry. Mercifully no ambulances that Paul could see. He tried to get closer, moving to the telephone box on the corner. More graffiti – *Homo-hoax* – Paul snapped a picture on his phone. Across the far side of

the gardens was a small but vocal gathering, some waving placards etched with slander or biblical references, most wearing sinister-looking gas masks and demanding attention from the authorities present. The chants came... Paul could make out 'the many, not the few...'. He jumped in fright as a rock was hurled from an individual from the back and smashed into the windscreen of one of the police cars. Those in riot gear were quick to respond, shunting the front row back. A second crowd appeared, this time from the opposite end of the gardens, with similar attire and same aggressive stance. Mounted police on horseback engaged with batons, one was pulled from the saddle. The officer managed to stand and wrestle their way free of the mob, clutching their side and wincing as backups arrived. The crowd was eventually dispersed with the arrival of fortified trucks armed with water cannons. Paul had already broken into a run and never looked back.

'It's quite remarkable. A single sample from a young female born in Jordan but visiting England with her fiancé. A definite positive on XENO-20, and the disease the most likely cause of the miscarriage, but she herself appears... Paul? What's happened to you? You look like you've just finished a marathon,' Dr Braithwaite asked, lifted her eyes from her microscope as Paul slumped breathlessly into the chair next to her.

‘Here, put your mask on please.’ She handed him the familiar blue and white fabric.

‘Have you seen it out there? It’s chaos,’ Paul puffed, struggling with the elastic around his ears. ‘Soho Square... there were mobs. Crowds of people targeting the gay community. Even attacking the police.’ Ana reached for the TV remote.

‘Been happening all night, not just here in London. Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Belfast and Glasgow all had incidents. Then there’s the rest of the world.’ Ana switched from station to station, all displaying the same horrors of riots, accusations and rising death tolls. ‘It’s getting out of control. Fast.’

Paul regained his breath. ‘Are you telling me that this Mr Zethus, the one that broke the story about a heterosexual plague, the *straight disease*, is actually being taken seriously?’ he questioned. ‘We know nothing about him or his background. I mean, is he even a doctor? Medically trained in any fashion?’

Ana muted the television and returned to the microscope. ‘Does he have to be? If the evidence is pointing to that conclusion, people can decide for themselves, can’t they? Once the proverbial Pandora’s box is opened, it’s very unlikely governments can effectively contain such

opinion. With that, come consequences,' she sighed. 'Which is why we need to work on this particular sample we have here. Why is this one immune?' her voice lowered.

'When you took my blood last week, you found something, didn't you? Something Mr Hall and his associates didn't want you to find.' Paul drew close to Ana.

'More what they didn't want to *hear*.'

'Which was what?'

Dr Braithwaite swivelled on her chair to the opposite desks where her papers lay. She rummaged through a few, then decided on one. 'Your bloodwork, Paul. It repelled the virus, destroyed it in fact.'

Paul looked in shock. 'You're saying I'm immune too?'

'It would appear so. Possibly all gay men, gay women too potentially. Who knows.' Ana sat upright and tensed her shoulders. 'So, this Mr Zethus might just be one step ahead of all of us. Maybe even the perpetrator.'

‘He must be easy enough to find if he’s gone public?’ Paul wondered before switching train of thought. ‘But anyway... how? How does someone so obscure obtain a virus that’s so... so, exclusive?’

‘That’s what we must find out. Supposing they did catch Mr Zethus, wherever he may be in the world... does that necessarily mean he has the solution to what he’s unleashed? A cure? Even the slightest comprehension as to how to create and manufacture one?’ Ana became crestfallen. ‘Whatever he’s done, it might be too late to undo.’

‘Everything must have a cure.’ Paul tried to inject some optimism into his mentor. ‘We just need some more time.’

More harrowing sounds of screams were heard from just outside their building. Paul shot to the nearest window and saw two masked women trying to assist an elderly man that had collapsed by a corner shop, blood trickling from his mouth and eyes. Others rushed to assist but quickly backed off upon witnessing the man’s condition, as if another step would bring them closer to death itself. Ana’s mood remained sombre. ‘Time is the one thing we are running desperately short on.’

Chapter 17

Edinburgh, Scotland

11th April 2020 AD

The road was seen as the most sensible route to Scotland. Airports and train stations were delayed by saliva swabs, temperature checks and health questionnaires, Gary had reported, and it was only going to get worse. The police were trying to maintain a light touch on traffic up and down the British Isles, but that too was under threat in the wake of increasingly violent protests spreading from city to city.

Gary and Geraint had elected to remain in Bath and assist Aisha in her grief. Violet too would have stayed had it not been for her concern over Adam and what was set to be another encounter with Damas. Adam fought against her travelling to Edinburgh, and the company of Uncle Alex at first – the challenge was, after all, thrown down to him and him alone. Not allowing his mentor the passenger seat would have felt too cavalier though, and the vivid flashbacks to the duel at Wembley Stadium convinced him that should either Damas or Cleo seek to push for anything more than the agreed one-on-one match it could only be the young daughter of Sir Bors that stood in their way. Violet insisted on navigating from the back seat the entire journey.

A mile from the border, the three pulled in for petrol. Alex prompted Violet to pay at the desk and pick up a few Mars bars while there. He slouched against the bonnet of Adam's Volkswagen and gave the tyres a few kicks with his heel. Arms folded tightly and with a stern expression, Adam realised his uncle was desperate to talk, but couldn't find the words. 'You OK?' Adam broke the silence, shaking the petrol nozzle clean.

Alex grumbled. 'Just want to know how you're feeling about all this. That's all.'

'Fine. Why wouldn't I be?'

'True that. True that.' Alex backed down instantly. 'It's just...'

'Please say what you mean, Uncle. Don't dance around the subject,' Adam cut in.

'Everything Geraint and Gary shared with you about the right to lead and its protocol. I know you are strong, stronger than ever in fact, but you can only use your brute strength, Adam, no Sacred Band fire or anything. Pure, physical combat,' Alex said, head hung low.

'Your point?'

'I... don't want to fail you. Not after I failed your father. I can't see how Richard would have approved...' Alex stalled, as if his older brother was there judging his approach and pouring scorn in its direction. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken.'

'No. You shouldn't have,' Adam snapped back while sliding back inside the car. A wounded Alex followed. 'Look, Uncle. I know I can lose. Damas is, after all, quite possibly a demi-god, a grandson of Zeus' for heaven's sake! We know not of his weaknesses, only his strengths. But, if I don't answer his challenge, I might as well hand over the Sacred Band leadership to him now, mightn't I? If not, how long do you think it would take a prince of Thebes to rally his troops to his side and dismiss me as nothing more than the shadow of a fighter? This has to be done.' He rattled the keys and thumbed the steering wheel as the engine turned over. 'Damn it!'

Alex sat silently for a moment, trying to balance his demeanour between concern and confidence. 'I get it, you know I do, Adam. All I ask is that should it come to this, you... you *yield*. Please.' It was rare for Alex to show the slightest hint of emotion outside his disturbed sleep, but this was as genuine as it was ever going to be from a seemingly iron-hearted veteran. So genuine that it was enough to make Adam consider the plea,

and make a vow to his uncle there and then. Only his pride stopped him. He wanted to win... he *would* win.

Evening had turned into a crisp cool night by the time the car had pulled up to the outskirts of Methil Docks. 'What's the time?' Violet asked, already scouting outside for any sign of the siblings.

'Twenty-thirty,' Alex replied with the firmness of a drill sergeant. 'Don't suppose Fernando gave any specific instructions as to where in Fife we should be meeting?'

Adam gave a shake of his head and checked his mobile once more. Nothing. Panning around, it wasn't as if the docks was an inconspicuous location – well lit, partially residential with a scattering of late-night joggers and dog walkers making their way casually past the River Forth. He caught a glimpse of the amber haze that was Edinburgh on the horizon, the black bulge that was Arthur's Seat split by the zig-zag of rust-red light cast by the Forth Bridge. Each time he'd visited the Scottish capital he'd always made a solitary venture to the summit of the mound, sat on one of the benches and talked quietly to himself... well, to his father more precisely, his body still entombed beneath the

rock of King Arthur's resting place along with William Wood, Mack Benson, and the sons of Galahad, Gawain and Bedivere, all interred together. A word or two would occasionally stray to Iain Donnelly, and Adam would always arrest himself when it did. The shot of pain across his chest radiating from the scar upon his collar, Iain's spear coming to life again in an instant. Adam would dig his fingers into the earth sometimes and grit his teeth until the pain subsided, let out a muffled scream or two before making his way back down to the city a cleansed man. His mobile buzzed twice, the messages from Fernando read *Warehouse Five. Damas here.*

There was a distinct odour of wood shavings and pulp from inside. Several worn lumber cutters lay neglected along one side, shattered glass and broken beer bottles littered the other. The coo and flapping of stray pigeons echoed from each corner as Adam, Alex and Violet tentatively moved forwards. 'You sure this is the one?' Alex whispered.

'There isn't another Warehouse Five,' Violet replied, prodding the corpse of a dead rat with her staff. 'Place looks completely abandoned.'

The crack of a stranger's footsteps rang from behind, the trio twisting round instantly, blue shields up and swords unsheathed. The familiar face of Chris Wood crept out from the shadows. 'Whoa. Easy... it's me.' He held both hands aloft. 'Take it this is the right place then?'

Adam lowered his shield. 'What are you doing here, Chris?' he grunted.

'Well... I was told to come. We all were, weren't we? The Band I mean,' Chris replied, looking confused upon seeing Violet by their side.

Adam turned to Alex and raised an eyebrow. 'Geraint said there might be an audience,' Alex muttered.

'An audience for what?' Chris inquired, pulling a face upon seeing the dead rat by Violet's feet. 'And why in this place exactly?' The warehouse suddenly shone in a glimmer of blue, ebbing from the far end of the building – it was Sacred Band fire. Two rows of shields either side of the opposite entrance, about two dozen or so, Adam guessed. Between them was the imposing silhouette of his opponent, the blue light just enough to make out the bare torso of Damas, pectorals and abdominals clearly defined.

'Master Allen, I bid you welcome,' Damas boomed. 'Do please step into the light so that we all can see you for who you are. The leader of the Sacred Band.'

Without hesitation, Adam marched forwards. His eyes were locked on Damas, his face a mask to hide any signs of doubt or misgivings. He stopped five metres short of Damas, his Sacred Band members closing

off a circle behind him. He took stock of the faces that now surrounded the two of them, some he recognised, such as the two strikers from Celtic FC and a handful from the battle at Mount Sinai. Several were complete strangers. The jittery face of Fernando appeared from behind Damas, clearly feeling out of place with no shield to summon, but brave enough to approach the tall frame of the challenger.

‘So, Sir Zethus, am I right in thinking you are proposing a duel with Mr Allen for, what is it you say... the right to lead?’ Fernando timidly announced.

Damas cracked a smile before launching into his formal introduction. ‘I am Damasichthon, son of King Amphion and Queen Niobe of Thebes. Now orphaned with my sister, Cleodoxa, the last remaining Niobids... from fourteen come two – forever at the mercy of the Gods Apollo and Artemis, yet born of the blood of Zeus.’ He gestured towards his sibling, Cleo emerging from behind the Sacred Band warriors and bowing her head in respect before glancing towards Violet with lambent brown eyes. ‘You may not know of me, or my sister, but trust me, my friends, we know of you. Where you come from, why you came to be, and what your true destiny is. I must offer my sincerest apologies to you all, brave Sons of Ares, as for too long we have remained silent in the face of your destruction. Relying upon knights from Ancient Britain to lead you all into a better world, even awaiting the penance of our own grandfather

and his Titan ally Prometheus for ever having created such creatures, as wretched and as worthless as mankind. We hid. We cowered. You suffered... and continue to suffer. No more, I say.’ He raised a clenched fist high above his head. ‘From men come the lions, and the lions shall roar.’

Adam could sense the swelling of pride from those around him, although no cheers or cries of allegiance came. Then came the jarring tone of Chris Wood – ‘Hey, it’s you! From Scotties’ Bar. The antiques dealer from Athens,’ he pointed, while taking a few ill-advised steps forwards through the circle. Alex urged Chris back with a withering look that made him feel like a naughty school kid. Adam broke his stance for a second and looked back over his shoulder at his uncle, Violet and Chris, then turned back to his opponent.

‘What did you do?’ Adam demanded.

‘Oh, you mean the sickness?’ Damas shrugged casually. ‘Quite remarkable really, far beyond what I would have ever anticipated. A plague born of Mount Olympus itself, the children of Zeus and Leto its masters. When their poison-tipped arrows rained upon my kin from the skies as punishment against my mother, it was their warning. A warning to men and women that none shall eclipse the power of the Gods, and all shall remain their subjects no matter how just or disciplined. We are

all their creations, and to spurn your creator is to court death. But after so many years, my sister and I have seen that these same Gods do not care in such ways anymore – they have left this world to ruin. The weak, the feeble, the cruel of mind... they have inherited. What sort of a legacy is that? Cleo and I wait for more arrows to come, to strike from the skies as they did us, severing the flesh that has rotted. Never do they fall. Why? We did what needed to be done.’ Damas’ chest tightened in resolve.

‘You created a plague of biblical proportions to wipe out humanity?’ Adam questioned.

‘Ha, the text of the Bible steals so much from us Greeks, I swear. However, you are not entirely incorrect, young Allen, for just as the flood spared Noah and his family, so shall those that are worthy be spared from this disease. I think you and your kind know of what I speak,’ Damas said, cracking a smile.

‘You would save the Sacred Band... because they are brave and loyal to your family?’ Adam questioned again. ‘But all those that follow in their footsteps, those born homosexuals, you’d spare them too?’

‘Wasn’t my initial plan. I couldn’t foresee how such an amalgam of myth and science would play out.’ Damas gave a respectful nod towards his

sister. 'Cleo here extracted the blood of the Sacred Band, a sort of codex it would appear for homosexuality, and isolated it from the plague's effects. I have your friend Mr Wood there to thank for that.'

If Alex's expression hadn't chastised Chris enough before, it certainly did now. Wood's mouth dropped open before letting out a mumble protesting his innocence and something about a broken pint of Guinness. Cleo spared him further rebuke when she pulled the blood-stained white handkerchief from her pocket, offering a distinct look of remorse.

'As I said... I am no Cassandra. This plague might salvage homosexuals, bisexuals, maybe even those that have yet to decide. What I am sure of, however, is those that survive will be stronger, better and bond closer than ever before – through our shared pain and strife in the wake of such repression. Not folding at the first drops of fear,' Damas concluded.

Adam straightened and took a solid step forward. 'Deucalion and Pyrrha had magic stones to form the Hellenic race after judgement was passed on them by the Greek Gods. How do you suppose such a new race will thrive after you've won?' he posed.

'Most impressive, young Allen - a scholar of Greek mythology I see. Correct, should procreation be the primary concern, yes. However, a

golden race would beat a bronze one I would argue, even if not all can be as fortunate as my sister and I.’ Damas’ smile spread. ‘Still, perhaps those born of the Round Table might be able to help us out in that department? Their descendants, I’m sure, will learn the purest of virtues and cement such a legacy of which we can all be proud... that is, should they *survive* their full term of course.’ The final words stung Adam, taken aback at first that the so recent misfortunes of his brother and Aisha had even reached Damas, but the impertinence of such speech triggered fury throughout his body. Adam’s mind had remained focused and dignified, a picture of control, until that moment. His fist swung, boldly connecting with Damas’ jaw, causing the larger man to twist down to one knee. Stunned silence descended.

Damas spat the freshly drawn blood from his mouth and grinned. ‘Challenge accepted.’

His range was long, Adam noted immediately. Damas’ punches at full stretch kept him from getting in close where he needed to be to land effective body blows. He turned three hundred and sixty degrees to avoid a shot from Damas and locked in tight to the belly, punching furiously. The hot, masculine breath of Damas blew against the back of

his neck, but like the stubborn root of a tree, he remained anchored to the ground. An elbow came down hard on Adam's back, then again, causing him to buckle. Both Damas' arms wrapped around Adam's waist, pinching tightly, then he was dropped to the floor, cracking the back of his skull. He tried to shake off the daze as Damas' fists hammered down relentlessly onto his ribcage.

Adam freed a leg, managed to curl it over the top of Damas' head and lever him off. He held the chokehold as long as he could, restraining Damas' arm through gritted teeth. His opponent's free arm seized his shirt collar, hauling Adam down to his level and tearing the fabric like a sheet of paper. The two rolled, entwined, Damas achieving the superior position and locking both arms around Adam's throat. The sweat of the two men provided just enough lubricant for Adam to swivel within the grip onto his back and thrust a knee into Damas' forehead with a crunch. He was released and leapt back to his feet. The punches came again, more intense this time and in much quicker succession. How Adam wished he could summon his shield just this one time, anything rather than to absorb weight after scolding weight.

'Your legs. Use your legs,' Alex could not help shouting. Following the advice, Adam prised himself free of Damas' onslaught with his knee and found himself with both space and respite. Damas approached again, this time being met with the sole of Adam's boot as it landed squarely

on the chest. Damas retreated, ducked the second roundhouse but was caught by the acrobatic third that saw both Adam's feet spring clear off the floor. Damas spun sharply, then folded.

Adam was back on his feet, hands raised, preparing for a riposte. Damas shot a look to a forgiving Cleo, then let out a thundering roar, charging Adam and tackling him to the ground. He perched on top of Adam's chest, pinning him down. Punch followed punch to Adam's face, blood spurting upon every contact. Chris and Violet drew close to one another, both eager to turn away from the carnage, but neither able to bring themselves to. Alex continued to shout advice from the sidelines, crouching down as low and as close as he could to the affray... but Adam was looking spent.

'Do you yield, Master Allen?' Damas paused, blood-streaked fist hovering, ready to strike once more. Adam gave no response. Damas struck his cheek twice more. 'Do... you... *yield?*' Alex held his breath, desperate to make the call on behalf of his nephew, when Adam opened his mouth to speak. He sucked in what air he could, tasting more iron than saliva at this point, only to spit a wad of bloody mucus directly into Damas' face. It was a distraction, as Damas wiped the irreverent gesture from his black stubbled chin, unaware Adam had slid an arm loose. The fist came down again, but netted by Adam's palm with surprising strength. The teeth of both men ground, neither giving way, when Adam

suddenly released and thrust his knuckles firmly into Damas' groin. With a yelp, the bigger man toppled from his position. Like a caged animal, Adam threw himself back into the brawl, slamming his knee down into Damas' soft abdomen, his face pure fury. For a moment, this untamed beast of a nephew gave Alex a sense of optimism... he might just pull this off.

The sentiment wasn't to last, for in this act of savagery Adam had left himself exposed. Damas coiled both his arms and a leg around the quads of his aggressor and skilfully twisted himself to bring Adam down. He contorted himself slightly, both his legs locked above Adam's hip, but his ankle still in his grip. A final, brutal turn and Adam let out a piteous cry of pain. Damas resumed his position on top, gabbing a handful of hair before crashing a single punch into the jaw of his crippled opponent. 'Yield, Adam. *Now,*' he demanded.

Alex couldn't speak, his mouth turned to ash. A desolate echo came from behind as Violet found the words he could not. 'Adam! Please, stop this. Stop!' she wept.

'I won't ask again, Master Allen. Don't make me do this.' Damas kept a firm hold on Adam's blond locks, allowing him just enough air to breathe. Adam could no longer think, everything was shades of vivid red with just the faintest blur of blue fire encroaching on his shrinking field

of vision. A flash of a memory, of Iain Donnelly seated not too dissimilarly moments before Adam's spear pierced his flesh, brought a sense of serene resignation. Enough to even bring a slight smile to his worn-torn face. 'So be it,' Damas sneered.

His final blow was denied by Cleo hooking his arm with hers. 'That's enough, Brother. *Enough*. You've won. The Sacred Band is *yours*.'

Chapter 18

Bath, England

12th April 2020 AD

The Roman Baths were closed. As were all tourist sites across the city – every city in Britain, in fact. So concerned were governments about the potential for XENO-20 spreading that any venue that encouraged mass gatherings had been put out of commission. Museums, theatres, cinemas, even some mainstream shops. People flouted such rules, of course, holding get-togethers in pubs and bars, some organising outdoor activities for the Easter bank holiday weekend that were anything but stringent when it came to enforced social distancing. Threats were issued from front line services relating to any form of aggression levelled at police and National Health Service staff, both pushed to breaking point as infection rates ticked well into the millions. It might have seemed strange to wish for news that hospitals and health centres were close to capacity for intensive care units or beds – but the truth was those sadly admitted had found themselves ushered out via the morgues not seventy-two hours later. It was not so much an issue of capacity now for the infected, more a final, tragic stay before departing this life. As such, conspiracy theories had run wild, everything from population control experiments to gay terrorists. There were marches

taking place daily in nearly every major metropolis in the world, some peaceful, most resorting to violence. The armed forces had been drafted, although given the severity of the pandemic several had refused to step forward and risk contamination, despite many reassurances that adequate protection could be offered through face masks and alcohol gels. The subsequent failings of law and order were destined to lead to only one conclusion – chaos.

Had circumstances been different, Luke Allen might have squirrelled himself away in his home to try to be part of the solution, not part of the bubbling anarchy. It's certainly what Aisha would have wanted and advised. But the circumstances were unfairly cruel for him, a rancour that refused to diminish despite every sinew in his body urging him to think otherwise. No one should feel a loss like this, perhaps no one could understand a loss like this. How did it feel? Like someone mangling his innards with a shiv, only he too had a grip on its handle and for reasons known only to him, he was forcing the blade deeper – the pain a punishment for his failure. And all the while, he stood in a crowded room full of his closest family and friends with not one in a position to offer any comfort or solace. He was alone in his agony.

The lock on the Roman Baths gate was easy to pick, springing open under the cover of his coat. He took time to survey the many masked

faces righteously holding banners of protest outside Bath Abbey before slipping inside, undetected.

The dank, sulphuric smell always upended his stomach. He trod carefully towards the lime-green waters of the primary bath, lit only by moonlight, cautiously avoiding the fixed security cameras in each corner by skipping from pillar to pillar. He aimed for the edge of the waters where he and his brother had returned the fabled sword Excalibur eight years before. Crawling on all fours, he worked his way to the rocky outcrop and dipped his fingers into the pool. It was only then it occurred to him that he didn't have a clue what he was doing. He rolled his eyes at the absurdity of his plan for a moment, then tried to regain focus.

'Pssst. Min. Mary... it's me, Luke,' he whispered before letting out a frustrated sigh. This really was sounding ridiculous now – communing with a mucky pond of water in an attempt to call his old girlfriend up from its depths. He kept trying though, something more formal perhaps would get her attention. 'Mary Cassidy – the Lady of the Lake. It is I, Luke Allen, son of Richard Allen and knight of Sir Galahad here to... no, no. Bloody stupid.' He shook his head in disdain, then sank the tips of his spiked fringe in surrender. 'Look Minnie, I'm sure it's clear to you that I really don't know what I'm doing, and I must appear like a hopeless mess. But you said Excalibur would return to me when I needed it most... when we needed it most. Well, what time is that if not now?

Surely you can see what's going on? Please.' His voice began to shake. Still nothing. His temper surged. 'Ah, to hell with you! If you can't help me now then what's the point of even having Excalibur? What, does it need to be some mystical force that threatens the entire universe in order for you to hand it back to us knights just so we can simply triumph, is that it? Is mere justice not enough? A person's own pain? *My own pain?*' he ranted uncontrollably, splashing the waters with each sentence. Still no answer. He picked up a loose rock and hurled it wildly into the bath and let out a scream – let them capture it on CCTV, he didn't care. 'Forget it. I'll find another way,' he sulked.

'Do you know how many ancestors of the Sir Bedivere bloodline came to the Lady of Lake asking the same questions, Luke Allen?' came the smooth voice Luke knew so well. Luke's eyes darted around the waters trying to find its source, but he was alone. He looked at a delicately carved statue of the Roman Goddess Minerva standing proudly on a plinth, tapped it a few times. 'So often the same. The pain, the suffering, the *vengeance,*' Mary's voice continued, again from every direction. Luke searched frantically, shouting her name.

'Min? Mary, where are you?' Luke asked repeatedly.

'Yet as you know full well, Luke, Excalibur shall not come to those that are disturbed in mind and soul. The bringer of death cannot be placed

into the hands of one that desires just that,' Mary echoed around the chamber.

'You think I want death? I don't... I want life, Min. Look at what's happening – millions are dying because of Damas and his sister. This plague they have unleashed. If Excalibur can stop them...,' Luke rambled.

'*Control*. What you are asking is for control, Luke... and control *is* power,' came Mary's ethereal reply.

Luke slumped against one of the pillars, face buried in his hands. 'Mary, come on. This might not look like your typical war, the Red and White Dragons locked in combat, your sacred statues and enchanted necklaces spilling the blood of many innocents. But trust me, lives are at stake, and will be lost. You must help me. Give me the King's Blade. Give me Excalibur,' he pleaded.

'So many lives... yet you care only for one,' Mary faded. 'Only *one*.'

Luke shouted her name. No response. He jogged around the bath edge, completed two laps of its perimeter. His hands began to shiver from the cold, his breath casting plumes of silver clouds in front of his face. He was alone once again, but now in a way more vicious than ever before.

Chapter 19

Budapest, Hungary

5th May 2020 AD

It had started exactly two weeks ago today, Laszlo recalled. The announcement from the National Assembly that all known gay and lesbian sites were to be interrogated by the Hungarian Armed Forces and the NBSZ Special Services was to take immediate effect. At first, there was a public outcry from across the country, quickly quelled under the guise of science and respected guidance from the medical community in an attempt to search for a cure to XENO-20. We were told that the gay community had given Parliament its full support, both here in Hungary and across the world, ever since the stories had emerged of individuals in Italy, the United States and even here in Budapest claiming immunity. Public opinion turned overnight, welcoming the round-up of my people, some claiming us to be saviours, but Laszlo was not fooled. Having lived through the nineteen-eighties under the iron fist of socialism and HIV epidemics, too much of this sounded familiar, the only saving grace being that if these stories were true, that he along with his closest friends were to be proven naturally immune to this latest illness sweeping the continent, any such curfew would be short-lived.

‘Laszlo... Laszlo. You awake?’ Hanna asked from the bed beside him. She was a petite woman, mid-twenties, with vibrant purple hair and pierced lips. She had initially stepped forward as a volunteer test subject days after the announcement, much to the concern of her partner Zoe. Only a few days ago, she received news from the patrolling guards that Zoe had been killed in an apparent homophobic attack just outside Saint Stephen’s Basilica. Both subsequent nights she had cried herself to sleep but not spoken a word to any one of the twenty or so other inmates in the facility. ‘I’m sure I heard something. Outside.’

‘Probably just the guards.’ Laszlo checked his watch. ‘It’s almost midnight, they’ll be doing their rounds.’ He rolled over on his cramped single bed trying to get comfortable... difficult for a six-foot three-inch man lying on a mattress that could barely accommodate a child. He coughed a few times to clear the damp from his lungs. The facility had been without heating for a week now, medics stating it was to do with their need to keep temperatures low in order to develop any vaccine. No one inside was going to argue when white coats were flanked by imposing militia armed with semi-automatics. Laszlo heard what sounded like a scream, followed by frantic rants and barking of orders.

‘It’s not just midnight rounds,’ Hanna insisted. ‘Can’t you hear that? Something is going on outside.’ She jumped from her bed and wiped the moisture from the small window above another inmate’s head, waking

him in the process. 'Look. Over by the border wall. The guards... they're firing at something.'

Floodlights beamed down upon the main entrance to the facility. Watchtower guards had already let off several rounds into the dense canopy of trees below, and now fell silent. *Nez... Nez!* came an order from a superior, spotting movement between the trees. First just one figure, then two, then several more. A few more targeted shots were fired, splinters bursting from bark. Silence came again, when a solitary figure approached the main gate.

'State your business!' said one of the gate guards, gun held high with finger poised on the trigger. The figure took two intrepid steps forward. 'Not one further step. I warn you!' the guard reiterated. The figure stopped, lowered the hood of his coat and ruffled his long black hair. 'What do you want?' the second guard drew close, radio pressed to his ear.

'You have something of mine, gentlemen. Well, I say *mine*, they are of course creatures of free will and will do as they choose,' Damas announced. 'Sadly, I fear much of this world has forgotten that.'

The two guards looked at one another, guns still fixed. 'This is the private property of the Hungarian Government. You are to leave immediately,' one instructed.

Damas remained unfazed. 'Private property of the government you say? If that isn't an invitation to uncover and bring an end to heinous acts what is?' he stepped further forward. 'I was hoping to do this without confrontation, gentlemen. But if you insist.' He raised one arm in signal – blue bolts of flame shot from the tops of the trees into the summits of both watchtowers, erupting on impact. Guards fell to the ground with chilling cries. Before the gate guards could react, Damas seized the head of one and snapped the neck in a clean jerk. The second he held by the throat, lifting him from his feet with little effort. 'Now. Where might I find those you keep behind your walls of persecution?' he hissed.

The gate guard writhed, face turning blue and puffy. He managed to croak out an order into the static of the radio still held limply in his hands. Damas heard the rally of troops from behind the gate and sighed. 'Very well.' He slammed his victim down hard onto the ground, the impact enough to crush the windpipe. The gate opened, more guards poured out from within – 'Tuz! Tuz!' – one shouted as bullets rang free. Damas retreated slowly behind the wall of blue shields that had formed behind.

The imposing line of Sacred Band fighters marched forward, heads low, summoned flame circles locked. Whenever the frenzy of bullets ceased to reload their blue spears were hurled, always finding their targets. Hungarian guards fell at an alarming rate, enough to make them flee back inside. 'Secure the gate doors,' yelled one superior. 'Ready the RPGs.' The guards responded, heaving the heavy metal gates shut. No sooner had the bolts been secured than the gates shook and rumbled. Thuds were heard from outside, regular like the ticking of a clock. The superior tensed his jaw in utter disbelief as the bolts began to crumble and bend. The gate was not going to hold. A final boom like the sound of thunder and the gates collapsed, the blue of the Sacred Band relentless in its advance. 'RPG... now!' came the new order.

From the roof of the facility came the trail of jet-propelled smoke as the grenade was launched. The Sacred Band crouched down, preparing for impact, then stood once more when the weapon exploded far to their left side, igniting a fuel tank. Damas had made his way to the front of the blue line, swatting the grenade away as if it were a fly. 'Is that all you have to offer, gentlemen?' he mocked.

All guards were now in full retreat, the fires from the explosion running rampant through the facility grounds. Damas gave the orders to the Band to advance and hunt, save two fighters that were to accompany

him inside. The screams and pleas for mercy from each guard that fell sounded like sweet music to his ears.

Laszlo pressed his head up against the door to their chamber, all inmates now out of their beds enquiring about the commotion outside. 'Shhh. Be quiet, everyone,' he commanded.

'They're going to kill us! It's true. This was all just a ruse. They'll slaughter us in our sleep!' one inmate spat hysterically. 'We should never have come here, volunteered. They want us dead, all of us...' He was met with a slap from Hanna, demanding composure.

'If that were true, they would have just done it. Marched in here and shot us all. No. Something is wrong... something...' she jumped back as Laszlo stumbled away from the door as it shook. They could just make out the mutterings of a guard, the other side capitulating with excuses and offering the gays up if he were to be spared. He was met with the fire of a blue spear that both impaled him and sparked its way through the door. The collective group of captives backed away in fright, Hanna helping Laszlo to his feet.

Damas forced the doors open, standing resolute with the two Sacred Band members upon each shoulder, boasting their brilliant blue shields. 'Apologies for the drama my friends. My men and I mean you no harm, I trust that much is clear,' he addressed them confidently. 'I'm sure you have many questions... who I am, what we are, and why we are here for you. I can answer them for you in good time. For now, however, I must ask that you accompany me to London where you will be safe.'

Laszlo gave the would-be saviour an incredulous look. 'How can we trust you when we don't know who you are? These people here have been through enough this past month – the lies, the deceit, the loss of loved ones.' He picked out Hanna from the crowd behind. 'Now we see you and these fighters of yours wreak havoc of a different kind, but the outcome is still the same. Death and destruction.' He quivered slightly, but just maintained composure.

Damas gave a bow of his head. 'I hear you, sir. I understand also. There is, however, a war coming, a storm the likes of which you and I have not witnessed before. Now is the time to choose a side. Will you stay here like caged animals? Or will you choose to be free?' He opened his arms warmly. 'I assure you, I shall grant you that choice. But know that my offer comes only once. Now, what shall it be?'

Hanna boldly stepped past Laszlo and came within a footstep of Damas. 'I... I have...' she choked through her tears.

'You have lost someone. Someone close. What is her death to be for you? Is it to be in vain or to stand?' Damas asked. Hanna screwed her eyes shut, then opened them with fresh ferocity as she walked past Damas and stood proudly by the two Sacred Band guards.

'Good choice,' Damas concurred. 'Now. Who else?'

Chapter 20

Bath, England

8th May 2020 AD

The Allen family home had become crowded, right at a time when Aisha was not in the mood for further company. Chris Wood and Fernando had returned to Bath along with Adam, Alex and Violet on the advice of Gary Willis and Geraint South – Fernando resisting fiercely at first, determined not to back down to the new command of Damas Zethus. The warriors would still answer to Adam, he thought, they would not accept such a rogue as their leader irrespective of assumed lineage and now obvious strength. He pleaded with Alex, he begged to stay and try to turn the tide back in the Allens' favour, but was met only with a pat on the shoulder from Adam's uncle and a crestfallen look... the damage had been done.

Adam had since remained silent regarding the whole affair, not even sparing a moment to inform his brother or Aisha about the events that unfolded. He breezed past the two of them when he arrived – dried blood still caking half his face and wobbling slightly with a limp – headed straight up the stairs in heavy stomps and slammed his bedroom door hard like a grounded teenager. Violet managed two or three words to

Luke before he too petulantly stormed outside, Aisha knowing full well where he was headed once again. The damn Roman Baths. ‘She’ll have to return it to me now. Excalibur. What choice do we have?’ Luke demanded. ‘She can’t just abandon us!’ Each time he mentioned his former love Mary Cassidy, it was like another cut upon Aisha’s skin. She felt helpless, with no light or hope, unable to move forward and unwilling to look back. It was a cage that was forever closing in around her. No one to turn to for advice – for the pain was her own, and could not be compared. Violet tried as she always would... but this was not akin to the loss of a beloved parent, close friend or esteemed mentor, but something entirely different. An emotional journey she must make alone, with her feet solid as lead. She tried a different tactic, listening in to the news broadcasts watched in horror by Chris and Fernando as the world caught fire – XENO-20 rampaging its way from continent to continent, millions of lives now lost. The attempts from all governments to restrict travel failing, law enforcement buckling against riots, some countries closer to her home in Jordan now under full martial law. She ordered her followers, those loyal to the Knights of Palamedes, to divert all attention to protecting the innocent affected and keeping what peace they could in a notoriously unstable region. It was a trifling token, but it was something that made Aisha feel as though the world’s frenetic pace had slowed just a little, and if only for a moment.

More alarming of course were the bitter seeds of division that had so fruitfully been sown by Damas. The heterosexual versus homosexual wars had begun. Stories broke of strange men wielding fire defending gay hotspots from violent protests and attacks – some even launching offensives in capitals known for their cruelty against such minorities. Damas had taken swift action in his new role, the Sacred Band acting with both shield and spear as they have always done... this time, the enemy was the dying majority that neared ninety per cent of earth's population. Rumours of a cure had sprung up and been circulated from Russia to Brazil, each one swiftly dismissed by respected bodies such as the WHO. Tabloids fanned the public demands to 'test' homosexual subjects in order to determine the nature of such immunity, and that the rounding up of some gay men and women was justified during times of national emergency. All was allegedly done willingly by these minorities and without duress, a position upheld until a young transgender individual spoke openly about how their whole family was killed in Ukraine when they refused to give their child up to the authorities. This was not the last time such a story unfolded, even here in the United Kingdom. Quickly quashed by all involved governments, but the pattern was becoming ever more clear – those in power were desperate, and afraid.

Aisha couldn't take any more. She returned to her and Luke's room and curled up on the bed, stroking Luke's side of the sheets and trying to

rehearse any words she might use to try to explain how she was feeling. Nothing of sense came. She threw herself back and buried her head behind a pillow, muffling her tears. She heard a knock on the door – Violet, again, she thought. She stifled her cries, hoping Violet would get the message that she did not want to be disturbed. She usually did. Then the knock came again, louder. ‘Violet. Not now... I’m sorry, but not now,’ Aisha croaked out.

‘It’s not Violet, Aisha, it’s Beth,’ came the voice from behind the door. ‘May I come in?’ Aisha counted the days in her head... it was a Friday, and technically a bank holiday in celebration of both May Day and Victory in Europe. Not that anyone had much to celebrate. Beth would always make her way over to The Bear Pub from the Blue Hare in Cardiff to assist Violet, and despite firm travel curfews, she took the risk. ‘May I come in? Please?’ she asked again. Aisha rolled out of bed and opened the door. Beth, dressed in her familiar denim jacket and ash black trousers, looked as drained as Aisha, skin more wrinkled than before, lips cracked. She forced a smile before wrapping her arms around her.

‘I’m surprised to see you,’ Aisha said, managing to pull herself free. ‘I didn’t think you’d come over from Wales given all that’s been happening.’

‘Well, it’s not as if the pubs are busy. Not with all this lockdown nonsense. Violet had spoken to me... at a bit of loss I would say, most unusual for her. And I’ve never been one for rules,’ Beth relaxed a little.

‘Much like Nick Butcher then.’ Aisha flashed an uncomfortable smile, quickly followed by an apology. ‘Sorry, Beth. I didn’t mean to bring Nick up. Well, I know it’s been eight years since he passed, and I never really knew him... but...’ she ceased probing whatever wound she might have uncovered, trying to read Beth’s facial expressions upon hearing Nick’s name. ‘Violet told me so much about him, and that the two of you were happy together,’ she concluded with a sigh.

Beth gave a polite nod. ‘She’s certainly her father’s daughter, I’ll tell you that,’ she warmed. ‘Always attentive, driven, and concerned for her friends.’ She took a seat on the edge of the bed. ‘She also knew, like her father, when things were too much for her and she needed help. Much like running The Bear Pub, as wonderful as she’s been, she could never have done it alone now, could she?’

‘I guess not. I know she’s incredibly grateful to you, Beth.’ Aisha sat down beside her. ‘She’s had so much to deal with recently... and I can’t...’ she felt her emotions rise, her voice wavering. She took a deep breath.

‘As have you and Luke. So too has young Adam – he also shuts himself away from those around him, I’ve heard?’ Beth asked.

‘Only goes out for exercise... the allotted hour a day or whatever it is. Alex still working him hard but we all have to question for what purpose.’ Aisha glanced out of the window, spotting Adam jog off down the road next to his uncle. At midday sharp, as always.

Beth leaned back and looked at the ceiling pensively. ‘I used to wonder about that, years ago. What was the purpose of doing anything when all I really wanted, all I cared about was one thing. Something I lost, *someone* I lost. No amount of day-to-day activity was going to bring that person back, or undo what had been done. So what was the point?’ she blinked slowly.

Aisha drew a conclusion. ‘Your husband. He passed away from cancer around the same time as Violet’s mother. Must have been so tough,’ she said.

‘Almost as hard as losing both a mother and father in a single encounter with a witch, eh?’ Beth smiled. Aisha didn’t really know how to respond other than to smile back. ‘Ah, so you remember how to smile,’ Beth jostled. ‘Quite incredible lives you and these knights of the Round Table lead – Nick would never share with me their full extent, nor would I

enquire, but if only half of what he said was true...? Still, you are incredible people, are you not?' Beth gestured to Aisha's wooden staff propped up against the bedside table.

'I don't always think so,' Aisha replied. 'In fact, much of the time I just feel more vulnerable than anyone else. A weight of responsibility that has come my way without my permission. I never asked for this life,' her tone grew resentful.

'Nor did Nick, or Violet, or Adam... even Luke. I would imagine you've heard the saying the cards you've been dealt are never your own, but how you choose to play them...?' Beth mused. One of her mother's favourites, Aisha recalled.

'I'll tell you now, Beth, whatever life lesson you think you can provide, I've heard it. As such, I am not up to more profound lectures about stoicism, thank you very much.' Aisha stood abruptly and moved to the window for solace.

'Nor was I when I went through what you've been through,' Beth confessed. Aisha turned. 'It was not my husband to which I was referring.' She stared back down at her feet. Aisha took a few gentle steps back towards her.

'How long ago?'

'A few years before my husband was diagnosed.'

'I'm sorry, Beth. What, what term?'

'Five months. We had just gotten to the stage of planning a baby room and deciding room colours. My husband was convinced it was going to be a girl, and swiped through all these clichéd shades of pink from a paint chart,' Beth reminisced. 'I, however, wanted it to be a boy, can't really remember why... maybe something to do with the Allen brothers.'

Aisha resumed her seat next to Beth and offered a soothing arm around her shoulders. 'I had no idea... Violet never said...'

'Violet never knew. Only Nick did, and it was hardly the topic for discussion when his own wife, Violet's mother, was going through such a torrid time.' Beth said, patting Aisha's knee.

'How did you... I mean, what did you do to cope?' Aisha asked tentatively.

'If I were to offer you my story, would it help?' Beth raised a curious eyebrow. Aisha looked away. 'Thought not. Whatever I tell you about

how I managed to overcome my grief over my miscarriage will come as little comfort to you I'm sure. I could tell you how it was just one of those things, how the next time it'll be fine and that I would have children one day. But would that bring you peace?' she asked. Aisha remained silent for a moment, all her energy channelled into fighting back her own tears.

'What can I do?' Aisha quaked.

'Live for both those you've lost, and those you still have,' Beth advised. 'You will never hear me say such a path is easy, but each day that passes, you learn something new. Something to be grateful for, and that evidence alone can be enough. As it is for all of us.' Beth mirrored Aisha with a comforting arm of her own. 'You speak of the weight of responsibility, well, trust me, that weight will only be harsher if you cannot forgive yourself for events over which you had no control. Much like Violet's father, your mother knew this all too well.'

Aisha's battle with her tears had been lost, her hands smothered her face as she let out a howl of anguish, draining her lungs to a gasp. The creak of the bedroom door was heard, Luke stood without expression, his eyes red sore. 'Luke, how long have you been there?' Aisha frantically wiped her tears away with the sleeve of her dressing gown.

Luke didn't answer her, but gave an appreciative nod to Beth. 'Gary and Geraint are downstairs, thought you should know. Chris and Fernando are glued to the news...something about a televised broadcast by Damas on BBC.' He scuffed the soles of his boots on the floor and thrust his hands into his pockets. 'You want to get some air? Actually not a bad day out.'

Chapter 21

Bath, England

8th May 2020 AD

‘I’m not sure I can watch this.’ Chris interlocked his fingers and brought them to his chin. ‘Why even agree to a television interview if you wanted to remain elusive? Doesn’t make any sense,’ he grumbled.

Fernando turned the volume up on the BBC news. ‘Maybe he now feels he has the upper hand? Time to come out of the shadows and make yourself known? The big reveal, like Houdini?’ he suggested. ‘It’s not as if he has much left to hide now, is it?’ he turned to Gary and Geraint, both biting their bottom lips in anticipation.

‘I don’t believe Damas wishes to hide anymore. As you say, Fernando, the cat’s out of the bag so time to make a statement.’ Gary leaned on his staff and tossed a newspaper across the coffee table. ‘This took place in Budapest only a few days ago – Hungarian authorities tried to keep it quiet, but some of their soldiers had other ideas.’ Chris picked up the loose pages and read the blunt headline. *Assault on Hungarian Gay Concentration Camp*. He could only manage the first paragraph of text

before throwing the sheets back down in disgust. A flicker of blue fire shone from his wrist.

‘I might just want to hear what Mr Zethus has to say now,’ Chris seethed. ‘Bunch of homophobic despots thinking it’s all our fault, this XENO-20 disease. As if we planned it as part of some conspiracy...’ he fumed.

Geraint placed a hand on Chris’s shoulder and tried to settle him. His words of comfort, a sobering reminder that such aggression between men was exactly the outcome Damas wanted, bouncing off Chris like pebbles against iron. Wood remained transfixed on the screen, feet now tapping impatiently. Newsflash after newsflash highlighted the latest developments from around the globe – more riots, looting, attacks on law enforcement. Political leaders seemingly at a loss, but quick to blame their rivals for not acting quickly enough to control the pandemic. None willing to comment directly on the validity of accusations surrounding the ‘straight plague’ proposal, despite growing evidence. Representatives of all faiths urging unity and collaboration, keeping those sick or dying in their prayers – perhaps the only positive message coming out of a world on fire. Adam and Alex bustled through the door, both sporting fresh sweat patches under their arms and around their necks from the morning’s jog. Luke and Aisha passed Adam in the hallway, their hands linked tightly.

‘Where are you off to?’ Adam asked while chugging a glass of water.

‘Out. Need some fresh air,’ Luke replied coldly. ‘You going to watch this broadcast thing Gary and Geraint can’t shut up about?’

Adam filled his glass once more from the tap and gave a timid shrug before heading back upstairs to his room. Luke turned to Alex, his uncle responding with his typical crossed arms and dejected gaze towards the floor. ‘Guess not,’ Luke concluded and headed for the door.

‘Now we go live to an individual that claims to support the ongoing theory that the XENO-20 virus is indeed out to target those of a heterosexual persuasion...’ came the voice of the BBC news anchor. ‘Mr Damas Zethus, good morning to you.’ The screen split in two, the face of Damas shown clearly against a nondescript backdrop, impossible to tell his exact location. He nodded in acknowledgement and gave a flash of a grin. ‘Now, let’s start with you. Few here in Britain, indeed the world, had heard of you until you leaked the story of XENO-20 being a straight persons’ illness. Can we ask what fuelled such a comment?’ the anchor asked.

Damas chuckled and broke direct eye contact with his audience. ‘Why call it a story when it is a fact?’ he stated. The anchor looked bemused.

‘OK, so you’re telling us now that you have empirical evidence to back your assertions?’ the anchor continued.

‘I do.’ Damas held firm.

‘How so?’ the Anchor pressed.

Damas paused for a second, raised both index fingers to his chin in contemplation before replying. ‘I thought the BBC, as with all news networks, was looking for the *truth*, not spurious fiction spread through social media and mindless gossip?’ he asked almost acerbically. The anchor again looked bemused. ‘Well, let me remind you of this fact, that to date, no openly homosexual man or woman has died from this disease. Unless you can tell me otherwise?’

‘Well, we cannot presume to comment on all cases, Mr Zethus. It would seem a little presumptuous to claim not one person across the entire globe that is gay has not succumbed to the XENO-20 virus, wouldn’t you say?’ the anchor proposed.

‘I recall not so long ago, an illness was made public by many a world government that became a catalyst for fear and hatred towards my kind. An immunosuppressive disorder labelled the ‘gay plague’? So many in

power were quick to capitalise upon this stance, furthering their own plans for control and order. Not many questioning such authority, but many fast to condemn. Perhaps you can tell me the difference?’ Damas bit back.

The anchor looked visibly uncomfortable now... shuffling through desk papers and twisting awkwardly from side to side. ‘Now, Mr Zethus, science has taught us that serious epidemics like the AIDS crisis are not exclusively selective of their many tragic victims. Again I ask, why would you wish to perpetuate a myth that XENO-20 would act in such a fashion? Surely this is no more than an incendiary grudge against so many innocents on behalf of the gay community?’ the anchor composed themselves with an injection of confidence.

Damas looked away again. ‘XENO-20. From the Greek word meaning *foreign*, correct?’

‘Yes, I believe so. So-called because of the virus’s unusual behaviour when compared to similar strains like the common cold or flu,’ the anchor replied.

‘Ah, I know a great deal about the Greek language, you see, as I do their *myths*. Let me tell you, all myths have a grain of truth in them, embellished throughout the centuries no doubt, but dig deep enough

and you always find the foundations. You see, the Greeks would often use the term 'xeno' to describe not just one that is foreign, but one that is *different*. It gave rise to the word xenophobia of course, an insular perspective as to what is friend, and what is foe. A powerful tool, often wielded by those seeking power itself even to this day. Create a scapegoat, an enemy, a foreign invader in order to distract the masses and thus rise through the ranks. Create enough fear, and all will bend to your will,' Damas expressed defiantly.

'So...are you saying you are a man of power? Is that what your claim supports?' the anchor quizzed with a crease of the brow.

'I was once, as were those loyal to my family. Those same men that today stand to protect people that are deemed worthy to survive. Those that have through decades of persecution banded together in solidarity, in strength, whereas the many shall fall apart like ashes from scorched wood, spoiled from their years of self-proclaimed superiority and greed, the better souls shall persevere... and this world will be all the better for it.

'Spoiled? You call those millions of deaths around the world *spoiled*?' the anchor struggled to contain their own temper.

‘I do. For they are the ones that have stood before the Gods and turned their backs on them. I remember a time when such ignorance, such arrogance would have been struck down in thunderous blows of fury. No remorse or mercy. So many have forgotten the old way, and this is the price paid.’ Damas remained calm and composed.

‘Are you a man of faith, Mr Zethus? Which God do you follow?’ the anchor asked.

‘Ha! I follow none, believe me. But I know of their wrath. Sadly, I fear they have long abandoned this world, a world they helped create. Well, if that is so, then I shall ensure that such a lost legacy is reclaimed, reborn in the right image,’ Damas replied.

The anchor cleared their throat, the awkwardness returning. ‘Mr Zethus, you mentioned those that stand to protect people deemed worthy. You also openly praised the recent attacks on a medical centre in Budapest which took the lives of several Hungarian men. Are these the same men? Some form of guerrilla mercenaries that follow your, your cult?’

‘A *cult* are we now? How modest of you,’ Damas smiled. ‘I would like to remind all your viewers that what took place in Budapest was not in the name of medical progress. Nor similar incidents in other cities and states worldwide. No. You need only look on the streets right outside to see

how society has turned, the vitriol that has been spat in our direction. Those that fight do so against such oppression, knowing that they shall live when those that cage them shall fall. Our people will be protected, you can be certain of that, and any that are not of the heterosexual persuasion kept under lock and key by any political regime shall be emancipated and taken to safe spaces under my guard. They shall be made welcome in the cities of London, Paris, New York, Rio De Janeiro, San Francisco, Tokyo, Cape Town and Sydney – I take this opportunity to urge any who consider themselves immune to make haste for such havens. Leave those that cared so little for you behind to tear their own flesh from each other in chaos, to rot in the soil. When the dust settles, we shall be ready... and will bow to no one.'

'And if a cure for XENO-20 is found?' the anchor asked steadily. 'What will you do then, Mr Zethus?'

The corners of Damas' mouth turned up. 'There will be *no cure*.' He terminated his connection, leaving the anchor flummoxed, tapping their earpiece.

‘This can’t be happening,’ Chris snapped, seizing the remote from Fernando and switching the television off in disbelief. ‘The guy’s insane. He’ll kill us all!’

‘No he won’t – he made that much clear at least,’ Geraint tried to soothe once more. ‘It’s exactly as we feared, this illness is targeted... and now Damas has the Sacred Band to ensure the safety of those left behind.’ He looked across at Gary. ‘I wonder... Aisha?’ he asked.

Gary nodded. ‘Could well be that the bloodline of the knights might offer just enough protection from the plague. Not complete immunity, but *enough*.’ He took his staff in his hands and stood up.

‘Where are you going?’ Chris snapped again. ‘You’re not honestly suggesting that we alone can stop Damas and the entire army of Sacred Band warriors? We don’t even know where he is. Not to mention how to stop a bloody plague!’

Gary appeared undeterred and looked around for Luke and Aisha, spotting them by the front door. Aisha had one foot outside, clearly caught by some of the transcript of the broadcast and forcing herself to listen in conflict with Luke’s insistence that they leave. ‘Aisha. Luke. Wait – we must...’ Gary began.

‘No. We must not do *anything*, Gary,’ Luke retorted, taking Aisha by the wrist. ‘You may speak of our own immunity to this illness, perhaps you are right. But that doesn’t mean we don’t stand to lose anything, does it?’

‘You are knights of the Round Table. You have duties. What was once the work of the White Dragon has now become something far more sinister. Your father would have...’

‘Don’t speak of my father, Gary! Don’t you dare!’ Luke thrust his face into Willis’s, cheeks flushing with anger. Beth calmly stepped between them, allowing Luke to turn and escort Aisha from the house. Aisha gave a brief glance towards Beth as she was towed away, then rooted her feet to the ground stubbornly.

‘Luke. No. Please, we must stay.’ She held Luke’s arm. ‘Gary is right. They need us, both of us. Please.’

Luke craned his neck back, screwed his eyes shut. He knew she was right, but the pain was still burning deep within his heart. So much lost, how could anyone possibly understand? Aisha’s grip became tighter, her other hand cupped his jaw. ‘Let it go, my love. Let it go,’ she whispered, pressing her forehead to his. The two stood silently, then broke apart as Luke walked alone towards the main road into the city. Aisha wanted to

shout out after him, beg him to come back to her, but all strength had drained from her voice.

As Luke turned a corner out of sight, a car crept its way around and stopped a few metres from the front door where Aisha stood. A woman, dressed formally in a blue blouse, stepped out, accompanied by a young African gentleman she addressed as Paul, both sporting white face masks. 'Excuse me, are you by any chance Mrs Aisha Hussin?' the woman asked. Aisha gave a nod. 'My colleague and I have been looking for you for days. We tried the local hospital where you were admitted but I'm sure you'll understand the chaos there. My name is Doctor Ana Braithwaite, and I'd very much like to speak with you.'

Chapter 22

Edinburgh, England

8th May 2020 AD

The view from the upper laboratory window across Meadows Park was crisp and clear. Cleo could see a small group of university students gathering despite all legal protocols concerning mass social gatherings, banners and crudely painted placards pointing firming in the air like a row of spikes, smears of rainbow colours on many a cheek, chants of gay liberation and freedom vibrating through a ringleader's tinny speakerphone, the stamping of feet rumbling through the ground. She would have joined them, had it not been for the strict policy of staff not to interfere with Student Union activities – not that over her many centuries of life such restrictions had ever held her back. There was something to be admired about the fervent determination of youth and their ceaseless passion for equality. So often many such individuals were not directly impeded by the oppression passed down by their leaders, but all the same, stood together with those that were. Dare Cleo cling to a remnant of hope for mankind? Whenever she had done so in the past, it was swiftly dashed by the opposing side – seen here this very evening, a tide of rage from city folk armed with broken bottles, flares and an array of street furniture seemingly uprooted, now wielded as blunt

weapons. It was ugly. A stand-off little more than ten metres wide between the two lines, the Scottish police doing what they could to stem the flow of aggression.

She caught sight of several faces amongst the crowds, blistered and bleeding. There were infected individuals in both factions. A relief perhaps, given the reported nature of the XENO-20 illness and its intended targets, that some had still chosen the side of the homosexuals and their wider kin. Many though stood fiercely in the opposite pack, coughs of blood spraying with every shouted profanity, some simply collapsing on the spot, then suffocated by the trample of the many feet crowding around them. A lone bottle was thrown, shattering inches from the student line, who retaliated with what appeared to be stained pink flour that exploded above their enemies' heads – laughs and cheers followed when several aggressors believed the pink clouds that formed to be some kind of poison, fumbling and falling over their own feet in a fit of panic. The police banged their batons against their riot shields in warning to both sides. Cleo sensed the inevitable conclusion of affairs, and went for the cord of the window blinds.

'Do you know what always amazes me about this small, North Atlantic island?' Damas' deep voice came from behind, startling Cleo. 'Despite bearing the name 'United', it takes so little to turn its four corners against one another,' he smiled, pulling close to his sister. He took the

window blind cord from her hand, revealing the view once more. ‘But look closer,’ he pointed. ‘Do you see how the majority turn so quickly upon one another, like rabid animals? Unable to control their fear, because for so long they have had nothing to be afraid of. They haven’t learnt, or evolved, yet claim they are the future, they are superior. *Why?*’ Cleo followed the line of her brother’s finger to a close-knit group of aggressors now fighting among themselves – one obviously infected, clinging to the collar of another for help, then forced to the ground and kicked remorselessly by the very people they once stood alongside, spat upon and decried as filth. ‘Fear, my dear sister. The most powerful tool over all that walk this earth. This is how an empire truly dies,’ Damas whispered.

Cleo wrestled the cord back and obscured the view once more. ‘Are you happy with your broadcast, dear brother?’ she asked coldly.

‘It struck the necessary notes, yes. I sense you are not?’ Damas leaned back against Cleo’s workbench, arms folded and chest puffed. Cleo gave no reply, only busying herself with some Petri dishes and examining more specimens under the microscope. ‘You should be immensely proud of yourself, little sister, for without your work on the Arrow of Apollo and the blood of the Sacred Band, none of this would have been possible. I may claim the victory, but it is you that has shaped the world forever,’ Damas soothed her with a smug expression. Damas took his

sister's prolonged silence as an invitation to offer more. 'Mother and Father would have been so... so impressed, Cleo.' He reached out and pulled his sister's wrist away from the focus dial of the microscope. His eyes closed softly, moments before she snatched her hand away.

'What are you doing?' Cleo demanded. 'Stop trying to read my thoughts without my permission! You know we have always agreed not...'

'You can relax, Sister. I've known for some time,' Damas casually smiled. 'You think you can hide secrets from me? Just as I have opened my heart up to you on many an occasion, you know I can tap into yours like a reflection. In Wembley, you felt my pain, and my resolve – you welcomed it. However, I also felt your indecision, your apprehension, your *fail-safe*.'

'Fail-safe?' Cleo questioned, manoeuvring herself awkwardly away from her brother.

'Asclepius. Where is it?' Damas demanded.

'I don't know what you're talking about, Brother.'

'Don't lie! It's futile and you know it, Cleo. The cure you've developed from the arrow – Apollo had the curse of disease, but his son Asclepius

was his antithesis, the bringer of health and medicine. The sharpened pins of death that rained upon our family that day had the potential to carry both, and I want to see your conflicting work,' Damas sparked.

Cleo's mouth went dry, she stared at her feet. 'If you knew of the cure of Asclepius, why only now ask me about it?' she questioned.

'I am not as reckless as you may think, Sister. For all our years of life, I would not assume to understand Gaia, Mother Nature herself and her ways. We were playing her game of death here, unleashing a disease, unsure of its consequences. Having a cure on standby would appear a sensible option, would it not? Besides, there could be some from the opposing sides worth saving... Take the Round Table of knights for example. That young lady we encountered at the stadium, and again during my bout with Adam Allen – quite unique, would you not agree?' Damas proposed.

Cleo had tried to rid her mind of the one they called Violet, daughter of Sir Bors, for she had haunted her own thoughts since the moment the two had met at Wembley. Her mixture of tenderness and ferocity was like a drug to Cleo, an attraction she'd not felt for many a century. It was an attraction akin to that which made her mother the revered figure she was, towering over the men of Thebes and bending them to her will with a mere flash of crimson from her eyes. All those born of royal blood into

the Kingdom of Thebes knew of the founding lady Harmonia, and her curse that brought the walls her father had built tumbling down like petals from a fading flower. Such was the enchantment of the Necklace gifted by Ares, but known to be destroyed so recently by the knights of King Arthur. Could such power still endure outside its jewelled body? Such powers had their ways... for what was a mortal human if not the perfect host for greed, lust and ambition? But this young woman, this Violet, shrinking she was certainly not, Cleo had playfully convinced herself. Whether it be the pedigree of Sir Bors flowing through her veins, or something else entirely, she was unsure – but yearning to find out.

‘I ask again, Cleo. The cure. Where is it?’ Damas grew impatient.

Cleo calmly walked towards a steel silver canister standing upright against an incubator cube and slowly unscrewed its top. A spurt of white gas was released with a hiss. She dipped her hands inside and removed the Arrow of Apollo, its head still gleaming gold as clean as the day it was shot, the wooden shaft showing no signs of decay. Cleo held it delicately in both hands and turned to her brother. ‘The arrow itself holds both the disease and the cure. Contrary to what you might think, Damas, while I have had my suspicions about the extraction of Asclepius’s blessing, I have yet to begin any practical trials,’ she admitted. ‘All we have is the *theory* – and this arrow.’

Damas stepped closer, examining the arrow held before him. The seed of all his pain and revenge. Now in a twist of fate, the key to his salvation. 'We've come too far now, Sister, and from what we can gather, your work to protect those that needed it has been successful. I am comforted that whoever remains standing upon this earth will have proven themselves worthy – thus we need no cure. Destroy it. Destroy the arrow,' he ordered.

'But... but Brother, we don't yet know enough about the disease of Apollo and its wrath. It could mutate, new variants created which you or I know nothing about. You could stand to inherit nothing but a wasteland void of life,' Cleo protested.

'A risk I'm willing to take. Destroy the arrow, Sister,' Damas instructed. He turned away, made for the laboratory door only to pause and face Cleo once more. 'I sense hesitation in you, Sister. These fears of which you speak, they are not for the whole of mankind, are they? No, more the wellbeing of a few perhaps?' He moved closer. 'Or, just one? The girl? This Violet?'

All her guard was torn down with every word uttered by her brother. Cleo was left completely exposed. She crumpled before him, falling to her knees before his feet. 'Dear brother, I have never begged before you in such a manner before, but this one time, please indulge me. I ask you

to spare the descendants of the Round Table, however many are left or could be reborn again. They have shown they are noble, loyal and brave – much like your Sacred Band. They stand for peace, irrespective of one’s birth, and as you know, have proven despite centuries of attrition between the Red and White factions, can coalesce for the common good. Surely they deserve a chance?’ her eyes grew moist.

Damas cupped his sister’s cheeks in his hands. ‘Dearest sister, it may well be that those born of a knight’s bloodline could be immune – but it will be nature that will determine this now. It is not for us to decide. For every exception we make to this purification, there will no doubt be another, then another. This then becomes weakness, and has been the source of all mankind’s ills. Too many banners, too many differences, too many enemies within enemies. Surely you understand?’ his voice unwavering. Cleo held his gaze, noting Damas was unaware of the beaker half full of acid she had concealed inside the sleeve of her lab coat while pretending to acquiesce to him. She screwed her eyes closed and inhaled deeply, knowing she had only seconds before her brother’s mind locked on to hers. Her arm swung, the beaker smashed against Damas’ left temple, the liquid within burning his skin and eyes as he fell to the floor writhing in agony.

‘Forgive me, Brother. But monsters should remain myths,’ Cleo stuttered as she leapt over his body and bolted for the lab door. As she hurried

through the corridor she heard the cries of Damas to his two Sacred Band sentries that had been standing by the stairwell, blocking her exit.

‘Don’t just stand there! *After her!*’

Two Sacred Band warriors was an easy task to manage for Cleo. She hesitated as two blue-ringed shields emerged, flamed spears erupting from their hands. One was hurled, she dodged behind a nearby desk as the computer monitor on top exploded into bursts of blue. The pair moved in on her position, one being too eager. She clamped her arms around the fighter’s heels and pulled him to the floor, his partner quick to defend, only to be met with Cleo’s heel squarely to his chin. She scrambled to her feet and fled for the stairwell. Damas left, cursing his two acolytes for their failure.

The stairwell meandered sharply, Cleo slipping several times on the polished stone. She heard her brother’s footsteps only a few flights behind her, a sinister echo of her name resonating. She reached the fire escape door and flung it open, triggering the alarm as she passed through. The boisterous crowds had, as expected, broken through the police ranks and engaged in a melee of fists and projectiles. From the

corner of her eye she saw six more Sacred Band members, clearly on guard to defend their own people, and two dressed in a recognisable football training kit. Cleo turned and ran in their opposite direction, straight into the mess of bodies spread across Meadow Gardens. She was groped by frantic, bloody hands, the stench of alcohol, flare smoke and other flammable liquids causing her to retch. She kept pushing her way through, tossing any weaker adversary aside from her path until she came face to face with a brute of a man. Sick with the plague, red foam spilling from his mouth onto his black beard, mind unhinged. He grabbed Cleo by the throat, spitting curse words, noting her lab coat and chastising the medical community for doing nothing during such a plight. She tried to wrestle free while avoiding unnecessary harm to the desperate beast, but the blue fire of the Sacred Band had crept closer and showed far less mercy. University students had parted like the seas and allowed their bodyguards to engage with both spear and shield. Bolts of blue again shot overhead, scattering the belligerent demonstrators and leaving the law enforcers little choice but to run for the safety of their vehicles. As the breath of one Sacred Band member she knew to be Milo drew close upon her neck, Cleo acted impulsively, thrusting the arrow she was gripping deep into the flesh of the brute. Every muscle in his face froze, his skin grew pale as snow, eyes welled fresh blood, and his hands released Cleo's neck. She marched forward, putting a distance between her and the Celtic FC striker as he slowed to defend his partner Tommy from the masses.

Her car had been damaged by the riots, a wing mirror left hanging and a spiders' web crack across the passenger window. Cleo fumbled for her keys, jumped inside and floored the accelerator at the earliest opportunity. The back end of the car swept out in a plume of rubbery smoke and sped past the dormitories where the students had begun to regroup. She dared a glance back and saw the blue-flamed circles breaking through the smoke, then fading. She breathed a sigh of relief.

'I'm sorry, Damas,' Milo conceded, bowing his head to his leader reverently. Damas nursed his face with a damp cloth, gritting his teeth as he picked out the shards of glass from his skin. 'We can hunt her down, Tommy and me?' his Celtic FC partner stood by his side.

'I need all Sacred Band warriors upon these shores to head for the safe space of London, pull out of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool... every other city. Head straight for Soho,' Damas growled.

'But would we not leave many of our people defenceless?' a third Sacred Band member enquired. 'Tonight has shown they are still subject to

violence and attack, sir. It will be the same across Britain as the XENO-20 virus gets worse.'

'If they are meant to live, they shall, soldier. The odds are after all, in their favour. The virus cannot be... shall not be, stopped. No, all of you, to London at first light.' Damas walked away, still smarting from his wound. He paused, inspected his hand and closed his eyes in thought. 'How many Sacred Band members do we have stationed in Cardiff and Birmingham?' he asked.

'About a dozen, sir,' Milo confirmed.

'See to it that they move on Bath immediately, under your command. Might slow her down.'

'Why Bath, sir?'

Damas tensed his hand to a fist. 'Just a *feeling*, soldier. Do as I ask please.'

Chapter 23

Bath, England

8th May 2020 AD

‘So you see, once I and my colleague Paul here had heard of a seemingly ordinary young woman, carrying a child and testing positive for XENO-20 – but somehow surviving – well, we had to seek you out,’ Dr Ana Braithwaite explained, letting her tea grow cold.

‘What makes you believe she was ordinary?’ Geraint South muttered under his breath. Gary nudged him sharply in the ribs. Braithwaite and Paul simply looked at one another, then turned to Aisha.

‘Forgive me, Mrs Allen. When we heard of the tragic news of your miscarriage, and that you were supported at the Union Hospital in Bath with what appeared to be your husband, Luke, we assumed that you were in a heterosexual relationship. Please correct us if we were mistaken.’ The doctor skimmed through some loose notes. ‘You see, I first encountered this pathogen back in March, with the incident at Wembley Stadium. Shortly after, as you may know, a pattern emerged that was deemed insanity by the medical community, despite support from my own colleagues in Italy, Hungary and the United States. A

dangerous correlation that could erode social stability. I was urged to desist from such a pursuit, but as time has passed...' she lowered her head, unable to finish. 'Paul here confirmed my logic... the "gay immunity". Possibly more, given the fluidity of sexual preferences, but it was irrefutable as far as his blood goes. Mine, less so.' Paul remained silent, breaking his posture only to check the latest news feeds on his phone, his expression becoming more melancholy with every update.

Aisha composed herself while still keeping one eye on the front door, hoping for Luke's return. 'We're not actually married, not yet,' she confessed. 'I should go by the name of Mrs Hussin,' Dr Braithwaite acknowledged her mistake with a respectful nod. 'And Mr South, my friend here, is right – I am not ordinary.' Gary stood forward ready to interject again as Aisha reached for her wooden staff. Before he could restrain her, she thumped its tip down on the tiled kitchen floor, there was a flash of winter-white light and it became the sword of Sir Palamedes. The brazen act caught even Alex Allen off guard. Geraint and Fernando cracked a smile as Chris pulled a flustered and irritable Gary away.

'I'm... I'm sorry. What exactly are you people?' Paul's attention was now firmly on his hosts.

‘You know of King Arthur?’ Aisha continued bluntly. Paul nodded, speechless. ‘Well, he had a Round Table of knights, those knights had descendants, and you’re looking at three of them.’ She pointed the tip of her sword towards Geraint and Gary. ‘That’s Geraint South, born of Sir Geraint’s bloodline, somewhat obviously, and Gary Willis here comes from the line of Sir Gehrís. Come on boys, don’t be shy, show the lady your swords,’ her tone facetious. ‘There are two more... one, the daughter of Sir Bors, runs the pub down the road and the other, my fiancé, has just stormed off in a huff as he so often does. That’s the knight of Sir Galahad in him, I so often am told,’ she continued flippantly.

A pin could have been heard dropping for what seemed like an eternity when Paul again spoke up. ‘And... you guys? What are you?’ he pointed to Alex, Chris and Fernando.

‘Sacred Band.’ Alex followed Aisha’s example, tiring of charades and subterfuge. ‘Not getting the best reputation at the moment, I’m sure you’ve seen.’

‘The soldiers that Mr Zethus commands? The ones defending the gays and their safe spaces? The ones that somehow wield fire? You?’ Paul’s brown eyes widened in wonder. ‘What are you doing here? Why are you

not out there with the others, fighting?’ Dr Braithwaite gave a solid slap on Paul’s forearm in warning.

‘Lad’s got a point.’ Alex turned to Chris and retired back to the lounge, aggrieved.

Fernando stepped in. ‘You see, sir, the Sacred Band are most loyal to their leader, but that doesn’t mean we all need to agree with all the actions undertaken. In fact, those in this room risk persecution for defying the orders of Mr Zethus, not willing to support such a ruthless, cruel regime,’ he tried to explain in broken English.

‘You’re not Sacred Band, Fernando. Remember that!’ came Alex’s booming voice from the lounge. Fernando fell back crestfallen, comforted by Chris Wood.

‘We had a better leader once, the nephew of Alex in there. He should still be leading, but...’ Chris faltered.

‘But he failed. Now he’s upstairs sulking like a petulant teenager,’ Alex bellowed from the lounge once more. ‘Tried to warn him, but he wouldn’t listen.’

‘Alex. Enough!’ Gary commanded. ‘If it were you in Adam’s position, you would have done exactly the same... or have I misjudged the Allen family all these years? Richard? Elaine? Luke? From what I’ve seen the only one to shirk duty was *you*,’ he scolded. Alex was on his feet, striding towards Willis, blue fire racing through his forearm.

‘Say that again, Mr Media! I dare you!’ Alex hissed, Gary’s staff now shining steel. Dr Braithwaite and Paul both gripped the edge of the table at the sight of the alarming, if wondrous, altercation unfolding. The creaking of stairs came from behind Alex.

‘Stand down, Uncle, please,’ Adam soothed. ‘You too Gary.’ He calmly took a chair at the head of the table. ‘No need for any of you to throw stones at one another, for my uncle is right, the fault is mine. I challenged Damas, and lost to the stronger man, and thus lost the Sacred Band. But... we’re still here, and together. While we remain united, we have a chance to stop him,’ he proclaimed.

‘Done a bit of soul searching up there, have we?’ Beth smiled as she asked the doctor and Paul if they wanted a top-up on the tea, both still looking perplexed. ‘Trust me, you get used to this lot,’ Beth muttered into Ana Braithwaite’s ear.

‘So, as the only trained medical professionals in this room, what can you tell us with regard to XENO-20, and why has Aisha here survived?’ Adam asked.

‘Well, we are not entirely sure. But perhaps... this, this special Arthurian blood you carry has something to do with your immunity,’ Dr Braithwaite struggled to find the right terminology. ‘Our thinking was that if there was to be a cure to XENO-20, it would most likely come from one that is naturally immune to it, hence we were tracking down Mrs Hussin.’

Adam pondered the proposal, then turned to Aisha. ‘Forgive me for being so direct, Aisha, but given the recent circumstances of your miscarriage, I’m not convinced the blood of a knight would be enough to withstand such a plague. I’m sure Damas and his sister, if they are the age that they claim to be, would have known about the descendants of the Round Table and possibly sought you out first for trials. Then, of course, there’s the encounter with Chris.’ He gave a brief gesture to Chris Wood. ‘Damas met you in Scotties’ Bar, he and Cleo got your blood, and somehow fashioned an immunity from the DNA of a Sacred Band warrior. Hence we, and our kind as it were, appear free of the disease. The rest of the world, however...’ his voice trailed off despondently.

'But all viruses must have cures. It can take time, but we can always find one,' Paul blurted out.

'How's the one for cancer coming along? Or HIV for that matter?' Geraint shot back. Paul backed down.

'He's not wrong, Geraint. Whatever this virus is, Damas has knowledge of its inner workings, and it is, as the doctors here say, unique. Possibly built within the very myth supporting the children of Queen Niobe herself,' Adam suggested.

'Children of who?' Dr Braithwaite interrupted.

'Queen Niobe. Greek myth, well, so we thought. Had fourteen children, all but two slain by the god Apollo and his sister Artemis. Damas and Cleo could be linked,' Geraint tried to summarise for his guests.

'This is absurd.' Dr Braithwaite put her face in her hands. 'What are we up against here?'

'Ana, we just witnessed two people wield magical swords and another summon fire to his knuckles! If we wanted to find something... I think we just did!' Paul gushed.

‘Speaking of finding things... where is my brother?’ Adam asked the room.

The evening sun didn’t provide the same level of cover Luke enjoyed the previous nights, which had allowed him to sneak into the Roman Baths unnoticed. Much of the carnage that had ensued through the streets had temporarily been quashed by police, an easier task for a relatively tranquil city when compared to the larger ones up and down Britain. The gates to the Baths remained locked, but loose enough for Luke to slip through the gap. The familiar damp, sulphurous smell caught his nostrils, a hazy aqua mist lingering over the main pool. He took the same seat on its edge as he’d done many times these past few days, dangling his fingers in the cool waters.

‘Feel like I should be writing a diary around about now, Min,’ he joked. ‘I know you were always fond of them, never saw the point myself. After all, if you can’t even speak your mind, why should you be compelled to write about it, eh?’ He looked up at the spring skies, remarkably clear and filled with murmurations of starlings. If there was to be any comfort in the past few months’ near-despotic agenda, it had opened up a new voice for nature – fewer cars, planes and trains. ‘Nature’s way’ he reminded himself fondly of Mary’s words while playfully flicking away

droplets, reminiscing about the encounters with Lady Morgan, the very Morgan le Fay of old, the legendary Excalibur in his grasp. It seemed like a lifetime ago, as did his time with Mary back in Boston. He laughed to himself as he pulled the photo of him and Mary 'Minnie' Cassidy out of his pocket, their friend Jenny Van Hasen completing the group. 'I still keep this... never sure why?' he spoke gently to the water. 'Well, that's not true... pretty sure you know why. Good memories,' he smiled. Turning the photo over, seeing Jenny's faded scrawled phone number, his smile soured. 'Some good memories, at least,' returning the photo to his jacket pocket. 'Memories, good or bad, belong in the past though, right? That's what you wanted me to learn?' he asked.

There was still silence, an uncomfortable but by now familiar silence to Luke. What was he thinking? That some epiphany, a confession of realisation would draw Mary, the Lady of the Lake, up from her watery depths, Excalibur in hand, ready for him to wage war once again? Ludicrous. Luke knew it. Whatever it was he and his friends and family were facing, it was not this myth. Not even the King's Blade would rid the planet of a disease that did not come from the bold edge of a sword. Maybe Excalibur had its limits when it came to the ultimate rescue plan. No matter how still of mind Luke thought he was, how prepared he was to let go of his past pains and sacrifice for the future, this was not the Sword's fight.

His phone buzzed. He anticipated Aisha, but instead saw Violet's name pop up. He silenced it. He wanted a few more moments in peace at least. 'When you spoke to me last, standing here, it did get me thinking... yes, don't sound so alarmed...' he joked. 'All the descendants of Sir Bedivere – Mack Benson, his grandfather, Ben Benson I believe – countless others with the weight of responsibility on their shoulders when it came to ending the cyclic powers of the Palladium and the Necklace of Harmonia, the tireless desire of Lady Morgan and the White Dragon. Only seventeen, *seventeen* I think it was before Mack, had managed to summon Excalibur from Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh. OK, that's plenty of ruthless empires to hit the reset button on... many lives spared, but how many were missed? Opportunities lost? It left me thinking that poor old Mack, had he stopped to think how many suffered as a result of his generation's failures, just how ill his mind would have become. Maybe he did just that, on top of losing his wife and daughter? Who knows? That's certainly one hell of a cruel curse, mind,' Luke rambled, still trying to silence the calls coming in from Violet. 'Anyway, I'm not here to confess. If you want to keep Excalibur from me then you must have your reasons. I'm just here to say – I *can* move forward. Aisha and I both can. It will be painful, but we'll make it. We won't carry the anvil around our necks the way so many of the bloodlines of Sir Bedivere did, somehow miraculously succeeding in breaking free for the good of others. I'm an Allen, a son of Sir Galahad, and we'll break the mould, just

as you did, Min.’ He smiled ruefully, wiped a tear and stepped down from the pool edge.

He went to dial Violet’s number when Mary appeared before him, dressed in liquid sapphire blue just as before, leaning nonchalantly by one of the stone pillars, a small sprig of Glastonbury thorn woven between her fingers. ‘My oh my, Luke... if those words were ever destined for a diary, then today should be the day you begin,’ She laughed.

Luke returned his phone to his pocket and cocked his head, eyeing Mary from top to bottom. ‘Good dress that, although always thought you looked better in red and white,’ he grinned. ‘Can skip the polka-dots if you like?’

‘And the mouse ears? They’d clash terribly,’ Mary shot back, patting her head. ‘Quite another adventure you Allen boys have been on recently, am I right?’ she focused. Luke replied with a shrug. ‘Hmmm... and as you say, you’re not sure whether the King’s Blade is up for such an unusual challenge brought forth by the Children of Niobe?’

‘Was the only thing we had left to try, Min.’ Luke settled down upon the buttress of the nearest pillar. ‘But yes, a sword in a bug-fight? I remain to be convinced.’

‘I can put you out of your misery, Luke...’ Mary held the Glastonbury thorn sprig before him. ‘This is not exactly a conflict for Excalibur. For what has surfaced at the hands of Damasichthon and his sister Cleodoxa is not born of the Trinity – the Palladium or the Necklace of Harmonia have had no role in this debacle, therefore neither does the precious third piece. Sadly no pressing of the reset button to be had here, proverbially speaking.’

‘Could still come in handy though,’ Luke grumbled.

‘And I’m sure you’d swing it like the controlled, chivalrous knight and gentleman that you are, hun,’ Mary bowed mockingly. ‘And against demi-gods like Damas and Cleo, yes, maybe you’ll inflict some damage, maybe even kill them. But will that be enough? Will the severance of society heal so quickly from the wound Damas has opened?’ she asked.

When he stood upon Mount Sinai with his brother, Violet and the rest of the Red Dragon eight years before – there was a true show of unity. People of all creeds coming together in a move so daring Morgan le Fay had herself underestimated... even her own subjects, headed by Sir Lawrence Worthington, the loyal Sir Lancelot bloodline, turning against her in favour of a belief all could co-exist peacefully without superiority. If the head of the snake that was Damas was to be chopped clean off

now, would it only make a martyr? How long before a new wolf tried to become the head of the pack? Would his brother Adam be able to regain control of the force that was the Sacred Band? It was yet another risk, Luke contemplated.

‘Did you know that when you’re overthinking, hun, your top lip crumples up?’ Mary giggled. ‘It’s actually quite adorable.’

‘Aisha tells me that too,’ Luke replied, trying to smooth any creases from his moustache stubble. ‘She’s doing OK now, by the way, thanks to Beth.’

‘I know – shared experience and all. But as you heard, we’ve all got our own paths to walk. Most often, we must do so alone. Advice is your manual; the construction is still up to you,’ Mary responded. ‘And with Mr Zethus, it is no different.’

Luke raised an eyebrow. Who was capable of giving Damas *advice*? He said himself, he would bow to no one, nor would any of his followers. Pretty resolute. He raised his arms towards Mary. ‘You want to give the homicidal maniac some words of wisdom, be my guest, Min,’ he sighed.

‘Not me, hun, this is a family matter.’

‘Cleo? His sister? She doesn’t appear to be on our side, in case you haven’t noticed.’

‘Best try someone else then... someone much closer to Damas.’

‘Who?’

Mary gleefully passed the Glastonbury thorn sprig to Luke, delighting in its transformation into the mighty blade of Excalibur. Luke felt that same empowerment he had done before when holding its pommel, a strange mixture of strength and frailty, a conflict of rage and serenity all at once. ‘The power of death in your hands once more, my love. But also don’t forget... *rebirth*.’

Luke lowered the blade, stared at Mary. ‘Rebirth?’ he quizzed.

‘I am of the water and air, my counterpart Morgan le Fay of the rocks and stones. Both are alive, and move in their own ways. Take Excalibur to the stones of Mount Sipylus, see if what was once dead remains so,’ Mary riddled.

Luke’s phone buzzed for a third time – still Violet. He glanced down to silence the device once more, and when he looked back up, Mary had gone. ‘Why does she always do that?’ he cursed to himself. He promptly

dialled Violet back. 'Violet? What do you want... kinda in the middle of something here and...wait, what? Why is Aisha not answering? Hang on, slow down. What do you mean Cleo is *outside* The Bear Pub?

Chapter 24

Bath, England

8th May 2020 AD

‘How did you find me?’ Violet bristled, placing her mobile down firmly on the bar and sliding her hand towards her staff. ‘Did you track the car? When we were up in Edinburgh during the fight with your brother?’

Cleo had taken only a single step into The Bear Pub when Violet called Luke, having gotten no response from anyone at the Allen residence. She looked worn, Violet thought, white lab coat torn at the shoulder, specks of dried blood down the sleeve and breast, skin clammy with a hint of mascara running from the corners of her eyes. ‘I really don’t have time to explain, Mrs Butcher, but trust me, I would not be here if it were not important.’

‘Define *important*.’ Violet moved to within striking distance. ‘I’m sure you could argue things have been important ever since you and your brother let loose this virus upon the innocents at Wembley Stadium. Now the entire population is at risk – and for what exactly? I would say

Damas has taken the meaning of gay pride a little too far, wouldn't you agree?'

'There was a time when I would have thought not.' Cleo remained fixed on Violet's staff and the flash of red light pulsing through its bark. 'We have always felt a connection as siblings, all fourteen of us, well, what was once fourteen...'

'I know your sob story. Please do not bore me with it. My friends will be on their way and if you have indeed travelled alone to Bath – trust me, you'll be outmatched,' Violet snapped.

'Good, let them come. The sooner the better in fact. For while I have travelled alone, my brother will soon learn of my whereabouts – either through our connection or his scouts – and will no doubt unleash the Sacred Band to stop me. Stop us.' Cleo held firm.

'Stop *us*? There is no *us*,' Violet spat back.

'Please, we don't have long, Violet,' Cleo pleaded, revealing the golden tip of Apollo's arrow from the inside of her lab coat. 'We can end all this, now. But I need your help.' Violet squinted at the object, took a few timid steps forward. 'This is the source of the plague – what you call XENO-20 – my brother and I would call it the curse of Apollo. But while

he and his sister Artemis were known as the harbingers of death in our times, they could also heal. Such was the mercy of Gods and Goddesses. Forgive me Violet, but from our briefest of encounters, something tells me you perhaps know a little about the power of Goddesses.’ Cleo boldly ran her finger along the edge of Violet’s staff. ‘My brother and I have been walking this earth for centuries now, and have heard all the tales of the knights of King Arthur, and their ancestors. Your noble circle divided for so long, then brought together in a challenge to a sorceress that considered herself superior. The *magic* you possess. But yours is... is *irregular*, is it not? Fuelled not only by duty, but *passion*... a desire similar to those my brother now controls. There is more to you than a sword passed down through the ages, isn’t there? The young lady that destroyed the Necklace of Harmonia, once a treasure of my own household, its power stemming from Ares himself. Such fire, even when seemingly extinguished, leaves a cinder. A trace.’ Cleo’s lips came close to a caress against Violet’s cheek, sending ripples through her skin. The gentle and perfumed breath of Cleo broke down Violet’s guard. She felt her lips being charmed towards every word spoken, mere moments from a kiss. Violet jolted, broke free from the trance, turned away.

‘What do you want, Cleo?’ Violet focused on the floor. ‘Is this some sort of trick? Because if so, I’m not falling for it.’

‘No. No, please, Violet. This is no trick,’ Cleo flustered, both wounded and embarrassed. She offered her hand – ‘I’m not sure if this will work, but if it helps, you can trust me. The connection my brother and I have, I long considered unique between the Niobid children, but from our first encounter at Wembley, I sensed, maybe...’ she reached out. ‘Goddess to Goddess perhaps? I don’t know.’ She became coy.

Violet pinched her brow, unconvinced. Her phone rang. It was Aisha, returning her calls no doubt. Luke would be but minutes away. She took the risk, clamped her hand within Cleo’s. A flood of patchwork memories filled her mind... flashes of agony from the day of Leto’s festival, a family murdered by divine retribution, parents unable to contain indefatigable grief. A monument of stone, a mercy for their mother Queen Niobe from the sacrifice of Cleo and Damas, the surviving children, made to live on forever inside a shell of morosity. The hardened teachings of those that served justice, but with the sister learning quicker than the brother. She pulled her hand free, trembling so hard against the bar the pint glasses hung above sang.

‘And I too, Violet, am sorry for your loss. Both Mother and Father.’ Cleo dabbed away the tears from her own eyes. ‘You see, I *do feel*. Despite what you might think of me,’ she gave an innocent chuckle. Violet twitched a forgiving smile back as the front door flew open.

‘Don’t make me use this, bitch!’ Luke stormed, the brilliant white of Excalibur poised above his shoulder ready to strike like the tail of a scorpion. ‘Get away from her and head back to the pit you crawled out of and...’

‘Luke, stop! It’s all right. She’s here to help.’ Violet threw herself between Luke and Cleo. ‘Trust me, please. Wait, is that...?’

‘It is. Took me a while I know, but...’ Luke’s fire ebbed away upon looking at a frightened Cleo. ‘What’s going on here exactly? She trying to negotiate or something?’

‘You could say that,’ Cleo croaked nervously. ‘I must say, I’ve never seen the Sword of your King Arthur in all its glory before. Certainly lives up to the myths,’ she tried to appease.

‘Used to think of it as a myth too. Much like most of the world that is now dying because of your brother. As glorious as this sword is, it’s no antibiotic. Pretty sure it could take Damas’ head clean off though, so watch yourself!’ Luke warned.

Cleo revealed the Arrow of Apollo once again. ‘No, Mr Allen. But this just might be.’ Luke cocked his head to the side, then turned to Violet.

‘Luke, we need to get to your brother and the others... and we don’t have long.’

Aisha punched in Violet’s landline number for The Bear once more. No answer. She tried Luke again, engaged. ‘Nothing.’ She turned to the group, now huddled around the kitchen table. ‘Three missed calls from Violet and now nothing.’ She paced up and down.

‘Let’s go round there, straight to The Bear,’ Gary said. ‘Find out what’s going on. Beth and Fernando can stay with Dr Braithwaite and Paul here, just in case we run into trouble.’

Alex loomed intimidatingly over the two guests. ‘Were either of you followed?’

‘No... I can’t say we were, or we would have likely been...’ Dr Braithwaite stuttered, looking to Paul for backup. The interrogation was broken by a firm knock on the door. Alex swung round and prepared his shield once more, Geraint and Gary mirroring with their swords. Both the doctor and Paul jumped in sync from the shock. ‘Please... I appreciate Paul and I am new to all of this but can you stop doing, well, whatever it is you are

doing here.’ Ana frowned at her hosts and their magical incantations. Alex gave a nod to Beth to approach the door and answer, creeping behind her but keeping out of sight. Beth gingerly turned the brass handle and cracked the door open, then breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Violet. Thank God, we were worried.’ Beth pulled Violet in, pushing aside both Luke and Cleo. ‘What? What is this?’ She stepped away upon seeing the Niobid child, Alex with spear already conjured, ready to be sprung loose as Violet rebuffed with the red-flame shield of her own.

‘Alex, it’s fine. Let Luke and me explain,’ Violet soothed. ‘We don’t have much time.’

Adam and Chris placed their hands on Alex’s torso in restraint. ‘Indeed we don’t, Violet. Go on,’ Adam instructed, eyes fixed on Cleo.

‘There’s a cure. A cure for XENO-20. Cleo came to help us,’ Violet gushed, encouraging Cleo to show the Arrow of Apollo. ‘This arrow. It came from Apollo’s bow. It’s poison, a specific toxin the likes of which our world has never seen, but Cleo’s family has. But that same arrow contains the antitoxin, just as Apollo’s own son... Asciphus, no, Alexis – something... what was his name?’ Violet fidgeted.

‘Asclepius,’ Cleo and Geraint spoke in unison.

‘Of course... the God of Greek medicine,’ Geraint added, moving closer to inspect the arrow.

‘Problem is, unlike the virus, to create a cure requires specialised reproduction, the same as any typical vaccine,’ Cleo elaborated. ‘I couldn’t complete such work at my laboratory in Edinburgh, but my brother knew it was possible. I tried to keep it from him but...’

‘Damas knows XENO-20 has a cure?’ Adam forced.

‘His safety net, you could call it,’ Cleo confirmed. ‘In case the selective nature of the virus didn’t quite conform the way he wanted it to.’

‘As in keeping people like us safe.’ Chris placed his hands on his hips. Cleo bowed in apology.

‘You said you *tried* to keep it from Damas?’ Adam asked.

‘Yeah, that’s the other thing. Turns out these two are like Siamese twins – they can read each other’s thoughts,’ Luke interjected. ‘So, kinda guessing your old nemesis won’t be too far behind. Oh, by the way... I called in a small favour.’ He presented the thorned sprig of Excalibur to Aisha.

‘That one looks a little smaller than the others here. Is that typical of the Galahad line?’ Paul shot up like a giddy geek in a comic store.

‘Who the hell are you two?’ Luke pulled the thorn sprig away from Paul’s eager hands. Adam rushed through the introductions to Dr Ana Braithwaite and her colleague. ‘Pleasure, kid,’ Luke said before returning to Aisha. ‘Mount Sipylus. Where is it and can your men get us there?’ he asked.

‘Northern Turkey. Yes, probably. Why?’ Aisha replied.

‘Something Mary said. We cannot mow Damas’ plague down with Excalibur, but...’ Luke paused and glanced at Cleo. ‘We might be able to arrange... I don’t know... a family reunion?’ Cleo’s eyes grew wide as bowls. ‘Only shot worth taking, don’t think he’ll listen to anyone else, no offence, Cleo.’ She acknowledged the argument, but desperate to ask quite how this blade of kings would resurrect her mother.

‘If you are to travel to Mount Sipylus, the tomb of my mother, Queen Niobe, then I insist I come with you,’ Cleo stated defiantly.

‘No, *wait!*’ Dr Braithwaite chimed in. ‘Look, I’m not going to sit here and pretend to understand you people and your ways... but if it is science

you are interested in, then Paul and I can help. You say you cannot create a vaccine, my dear, but maybe we can. This virus, XENO-20, is not going to disappear just because its creator is defeated. It is still running rampant and needs a proper cure like every other disease. I may not know how you created such an ailment, but please, let us try to resolve it. Come back with us to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. We can work on the vaccine together,' she reasoned with Cleo.

Adam turned to Gary and Geraint for approval. 'If they go, they'll need support. It's chaos in the capital and, if Luke and Violet are correct, Damas might well have already foreseen the move. He'll have all the Sacred Band warriors he can muster ready to mount an offensive.'

'And you? Where will you go?' Alex asked his nephew.

'Violet and I will go with them to London and hold Damas off for as long as we can,' Adam said, resolute. 'And Violet, trust me when I say I can't do this without you.' He gave a slow but intimate wink towards his friend.

'I know,' Violet replied.

Aisha pressed her mobile to her ear and called the name Madani, General Madani. Her description of events was brief, her instructions clear. To meet in the Turkish city of Izmir in five hours, with a jet standing by at Bristol airport. 'For Palamedes,' she concluded, and hung up. 'You better be right about this, my love,' she turned to Luke. 'How soon can we get to Bristol airport?'

'As quickly as Adam's Volkswagen goes when I drive,' Luke quipped. 'Hang on, did you just order a private jet? Yet you made us travel economy over from Jordan?'

'Carbon footprint, darling. Plus, I prefer to keep the Hussin activities to a minimum if you don't mind. Now, let's be off shall we, Sir Galahad?' she clutched her staff in her palm and headed for the door. She fell back immediately as the shard of blue flame struck the railing to her side. She rolled and took cover with the rest of the group. 'What in the name of...?'

'Sacred Band! At least a dozen, I count!' Fernando reported from his precarious view in the lounge. Another spear shattered the window glass above his head, showering him in sharp fragments. 'One of them is Milo Conti!'

‘Great time to get star-struck.’ Chris crawled his way across to Adam. ‘Guessing there’s not much point trying to reason with them?’ Adam shook his head. ‘Wonderful,’ he cursed. More spears shot through the windows, scorching the kitchen table under which Dr Braithwaite and Paul huddled, Beth pulling them close.

‘Luke. You and Aisha make a break for it! Use Excalibur if you have to but please don’t...’ Adam began.

‘Don’t worry, bro, we won’t harm your Boys in the Band,’ Luke teased uneasily. ‘Hope your car’s got what it takes.’ He and Aisha grasped each other’s hands and bolted for the door, Aisha immediately summoning knight light for momentary cover. The flames of blue continued seconds after, while the familiar churn of Adam’s car engine trying to spark into life could be heard. A roar and screech of wheels soon followed, fading away with every breath of relief of Adam.

‘We can try to get you away too, Adam.’ Alex knelt by his side, shield high in deflection. ‘Chris and me, I mean. You and Violet can get to London as planned.’ A spear smashed against his shield, breaking both

his focus and his nerve. 'Damn it! It's now or never, Adam. Just promise me, promise me...'

'It's ok, Uncle. Violet and I can handle Damas. I'm stubborn, but I do learn... from the best in fact.' Adam flashed a smile then turned to Violet, the young knight itching to engage directly with both fire and sword. 'Not yet, Violet. Gary, can you and Geraint get Cleo, Dr Braithwaite and Paul to your car if we pull Milo and the group clear?'

'We'll need both mine and Dr Braithwaite's if we're all to make the trip.' Gary sliced through a spear with his blade, then resumed his defensive position behind the stove. 'Might have to trim the boarding party down a bit.'

Violet scampered over to Cleo. 'Where you go, I go.' She held her hand tightly. Adam caught sight of the terrified faces of Dr Braithwaite and Paul, Paul trying to reach out to his mobile a good three metres from their shelter. A thunderous boom ripped through the ceiling above, the chandelier in the main bedroom crashing down, plaster crumbling from all corners. The distinct odour of smoke began to waft downstairs, heat radiating mildly at first, but quickly becoming more intense. Another spear flew through the blown window right over Geraint's shoulder, the swing of his blade failing to land. The curtain fabric from the patio doors

lit up like a firework. South choked on the acrid fumes and hauled his body towards Gary.

‘Screw this! Chris, with me.’ Alex tugged on Wood’s shirt.

‘Are you insane? We’ll be overrun!’ Chris protested.

‘Just like at Mount Sinai, so I’ve been told. Besides, you want to live forever? Now! Give the others a chance,’ Alex ordered, grip tightening. ‘Stay back to back – when I call shield, you summon. Got it?’ Chris was given no chance to argue before being ejected from the house, pumped on adrenaline.

‘Gary. Geraint. Go now. Use Dr Braithwaite’s car and take her and Paul with you. Violet, Cleo and I will catch up, toss me your keys,’ Adam said, reaching out to Willis.

Beth had resourcefully torn a damp tea towel in half and offered it to Dr Braithwaite and Paul to help them breathe through the rising smoke. Gary skimmed his keys across the tile floor to Adam. ‘Not a scratch, Allen. Luke warned me,’ he winked. ‘Good doctor, when you’re ready,’ he held his blade high. The four darted for the front door, more flashes of knight light illuminating the darkened night skies. ‘Go, go!’ Gary was heard shouting. Fernando peeked up from his position, wincing at the

sight of Alex and Chris pinned behind two post boxes, Sacred Band spears shearing each side. Gary had taken the wheel of Dr Braithwaite's car. The rear window exploded from a well-timed shot by Tommy Brooks, partner to Milo, standing dutifully by his side.

'Take the house! No one else leaves!' Milo instructed the Band warriors. 'Move in. Fellow Sacred Band or not, they fall if they resist.' He pointed to Alex and Chris's defensive position.

'Adam Allen. He must still be inside,' Tommy paused. 'Mate, you seriously asking us to...'

'He's not the leader, Tommy, not anymore. Now move,' Milo spurned, noting Alex had slipped from his squatting position. The Celtic striker took the shot, his spear rooting itself into Alex's side, the heavysset man yelping in pain.

'Alex is down, Adam!' Fernando yelled. Adam tried to manoeuvre into a clear vantage position but the fire from within the house engulfed him.

‘We’ll all have to get out of here,’ Violet coughed fiercely. ‘We’ll be cooked alive if we don’t.’ At least eight of the reported twelve or so Sacred Band incendiaries were still standing, from what Adam could make out. Some flesh wounds were inflicted on four courtesy of Alex and Chris, the pair doing their utmost not to take the lives of their brothers. ‘Adam! I get your loyalty to this lot, but time to level things up, don’t you think?’ Violet boomed again, pupils flaring red, sword ablaze. ‘Cleo and I can make it to Gary’s car from here, you stay behind.’

Adam felt tempted, for this was still his Band to honour and protect, despite Damas’ corruption. If he could not fall in front of them to spare his uncle and those dearest to him, then he had truly failed. Beth remained on her belly under the table, pressing the tea towel close to her own mouth in a desperate bid to block the smouldering air.

Fernando braved a move, drawing close to Adam. ‘Mr Allen, perhaps let me try something, yes?’ he asked.

‘I’m all ears, Fernando.’

‘I know you often mock me, my country, for such an act. But let me... how is it you say? Indulge me this one time?’ He gave his signature cheeky but awkward grin. ‘Be ready please, sir.’ Before Adam could

enquire, Fernando had scuttled to the front door, waving the smoke away from his face.

'Resa! Resa!' Fernando's voice was heard, squeaking higher each time. The shade of blue that had hovered over the Allen home gave way to midnight black skies. Milo's voice then echoed, requesting a ceasefire.

'What's the fool doing?' Beth wormed her way from beneath the table, regrouping with Adam, Violet and Cleo.

'Please, Signor Conti, please. Vicinato!' Fernando pleaded. Adam translated the word into *neighbour* in English.

'The house next door is for sale, and Mrs Stepson moved in with her son when all this plague business kicked off. But Milo doesn't know that. Smart little Italian is doing what we believe his people do best... surrendering!' Adam choked.

'What? Milo surely won't buy this?' Violet crawled her way towards the front door for a gulp of clean air.

'Well, he is Italian too.' Adam furrowed his brow as he clocked his uncle and Chris's helpless position. Chris was cradling Alex in his arms, hand

clamped against the wound. Milo had stepped forward, fist raised, standing the Sacred Band unit down.

‘Please, Signor Milo. The house is... *fuoco*... burning. Adam Allen, he will step out with his comrades if you let them and the neighbours live, sì?’ Fernando bent to one knee. ‘You have won, Milo, sir. Bravo.’

‘Not sitting with me, this, Milo mate.’ Tommy refused to lower his shield. ‘Adam Allen is not the quitting type.’

Milo put his hand on his partner’s shoulder. ‘Nor are we, but when the final whistle goes...’

‘Yeah, yeah. On your head be it,’ Tommy scoffed.

‘Grazie, Signor Conti, grazie,’ Fernando stumbled. ‘And, please accept – *scusa!*’ In a blink, he whipped out from behind his back what looked like a small metal spade, catching Milo harshly on the jaw and toppling him to the ground.

‘What the...?’ Violet gasped. Adam looked across to the fireplace, the coal shovel missing from its utensils.

'I guess that's our cue. Cleo, Violet – come on! Beth, be sure to help Chris and my uncle, will you?' Adam barked as the three sprinted for Gary's car.

'Looks like Fernando is going to be the one that needs it,' Beth muffled through the tea towel. 'Good luck.'

Before Tommy could register Adam, Cleo and Violet's move he made sure to avenge the insult made by Fernando. The small Italian was knocked clean off his heels with a hard punch to the nose. 'Stop them! They're getting away,' he bellowed at the Sacred Band fighters, equally caught off guard. The trio had already bundled into the last remaining car, Adam welcoming the improved acceleration as he floored the pedals. A few lone spears splashed out of range, the crimson blur of a fire engine flashing past the windscreen towards his burning home. Beth was seen rushing to Alex's aid, Adam breathing a sigh of relief.

'Will they be all right?' Cleo asked quietly. 'The Sacred Band, my brother's orders...'

'I can only hope they treat their fellow brothers as I would have treated them.' Adam kept both hands firmly on the wheel, giving the occasional glance in the rear mirror. 'For all Damas' corruption, let's not forget what his objective has been. Chris and my uncle, I pray, will be spared.'

He fiddled around the dashboard for the headlights. ‘Fernando on the other hand... doubt there will be a season ticket to Celtic FC matches in the post for next season.’

Milo rubbed the fresh graze on his forehead, tasting his own blood from his fingers. He stepped away from the searing heat emanating from the Allen home, the firefighters dowsing it in jets of water. The Sacred Band secured Alex Allen, Chris Wood and Beth. ‘Put them in the trucks. Along with this plucky one,’ he pointed to the spread-eagled Fernando.

‘Plucky? I bloody told you mate, didn’t I? A bloody trick. Now Damas is going to have our heads on a damn platter and...’ Tommy’s rant was cut short by an embrace from his partner.

‘You fought well. As did Alex Allen and Chris Wood over there. That is all we shall report to Damas. As for Adam Allen... let’s see where this leads him. When all this is over, he’ll either be with us, or six feet under,’ Milo soothed.

Tommy cursed a little before lifting the dead weight of Fernando over his shoulder. ‘You’re gonna have to report it in Milo, to Damas – we lost

his sister and... ah, come on! This training top is brand new and this little prick has gone and bled all over it,' he sulked his way back to the trucks.

Milo pulled his mobile out of his pocket, punched in a number. 'Damas, sir. Yes, we engaged at Bath – no sign of your sister, but met some resistance from a few renegade Band members. Yes, sir, one was the uncle of Adam Allen. Knights also present, I spotted Gary Willis, Geraint South, Luke Allen and Aisha Hussin... and a few unknowns. That was all. Yes, Aisha Hussin of the line of Palamedes. Correct. Very well, sir, we shall make for London as you originally requested, and yes, expect *company*.'

Chapter 25

London, England

9th May 2020 AD

Ribbons of dawn were weaving their way through the city skyline of the capital as Gary pulled up just ahead of Westminster Bridge. The same concrete stone blockades around Parliament that had littered many a street throughout London, some manned by military personnel, others merely makeshift protection for residential areas, given the dilution of law enforcement. As panic had increased, so had the burglaries, shop looting and mass anti-social behaviour. While in the typically stoic manner only Londoners could muster, life had continued as close to normal as it could, there was little doubt that the scars would remain both on the landscape and its people for many months, if not years, to come – cure or no cure.

‘Road ahead is blocked entirely,’ Gary spoke from behind to Dr Ana Braithwaite and Paul. The doctor had been making calls on her mobile every twenty minutes or so since they departed Bath, desperate to get hold of contacts within the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and prepare every available resource to help study the Arrow

of Apollo. She'd made little progress, the building itself in lockdown given its proximity to the Gay Safe Space of Soho and fierce confrontations on its borders. Paul had largely remained silent, occasionally asking Geraint for one of his sugar barley travel sweets to moisten his parched mouth, the tremor in his fingers not yet subsiding after the drama in Bath.

'We could try Blackfriars Bridge?' Ana suggested, spitting a curse word as her call once again went to voicemail. 'Either that or we try to make it on foot?'

'How far are we from the School?' Geraint asked, noting the CCTV rods dotted across the Thames embankment.

'Twenty, may thirty minutes tops,' the doctor replied.

'I don't see any other option,' Gary concurred as he loosened his seat belt and passed the car keys back to Ana. 'Good set of wheels you got here,' he added.

'Sorry it's not fire-proof.' Ana prodded the scorch marks around what was left of the rear window. 'I take it we're likely to run into these Sacred Band guys again?'

‘Safe bet. Geraint, be ready,’ Gary urged with a lift of his staff. ‘How far back are Adam, Violet and Cleo?’

Geraint checked his latest message. ‘Would appear they had a few problems with the diversions around Twickenham. They’ve ended up by Waterloo Bridge, and also agreed to walk,’ he confirmed. ‘I’ll let them know we’ll meet at the School.’

‘Very well. Tell them to stay sharp... looking at these streets, it won’t just be Damas and the Sacred Band that pose a threat.’ Gary took a few tentative steps forwards across the bridge, latching on to a smaller crowd of activists making for the Palace of Westminster. ‘This whole city looks like it’s ready to blow.’

Cleo patted down her coat pockets once again, just as she had been doing every few minutes. The arrow was still safely tucked away, she sighed in relief. She’d tried not to think, to completely switch her mind off in fear of her brother tapping even the slightest hint of her thoughts and revealing her location. She’d learnt over their many centuries together that their connection was not strong enough to physically track one another in such ways, but since the assault on the Allen home in

Bath, it was clear Cleo had been unsuccessful in completely shielding her emotions and logic from Damas. He knew she would seek out Violet Butcher, Adam and Luke Allen, their allies. It didn't need his Sacred Band fighters to stalk her south to draw such conclusions – she had been careless. Too transparent in her feelings. With or without such sibling gifts, as certain as the sun itself Damas would clock her next move, and would without doubt leave nothing to chance now.

'This way,' Violet ordered, keeping a good two metres ahead of both Adam and Cleo as the three moved quietly through Covent Garden. The usually bustling weekend filled with tourists and market-goers was ghostly quiet, with only a handful of people making their way towards corner shops and supermarkets for essentials. A lone stranger – clothes moth-eaten, face dishevelled – was seen clinging to the hips of a middle-aged woman, pleading for food. Streaks of blood lined his gaunt face, eyes pink and puffy. The woman struck him hard on the head with her shopping bag the moment he vomited crimson foam across her thigh, and she fled in hysteria, mask fixed firmly across her mouth and nose. Moments later, the man was flat on his chest, the faint rise and fall of his back softly ebbing until he was motionless. Adam began to veer off in his direction to offer aid, but Cleo held him back – no need to waste valuable time now.

‘Your brother, Luke. The sword known as Excalibur. What do you think he can achieve by visiting my mother’s resting place?’ Cleo drew closer to Adam.

‘Not sure. The only thing I know is that if my brother has been successful in retrieving the King’s Blade, then the one that permitted it has likely shared a little advice. Can only be a good thing.’ Adam remained vigilant.

‘Is this the so-called Lady of the Lake?’ Cleo asked.

‘That’s right. A friend of the family, you could say,’ Adam replied with a casual smirk.

‘And he thinks he can *reunite* mine?’ Cleo looked optimistically. ‘How?’

Adam paused, his focus switching. ‘Violet!’ he raised his voice.

‘I know, I see them.’ Violet slowed to a standstill, wooden staff at the ready. ‘Your buddies just up ahead by the British Museum entrance. About ten, it looks like?’

‘There will be more. Can you message Gary and Geraint?’ Adam crouched by her side. Violet pulled her phone out, flicking it in hope of clear signal.

‘Geraint says he, Gary, Dr Braithwaite and Paul are making their way on foot from Westminster Bridge. Will likely encounter the same problems we are,’ Violet tutted. ‘Damn message isn’t sending and can’t call through... bloody mobile networks probably all shutting down.’

‘Let’s try to go around,’ Adam ordered.

‘Sure we can’t take them?’ came Violet’s crisp reply.

‘I’d rather not try.’

Violet went to give a disapproving shake of her head just as Cleo rested a hand on hers. The three slipped around quietly towards Russell Square, where yet more protests were heard. Savage shouts lashed through the air, the shatter and spark of glass bottles and flares shaking the very ground. Two groups of bodies faced off either side of the square, the army frantically barking orders for both sides to keep their distance, a shot or two fired high into the air. The warning failed in its objective. The rainbow flags stood defiantly on one side, shouts of *straight plague* spitting at their rivals. Molotov cocktails were the response, lighting up the space inches from the homosexual-aligned front line, forcing their supporters back. The second mob pushed against the army peacekeepers like a wave against a breakwater – some breached. They charged in untamed fury, some visibly sick with XENO-

20, brought down swiftly by blue spears. The chants of *Band! Band! Band!* were followed by cheers as more aggressors fell. Rage erupted again, masks ripped from the faces of those most vulnerable in their own act of defiance, revealing pus-filled boils and oozing blood. A war cry sounded by an infected mob leader, at least a dozen charged at their opponents with an assortment of domestic weapons. The army flesh-wounded a few, but the tide was overwhelming, as a dozen soon became a flood. Blue flame shields went up, repulsing some attackers, but only just holding firm. A cacophony of cries, screams and hate filled Adam's ears until he could look upon the sight no more.

'It's a needed distraction. Let's move,' Adam nudged Violet coldly. Violet remained transfixed by the carnage unfolding, lips parting to speak, but no words to be found. 'Violet! Let's go!' Adam instructed once more. 'We need to get Cleo to the School... and find Damas.'

Bedford Gardens had provided needed cover for Gary, Geraint, Dr Braithwaite and Paul. The entranceway to the School was patrolled, but not heavily so. A clear run and the four could be inside. 'Now's our chance, Gary,' Geraint whispered.

‘What about Cleo? Is she close? Adam and Violet?’ Gary replied. ‘This could all be for nothing unless they reach the School with us. Geraint checked his phone, frustration visible on his face at the lack of connectivity.

‘We’ll just have to risk it,’ Ana said. ‘Hope they make it in time. Paul and I can prep the vaccine labs, I know a few colleagues are likely still inside, I just can’t reach them.’ She fussed over her mobile before giving up any hope of making a call.

‘Fine, let’s do it.’ Gary stood, blade summoned. ‘Doctor, you and Paul head straight for the main entrance. Geraint and I will have your backs and... wait, is that...?’ Gary paused to point at a strident figure stepping out from a black truck pulled up on the corner. ‘It’s *Milo*. Son of a bitch made good time,’ he cursed.

Geraint pushed his way forward for a better view. ‘If that’s Milo, then chances are Damas is nearby, along with many more Sacred Band. Probably pulling them from that safe space of his in Soho over there and launching some sort of offensive.’ He scanned the route ahead. ‘Also means Alex, Chris and Fernando...’

‘Not now, Geraint. Let’s focus on the task in hand.’ Gary held Geraint’s arm. ‘You and I can draw Milo off, let Dr Braithwaite and Paul make their way inside. Only option we have.’

‘Once you’re inside, use this code to access the laboratories upstairs.’ Ana scribbled down six digits in her notepad and tore the page off, handing it to Gary.

‘Assuming you can get inside.’ Paul rolled his eyes at the growing number of Sacred Band troops flowing from the trucks arriving.

Gary curved a quick smile. ‘We knights have handled worse. Now, on my mark, Geraint.’ He prompted his fellow knight to unsheathe his blade. ‘Knight light ready. Let’s give these chaps a *real fight*.’

Violet scampered around the corner of the building, the carved words *London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine* hanging just above the main entrance. Three black trucks had passed her, recognised from the affray in Bath, seemingly heading back towards Soho, but grinding to a halt just north of Bedford Gardens. She turned back to Adam and Cleo for advice – where to from here? Then she heard the shouts, not as

manic as those of the protests and rioters from behind – more formal, more controlled. Brilliant white light shone from just beyond the School’s entrance, cancelled by salvos of blue fire. It was unmistakable. Gary and Geraint had engaged.

‘They’re freeing the entrance to the School! Drawing the Sacred Band clear!’ Violet jumped up in a frenzy. ‘Cleo and I can make it inside if we go now.’ She tugged on Adam’s sleeve.

Adam breathed heavily, feet rooted to the ground. ‘Adam. Come on. We’ve got to go now.’

‘Can you see Damas?’ Adam asked sternly.

‘What? No. I don’t think so... why?’ Violet burst out. ‘Adam? What’s wrong?’

The flashes of white and blue suddenly ceased. One of the trucks was lifted completely off its thick-tread wheels and hurled like a pebble towards the pulsing white knight lights. The monstrous crash of metal and glass threw Gary and Geraint apart, their swords still bright, but both on the ground. Damas was here. The lone figures of Dr Braithwaite and Paul were seen scurrying across in the background as Sacred Band members moved in on Willis and South, spears conjured and ready.

‘Now, Cleo, go now!’ Adam bellowed while sprinting towards the two knights, Violet close behind.

Cleo bolted for the main entrance, jumping neatly over the debris of the scene and ducking the occasional blue flame projectile that spotted her move. She saw Dr Braithwaite and Paul throwing themselves at the glass doors. She was within metres of joining them – then the face of her brother appeared, olive skin beaded with sweat. ‘Dear sister... I would like to think it was our connection that drew me here, and indeed my men to Bath only moments ago, but alas, even a common man could predict such feeble emotion,’ he tsk-tsked with disappointment. ‘You must have realised, over all these years walking this wretched earth, I have forged contacts, alliances, allies of my own. Did you not think, before releasing the wrath of Apollo, I would have done my research? Expanded my network, from doctors to nurses, politicians to soldiers? Doctor Ana Braithwaite is a sharp one, I’ll give her that, and certainly not one for establishment or chain of command – worthy of this very School named after Asclepius’ own daughter, *Hygeia*. The board to which she reports, however, are much more loose-lipped,’ he said, moving nearer. ‘I’ve kept this site under surveillance ever since her first enquiry. Sadly, I needed no such slivers of information from cowards trying to save their own skin to see that your feelings for the young daughter of Sir Bors, this demi-god Harmonia, were ever in question. A good and worthy choice of partner, I must admit. The two of you will live happily together once this

is over. Aisha Hussin and Luke Allen on the other hand...' he followed with a crude shrug of his shoulders.

'You know where they've gone?' Cleo asked, in shock.

'You need not worry... captives Alex Allen, Chris Wood and that Fernando creature would never talk – made of a higher calibre. No, I didn't have to interrogate our own and could take no pleasure from such acts. Let's just say the followers of Palamedes, however, can be, well, easily *persuaded*. Perhaps they lack the loyalty you and I once knew, more's the pity,' Damas tutted. 'Still, they'll be dealt with soon enough upon their arrival in Turkey. I must confess to being intrigued as to the intentions of the knights of Galahad and Palamedes, as well as their saviour Excalibur. While my knowledge of the King's Blade is weak, its lust for destruction might as well be inert now. Look around you.'

'They might just surprise you, Brother.' Cleo stood resolute. 'We may pretend to know the ways of the Gods, but our parents once thought that as well... and where did their arrogance lead them?'

Damas lost his glee for a second, let out a slow and exhausted sigh. 'Enough now. The Arrow of Apollo, give it to me.' He rubbed the skin on his cheek, still sore from Cleo's attack in Edinburgh. Cleo backed away, one eye firmly on the School's entrance. 'Cleo. I won't ask again.' A wave

of red fire flashed between them, Damas hurled back into the ashen brickwork of the School walls. He went to find his feet, only to be punished again by a blue spear piercing his thigh.

‘Cleo. Inside. We’ll handle this,’ Violet commanded, sword burnt red, shield matching. Adam standing shoulder to shoulder with Butcher, alive in blue flame. Cleo ran, Gary and Geraint arriving at the door simultaneously, swords busy deflecting Sacred Band fire.

Damas managed to stand once more, muscles bunching. Swelling with too much pride to call for backup against the former Sacred Band leader and the knight that stood before him, he barked orders for his fighters to lay siege within the School and retrieve the Arrow at all costs. ‘Such a waste, young Adam Allen. You too, Violet Butcher, with all your talents as knight, Sacred Band and *more*. You could have stood equally at the sides of me and my sister, in a land fit for the best that feast upon it. *Only* the best,’ he teased. ‘You see, Adam, Mr Donnelly and Morgan le Fay were wrong, the weakest of mankind is perfectly capable of destroying *itself*... they just need the right incentive. Now you see just how futile the works of the Red and White Dragon have been all this time, your own father and his allies trapped in an endless tug of war for the future, when that very future has already been written,’ Damas proclaimed, both fists raised.

'There is no future that is *already written*, Damas,' Adam snapped back, he and Violet holding their ground.

'Evolution might disagree with you there,' Damas smirked, circling. 'My sister and I may be two thousand years old, but trust me when I say those *born* with power shall always triumph over those that merely *seek* it. And from those born into *struggle*, comes power.'

'Or understanding,' Violet snipped.

'How endearing,' Damas joked. With a mechanical locking of his shoulders and seething in his eyes, he threw himself at Adam and Violet.

Chapter 26

Manisa, Turkey

9th May 2020 AD

‘We will have to set down in Izmir Airport, Bayan Hussin,’ General Madani suggested as the jet pulled low across the turquoise of the Aegean and approached the twinkling lights of Manisa. ‘It’s going to be about as close as we can get to the mountain,’ he confirmed with a quick scout of the surrounding terrain.

Aisha leant across into the cockpit. Both the cities of Manisa and nearby Izmir appeared subdued for what should have been a busy market afternoon – the urban streets usually alive with people oddly quiet and orderly. Some pockets of military presence, courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, not completely out of the ordinary, she thought. The primary airport as a touchdown still sat uneasily with her, too much attention from regional authorities despite the credentials she carried. ‘What about the Izmir Docks instead? Should easily be enough space to land by the cargo holds? I know several of my men are close by as well, helping with the relief efforts and shipped-in supplies from Europe,’ she proposed.

General Madani took a cautious second look, muttered in Arabic and reaffirmed his position. 'The Followers of Palamedes have since found their way back to the main city of Izmir, Bayan Hussin. Much better to join with them at the airport, yes?' he added as he turned the jet ninety degrees.

'Really? But I specifically requested that they... Fine. Airport it is,' Aisha capitulated, with a quick eye roll towards Luke.

'Still not far from the mountain, hun. We'll make it there in no time,' Luke sounded upbeat as the descent began. 'Good to know that we've got allies on the ground too.' He smiled, resting a comforting hand on Aisha's knee.

'Not sure why they are at the airport. Most of the supplies have been coming through the docks, and I gave no instruction to...' Aisha tapped her staff against her seat in a fluster. 'Doesn't matter. Besides, when we get to Mount Sipylus, do you have the faintest idea what we are supposed to do?' she asked. Luke just shrugged. 'Great – always good to have a plan,' she mocked while unbuckling her seat belt as the tyres bumped upon the tarmac. The stairs opened during taxiing, several men dressed in khaki robes and heavy boots stood to attention as the two stepped off, hand in hand.

‘Well, this is quite the welcome party. Good job, my love.’ Luke gave a toothy grin, only to have it dashed by Aisha’s frosty glare towards those standing in front. ‘What is it?’

‘These aren’t my men, Luke.’ Aisha gripped her staff with both her hands. ‘General Madani!’ she bellowed behind.

The general slid his way down the stairs gingerly, revolver pointing directly at the two knights. ‘I am sorry, My Lady, so sorry. But Damasichthon, he who goes by the name Mr Zethus, he made me and my family a promise. A promise of a cure to protect my wife and children if I...’ he began to choke on his own treacherous words.

‘General, how could you?’ Aisha demanded. ‘Whatever Damas has promised you, he will not keep his word.’ A shade of blue lit both her and Luke’s faces as the familiar spears of the Sacred Band sprang from the hands of the opposing men.

‘Hun, please tell me you have a Plan B here.’ Luke tightened his hold around the small thorn staff of Excalibur. ‘I did make my brother a promise not to hurt this lot.’

In the periphery of Aisha’s vision was a vacant jeep, not fifty metres away. It was a manageable distance with the right distraction. ‘I know,

Luke, no harming of the Sacred Band. I agree.’ she retreated back towards General Madani. ‘My so-called loyal general on the other hand...’ she shot a meaningful look towards Luke. He took a swift breath and with a mighty roar shone the blinding light of Excalibur’s full blade directly at the jet, the force powerful enough to shift the fuselage back several feet, General Madani tossed back inside, letting slip a few rounds from the revolver that rattled within the cockpit. Aisha immediately deflected two spears thrown, blue sparks bursting upon impact with her sword. ‘Get to the jeep – quickly!’ she shouted.

Signage flew past on the main highway between Izmir and Manisa in a blur of blue. Luke tilted his head up at the highest peak he could see. ‘That one? Is that it?’ he asked.

‘Does it look like a woman weeping?’ Aisha replied, still firmly looking behind as their pursuers drew closer.

‘Think so.’

‘There’s only the one, and you’ll know it when you see it. Get down!’ she barked. A volley of bullets caught the rear of the jeep, shattering its backlights.

‘Jez, I thought these guys didn’t use guns?’ Luke cowered.

‘Different division of the Sacred Band, I’m guessing. Maybe flaming shields and spears aren’t enough out in this part of the world.’ Aisha summoned her blade and readied a blinding knight light. ‘Take the turning on the next right, should take us to the mountain – I’ll try and slow this lot down,’ she ordered. Rolling into the back seats, Aisha opened one of the side doors, immediately having to draw her head back inside as a second volley shot past.

‘Careful, love,’ Luke cautioned.

‘Just drive,’ Aisha snapped back, reopening the door and improving her position. The tip of her sword she let grate upon the road surface, releasing gleaming sparks. She thrust her hand upon its pommel with a cry and let loose the beam of knight light just as Luke spun the wheel. The incandescence was enough to bring the pursuing vehicles to a momentary stop, one veering off into the layby in a cloud of dust.

‘Good play,’ Luke conceded, pulling Aisha back to the passenger seat.

‘I have my moments,’ she puffed. ‘Pull up here. We’ll have to make the rest of the journey on foot, I’m afraid.’

The face of Mount Sipylus loomed over the pair, a harrowing sight of anguish petrified in stone, bent forward in submission. Luke mopped the sweat from his brow, the heat of the climb up to the summit taking its toll. He dared a glance back. The Sacred Band members were regrouping at the base – shields, spears and guns all prepared. ‘They’ll hunt us down.’ He stretched a hand out to Aisha and hauled her up over a large boulder. ‘We could make a stand right here? Might have the advantage?’

‘Not for long we wouldn’t,’ Aisha caught her breath. ‘I’ve messaged my followers to come and assist, but those responding are a good hour away at best in Manisa. Curse Damas! I should have known, seen it coming...’ she leaned against Luke’s shoulder in remorse.

‘You’ve got us here, hun, that’s the important thing,’ Luke consoled. ‘Besides, Followers of Palamedes present or not, it’s still up to me to try and awaken this here Queen of the Damned,’ he gestured to the hardened face of Niobe. ‘Mary, as always, didn’t exactly give me a step-by-step guide here.’ He frowned as a vibrant wave of blue fire crashed inches away from their feet. ‘We’ve got to find cover!’

The voices of the Sacred Band echoed through the dense shrubs that surrounded the mountainside. Dialects of Turkish, Greek and North African grew louder with each passing minute Luke and Aisha spent belly down in the soil. 'We're going to have to split up, Luke. I'll draw this lot away to the trees over there while you make a move back to the summit,' Aisha whispered, trying to cover all possible directions.

'Hardly many trees over there to help shield you,' Luke countered. 'I say we stick it out together.' He gripped her hand. 'Two knights gotta be better than one.'

'You'll need time, Luke, let me give it to you,' Aisha insisted.

'Not about to lose you too, hun.'

'Never have, never will.' Aisha pecked Luke on the cheek. 'Besides, neither of us are good at taking orders now, are we?' She stood on her feet, sword on full display, flashing in the sunlight. 'Hey! Over here!' she shouted before Luke could stop her. She ran for the sparse copse of trees to their left, just finding shelter as a flaming spear sheared the bark. Shouts and orders rang out, followed by the crackle of bullets. Luke had one chance.

His footing on the rocky mound was loose. Luke stumbled a few times, casting a look behind as Aisha's pulsing knight light repelled a few Sacred Band opponents. They were closing in on her position fast. He crawled to the very edge of the mountain, looked upon the forehead of the weeping woman, almost lost his balance as he tried to stand. A bellow came from an African Sacred Band fighter when he spotted Luke wobbling on the edge. Several other fighters switched focus away from Aisha and headed towards him, weapons ablaze.

Luke held the short thorn staff of Excalibur tightly. Closed his eyes and ran Mary Cassidy's words through his mind like a freight train off its rails. Air and stone alive... from death comes rebirth. From loss must come hope. His eyes slowly opened, the King's Blade in all its splendour once again in his hands. He blocked out the shouts of aggression from behind and brought Excalibur high above his head, channelling a peace that surely only the line of Sir Bedivere must have experienced during such moments. All resentment of past ills fled his body like a venom drained. The tip pierced the rock's surface, a single beam of pure white light shot up into an opalescent sky. The earth crumbled from beneath Luke's feet and he tumbled backwards from the peak down the grasses below. His skull crunched against a loose rock. Then all went black.

Chapter 27

London, England

9th May 2020 AD

Paul thumbed the door keypad in anger at his second failed attempt to unlock the vaccine centre laboratory. ‘Bloody hell, come on,’ he cursed under his breath, pressured by the shouts coming from behind from Gary and Geraint. The corridor to the laboratory was mercifully narrow, preventing Milo Conti, his striking partner Tommy Brooks and a horde of Sacred Band warriors from closing on the knights. The confinement limited their throwing arms, the occasional spear falling short or easily deflected by the knights’ blades. It didn’t stop the advance of the blue fire shields though, the width enough for four fighters to align and grunt their way forwards like an armoured tank in low gear. Gary and Geraint pulsed their knight lights intermittently, forcing a halt, but gaining no ground of their own.

Cleo stood nervously between the two knights and the two scientists. Dr Braithwaite had shunted Paul aside impatiently and began punching digits of her own. Cleo knew she had the calibre to repel at least a few of the Sacred Band fighters should it come to such attrition, and felt herself inching towards Gary and Geraint in solidarity. But if she were to meet

her end in such a battle, everything she has assisted her brother in executing would be allowed to run its course. Dr Ana Braithwaite and her expertise were no doubt worthy of praise by today's standards of modern medicine, but this was not born of modern medicine. This was the poison of the Gods, a biological structure so complex that when presented to mortals it would be akin to the discovery of the first hieroglyphics and scriptures of Ancient Egypt. For Cleo to fall now in a blaze of blue flame would be to have their own Rosetta Stone shattered.

'I'm in.' Dr Ana Braithwaite breathed a sigh of relief as Paul pushed his way through to the inside laboratory door. 'This glass door is reinforced – Cleo, Gary, Geraint... come on!' she beckoned, ducking impulsively as a flamed spear struck the side panel of glass. 'Now.'

'Cleo – get inside with the doctor. We'll hold the Band off!' Gary shouted, thrusting his blade into the floor to elicit a brief knight light, washing the rich blue of the Sacred Band fire clean for a few seconds before fading. Cleo hesitated, looking back and forth at the open laboratory door and the two knights crouched either side of the corridor. 'Go now. Please – Dr Ana and Paul need you,' Gary insisted.

Cleo went to turn and bolt for the laboratory, reversed her single step, and returned to Gary's side. 'At least you and Geraint get behind the glass doors, you can't hold out here,' she reasoned.

'Glass won't stop them. Even reinforced.' Geraint gritted his teeth as a rain of blue sparks drizzled over his head from the near-miss of a spear. 'They'll burn through it, given time.'

'Indeed, given time,' Cleo pushed, still tugging on Gary's arm. 'If you knights are going to make a final stand, at least make them work for their victory.' Gary and Geraint exchanged looks, nodded, then fled back with ducks and dives behind the glass wall. Dr Braithwaite slammed her hand against the inside keypad, sealing the panels shut.

'Cleo, if you please.' Dr Braithwaite ushered her through the inside laboratory door where Paul had prepped Petri dishes and pipettes, the buzz of computers humming to life. Gary reached and closed the inside door, offering the three a wink of good luck just as Milo tapped the glass from the other side. Gary and Geraint stood sentry, swords lowered, being watched by the Sacred Band as if they were exhibits in a museum.

'A little late for such theatrics, wouldn't you say?' Milo's breath steamed the glass. 'It's over, guys, Mr Zethus has won.'

'If that's so, why are you here now? Nothing to concern yourselves with surely?' Gary replied coolly. Milo began to chew his lower lip in frustration.

'His sister has something... something important. Damas wants it back,' Milo hissed.

'Still taking orders without asking questions, I see. You once had a leader that challenged that notion,' Gary retorted.

'And that leader lost, got his ass kicked,' Tommy Brooks interjected on his partner's behalf. 'Now we've got a chance at life, to be the ones with all the power. To make the decisions.' He brought his crooked nose close to the pane.

'I thought that way once... look where that got me,' Geraint snapped back. 'Power is a fools' game, played only by the disillusioned.'

'You say disillusioned, we say the persecuted, the judged. You don't think each time Tommy and I step out onto the pitch we want to be treated as equals? Like the rest of our teammates? Have fans cheer us as they do other players? It won't happen, we know it won't happen. Why kid ourselves?' Milo spat, the hint of a tear forming in his eye.

'How do you know? Wasn't aware either of you has tried,' Geraint prodded.

'Don't have to... just look,' Tommy grunted.

'Now who is the one that is judging?' Geraint curved a smile. Tommy backed away, shooting fierce glances at his partner. Milo cast his eyes to the ground, blue flame shimmering from his knuckles. He thrust both fists against the glass, instructing Tommy to do the same. The glass panels appeared to hold, then hairline fractures shot from their corners like threads from a spider web. Gary and Geraint stepped back, swords ready to strike.

Adam hit the ground hard, his vision blurred. There was a crunch from his rib cage and a dull ache that spread as quickly as the air left his lungs. Damas swung again, in the same place, and the wave of pain ran through Adam's body once more. His shield arm was free, the edge of blue flame singeing Damas' black beard and allowing just enough room for Adam to swing a punch of his own squarely on the jaw. Violet leapt from behind, clinging to Damas' back like a monkey, blood-red blade a hair's width from Damas' throat. She grappled with the larger opponent, trying to find strong footing, only to be tossed over Damas' shoulders, landing awkwardly on her hip. A swift but powerful kick from the towering Greek catapulted Violet into the metal railings lining the School's walls. His attention returned to Adam.

The ugliness of the mobs that had gathered around Russell Square had spread like a conflagration through the streets. Those remaining Sacred Band members not in hot pursuit of Cleo and the Arrow of Apollo within the School had rallied to the border of the Soho district. From his position lying crippled on the ground, Adam could see the carnage unfolding, his brothers launching like starved wolves into the sea of plagued Londoners in retaliation for their violent uprising. A few were brought down by the masses, quickly defended by any within the Soho safe space that were brazen enough to break ranks and enter the affray. Law enforcement had buckled, wildly swinging batons on the skulls of anyone that came close to their horses, completely uncoordinated. The chaos drove the animals into a panic, rearing up whinnying and throwing off their officers, the mob left to finish the job. Adam forced his eyes to remain open, although all he really wanted was to let them close and shut out this unfolding nightmare. His throat became tight, Damas' vise-like grip ripping him free off the ground and into the air. Violet struck again, this time her blade piercing Damas' thigh just above the kneecap, producing a yelp. Her eyes shone red with fierce intention as she drove the sword deeper. Adam was relieved to have his feet find the ground once more, and he drew in as much air as he could in greedy gasps.

'It'll take more,' Damas winced, wrapping his hand around Violet's blade and pulling it free from his flesh. '*Much* more,' he sneered as he

absorbed the punishment of the sword's flame in a demonstration of resilience, fresh blood running freely down his forearm. 'Whatever Goddess may lie within you, daughter of Bors, you've yet to truly harness it.' Violet's stance weakened, permitting Damas' harsh kick to her breast, throwing her back into the side of one of the trucks. The back of Violet's head collided with the wing mirror, glass tumbling down with her. She lay motionless. Adam's rebuke came through a shining blue spear thrust into Damas' shoulder, only just penetrating the demi-god's skin. With a defiant roar he thrust harder, this time drawing blood and a reaction from Damas. The spear, however, didn't hold, fizzling out as Damas squeezed Adam's throat with both hands. 'A noble effort, Mr Allen. I would expect no less from my men. You have proven yourself a just leader of the Sacred Band and certainly should be standing among them. I saw that when we fought before in Edinburgh, and I see it again now. Please, don't make me take you from them.' Damas laced his words with remorse as Adam's struggle became weaker, eyelids beginning to flutter. He felt limp, almost peaceful, as if welcoming Damas' execution if it meant an end to the suffering he had felt for so long now. Only the sight of trembling Violet on the edge of his vision and a flashing memory of his father triggered his resistance. In an instant, the chokehold upon him loosened, the air he gulped felt fresher and sweeter than ever. He looked at Damas, his eyes glazed in a trance of sorts, staring through Adam as if he were no longer trapped between his hands. Adam tried to wiggle free, but it was as if he were caught in a

petrified statue, Damas' entire body frozen solid. His aggressor was no longer in control.

The cool breeze of Mount Sipylus was unmistakable, as were the scents of the salty Aegean and the pines from Damas' youth. He breathed in deeply, a welcome warmth of home as his eyes awoke to the panorama of the Lydia, a view as he remembered it, not the modern Turkish metropolis it had now become. Pastel shades of orange and green played with one another and the rugged mountainous terrain that appeared to stretch for miles without sight of a single soul.

'It was beautiful, was it not? Our homeland,' came the voice Damas knew so well and had longed to hear once more. 'Despite being incarcerated in this very rock for centuries, I have still had the privilege of enjoying this view for an eternity. For that, I am grateful,' Queen Niobe spoke softly, appearing by Damas' side garbed in those same flowing robes she was bedecked in on the fateful day of the Festival of Leto. Her complexion unchanged, skin unblemished, long black hair flowing like nectar and darkened eyes deep with both wisdom and compassion. 'You, however, my dearest son Damasichthon, I sense feel little to be grateful for, am I correct?' her tone dimmed.

Damas stood rigidly, stoically, despite every fibre within him wanting to throw his arms around his mother and weep as she had done the last time they met so many years ago. 'Why should I feel grateful?' he grunted. 'My sister and I abandoned on this world, watching it tear itself apart, its people like... like a *plague*. A *virus*. Incapable of understanding one another, only self-serving. Is this what our Gods wanted? What Zeus and Prometheus had in mind when they created this race? Apollo and Artemis slaughtered you, our entire family, with poison-tipped arrows no less, because you dared challenge their divinity. Yet, they allow mankind to run amok without any such intervention. *Why?* Should Gaia, the Mother Earth, ever dare make her voice heard through disease, famine or other such perils, it is never those that should suffer that are targeted. The rich and powerful, the false gods, they are spared. Those like me, torn apart like dried parchment, forced into subjugation – this was not always the way. I demand those ways return,' Damas sparked, fighting back stinging tears.

Queen Niobe took her son's hands in hers. 'Your anger has left you anchored to the past, my Damasichthon, like an anchored ship stretching fruitlessly towards the horizon. You only see what was, not what is or *could be*. I too felt this once, but you must let go of your hate and regret if you are to ever move forward. Now, you stand to destroy

the very gift your grandfather, Zeus, bestowed upon mankind,' she soothed.

'A gift? What gift?'

'It is a fragile but precious thread that I dared spurn all those many years ago in Thebes. That which the Gods have looked to nurture and protect. For it is mankind's insatiable thirst not for superiority, but *equality* that truly makes them unique among all creations. No matter who they are, where they are born or what they grow to be, they will never stop fighting to be equals among themselves. They can loom as tall as mountains or crouch as small as shrubs but still be seen, sound as loud as drums or be as quiet as a whisper but still be heard. One may control armies, another stand alone, yet both can shape the world. Yes, the progress will be slow by our standards, painful sometimes, but with each day that passes, with each new generation, the acorn that was planted will grow into the strong oak it was meant to be. That is your grandfather's legacy, and why you and your sister were left to endure and to learn.' She smiled and caressed Damas' cheek. 'You see, mankind has come so far, don't kill it now.'

Damas heaved his big shoulders, attempted fruitlessly to stop his lower lip from quivering as he clenched his mother's hands in what became a grovelling apology. 'I... I've missed you. All of you. So, so much, Mother.'

Despite Cleo, I have felt alone, and afraid. My fear turned to anger, desperate for change in my favour for once. But...' his voice broke.

'The change you seek is happening, right now. Your anger just blinded you to it. Cleodoxa was always the smart one of our family, and admires you as her older brother so much. She has begun to find her voice in this world, but it was your pain she too shared, and why she acts as she does now. With a whisper, not a shout.' Queen Niobe dried her son's tears.

'I am not as strong as her. Never have been,' Damas sobbed. 'What will become of me?'

'Your work is done, my son. Return with me and reunite our family once more. Your pain shall end,' Queen Niobe replied.

'And Cleo?'

'Her work is yet to be completed, as you well know. Besides, there will be someone upon this earth to guide her still, a woman not so dissimilar to us,' the queen said with full smile.

Violet Butcher, knight of Sir Bors and blessed by the Goddess Harmonia – a Goddess whose very existence was to bring peace from the curses of war, her father Ares. It was a suitable match, and one that might just

salvage that precious shred of hope from the ocean of despair he had helped create. Damas managed a smile as he leaned in to kiss his mother's smooth pale cheek, then paused in fright.

'The Sacred Band? What of them? Our father's prized warriors and guardians of Thebes? I cannot leave them leaderless,' Damas flustered. 'I must return.'

'They have a leader, my son, and a worthy one too. You yourself knew that. They will be safe under his command,' his mother calmed.

'They may not follow him now, they are loyal to me.'

'Then you speak the truth to them, of their true place in the world as you have now come to know it, and as Adam Allen has looked to enforce.'

'How can I speak when I am no more than a shadow upon this earth cast from the beyond?' Damas wondered.

'Oh, I will show you how, my dear son. Trust me, sacrificing immortality comes with its benefits, your father Amphion knew that when he gave his life up for you and your sister. His wish was like mine, that the two of you remain strong in both mind and body – inseparable – if you are

indeed to walk this earth for so long in service, thus never feeling alone. Your *connection*, you see?’ Queen Niobe placed an arm around her son and pulled him close to her chest. ‘Now, shall we go home?’

Damas gripped his mother tightly, burying his face into her velvet hair. He whimpered his consent before quietly uttering, ‘Mother, the Necklace of Harmonia, the curse of Thebes bestowed upon our founder Cadmus and his wife...’

‘Yes, my dear.’

‘Did you ever actually wear it?’

The queen gave a slight chuckle. ‘That awful thing? No. Always found it too gaudy. Sadly didn’t make your father or me immune to its effects though. Such is the way of our Gods and Goddesses. Glad to hear that it, along with the Palladium, are destroyed. Wretched objects.’

A flash of light closed her words.

Like ashes from a smouldering fireplace, Damas' frame scattered in the wind. Adam crumpled to his knees, shaking his head furiously to regain consciousness. Violet! He ran to her, helping her find her feet.

'What happened?' Violet tried to rub the concussion from her head.

'Where did Damas go?'

'I don't know. One minute he was there and the next...'

Adam struggled to explain. The doors from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine flew open, Milo Conti leading his Sacred Band troops outside. Adam readied his shield, only to retract it when the Celtic FC striker gave the command to Tommy to release Alex Allen, Chris Wood, Fernando and Beth from the truck. The two footballers acknowledged Adam with a nod before encouraging the remaining Sacred Band members to do the same.

'Errr... what's going on?' Violet remained cautious, sword still on display. Chris and Fernando staggered out from the truck, Uncle Alex propped up between them, still being tended by Beth. 'How hard was I hit just then?' she remained baffled.

'This fighter needs medical assistance. Sure you'll find some in there,' Milo ordered, pointing to his released captives. 'Adam – I believe we of

the Band have work to do.’ He gestured at the vitriolic crowds swarming the streets. ‘Urgent work. What are your orders?’

Adam stood stunned for a second, urging Violet to lower her guard. He knew the Sacred Band’s presence was not going to quell the carnage, only energise it. He immediately ordered their withdrawal back to Edinburgh, a command that was met with disapproval from Tommy Brooks.

‘We can’t leave the Safe Space of Soho to this lot of maniacs. The whole gay community will be slaughtered!’ he argued.

‘Let the government protect them, like they’ve been trying to do,’ Adam opined. He looked up at one of the highest windows of the School and spotted Paul waving. He knew instantly what it meant. ‘Besides, we have some news to share with the authorities of the world that might just spare us further bloodshed – a cure for XENO-20.’

Chapter 28

Bath, England

16th July 2020 AD

Aisha tucked a loose strand of hair back beneath her cream-coloured hijab. ‘Do I look presentable?’ she asked Luke as the two approached the Roman Baths, hand in hand. Luke put her mind at rest as he patted down his gelled parting, then furiously wiped his sticky hand on his jeans.

‘Think I preferred my hair short you know. Much less hassle,’ he moaned while twirling the short staff of Excalibur in his other hand. ‘You know, last time I held this I did wonder whether I should just keep hold of it... but no, no, my brother insisted.’

‘Quite right too. I don’t want my soon-to-be husband wrestling with some power trip all of a sudden,’ Aisha said, pulling Luke closer. ‘Much better off with Miss Cassidy.’ She stopped to admire the pale lemon-coloured stonework of the exterior, a local task force busy jetting off the graffiti that had been sprayed on during the recent riots. Thankfully most of the Georgian city had been spared, a few shop windows shattered and stock looted, but nothing that couldn’t be repaired and

replaced. Despite a vaccination programme now in full swing – code-named ASCLEPIUS – and a simmering down of public aggression with each jab, life could begin to return to whatever one might call normal. The scars however would linger, with watchful eyes from governments the world over not quite at ease enough to lower their guard, many countries still enforcing late-night curfews and social distancing. The *new normal* many had begun to call it, a lifestyle that for some was still considered oppressive. Aisha, pointing to a burnt rainbow flag poking out of a street bin, tightened her arm around Luke’s waist. ‘Will all this be enough?’ she asked pensively.

‘How do you mean?’ Luke replied.

‘The LGBT community, how perception has... *changed*,’ she posed. ‘Yes, there’s a cure to XENO-20, and most consider its release more of an act of terror by a small group of fanatics as opposed to an entire movement, but the source – Mr Zethus, Damasichthon – is no less affiliated to their cause. There will be a backlash, there always is.’ Aisha shook her head in disdain.

Luke calmed his bride with a reciprocal embrace. ‘Possibly. We can only try and explain and educate rather than pick sides. I’m sure my brother and the Sacred Band will lead the way – it’s what they’re born to do after all.’ He nuzzled her neck. ‘There was a time when the sight of you and I together as future husband and wife would have raised an eyebrow or two... yet look at us now,’ he reassured her.

‘Actually looking forward to seeing you and Adam in matching sherwanis,’ Aisha chuckled as the pair reached the Roman Bath entrance, taking their place in a small queue of tourists and digging in their pockets for face masks. ‘So, you broke in here?’

‘Uh-huh,’ Luke cracked a gleeful grin.

‘Let’s hope nothing has been captured on CCTV. I hear you and your brother have a reputation for shenanigans in this place. Bath’s most wanted troublemakers.’ She poked him playfully in the ribs with her staff. ‘Have to say, it seems strange to be meeting your ex-girlfriend for the first time, under such bizarre circumstances.’ Her speech became muffled behind her mask.

‘You get used to it. Besides, no one but us will see her when I give this trusty blade back. Special trick of hers, apparently.’ Luke inched closer to the pool’s edge. He waited patiently, dipping the staff of Excalibur into the waters tentatively a few times, then mockingly pretending to fish with it. His gentle laughter was tempered as Mary Cassidy suddenly materialised from behind the two, triggering a startled squeal from Aisha.

‘At least he didn’t actually get in the waters this time,’ Mary joked. ‘Honestly, he and his brother felt it necessary to try and swim their way out to the centre of the pool to return the King’s Blade. You should have seen them – looked ridiculous afterwards.’

Aisha forced a chuckle, still disturbed at the appearance of the apparition that was the Lady of the Lake. She wanted to ask questions, so many questions, but found her mouth was dry. 'I'm Aisha Hussin, pleased to meet you,' was all she could muster.

'The knight of Sir Palamedes. Pleasure. Luke has told me so much about you.' Mary bowed reverently. 'I trust your followers are well?'

'They will be, I'm sure,' Aisha muttered uncomfortably, as if under interrogation for the insubordination and betrayal of her General Madani. 'They are good people,' she defended.

'Indeed they are. But human also, and deserving of forgiveness when they stray.' Mary gave a warm but slow wink as she reached out to take Excalibur from Luke. 'Which reminds me, how goes Adam and the Sacred Band? Some herding of a stray flock needed there too, no doubt?' she asked.

Luke's eyes lit up as Mary took the wooden thorn staff, her touch illuminating the magnificent blade of Excalibur. Aisha's lips parted for a moment, awestruck, before gripping his hand in comfort. 'He's on it. It's not like he and the Band are on the FBI's radar or anything, but some good PR wouldn't go amiss. Thankfully, we have Gary and Geraint to assist there,' Luke replied.

'Your brother and his Sacred Band have exposed themselves to this world in a way not seen in centuries – it will take time to understand.

Just remind Adam, no one is a closed book... *educate*, don't argue,' Mary mused. She took a few timid steps back towards the pool before halting, pointing the tip of Excalibur's blade towards Aisha's own staff. 'Have you given any thought as to who might inherit that?' she asked. Aisha's face turned gloomy, the mere hint of bearing children reopening a still-fresh wound.

Luke wrapped his arm around his fiancée. 'Suppose we'll just have to wait and see,' he quipped optimistically.

'Hmmm.' Mary moved forward once more, placing her palm upon Aisha's belly, Aisha drawing in a sharp breath of alarm. 'Could of course be Sacred Band, as the Sir Galahad line goes. Still, let's keep all options open, shall we?' In a blink, Mary had vanished, leaving Luke and Aisha staring at one another as a tour guide politely asked the two to move away from the crumbling pool edge. They gave their apologies and headed for the exit.

'Sir, Madam,' the tour guide shouted after them.

'Here we go,' Luke cursed, readying any excuse he could to explain his previous exploits. 'Yes?' he snapped back.

'I believe you dropped your walking stick.' The tour guide offered a slim, polished wooden staff to Luke. He turned to Aisha, noting she still held her own by her side. Luke inspected it closer, its markings, texture and shape identical to that owned by his father. Impossible.

‘Errr... thank you,’ came Luke’s bewildered reply, taking the staff and immediately pretending to lean upon it, the tour guide not looking particularly convinced.

‘No problem. But please, do keep away from the bath waters in future – despite their name, not really suitable for swimming in.’ The tour guide made a shallow attempt at humour.

‘Guess not,’ Luke quipped, trying to contain his inner smile. He and Aisha turned casually once again and made their way outside.

‘Is that...?’ Aisha examined the newly presented wooden staff.

‘Would appear so,’ Luke answered. ‘Sword of Sir Galahad. Probably the least Minnie could do after destroying my father’s.’

‘Our sparring sessions are back on then,’ Aisha giggled. ‘Can’t wait to teach you a few decent moves with a sword.’

‘I know a fair few of my own, you realise,’ Luke pushed back. ‘Any kid we have will of course want the sword of Sir Galahad first.’

‘Oh, and why is that?’ Aisha clipped Luke’s ear as if disciplining a child. ‘Might I remind you this sword of Sir Palamedes also comes with its own armed guard... and a private jet,’ she teased.

Luke shook his head playfully. ‘I’m not going to win this argument, am I?’ Aisha’s firm look gave him his answer. ‘Jeez, I really hope the first will be Sacred Band. So much easier.’

The Bear Pub kitchen was hazy with acrid smoke. Violet wafted it away from her face as she fought her way to the oven, the fire alarm already splitting her ears. ‘Cleo. Be a dear and switch that thing off, will you?’ she coughed out, opening the oven door to a wave of bitter fumes.

‘Baking skills not quite up to scratch again?’ Cleo laughed at Violet’s burnt efforts while turning the volume down on a trancy Bjork song. ‘I make that batch number four?’

‘Six, actually. I tried a couple of times last night when you were in bed.’ Violet looked crestfallen. ‘I am seriously contemplating just buying a cake for Adam’s thirty-third.’ She threw the baking tray down on the table.

‘Sure he’ll appreciate the effort.’ Cleo gave Violet a quick peck on her cheek. ‘What time are the group due back from London?’ she scanned through the recipe ingredients.

‘Gary and Geraint said they would be done by three o’clock. The train journey back is about an hour or so, anytime now I guess. I need more

flour.’ Violet’s thoughts jumped. ‘Alex, Chris and Fernando are making their way down from Edinburgh this evening... Fernando didn’t want to miss the Celtic FC friendly against Nice, apparently. I really need more flour,’ she continued to search through the cabinets.

‘Milo and Tommy got Fernando a season ticket for next year, I heard?’ Cleo asked while scraping the charcoaled remnants of Violet’s concoction into the bin. ‘Pretty kind after one of them was hit in the face with a shovel.’

‘Well, guess they admired his spark. Chris even said he might be dating another footballer the pair introduced him to. Little early to tell but I’m sure their sport will catch on.’ Violet sagged into a nearby chair. ‘Speaking of couples, Chris and Alex...?’

‘What? Seriously?’ Cleo spun round.

‘I don’t know. Spending a fair bit of time together up in Scotland. Alex buffing Chris up the same way he did his nephew. Kinda cute really, the Allen and Wood families getting together again,’ Violet contemplated out loud. ‘Amazing how the wounds of war end up bringing people closer, isn’t it?’

Cleo leaned across and kissed Violet once more. 'You're telling me.' Their moment was interrupted by a knock on the back door. 'If that's Adam, Gary and Geraint, best get myself off to Tesco ahead of young Allen's birthday tomorrow,' Cleo winked.

'Thanks for the confidence boost.' Violet flicked the car keys across to her. 'Flour only please... and do give Luke and Aisha a call, remind them it's midday sharp tomorrow. No excuses.' She headed for the door handle. Gary and Geraint stood side by side, both bone-tired but cheery.

'MasterChef application going well?' Geraint squinted his eyes through the residual smog.

'Fine. I have a backup.' Violet rolled her eyes as she welcomed the two in. 'How did things go in London?'

Gary slumped into the kitchen chair and rubbed his eyes free of the smoke. 'We're on the right track. Adam gave another good account of the Sacred Band, their willingness to assist in all enquires. The United Nations are set to host an additional summit alongside their planned biodiversity gathering in September. Viruses and their potential cures should fit well into the agenda,' he gave a sigh of relief.

‘Still plenty of countries that wish to hold them to account, however,’ Geraint soberly reminded. ‘Those same countries that have brought the hammer down on such communities for centuries now.’

‘Surely they must see Adam was instrumental in the creation of the ASCLEPIUS cure and the defeat of Damas? Must count for something?’ Violet protested.

‘Leopards and their spots,’ Geraint compared with a shrug.

‘Where is Adam anyway?’ Violet asked.

‘He asked to be dropped off at Prior Park. He’s kept a few clothes and other belongings there, after the fire at the Allen home. Probably wanted to smarten up before his uncle and the others arrive, when is it? This evening?’ Gary stretched with a yawn, his body language suggesting the cancellation of any pre-birthday drinks Violet and Cleo had planned for this evening in favour of a simple party tomorrow. Violet shot down such a proposal, reaching for her mobile and tapping in a message to Adam – *get down to The Bear now, you loner!*

The main hall of Prior Park was musty with the smell of bleach on polished wooden floors. Chairs neatly propped up along its walls, as was customary during the school's summer term holiday. There had been talk of students resitting cancelled exams over July and August in light of the academic lockdown caused by XENO-20, politicians thinking better of it in favour of the vaccination programme. Adam knelt quietly in its centre, eyes closed, memories of duels with Iain Donnelly eight years before – the summoning of his first blue-flamed spear, the body heat of the two, the sweat and the tears. The pleasure, and the pain. A hardened lump formed in his throat as he looked behind at the doorway where his father Richard stood, Karen Milligan by his side, and in sharp contrast the day he and his partner crossed razor-edged blades. That same indulgent passion welled inside him as if the event was relived; he quashed it quickly before it burnt his heart. Stay in the present, not in the past, he reminded himself – or fall foul of the mistakes made by Damas.

Learn from history, Geraint would advise, don't feel tempted to erase. As tempting as it was to wish away his past, Adam often prayed for such an offer. He basked in the evening light cast across the lush green park fields, milk-white waters lying still beneath the Palladian Bridge – his father and close friend William Wood's favourite contemplation spot. Even now, Adam couldn't bring himself to cross over it, for doing so would be to walk in the footsteps of Father, a role his brother was

perhaps better suited for. Luke was, for all his petulant faults, more refined, more mature in the matters of the heart. Adam was raw, guarded, almost obtuse – a flaw that almost cost him the Sacred Band itself. It was one thing to stand behind a pulpit and lecture global leaders as to the beliefs and purposes of the Sacred Band warriors, the one hundred and fifty male pairs standing to protect and serve for the good of mankind, not the vilified, poisoned creations of Damas – but if the essence of their being was love, a partnership that should never be broken, then what credibility did a leader have that stood alone? Adam’s words would only be met with incredulity, unless he had the courage to open his heart once more. This remained his greatest challenge.

‘Excuse me,’ came a robust voice from his side. ‘Do you work here?’

Adam looked the gentleman up and down. He guessed late twenties, stocky build of a rugby player, chiselled jawline with a fine, mature grey stubble. ‘I don’t, sorry,’ he replied, cocking his head to one side in curiosity. ‘You look... familiar?’

The gentleman gave a shy smile. ‘Well, I do play for Bath RFU...Academy though. Working my way up. You follow us?’

‘Who doesn’t in this city?’ Adam mocked playfully. ‘My friends are a little better versed in the sport than I, mind.’

‘Ah, fair enough. Sorry... but are you Adam Allen?’ the gentleman cut in swiftly then offered his hand. ‘I’m Jon, Jon Worthington. Seen you a fair bit on the telly recently... didn’t realise you were local,’ his face creased.

‘Worthington?’ Adam accepted the handshake.

‘Yeah, inherited the family name from my adopted father. He often spoke about this place here, Prior Park, told me to steer clear of it for some reason. Said his family name was not welcome. Never really knew why... thought it was just a school?’ Jon put his hands into his pockets and scuffed the gravel innocently beneath his feet. ‘He did say though, if I ever needed answers...’

‘Answers to what?’ Adam’s tone became stern. Jon gave a slight flick of his wrist, revealing a bracelet of blue flame, quickly extinguishing it as if taboo.

‘I saw some of those guys on the news... they called themselves the Sacred Band. They looked like, well, like that,’ Jon tried to articulate, pointing gingerly to his wrist. ‘Suppose I just wondered if I could get some answers, maybe by coming here, I don’t know... stupid I guess.’ Jon retreated inside himself for a moment, turning a cold shoulder to Adam.

'Lawrence, Sir Lawrence Worthington. That was your adoptive father?' Adam pried.

'You knew him?' Jon replied.

'Could say that.'

'Oh, after I turned sixteen he passed me over to another family. Real friendly folks. Said he would always keep in touch, and did each year for a while, then went quiet. Always thought that wife of his never really wanted kids,' Jon muttered with a scratch of his stubble.

'Morgan?' Adam asked. 'Morgan Worthington?'

'Yup. That's her. Guessing you knew her too? Never took much of an interest in me, even when my father picked me from their orphanage charity. Then when she saw this blue fire stuff, suddenly I became *valuable*.'

'I bet. So what happened?' Adam folded his arms cautiously.

'Lawrence didn't want me involved with her, Morgan. That's when he passed me on. Said he still loved me, and I believed it... still do to this day. Was told he died during that cliff collapse reported at the

excavation site on Mount Sinai years back. Morgan passed too, sadly. The two were real history buffs, I'll give them that,' Jon said, trying to mask his evident pain.

'That they were,' Adam muttered to himself, just loud enough to be picked up by Jon. He brushed the comment aside and promptly switched topics. 'So, you're a Worthington in all but blood?' he loosened. 'And that fire you summoned... I can draw a conclusion.'

Jon squirmed a little. 'My rugby mates, they don't know yet. About any of it. Never felt the need to tell them about me and my, my *preferences*. Sure they'd be cool with it and all, as would my new parents, but with everything that's happened recently...'

Adam spared Jon any unnecessary confession, placed a forgiving hand on his solid shoulder. 'Your father, Lawrence, was a good man. Close friend of mine in fact for many years. Didn't always see eye-to-eye but that's part of what a good friendship is about, right?' he consoled. 'As for the Sacred Band, let's just say he was right about finding answers here.'

'Can you tell me about him? Lawrence Worthington? I always knew there was more to him than he let on. There just *had* to be.' Jon became animated.

‘There’s quite a bit to tell,’ Adam chuckled with a blush. ‘And I won’t be the only one with a story or two.’ His phone buzzed with Violet’s message, prompting a smile.

‘Well, I’ve got time if you have.’ Jon inflated his barrel chest.

Adam bowed. ‘No time like the present.’

Epilogue

My name is Cleodoxa. Those that know me call me Cleo – and those that do I call my friends, perhaps even my family. My new family. I once stood with thirteen siblings, one of seven sisters that paid the ultimate price in the name of maniacal pride. All the victims of arrogance, superiority and some may argue, more. I have come to learn, over my two thousand years upon this earth, of new teachings enshrined by many of mankind, a list of seven deadly sins, and the fate that awaits those that indulge them. My mother was, in her own way, guilty of all seven, and for each one she lost both a son and a daughter.

Save two of course. My brother Damasichthon and I remained as solemn reminders to our parents of just what their actions had cost them. My brother saw this world as a curse, and his life upon it a torture – a pain which consumed him to such a point that all he could do was lash out in fury like a lion cornered. I could understand, for to be different is still seen as something to be feared by mankind to this day. All Damasichthon did was harness that same fear and twist it to his will. He was right when he claimed fear is the true ultimate power. If not, why is it still used so frequently and to such success? For me, I came to learn of a reflection of these seven sins, their opposites, the virtues. I shall not

recite every single one, because I believe only one to be integral to surviving a lifetime – mortal or otherwise. Hope.

When my mother, Queen Niobe, was brought back to this mortal plane by Excalibur, I could neither see nor hear her. But I felt her. I felt her anguish at losing her children, her husband and ultimately her own life. But in tandem, I sensed her optimism, her joy and warmth upon witnessing the creations of our Gods and Goddesses grow into what they had always wished. A race of equals, not superiors. I feel it was that very notion that led her to permit me to remain here with them, and close to Violet Butcher, daughter of Sir Bors, a token for our family to illustrate how love can be born from the most immoral of circumstances. We consider ourselves equals – me, the progeny of Zeus, Violet, the possessor of spirit born of Ares' own daughter Harmonia. A daughter that helped found our beloved city of Thebes alongside Cadmus, and forever brought concord after her omnipotent father had played his games. I'm convinced those dwelling upon Mount Olympus would be proud of such a union.

I must stress, the true lesson here though is not for either of us to consider ourselves a step beyond those around us. Demi-gods we may be, but that is not true strength. As Violet's own brethren – those descendants of the knights of the Round Table – have come to understand, to stand in equal measure with those around you and fight

for that equality is true strength. Their beloved King Arthur Pendragon knew this, hence the Round Table itself, no one single head above the others despite the presence of a crown. If a king could learn such a lesson over a thousand years ago, then it stands to reason that the same doctrine can be taught today. While we shall always require leaders, and our own elite fighting unit of the Sacred Band certainly had theirs, when a leader deliberately seeks the conflict of an enemy rather than the commonality of an ally, their path is lost. Believe me, there is far more mankind has in common than not, and Adam Allen knows this all too well.

Finding our place in such a world can mean struggle, as I have seen every day. Struggle itself can, indeed, be of use. The current leader of the Sacred Band has a body made of stone, but those closest to him know his heart is made of glass. To lose his partner Iain Donnelly in such a way leaves an indelible scar on an already timid skin when it comes to love. It will take time to permit that scar to emerge from the safety of the shadows once more... but it will. The beauty of the struggle is that so often it needs little intervention other than time. While I have been blessed with an abundance of it, most will not, including my dearest Violet. The temptation here is to rush, to be loud and shout from the highest peak to assert your intentions and enforce change. I remind those that try that it is the softer echo that travels furthest, and reaches the most ears.

Perhaps the alternative strategy to struggle is to merely *wish*. Reimagine a life when things transpired differently because you believe they should have, and to retain such an illusion. During my own upbringing I was regaled with tales of those that *wished*... be it kings that wanted everything they touched to turn to gold, to fly as close to the sun as one could, to demonstrate arrogantly their ability to drive a chariot or simply to desire the most beautiful female companion there has ever been. I too in fact share ancestry with a man left floating in an eternal sea, fruit dangling just out of reach, all because he desired more than just a seat at Zeus' table. A wish can become an obsession, an obsession that becomes chains, and chains that eventually become complete imprisonment. All of your own making, tragically, and we Ancient Greeks even have a word for it – *hubris*.

My advice, should you ever ask, is that so often there can be no more dangerous words uttered by mankind than 'I wish.' For such words suggest you have forgotten what it is to be grateful... and believe me, there is so much for which we all must be grateful. You just need to take the time to look. As a now close friend has told me, remember, there is no time like the present.

THE SACRED BAND: SEVERANCE
THE END

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