

THE SACRED BAND

CABAL

James MacTavish

Author's Note

In the prelude to the Battle of Mount Sinai, the closing event in *The Sacred Band Trinity: Part 3 – Grail*, Sir Lawrence Worthington recalls a phrase passed down through the line of the Knights of Sir Lancelot: “*While men may follow their women into battle, never should they stand by their side.*” He considered it a cautionary tale of *patriarchal preservation*, that women may prove to be the trigger of wars but should not fight alongside men. This was a Knight's code, the *Chevalier Blanc* or *White Knight*, an attempt at chivalry from the Sir Lancelot bloodline. Ironically, they had been taking orders from a woman, the sorceress Morgan le Fay, over many generations. Le Fay herself was the embodiment of feminine power over mankind, inspired by the faiths of antiquity, Wiccan and Pagan beliefs of the Triple Goddess through to the recognised reverence of Greek deities including Pallas Athena, and scholars such as the celebrated Hypatia of Alexandria.

Almost immediately, however, Worthington's attention turns to events punctuating history where le Fay's powers have not been the driving force of destiny, yet men still follow. A tease from Iceni warrior Boudicca, liberator of Ancient Britain from its Roman conquerors, then, more prophetically, the visions of Joan of Arc, commonly known as the *Maid of Orleans*. These are just a couple of examples of powerful women who made

their mark without the need for relics imbued with formidable powers such as the Palladium or Necklace of Harmonia, or indeed, born with any such magical birth right like the Goddesses of the Old Ways. This plants the seed of doubt in Worthington's mind, that he and all his predecessors wielding the double blades of Sir Lancelot since the formation of the White Dragon have failed to break this chain of subservience that was, of course, well and truly severed at the climax of the Battle of Mount Sinai and the Transit of Venus in 2012.

Luke Allen experiences an Excalibur-induced fever dream in the same book, guided at the end by his lost love Mary Cassidy, the newly crowned Lady of the Lake. In that dream, he catches glimpses of the centuries-old sparring between Red and White Dragon factions, many of which are explored in subsequent entries to The Sacred Band series. While the grandest events, such as world wars and continental conflicts, serve to highlight just how ambitious Morgan le Fay is to realise her perceived destiny, there had been moments of reconciliation between the fractured Round Table of Knights – moments the Sorceress swiftly sought to quell by any means possible. When Luke witnesses an exchange of dialogue between Henry Tudor, the future Henry VII of England and Wales, the familiar motif of the Red and White Roses of Lancaster and York become a symbol of harmony, an early attempt to rebel against le Fay and reunite as The Twelve once more.

Understandably, such a move would require subtlety and intrigue; hence, the *Cabal* was born.

While the term 'Cabal' has its roots in the Hebrew language, one interpretation draws upon the time of the Glorious Revolution, and the restoration of King Charles II to the English throne in 1668, with royalist sympathisers and influencers by the surnames Clifford, Arlington, Buckingham, Ashley, and Lauderdale helping pave the way for the Monarch's return from exile in Europe. Hence, the acronym *C-A-B-A-L*. As interesting as this particular moment in British history would have been to explore as part of *The Sacred Band Saga*, having laid the groundwork for both the events of The Hundred Years' War between England and France, together with the isle's first taste of civil war at the hands of 'Bastard Feudalism', the concept was adopted into a timeline set two hundred and fifty years prior. To help set the tone, it begins with a union, the blood of Sir Galahad in King Edward III forging alliance with the traditional foe in the Sir Lancelot line and Philippa of Hainault, born to the influential House of Valois. From here, comes the creation of the Order of the Garter, historically based on the famed Round Table and its knights, fictiously repurposed as a stance against le Fay and honouring King Arthur's sworn oath to service the people of Britain. This alliance however, must weather the storms of continental wars, the shifting of power, together with the passionate ambitions of the peoples of British lands themselves. All the while, the Sorceress bides her time,

pensively awaiting the same pitfalls of mankind to appear, the fallibility of the knight's trust in each other and over reliance on dutiful warriors of The Sacred Band itself. Just as history itself, there are twists and turns and all the chicanery you'd expect from the quest for crowns (so much so, that the research I conducted has been split out into a more linear summary – see *Afterward*), whilst attempting to remain true to the essence of the series and the unfolding of the 'hidden' wars between Red and White. Our heroes of The Sacred Band once again torn between familiar allegiances, duty, and survival...with more than a simple honouring of the Red Dragon faction this time around, but embracing a true *Y'Ddraig Goch* spirit!

Chapter 1
Sir Lancelot – Henry Beaufort
April 1447

I slaughtered a saint

‘She smiled come her end, that much I remember.’ It was said with a laboured breath, a pause for composure between each word. ‘Oh, how I wish she had meant it for me, to relieve my guilt. No, I was a mere spectre, as were the guards and the scribes that surrounded her. The Maid saw no locked doors or windows; dare I say, no walls or ceilings. So peculiar to say, I know, my dear John,’ my uncle wheezed. A frail finger gestured to the goblet by his bedside. I obliged, and his rasp eased. ‘For she was truly free, and the Heavens had made it so. No man could touch her, defile her, condemn her. That is when I knew, John.’ The cough flared again.

‘What about a woman?’ I asked, patiently tipping the goblet enough to moisten his lips. My uncle’s eyes twitched. If men were not capable of such a deed, could a woman succeed?’ The question was met with a faint chortle.

'The *Woman*. Our great muse. Orchestrator of influence and liege to the occult. A heretic's voice in combat with that of God himself? Never... *never!*' He became animated, raising his torso enough to drain any remnants of strength from his heart. I lowered him back down and pressed the pale staff close to his chest as comfort.

'Morgan Le Fay has been good to the Beaufort family name,' I whispered. Titles, lands, victories, and crowns. As I named each example of success and perseverance, of patience and fortitude, a sweet sigh of relief was exhaled by my uncle. A momentary bliss.

'My grandfather thought as you do, John. Even upon marriage with the sworn enemy of our Red Dragon adversaries and the closest unity our once-grand Round Table had ever achieved in this Isle, still the Witch schemed. Kinship is of no value in the quest for power.' A solitary tear welled.

I inspected the silver ring on the bedside table. It glinted faintly in the evening sun, the inscription *Albus Draco* only visible with a squint. 'It was Gaunt who gave you this, wasn't it?' I enquired, holding it up in the light. 'He never spoke of any union between White and Red.' I placed the ring down. 'Certainly, no apparent manifestation of one now.'

'I shall be punished for speaking ill of my father, but Gaunt still reviled all that was pure in this world. He tried to resist, but remained enthralled by le Fay and this cursed line of Sir Lancelot, malleable as clay for the sorceress and blind to the warnings of King Edward III. I was to be no different.' My uncle contorted once more. '*Honi soit qui mal y pense,*' he spat.

'The Garter? That was King Edward's appeasement?' I took a cue from the quote, *Shame on him who thinks evil of it*, the final words taken from the tale of the legendary Sir Gawain and his slaying of the Green Knight, a foretold early gambit by le Fay to test the resolve and amenability of King Arthur's subjects. I had known no other Garter than that commanded by my late King and cousin Henry, the fifth of his name, and while the regents for the young Henry the Sixth had proven as inept over the French as they were belligerent, this council was still under le Fay's command, any trace of Sir Galahad and the Red Dragon surely banished to the Welsh lands and its whimsical rebellions. My uncle's crooked digit pointed once more, this time to a latched cupboard door. I acquiesced, finding nothing other than moth-eaten robes and garments gathering dust inside. He croaked in persistence. Several firm thumps and the base of the unit came loose, revealing stained parchments hidden in the space below. The ink was blotched, the text only faintly legible, but the wax seal was unmistakable. Three proud plumes bold against a black shield, the markings

of The Black Prince, Edward of Woodstock, who had passed on near fifty years ago, leaving his mother and father stricken with anguish. I bit my lower lip. My heart flooded with a potent mix of envy and pride in the privilege of handling the very words of one of England's finest knights. I swallowed my excitement. 'You believe I require assistance in my campaign overseas?' I responded with a forced glibness. 'Has the Beaufort family name fallen so easily into disrepute?'

Uncle Henry's rebuke was swift, bolting upright and swinging his emaciated legs over the bed edge, staff quivering in judgement. 'You'd do well to learn, little John, so-called Duke of Somerset!' He punctuated his statement with a globule of phlegm aimed between my feet. 'Lands, titles, crowns, you whisper, yet this war with France enters its centenary, and who may I ask is winning? Does the old crone le Fay fill the sails of your fleet with steadfast victory across the Channel? Do her hexes bring a plague of misfortune upon our enemies? Or is it the righteous hand of God that steers the destiny and hearts of the ordinary man and encourages him to soar? The young Maid I so willingly sentenced to death had no such gifts of pagan legend, only her *faith*. Le Fay has always feared what she cannot tame. Edward the Black Prince knew that all too well, as did his father.' His knees buckled as he weakened, the stumble forcing the staff from his hands. It rattled its way over to me. I offered it back, meekly, my uncle swiping at it like a threatened animal. 'Take it, take it!' he scowled. 'It is of

no further use to me, the blade of Sir Lancelot. No longer will the sorceress charm me. May its strength be a guide to you, my dear nephew John, assuage your many years in captivity by our French foes and all-consuming desire for revenge. I have at least acted nobly in this regard, passing lineage through my blood.’ He knelt nobly, scarlet robes barely covering his modesty. He winced when he attempted to stand, hunching over grotesquely, his pale complexion causing concern. ‘Know this, dear John, that I am not alone in my sentiment. Joan, the Maiden of Orleans, had many a man answer her call – not all divine, and certainly not blessed with the powers of Red and White Knights or served through ancient relics.’ A more jovial demeanour appeared as he settled back upon the bed. ‘My sins from this Cabal may never be fully exonerated, but there remains hope of a bountiful tomorrow.’

Such transgression evoked my ire, the newly bequeathed staff transforming into steel. The pair of burning blades, unique to our line, offered a surge of confidence new to me. I towered over my stricken predecessor, a single edge aligned with his throat. ‘I will take Harfleur, regain all lost grounds in the name of this French fanatic. Let le Fay conclude her glorious service to the Kingdom of England. There will be no token rebellion or pious acts of these new faiths to counter; the Old Ways shall return.’ I retracted the blade and let it return to its less conspicuous form, my moment of energy spent. ‘You will die here in Winchester, your

duty to the White Dragon fulfilled, your Maid and Martyr no more than a pile of ash and embers, easily scattered to the winds.' I turned for the door, slowed by the reciting of a familiar rhyme by Uncle Henry, frequently chalked up as fleeting idiosyncrasy by our fellow knights. So close was I to asking for its meaning, but why appease the ramblings of a dying man? For the first time, I felt my footsteps were my own.

*Did not the angel fail you?
Spoke Catherine to the Maid,
A virgin, is she?
Both John and Anne do agree.
But Lemaitre and Knight can be swayed.*

Chapter 2
Sir Galahad – Edward Woodstock, Prince of Wales
June 1376

My mother defied a serpent queen

I shall have my father inform his subjects that England's valour has rendered my blood pale, drained of all riches and purity. Perhaps the serpent was right all along? Her grip tighter and more inescapable than either Red or White could have foreseen? I make peace with it now, accepting my end. Whatever beauty may have lain within our brief union has been stripped to the bone just as my own flesh fails me.

Let it be known throughout the Kingdom that I have witnessed strength born from the most common of hearts, tainted with neither witchcraft nor hexes. I have fought rulers who have lost their sight, seen a thousand Frenchmen and Englishmen clash, splinter spears and shatter swords while arrows rain around them, without charms or illusions. My father will claim that the fall of Crecy to his banner was testament to all that he and my mother had achieved in the name of Arthur, King of

Britons. That the aspirations of the Round Table and defence of our realm had never been so ardent, so exquisitely just. I shiver. King John of Bohemia deserves final combat against a worthy adversary, not a privileged one, and privileged is how I feel. A blade of Sir Galahad, at my command, sewn into my veins from my father. Near unrivalled. I hear echoes across the plains of battle that the Black Prince casts his ominous shadow over his enemies, and this is what strikes terror into a soldier's stomach. I see them flee, scatter like mice. I would ask one to fight, a commoner, and pray that he would land a mortal strike, proving to my Order of the Garter and my father that we are not infallible in battle, thus making us truly worthy. No. My sword rewards us only with glory, as do the powers that still quietly fuel our cause. We are mere slaves – and le Fay is aware of this, I am certain.

She poisons us still. This wretched sickness that runs through me is not dissimilar to that which took my sister, and many hundreds before. A biblical plague, some on the continent as bold as to attribute even this to me and my namesake, one that spares not even followers of Arthurian or newly awakened Theban magic. Unheard of in our lifetime, this could only be the work of an unrivalled sorceress, surely. My mother Philippa was warned. No union of the Dragons, never by the hand of Sir Lancelot – this was not the way. She defied this remonstrance, married my father of the Sir Galahad line, some say in rebuke for le Fay's bane in the

affairs of Grandmother Isabella, her 'She Wolf', and her deceitful Roger Mortimer. I was eighteen at the founding of the Order of the Garter, my brother young John of Gaunt, barely ten and still tethered meekly to our mother's apron strings. We of the Twelve Knights blended with the twelve chosen from common blood in true humility, a harmony that could only be attributed to the good knights of Sir Kay, Bill Montague's eye for intrigue the first to notice our Lady Morgan was not in attendance when we honoured fallen Sacred Band members. The name of the righteous Piers Gaveston, a favourite of my grandfather's, was only a moment past our lips when the demon stormed the Chapel of Saint George. Bathed in venomous green flame, sinister thorns and twisted bark contorted into human form, a hawthorn tree brought to life, a manifestation of cruelty and malice. 'There will be no treaty! No accord between gods and men! Avert your eyes to the Old Ways, yet the Old Ways remain. It is you who are blind,' were its only words. Its harsh stone axe split our Garter's honorary Round Table, those without powerful staves brazenly holding their ground, only a magically born knight's blade resilient enough to shield him from any blow from the beast. It was a fine stroke from the Earl of March, of Sir Gawain's lineage, that brought the monstrosity down to the sound of grinding boulders and hissing hot wood. Decapitated in a single parry. My young brother John had both hands pressed firmly to his ears, but he too agreed that the vengeful screams of Morgan le Fay piercing the air moments later prompted the Order of

the Garter's motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense*. To this day, I question whether our thoughts and our acts are destined to be entwined, whether to merely *think* evil inevitably leads to *doing* evil, or there remains some salvation in our freedom to choose.

Whatever freedom man or mage may cling to, it remains frail, open to manipulation from those cunning enough. While the Red and White truce has held until my final few breaths, this war of the ages has fractured its resolve.

I see how my young brother now covets the attention of the ill-advised, and even if he remains strong enough to resist, his own children may yield to le Fay's charms. When the last French foot had scampered from the fields at Poitiers, I felt in that moment that I had achieved what no wielder of the Sir Galahad blade had ever done, accomplished a victory through strategic intellect, not mystical means. I was a warrior in the purest sense, virtuous and equal, just as the Order of the Garter intended. Upon my honouring and the signing of the Treaty of Brétigny, the knights in our company, from Sir Gareth to Sir Kay, welcomed the admonishment of the Good King John of France and a period of peace from Brittany to Navarre. But a familiar flash of ravenous red sparked in my sibling's eye with each word he consumed.

The Witch's snakes have returned, and they yearn for the ear of Sir Lancelot once more. My triumph is dampened as this freshly styled Duke of Lancaster is not content with simply stalking my footsteps, but wants to imprint a path deeper and bolder.

I fear he and his kin will seek satisfaction through any means, leveraging accursed statues and pendants to precipitate destruction. Le Fay knows too much – the right wounds to probe and scratch. My father continues to distance himself from John, rumours of my mother's ignominious affair with a commoner, a butcher from Flanders, combined with my glory of late plunging my brother's name into yet more tenebrosity and obscurity. I fear I have well and truly earned my name in every such way come the end.

Yet still, the French persist, without enchanted relics of old, our treaty violated and lands retaken. What could be more tantalising for a future leader of the White Dragon than a stubborn adversary? If those of my and my father's Red Dragon faction would rather sue for peace than howl for war, where lies the thrill of the game? If there is one facet of mankind I have come to learn from solemn and weary battlefields, it is the desperation for a worthy enemy, factual or fictitious. A soldier and his kin will stab furiously into flesh for a hundred years should you will them to act for the single purpose of vanquishing a tyrant, a tyrant bent on stripping you of freedom, land, or title. It is here that I

pray to our new deities for the wisdom to tell friend from foe, to recognise puppet from puppeteer – a trait not so easily mastered in those born ordinary.

For this, I ask you, my dear son Richard and heir to my throne, to observe our family's escutcheon and the three white ostrich feathers argent adorning a black shield of peace, carved from the very rival that will come to define my epitaph, a king blind to all but capable of unsheathing his sword when it mattered most. Have our Holy Trinity hover above my slumber as I lie deep within the ground, a sobering reminder to you of the forces that can come to forge our destinies should your eyes come to fail you, too.

For our lands, and its people.

Edward of Woodstock, Prince of Wales

Chapter 3
Sir Bedivere – Henry ‘Hotspur’ Percy
July 1403

How strange this language, that of England

Onennua Meigion came the rasp of Glyndwr. Edmund and I exchanged glances. I prodded him with my stave, his old tongue Welsh now far more fluent than mine following his years in captivity. ‘Ashes. Simply means ashes, as in the trees,’ Mortimer replied. A seat was fashioned by the armoured Welshman, squatting down on a felled stump, chainmail sighing. He pointed at me, snorted, slapped his palm down firmly upon his thigh, and gave a sorrowful shake of his head. ‘I speak the truth, Owain. The sword of legend, Excalibur itself, his to command.’ Mortimer took an assertive step forward. ‘We could end this. England can once again be ours.’ My throat seized at the mere mention of the King’s Blade. I came close to interjecting, fearing that the ethereal voice would carry on the wind once more. A gurgle came from the stream not five feet away. I was so transfixed by its graceful flow that I didn’t catch

Glyndwr's growled words. 'Henry, Henry!' Mortimer snapped. 'The Prince asked about our... our *Epiphany*.' His words softened quickly.

'You want to know why I didn't summon the blade?' I replied. 'Why the good knights of Sir Kay, Sir Bors and Sir Gaheris failed to save King Richard? Why the noble House of Percy did not so much as brandish its sword?' My staff shook, a meek attempt to have Glyndwr's stone solid demeanour crack just a little. The Welshman merely narrowed his eyes. 'Very well,' I continued. 'I take no pleasuring in sharing with you both that my bloodline is cursed—'

Mortimer intervened immediately. 'Henry, please. This tale has been told to Glyndwr, the curse of the Sir Bedivere line. Your illnesses, your ailments and malignancies. To source King Arthur's sword opens a crypt of pain and suffering. Your ancestors wrestled with this torment too... but diplomacy between White and Red will no longer serve us, not with le Fay so bitter.' Edmund thrust his face into mine, his cheeks flushed. 'Honourable intentions, King Edward the Third and his beloved Queen Philippa, but this Union of Dragons was never meant to last, and our current predicament proves just that.' His breath was as hot as his temper. 'A Britain without its magic invites the cold and the dark. Men left to their own devices cannot be trusted, and the Sorceress will use their inherent greed to her every advantage.' The blade of Sir Gawain

revealed itself in a streak of inflamed red. I had prepared a defence against Glyndwr's expected astonishment, but he remained stoic. By chance, I realised that such magic was perhaps not a stranger to him or his family, with Edmund sharing far more than just his heart with the warrior's proud daughter.

'Crecy. Pointier. Limoges. Do you believe these victories came without the aid of le Fay? You, Edmund Mortimer, know better than that good Sir Gawain.' I took a bold step back. 'The curse of which I speak has nothing to do with the finding of Excalibur, but rather with its dutiful return to the Lady of the Lake.' I turned my back.

'Nimue?' Glyndwr uttered.

'I have failed my ancestors, and my bloodline, yes.' I revealed the small cut sprig of Holy Thorn from beneath my chest plate. 'The mighty King's Blade should have been returned to our blessed Lady, as is the duty of the Sir Bedivere knights. Morgan le Fay's serpentine charms worked beautifully over my family, keeping the House of Percy out of the Order of the Garter until I, myself, was welcomed in, rubbing salt in the wound after King Richard parted with 7,000 marks to secure my release after the Battle in Otterburn. A defeat for the Sir Galahad line that was not meant for any Ballard, which flared the tensions with the Sir Lancelot line even further.'

Mortimer drew a deep breath, daringly started to reach to touch the thorn sprig, only to resist suddenly and bite his own knuckles. 'My sister.' He pinched his brow. 'Does Elizabeth know?'

'My wife has been spared the burden of such knowledge,' came my curt reply. 'As will my sons, for I intend to return the King's Blade tonight, as a fortuitous omen in the wake of this, the *Tripartite Indenture* with you both.' The sprig returned safely to my chest, and my gaze returned to the stream. 'Peculiar, for of late, the voices I hear foretell that my plough is drawing its last furrow, that this Hotspur will be extinguished on the fields of battle, unceremoniously, but a necessary sacrifice.' Relief came from Edmund, swiftly followed by concern as to my prophecy, his faithful brother-in-law, hardened by so many loyal years serving King Richard, the fragile alliance under the Sir Galahad lineage, now to be undone at such a perilous time – the usurping of the throne by Bolingbroke and his Lords Appellant, the White Dragon by any other name. I placed a comforting palm on his shoulder and managed a tepid smile. 'All has been considered, dear friend. Let the Old Ways take their course.'

Glyndwr rose and cleared his throat. 'I... I struggle to say these words, those you and Edmund speak,' he stuttered, his accent trying to accommodate the English tongue. 'Bolingbroke, Henry IV, under the sway of Sir Lancelot and the Beaufort name? Long coveted the

Crown together with his... his horde. White Dragon Lords. A witch in control? Creatures of... *Tylwyth Teg*. Fairy folk? Stories that soothed my slumber when I was a boy. If what you both speak is true, and I have seen quite the spectacle thus far, what power do we have should *Caledfwich* be lost to us?' He pointed to the bare bark of Excalibur.

'You will have your armies, Prince Owain of the Welsh lands. All land west of the Severn Estuary up to Worcester shall be yours by my father's hand. He, in turn, will guard the north, with the Mortimers custodians of the south.' I carved a crude map of the Isle into the damp earths. 'We will hold for as long as is necessary to ensure that the Knights of the Red Dragon can regroup and re-forged the alliance.'

Mortimer cast an incredulous look. 'How many of the White Dragon Lords will be swayed, Henry? Le Fay's precious Palladium, combined with its lusting locket, set surely to swell Bolingbroke's ambitions in France and further? Success will fatten them, and their offspring, and we will lock horns like rutting bucks once more.' He scuffed the ground with his heel.

'My blood will be spent. My honour restored. If my successors can then call upon the Lady of the Lake once more, Excalibur will be ours to command. It will always come at the direst time of need, that I know to be true—'

‘A direr time than the execution of our fellow knights? You speak of your prophecy of your passing, but may I remind you that the blood of the Montague, Holland, and Despenser families flows freely *now* following the Epiphany Rising – and our spearhead Richard remains sealed at Pontefract Castle, the force of Sir Galahad incarcerated, soon to starve. Our allies, dare I say, scattered and hunted. What time is more pressing than *now*, Sir Bedivere?’ Edmund spat.

‘You will have the Band, Sir Gawain.’ I tried to lighten the mood with a playful tap of the staff between Edmund’s legs. ‘I trust that when you recanted your tales, you informed this Welsh Prince as to the other magic that flows through your veins?’ Mortimer became coy. ‘Your daughter, Catrin, should she see in this good man a suitable match, will give birth to one of the Three Hundred, my dear Prince. The very finest of warriors bathed in the fires of antiquity, sparked into life from the Grecian lands of Thebes!’

‘Tan glas?’ Glyndwr’s eyes widened.

‘Possibly. Blue fire, yes.’ Mortimer confessed. ‘I must caution you, Prince. Our own knowledge of these revered folk is extremely limited. So little about them has been documented by scholars—’

‘Scholars under the thrall of King Edward the Third. I speak true when I say that many an academic from both

Oxford and Cambridge has delved into the writings of King Bladud following the Briton's return from Athens. I have heard that the Wolf Lord was one of the first to attempt to translate the Greek text into Welsh, and let there be no doubt that such ambition would have hooked the attention of Morgan le Fay. Secrets of the unconquerable relics protected could not be shared, and the thought of a rival institute of learning in Stamford to challenge established and tamed thought was hence quickly snuffed,' I cried. 'Glyndwr, you will have an army – and should the child of my brother here be fortunate to find a partner of his own, legend states such a coupling would be unrivalled. Your name would endure, as would the Red Dragon. This man, good sir, was a decent capture.' I gave a wry smile.

Edmund permitted himself a smug smirk of satisfaction, unsure as to whether Glyndwr had understood much of their talk. When the Prince's eyes narrowed once more, the Knight of Sir Gawain offered a modest shrug. 'This language, the *Saesneg* words, they will take some getting used to.'

Chapter 4
Leader of The Sacred Band – Lionel Mortimer-Glyndwr
February 1461

The Red Dragon will rise

I was old. Why would they listen to me? Battle worn and blood soaked, they stood side by side as always. I counted thirty or so. Three without partners. ‘The Witch,’ one cried. ‘She was there. We all saw it.’ He thrust his finger high into the sky. *Parhelion*.

There followed a brief buzz of mutterings among the Band, a blend of English and Welsh tongues. I dared a step towards them, caught my heel on a broken scabbard, retched as the stench of death oozed from the bloated corpse of a soldier. ‘Yes... yes, I saw the mock sun. The Power of Three.’ I paused for breath. ‘Sir Tudor considered it an omen.’

‘Then why did he lead us?’ another Sacred Band warrior cursed, eyes aflame, mud smeared from cheek to cheek. ‘We know of our heritage, Lionel, not just that of the Red Dragon of Tudor, nor the Red Dragon of an age-long past. Did Sir Owen know or consider this irrevocable

truth? The powers forged in the Hellenic lands, a time of Empires and conquests said to be unstoppable and—'

'Unstoppable?' I interjected fiercely. The Band member fell silent. 'Never unstoppable. For only two of the suns, witnesses from the heavens today, can the Enchantress control. It is the third that will bring about her demise. *The King's Blade.*' I futilely kicked the broken scabbard free from the rotting corpse, releasing more putrid smells into the air. 'And it will rise, and with it, the Red Dragon.' I wheezed again. Another Sacred Band member snarled at such frailty, broke free of his partner's hand, and went to thrust a blue fire spear into my gut. Yes, I was old, but my wits were still sharp. My shield held firm; a burst of cobalt sparks sprang between me and the young buck. A brief stalemate ended with an assuaging act from his beloved, his hands warm on both our shoulders. 'My fight is not with you. Never with you,' I reminded them. *Save it for the real enemy William, those bastards of the White Dragon and their Witch,* I heard his partner say. 'And know your enemy. Red and White can co-exist on this Island.' The words slipped from my weathered mind without care or attention.

The Band's expressions became perplexed, the mutterings stirred again. Amid the echoes of my own words, I attempted to clarify. 'You know my family name, *Glyndwr*. A name that burns so hot in these Welsh lands, you'd be forgiven for thinking that a

dragon lay beneath the rocks. My father fought as an equal among the knights of legend, as a simple Welshman with not a drop of magical blood. He defeated one of these very knights at Bryn Glas, nigh on sixty years ago – but this Knight of Sir Gawain was not Glyndwr’s true enemy. A mere fish caught on a hook, writhing in a river’s torrent.’ The trembling in my limbs became visible. ‘This was a true knight of lore, of Britain. This whole Island and all its folk. He had served the more noble King Richard, a man cast in the shadow of the infamous Edward of Woodstock, the *Black Prince*, unprepared for a bloodline as burdensome as that of Sir Galahad, our true Kings. A precious and naïve mind so easily corruptible by dark magic, something my father and his kin knew all too well.’ I paused, knelt and touched the soil. ‘For my father, let us bless this site as *Mortimer’s Cross*.’ A handful of Sacred Band members indulged me with a lowering of their heads.

‘A ghostly name in Glyndwr,’ shouted a faceless Band member. I stood to attention.

‘Where is the true Prince of Wales?’ bellowed another from behind. I spun around, sensing a circle of short-tempered and exasperated blue spears soon to be closing in.

‘He is gone, just as my mother Catrin is gone from this world. Just as the favoured Knights of Sir Kay, Sir Bors, and Sir Gaheris all fell when opposing Morgan le Fay and

her puppet King Henry Bolingbroke come the Epiphany of the corruption. I fended off my audience from all sides. 'I, Lionel Glyndwr, am all that remains. Yes, I am old; I have no partner of my own. But I have my parents' blood, and I will see that their quests are fulfilled. A harmony of Dragons once more, forged together as the Order of the Garter intended.'

The mud-caked Band member drew close once more. 'What of the third Sun, Lionel Glyndwr? How do we summon such strength to counter that of the statue and its vengeful sister, the necklace? I care not for the true Prince of Wales; I care only for the bloodline of *Hotspur*, Knight of Sir Bedivere, our saviour!' The partners all caught Sir Henry's name. The chants of *Hotspur*, *Hotspur*, rumbled louder. Fiery fists punched above heads, and a shimmering blue cloak enveloped them. I nearly folded. The final conversation held with Sir Owen Tudor and his wife, the good Lady Catherine of Valois, could have easily spilt from my lips. The hands of the elusive Knight of Sir Bedivere lain bare through the Hotspur family line, failure upon failure since Henry's fall from grace at Shrewsbury. The Lady of the Lake turning her back and refusing aid to son after son at battles such as Saint Albans or Towton. There would be no further victory for the White Dragon banner, that much the Houses of Tudor and Valois had decided. Their marriage had secured the safety of Sir Galahad's staff, smuggled secretly by the knight himself, a starved King Richard II, to Catherine's sister, Isabella. It would be

safeguarded through the rein of Bolingbrook's son, Henry V, even during his attempt at a renewed peace and union during the Treaty of Troyes. But more so, that of a saviour, Excalibur itself. A whisper would come to Owen's ears, a Sage said to be of the reverent time of Rhodri the Great. This Sage would call himself 'Du', the Welsh for Black, which many an Englishman I'd hear mispronounce as 'Dee', *Bedo Ddu of Nant-y-groes* was however Sage's full name in true Welsh tongue. He would advise words of patience, of planning and plotting, alliances by stealth. The third Sun will rise when the lands of Britain require it the most. Although you may pray for men, for warriors, even the trifle of a horse in exchange for your self-entitled kingdom, the King's Blade will decide your fate. But not yet. Owen made me swear, even though this very battle cost him his life. The children of Hotspur are not ready, their minds not still, only filled with agony and revenge – the very worst of mankind's emotions, from which no commoner or Knight is immune. Even now, basking in victory, the White Dragon knights hiss ill of each other, their allegiance to le Fay untenable. The Knights of Sir Gareth and Sir Geraint were in no hurry to forgive King Henry V for the ignominious execution of their forebears in Southampton right before the Battle of Agincourt half a century ago – this second puppet King proving for bold in his daring to question the Witch's motives and undermining the peace with France. Nor would they easily forget his Chancellor and aide, Henry Beaufort blessed Knight of Sir Lancelot when he

exposed the bitter truth behind le Fay's frantic extinguishing of the Lady Joan of Arc for the impudence of suggesting the *true* Saint Catherine herself spoke to her. The very notion that a commoner had heard such a visionary voice from the Sorceress's revered Hypatia, mistress of Mother Nature, made this Maid of Orleans a potential rival, brave enough to challenge the snake's greedy grip over mankind and fevered desperation for the Old Ways. Such rivalry could not be allowed to endure, Morgan le Fay made certain.

Just as the Cabal of Lady Catherine Valois, Lady Anne of Burgundy, Count Armagnac the scribe, and Lemaitre the Executioner were to be bound and sworn to secrecy by Beaufort as the pyre was lit, the wheels of rebellion set in motion, the Sacred Band itself now must remain ignorant. Let the eyes of envy continue among our foes. As the Sir Lancelot line proves to be an unreliable ally for the Sorceress, her attention will no doubt begin to sway to an alternative sycophant. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the King's own brother perhaps? The Sir Lamorak blood craving more attention than power. Maybe the ever-resourceful Richard, Earl of Warwick, Knight of Sir Palamedes, claiming the title of 'Kingmaker' with all his loyal followers, preciously cradled. A battle of the Richards forthcoming, their shared besottedness with the White Queen saviour Elizabeth Woodville, an unexpected and tangled web for le Fay. Most certainly, the House of York has proven more malleable than her fickle Beauforts and Bolingbrokes, and the tease of the

Necklace of Harmonia, adorned by Woodville herself, many say, may just keep the dogs of war tethered, for now.

I bit my lip, drawing a faint trickle of blood, to block out the raucous chanting, slowly shifting into bellows of 'Gaveston! Gaveston!'. I clenched my eyes shut, hid the blue embers ablaze under the lids – Piers Gaveston acclaimed as a Sacred Band leader of legend to rival even the fallen of Chaeronea in a brazen attempt to unite Red and White through the rise of Kings, so cruelly dismantled by a She Wolf in Lamb's clothing. The justice that Edward the Third and his son tried to forge would come to pass, no trick of Sun or conjuring or monstrous green apparitions to deflect and deter. A crow gave a high-pitched squawk, pecking mercilessly at two fallen Sacred Band members, their arms interlocked. I shooed it away, and turned both bodies on their backs, revealing an assortment of wounds and broken teeth. 'The names of these men?' I asked.

'Err, that one went by the name of Perkin, Perkin Warbeck. The other is Simnel. Lambert, I believe,' the placating Band member re-emerged, his partner still frosty in my presence. I turned forlorn despondency into a cunning demeanour.

'We shall remember them both,' I announced, closing both pairs of eyes. 'A name can truly be eternal, in the

right hands. Excalibur will find the right hands, I promise you.'

Chapter 5
Sir Palamedes – Anne Neville
May 1471

I am the Kingmaker

I am what my father made me. I am the Kingmaker. Such a title is not without its burdens, he would caution, and while often confined to the shadows, there may come a time when the mask of intrigue will need to slip. He would pace in tight circles, staff grating against the floorboards, impulsively swung high when his temper boiled. ‘Twenty years. The Witch has held the blade of Sir Palamedes in servitude for twenty years,’ he’d boom. ‘Dear Anne, I have served. We have served. This noble House of Neville, from Saint Albans to Towton, has carried the Warwick banner into every affray. *Albus Draco, Albus Draco*, we have chanted, even when instructed to only whisper. Such is our resolve, our fortitude, and loyalty to the White of York.’

I’d perch at the foot of my bed, swing my legs idly, and tug at the loose threads from my sleeve. I was to be wed. My sister Isabella had already teased it, the bloodlines of Sir Palamedes and Sir Lamorak bound to the crown. We were both under the whip hand of Morgan le Fay, our names more malleable, more predictable than those of Sir Lancelot. We never spoke of peace or compromise, of treaties or placations. We

would forge empires beyond England, France, and Iberia. We would bring forth the Old Ways once more, and stand in fields soaked with the blood of both friend and foe in doing so. Father knelt before me, staff trembling in his hands, not offered but promised. 'You will marry without love, my dearest Anne. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, has eyes for only one, his niece Elizabeth of York – and what the Duke seeks, he is near certain to acquire either by his hand, or that of the Sorceress.' He had tried to spare me and cut me from this insidious loop of power and fortune that had become the doctrine of the White Dragon over so many years. He had put forth the presumption of witchcraft upon the once ally King Edward and his spouse Lady Woodville, the Queen herself serving as forbidden fruit for our family. Father lusted after her even more than the King himself. Cruelled denied by le Fay's plans, he was bitter ever since.

The allegiance from purest White Rose to rebellious Red was the sorceress's punishment, but on the eve of the great treachery that was to be Tewkesbury, my father conceived this plan of his own. Perhaps he knew he was riding to his end that fateful spring of 1471, all allies of the Red Dragon still scattered and awaiting the command of the long-muted Sir Galahad line, suppressed to silence since Richard the Second and the legend of his brother, the Black Knight. The Sacred Band had been subdued since Mortimer's Cross and the fall of Owen Tudor, with only the House of Valois left to carry hope.

‘Should you hear of my death, dearest Anne, then know the sword of Sir Palamedes shall move to you. Seek a true unifying force, as the Order of the Garter first intended, bring about an end to this fracture, this tale of two dragons, and nurture the rise of a single rose.’ He made me promise.

To see the banner of the Red Dragon fly defiantly above Pembroke Castle, to hear *Y Ddraig Goch* chanted merrily throughout the streets upon my approach, should have filled my heart with that very hope. I carried my head low and beneath my black veil, ordered my chaperone to halt his horse before the castle gate, and to allow me to continue alone. A simple serf appeared atop the gatehouse, the weak light of a lantern revealing ruddy pox scars. I waited silently on horseback, offered a glimpse of my face, and the serf broke an uneasy smile.

‘Did not the Angel fail you?’ he spoke in his coarse tongue. I narrowed my eyes, causing him to grimace. ‘I said, *Did not the Angel fail you?*’ he repeated boldly.

‘Spoke Catherine to the Maid,’ I replied confidently. The serf let out an awkward chuckle.

‘A virgin, is she?’ he teased.

‘Both John and Anne do agree.’

‘But Lamer... Lameter...er.’

'Lemaitre,' I assisted.

'Lemaitre, yes, Lemaitre, and—'

'Knight can be swayed.' My conclusion sent the serf near giddy with excitement. He fled, heavy footsteps echoing down through the gatehouse. The portcullis groaned as it was raised. A tall, regal figure approached, took my horse's reins with dexterity, and ushered me inside. *'Sir, I am to meet with Henry Tudor. His instructions were—'*

'Were my instructions, my lady,' the figure interjected. *'And you have but until sundown tonight to make good your plans with my nephew. Then we both sail for France. I care not about the outcome.'* He tethered my horse firmly and pointed to the single lit window high up in the bailey. *'Henry waits for you there. Until sundown, my lady, I mean it.'*

The door was ajar. The young Tudor was sitting patiently on the stool by the window, and stood to attention the moment the door creaked. *'Lady Neville. I wasn't sure you would come all this way, so soon after the events at Barnet. Your father, I mourned for him.'* He went to embrace me. My body remained stiff, my staff separating us. *'The line of Sir Palamedes and its followers falls to you now. It is as he wished, yes?'*

‘Not how I wished,’ came my tart reply. ‘My hand is now forced, Henry. I am to marry Richard of Gloucester.’

‘And with it, become Queen of England.’ Henry drew back, settling once more on the stool. ‘A true Kingmaker, like your father.’

‘A Queen has no power in these lands,’ I sighed. ‘Perhaps Morgan le Fay truly does have a duty.’

‘Clearly not for all women. Need I remind you of the riddle you so exquisitely fulfilled?’ Henry smiled. ‘The very bloodline of Sir Lancelot, the sworn defender of the White Dragon, reduced to the calculated murder of a young maid who dared forge a destiny independent of any relic or aged power. Brazen enough to channel Saint Catherine herself, yet clearly a mortal being. Tell me, how strong do you believe the Sorceress to be?’

‘Strong enough to keep that Cabal of ours a secret. Knights of Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad reduced to mutters of disapproval behind Morgan le Fay’s back, but no closer to owning the throne once more.’ I snapped. ‘We are all just pawns in her game, Henry. Her acolytes are outmanoeuvring any attempt at harmony from the Round Table. There are too many calculated whispers of ill fortune and discontent among the masses, too many smears and bloodthirsty call to arms. Over a hundred years of war with France, nearly matched by our own War of Roses, a war of Dragons!’

Henry took to his feet once more, turned his back to me, and pensively sought the dying light of the sun from the window. 'My grandfather would speak of the Palladium and its sanctuary, the seed of the realm and its everlasting protection. But it would never willingly grant power, he would say, for that came from its sister, the Necklace of Harmonia, the bringer of lust and desire, greed, and corruption. In his eyes, that was the real power, the power to drive men mad.' He ran his finger along the windowpane, winced as a cracked shard drew a pinprick of blood. 'Mad enough to kill their own.' He popped the wound into his mouth.

'You speak of more insurrection within the White Dragon? Beyond that of my father and his House? Why?' I quizzed.

'There are rumours that Queen Elizabeth Woodville's children are not of legitimate birth. These rumours will spread, thanks to the loyal death of your father and his courtiers upon the fields at Barnet and Tewkesbury. Le Fay will think that their defeat all but extinguishes any final claim to the crown by the Sir Lancelot or Sir Galahad lines, and that the silencing of Sir Palamedes will leave all but the sycophants of Sir Lamorak as Edward's progeny. But for all her skills, she cannot sway the mob.' He beckoned me over, pointed down to the same serf who had choked out the partial riddle at the gate, now tightening a long bow and entertaining soldiers with more tall tales delivered through

expressive movements. 'Never underestimate the strength of a legend when in the hands of the most ordinary. Joan of Arc has proven that much.'

'Illegitimate or not, the eldest has the birthright. He will become King Edward, the fifth of his name. My marriage to Richard will not prevent this, Henry.' I monitored the sun sinking lower, Uncle Jasper ever watchful from the courtroom. 'Unless you and your family are thinking of executing him based on rumours alone?'

Tudor's eyes were fixed on his feet. 'So much blood from our celebrated Round Table has been spilt. No, Lady Neville, no more. Obstacles must be removed, but this does not require needless sacrifice. Do you think that the warriors of the Sacred Band have been timid all this time, that the rallying cry of the Glyndwr name has been lost in these Welsh lands? They too can scheme as well as the Witch, and yet honour our pledge to unite Red and White. Should King Edward's children, however many, simply be stowed away, assumed murdered, with corpses and names to prove the claim, then those rumbles within the mob become a cacophony, a beast that only the Lancastrians can tame.' He parted his tunic down to his vest, the weathered stave of Sir Galahad tightly pressed against his chest. 'I, my good Knight of Sir Palamedes, will ensure that the House of Tudor is ready, that the blood of Sir Bedivere and the restored House of Percy are by my side together with the King's

Blade, and that the poisonous cycle of the Palladium and Necklace will be undone for the final time.'

I maintained my stoic composure, hiding my admiration for both the House of Valois and Beaufort for clandestinely shielding their alliance from any scrutiny. This was a game long in duration and cunning, waiting for the stars to truly align, ignoring skirmishes that would swing from one side to the other, but patiently awaiting the tempering of the fire and the signals in the smoke. The true Kingmaker, I knew, would be determined by the accursed House of Percy, the once lauded Hotspur, ostensibly loyal to the York cause but answering only to the Lady of the Lake. If this rift were amended, and Excalibur once more in Sir Bedivere's hand, the young Tudor need only remind him of the vision that was the wholesome Round Table, all Twelve Knights sworn to protect and serve not just King Arthur, but all of Britain. The Wars of the Roses would end, and a new era of peace would be sworn, and the would-be serpent queen vanquished. '*Honi soit qui mal y pense,*' I uttered out loud.

Henry's attention was caught by Uncle Jasper's bellow, the Sun shrinking into a crimson horizon. I took the rich red evening sky flooding over the Welsh heartland as an omen. 'Do I have your valour, Lady Neville, Knight of Sir Palamedes?' He acknowledged his uncle's urgency with a brief wave.

I twisted the silver signet ring around my finger and contemplated how many times my fellow Knights of the White Dragon may have done so over the many centuries when poised on the edge of choosing between greatness and reason. I responded only with a sharp nod as Tudor made his leave. 'You'll need more,' I said rashly. Henry paused with a perplexed look. 'More than stolen Princes and whispers of malcontent. You will need a... sacrifice.' I chose my words carefully.

Henry moved closer, concern spreading over his face with every step. 'What do you mean, Anne?'

'When all is done, look to the skies come the Ides of March. I am informed by some of the most respected astronomers of these wildlands that there is to be an eclipse of sorts forthcoming. A transit of heavenly bodies, much discussed, but its meanings unclear. This will be the sign for the House of Tudor, and with it, my farewell. You can but hope that all your plans come to pass by then.'

'You would do this? Take your own life for the King of England?' Henry understood.

'For Britain. As our first King would have wished. Excalibur expects no less.' I smiled.

Epilogue
The Sorceress – Morgan le Fay
August 1485

A fragile alliance

It is a feeling most unpleasant, one that bores deep into my heart. Every time. My knees buckled at the sensation, my nails clawed at the churned soil. I screamed just as before. The Palladium went cold in my hands; what was once light as a leaf became leaden. A weight rooted both my wrists to the ground, while my neck burned from the clasp of its counterpart. My relief, you ask? It was brief. A mere moment, for as soon as Excalibur's light had flared across the skies of Bosworth, high above the flanks of Sir Percy, the ill sensation vanished as quickly as it had come. My sister had made her amends with Sir Bedivere, this Earl of Northumberland somehow managing a forgiveness eighty years in its making. The Hotspur name made it indelible, yet to me, this was the act of a coward. At Shrewsbury, the Knight of Sir Bedivere made an honourable stand against my nominee for the crown – a nominee without an Arthurian blade, only supported by one. I know how much those of the Red Dragon would have cherished the thought of crossing swords with my fellow Knights of the White, the purest of conflicts. I could not risk such a candid hand, though, not since

their sickening union. King Richard the Second willingly sought to rule as Knight of Sir Galahad, Son of the Black Prince himself, living through his father's heroics. This boy was no king, not of England or France, let alone our beloved Britain. Could the fealty of John of Gaunt, my Sir Lancelot, be swayed? Of course not, for even I could see that the bond between Knights was too strong under King Edward the Third. My apparitions and hexes couldn't break their alliance. My Green Knight lay slain for the whole Round Table to see. For the first time, the Knights challenged the powers of the Old Ways – even Merlin would have trembled.

They are not the only ones capable of conspiring. If my magic was not enough to nullify this uprising, or the promise of building unrivalled empires in the name of the Old Ways not satisfying – then I need only look to a more simple temptation. Choose a quieter name of noble Knight blood; create my own *Kingmaker*, out of sight. The Beaufort Family became my poison, playing the role so exquisitely, from guiding King Henry IV and his son Henry V to further their crusades in France, to silencing the heretic in the Maid of Orleans for daring to interpret the aphorisms of Hypatia. These mortals are full of tricks that I have come to learn. I must, however, be cautious, for it is true that mankind has a way of galvanising itself against its true gods and goddesses. It can lose faith in a scramble for control. A child such as Joan of Arc is a potent reminder of how easily their attention can sway to a different calling, and how fear is

so often the only weapon I wield. As potent as this can be, it can be challenged, manipulated by plans of peace and accord, all sworn in to secrecy in the shadows. Cabals between my enemies and my allies; on this occasion, I didn't read the signs. This Order of the Garter is sworn deeper than ever envisaged, even over the century of war it has endured. Now, come this crisp summer's day of 1485, I am the one left scalded.

When knights are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, falling upon their blades as Anne Neville, Knight of Sir Palamedes, has done as a means to thwart my plans for their own brethren in the Sir Lamorak Line and the brother born the Duke of York, I enter into a time of extremes. Perhaps this land they call England, its devilish new tongues and conjoined Red and White Roses in the name of Tudor, is too hardened against my will... for now. I can ignite a challenge of my own to the new King Henry the Seventh, blood of Sir Galahad and his *Y Ddraig Goch* banner, and attempt to shred this veil of protection thread by thread. The Warriors of the Sacred band remain forever indebted and loyal to this cause, but I have found a rare oversight in their strategy. The stolen Princes in the Tower take the names of two brothers in arms, and they think these names lost to time. I will seek out Perkin Warbeck and Lambert Simnel, inform them of their true heritage as sons to King Edward IV and his Queen Lady Woodville, and their rightful claims to the throne as the blood of Sir Lamorak. It may fail after such a sharp rebuke, but serve

as a reminder to this wholesome Round Table that my time is far from done across this Isle.

I mock the newfound faiths of these lands, the martyrs and their New Gods. That is not to say they do not have a purpose. The Maid of Orleans still spoke of the revised Christian naming of *Saint Catherine*, not of Hypatia, thus my ways have not been forgotten, just misinterpreted and twisted by the masses. This will become my play, as these Christian followers will witness their own factions, just as my Knights have done. The tease and inevitability of 'divide and conquer'. Let them war among themselves, spar between Catholic and Protestant, let the lust for the Necklace of Harmonia sweep across the continent and the mighty Tudor dynasty. Marriage after marriage, mistress after mistress, adultery and greed – all this comes with the heaviness of the crown. I will be waiting, with the Palladium poised for the throne that proves most advantageous, my Knights subdued once more. France, you say? No. Too much time has been wasted on this Hundred Years' War and its canonised maidens. Iberia? The Spanish Kingdom and its already spreading territorial expanse? Now that is alluring. For as much as I too crave the British lands to become the jewel in my crown, I am always willing to choose a different path. Let it never be said that I am averse to change, for my spirit is as impressionable as Nimue's and as fickle as any of the Twelve Knights, the difference lies only in our resolve. Let the serfs and the common folk write their tales of this Battle of Bosworth Field,

twist Sir Lamorak into a beast, and tar the White Dragon name. Tales can be retold and readdressed over time, and time is my greatest gift.

**The Sacred Band
CABAL
The end**

Afterward

King Edward III is introduced as scion of the Sir Galahad Line, with a hatred of Morgan le Fay and her schemes, having seen his father, Edward II, overthrown by his mother Isabella – the ‘She Wolf’ of France – and stepfather Roger Mortimer. Edward II is believed to have taken a male lover in the form of Piers Gaveston, and for this historical fiction, a member of the Sacred Band sworn to protect both King and Throne. His death, hinted to be le Fay’s doing, led to Isabella’s estrangement and Mortimer’s execution. A bold move has the new King forge an alliance with the blood of his rival and enemy, Sir Lancelot, Morgan’s own favourite – the line held by French noblewoman Philippa of Hainault, born to the influential House of Valois. The marriage of the pair effectively brought the Red and White Dragon factions together, the union cemented with the formation of the Order of the Garter in 1348 under the King’s orders. Its motto, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, which translates to *Shame on him who thinks evil of it*, is the closing line of the oldest surviving manuscript recounting the tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this tale, however, the Green Knight is a fearsome apparition sent by Morgan le Fay into the Order itself, slain by Sir Gawain, the Earl of March and of the Mortimer House.

Even with Morgan le Fay silenced for a period, the war with France was afoot, and England's sovereignty constantly challenged. The Hundred Years' War began under Edward III, championed by successes in Crecy and Poitiers through Sir Galahad heir Edward of Woodstock, known now as The Black Prince. His untimely death paved an opportunity for the Sorceress, favouring Philippa's gifted Sir Lancelot bloodline through John of Gaunt and his many children over Edward's son, Henry II. Swaying the traditionally loyal Sir Lancelot line and its subjects within the White Dragon, the Lords Appellant uprising of 1388 was the first sortie to remove Sir Galahad's claim to power, though the Sorceress was forever cunning, choosing not Gaunt himself, but his more malleable son, Henry Beaufort – younger brother to pretender Henry Bolingbroke, Henry IV – and by now, an influential Bishop of the Catholic Church and statesman. He would keep watch over the tenure of Henry IV, perceived to be doing the bidding of Morgan le Fay even when his son Henry V attempted to sue for peace with France through his Treaty of Troyes. This was a final stab at unity from a puppet King, swiftly and unceremoniously undone through the rise of said Maid of Orleans and the reigniting of the Hundred Years' War. Henry Beaufort was dispatched to France in 1431 following Joan of Arc's capture at English hands, with Morgan le Fay fearful that her resolute stance and imitations of Saint Catherine and Hypatia would pose an immediate challenge. Upon realising that the Maid of Orleans was commoner, born of no magical blood, yet

summoned the will of men in a manner befitting of his own mistress of old, Beaufort's blade switched allegiance, and a Cabal was formed with the faithful, including Philippa Hainaut's prime House of Valois – Catherine, former Queen to Henry V. His prompt marriage of Catherine to Owen Tudor in 1428 offered a platform for Sir Galahad's name to be restored, avenging Richard II's death. Catherine's sister, Isabella, was Richard II's Queen, and custodian of the supposedly dormant blade of Sir Galahad.

All I'm sure will know the Tudor name, but the path to glory was far from smooth for this now legendary House. Owen, and his son Jasper Tudor, aligned themselves with the Lancastrian House, and while the reigning Henry VI had rightly assumed command of the English throne, Morgan le Fay had grown ever more cautious of the fickle Sir Lancelot and Beaufort's influence, even after his death in 1447 and the bequeathing of the Sir Lancelot blade to his cousin John, Duke of Somerset. This newly dubbed Duke proved reckless during the tail end of the Hundred Years' War, losing ground to France and dying without a male issue, leaving only one daughter, Margaret, Lady Beaufort and future mother to Henry Tudor, King Henry VII. The Sorceress backed the obsequious line of Sir Lamorak, blood of the first Duke of York, and early member of the Order of the Garter. This manoeuvre was supported by fellow White Dragon Knight, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, bearer of the epithet 'Kingmaker' thanks to his

loyal following, the Followers of Palamedes, if you will. Such a winning combination, combined with le Fay's ongoing control of the Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia, saw the House of York achieve stunning victories at Mortimer's Cross and Towton in 1461.

The Sacred Band drew its inspiration not only from loyalty to the Sir Galahad line and the passing of Richard II at Pontefract Castle, but also from the child of Welsh Rebellion leader Owain Glyndwr. Henry IV battled tirelessly against this infamous King of Wales, follower of the Arthurian Code, even though not a direct descendant of any Round Table knight, but fortuitously connected when Edmund Mortimer of the Sir Gawain line was captured at the Battle of Bryn Glas in 1402. Glyndwr offered the hand of his daughter, Catrin, in marriage to Edmund, and as Sacred Band folklore dictates, a Lion of Leuctra was born – this being Lionel Glyndwr, future leader of the Sacred Band who brought unity to the army with a rousing speech after the defeat at Mortimer's Cross (so named after his father's line). It is here where the plan to turn the public tide against Edward IV and Sir Lamorak begins, as a plot to stow away his heirs – Edward V and his younger brother, known as the 'Princes in the Tower' – comes to pass in exchange for the names of two fallen Sacred Band fighters, Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck.

This acrimony against Sir Lamorak and Morgan le Fay's ruthless ambitions grows stronger still, as Edward IV's

chosen Queen is Elizabeth Woodville, a favourite of Richard Neville. Upon realising that le Fay's own Necklace of Harmonia may have been the cause of this amorous persuasion, the Earl of Warwick begins his defection, partly spurred by the deaths of fellow White Dragon knights Sir Gareth and Sir Geraint as part of Henry V's purge of dissenters at the Southampton Plot hangings of 1415. While riding to his death against Lamorak and le Fay at the Battle of Barnet in 1471, he instructs his daughter, Anne, to marry the future King Richard III, the only successor in the line of Sir Lamorak and Edward following the Princes' abduction. While Henry Tudor and Uncle Jasper prepare to flee England and re-join the muted House of Valois – claiming the Sir Galahad blade while simultaneously partnering with the ousted House of Beaufort and the Sir Lancelot line – Anne forges a pact with the young Henry Tudor, agreeing to marriage with the Duke of York, while again sowing the seeds of doubt in the minds of the mob, galvanised by her feigned suicide in 1485. King Richard III is therefore forced to challenge the Tudors once more upon the Fields of Bosworth. Again, it is the ordinary folk who turn the tide of battle, despite Morgan le Fay's prowess.

That is not to say that the Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia would have been easily conquered by serfdom alone. The Knights of Sir Bedivere had their role, and an early mention in the story comes from the Percy family – notably Henry Hotspur, whose name lives

on in the Tottenham Hotspur football team at White Hart Lane. Hotspur claims the right to Excalibur, making good use of the King's Blade against both Scots and French and attempting to gain favour with the Order of the Garter given le Fay's own attempts to keep this strong Knight of the King's Blade out. Being captured at the Battle of Otterburn in 1388 and forced to pay a ransom for his release did not assist his cause. However, he hid a darker truth, being the only Knight of Sir Bedivere not to relinquish Excalibur after its summoning, set to end the influence of the Palladium and Necklace of Harmonia once and for all over the reigns of both Edward III and Richard II. However, the failed Epiphany Rising of 1400 by Red Dragon knights Sir Kay, Sir Bors, and Sir Gaheris in defence of Richard II, together with Sir Gawain's imprisonment by Owain Glyndwr, led the noble but troubled knight to cling to the ultimate bringer of death and rebirth. For this, the Percy line was punished, with Hotspur the first to incur the wrath of the Lady of the Lake at the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403, the stand of the *Tripartite Indenture* with Glyndwr and Sir Gawain's brother-in-law Edmund Mortimer. Legend says that Hotspur 'misplaced' his favourite sword upon the eve of the battle, and claimed that a 'Wizard' prophesied his fall. The Percy House became loyal supporters of the York line in the decades that followed but failed to commit any troops to the Battle of Bosworth when Richard III needed them most – a nod to the return of faith from Nimue and Sir Bedivere's penance through Hotspur's

great-grandson, Henry Percy, Fourth Earl of Northumberland.

Come the finale of these Wars of the Roses, Henry Tudor, firm holder of the Sir Galahad blade, and supported by his mother Lady Margaret Beaufort of the Sir Lancelot line, restores the Round Table leadership once more, thus forging the Tudor Rose of Red and White. Of course, Morgan le Fay is not so easily deterred, and while committing to skirmishes against King Henry VII through the rightful Sir Lamorak bloodlines of the stolen Princes – Warbeck and Simnel both pretenders to the throne – she brings forth the might of Spain and the Iberian Empire, events that unfold in *The Sacred Band: Armada*. The House of Tudor, for all its perceived unity, has its flaws, with it deliberately left ambiguous whether Henry VIII is a noble Knight of Sir Galahad or not, his lascivious nature perhaps proving too unstable for the Red Dragon knights. They therefore sourced more reliable figures in the lineage of Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh for Galahad and Gawain, respectively, possibly uncovered by the clairvoyance of Sir Bedivere’s John Dee, already closely woven into the Tudor House through connections to *Bedo Ddu of Nant-y-groes*, rumoured to be a direct descendant of Rhodri the Great. What perhaps proves a cleaner link is Morgan le Fay’s journey, as despite having seen her cherished Sir Lancelot line turn its back – not for the last time – the first child of Henry VII, young Arthur, Prince of Wales,

was set to wed into the Spanish Court under King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella, the bloodthirsty instigators of the Spanish Inquisition. Arthur died before any union of the crowns could take place, but their daughter, Catherine of Aragon, made her way into the English Royal Family shortly afterwards. Be safe in the knowledge that our antagonist never relinquished her ambition to be worshipped as the one true Goddess of the Old Ways, and that Britain was to be her seat.

As for the Sacred Band itself, the One Hundred and Fifty pairs of male lovers would commit to their duty as they had done since the founding of Thebes – wherever the Palladium was, they would not stray far. Those woven in as warriors serving the enigmatic Owain Glyndwr, the *Y Ddraig Goch*, would, just as Glyndwr's line itself, rise at the time of the greatest need – as King Arthur intended. Whether they return speaking the Welsh or the English tongue, I will leave to the reader!