

Summer- 1865

Judah Benjamin's heart was deeply troubled.

Two ships carrying him had mysteriously exploded since he left Florida and traveled to Havana and then Nassau. Benjamin suspected Beyer's agents were responsible, but that, for now, was just supposition.

Now he stood alone at the stern of yet another passenger vessel, staring at the cold and gray Atlantic waters. He was now close to the land that would soon be his new home, but he was still thinking of his home of old.

The Confederacy had collapsed. The South was occupied. Its armies were defeated.

There would be no continued struggle in the West. No new base of operations. No hope for a miraculous resurrection of fortune. The war was lost. Completely lost. The Aurelian contingency had died in its cradle.

The Cause which had once been spoken of with zeal—independence, state sovereignty, honor—had melted in the crucible of war.

Benjamin grieved thinking of what he had passed as he journeyed towards Florida during his epic escape. Twisted railroad lines. Burned bridges. Broken fences. Blackened chimney stacks where human habitation had once stood. Starving widows. Orphaned children.

And he knew all too well that victors write the history books. Andersonville would go down as one of history's great war crimes, a truly abominable and grotesque perversion resulting from a starving nation prioritizing its own people above the well-being of those who sought its destruction and subjugation. Camp Douglas and emaciated Confederate soldiers, meanwhile, would be forgotten. Their fate was merely the result of the cruel fortunes of war, notwithstanding the reality that the dreadful place was located near fertile farmlands unmolested by conflict.

Benjamin feared his friends would be hanged, while war criminals like William Sherman would be upheld, even exalted. No one would talk of the factory women stolen from their homes in Roswell, Georgia, and trafficked to the North, never to return. No one would remember Rebel prisoners being forced to walk ahead of Federal soldiers in areas containing suspected landmines. Songs would be written celebrating Sherman's infamous march through Georgia and his wholesale destruction of private property belonging to civilians. Statutes would be erected throughout the North in his honor.

Awaiting Benjamin in Liverpool was Aurelian, a treasure worth no less than \$1,200,000—secured from his dying nation at its twilight. He had ensured it would not fall into the hands of those who meant the South harm, or would have done so despite their fervent beliefs to the contrary. But now he wondered to what end.

At the moment, he had no answers. He only had this journey—to Liverpool, then London, and eventually to Paris, perhaps.

Paris. The home of his wife and daughter.

It was this thought that was truly responsible for his present melancholy. It was on this boat that, for the first time in so long, he was finally able to sit still. To collect his thoughts. To assess his personal losses. To think of himself and not the two nations he had been called to serve.

He had married Natalie Bauché de St. Martin, a Catholic woman from New Orleans of French Creole descent, when he was just 22 and she was a mere teenager. They had one daughter together. Their relationship had been one of quiet estrangement. And it was a void in his heart—a missing piece of his soul.

He knew the rumors—that he was a sodomite, that he shared his bed with Natalie's brother and loved him more deeply than he could ever love her. Such matters, of course, were no business of any other man. What happened in his bedchamber was his own concern alone. Yet this, too, became a weapon for his enemies. It was ever the way of lesser men: unable to rival greatness, they sought instead to drag it down, tearing apart what they could never hope to build, soothing their own inadequacy in the wreckage.

Benjamin reflected that he had always possessed a high tolerance for being the subject of scandal and intrigue. After all, controversy had been the price of his very existence. His own cousin, David Levy Yulee, had secured the honor of being the first Jew elected to the United States Senate, but only after renouncing the name *Levy* and converting to Christianity to make himself acceptable to a Florida electorate and polite Southern—indeed, American—society. Judah had chosen another path. He would not deny who he was, nor alter his faith to curry favor. It cost him dearly, marking him as a man of suspicion in both the North and the South. But he bore it with equanimity, preferring integrity to convenience. He would not deny his identity.

But, be that as it may, he had been denied much. He thought about the wages of his life, the significant costs of being a statesman. One of a man's most fundamental reasons to exist is to raise a family. For all his outstanding accomplishments, being a great family man would not be a line added to Benjamin's resume. He had provided financial support for his wife and daughter. But little else.

Benjamin took stock of his life. He knew he had accomplished so many great things. And yet, in the final calculus, had he accomplished anything of true and lasting value? What was his legacy?

He thought about whether he should call upon his family when he arrived in Europe. Should they join him in his remarkable renaissance, his second act?

These were questions he could answer at his journey's end. For now, he was left alone with his thoughts. And the ocean ahead.