

The Gil-Gamesh turned on his heel, back toward his tent, before he whipped around for one last point. “And Edan, when you return from Cornish with the *Flying Fancy*, I expect the Pirate King, not the apologetic, young sailor I see before me!”

Bryan turned again and entered his tent without another word to Edan. He knew he was harsh with his young Captain, but that was what he needed, especially now.

The Gil-Gamesh spent the next few minutes catching his breath while he gathered the things he needed to contact Strongürd Keep—a water basin and a mirror. It was something he learned from his former mentor, the wizard Archibald Bowbridge, who had died at the hands of Morgana le Fay.

He submerged the mirror inside the basin and set it on the floor. “*Loquere Strongürd!*” he beckoned, as he passed his hand over the basin three times, repeating the incantation until the basin began to glow with a blue light.

The Gil-Gamesh stepped back as the light erupted into a column of shimmering blue. Within seconds, the light changed into the image of an old man in regal robes. His head was adorned with a gold bald cap. A long, thin white beard hung down from his chin to his knees. His face was careworn from more than 1,000 years of service to Avalon. It was Chancellor Ian Talbot, Minister of Magic for Strongürd Keep.

“Ah, Lord MoonDrake, it is good to see you,” the wizard proclaimed with a short bow. “What can I do for the Gil-Gamesh of Avalon?”

Bryan was always appreciative of Chancellor Talbot’s grace and courtesy. He was once Chancellor to Queen Cadhla but, as his age started to slow him down, he stepped down to return to his home at Strongürd Keep until the end of his days.

“I need to speak with Grand Master Baptiste, Chancellor Talbot,” Bryan said. “I realise this is not a good time for you, but it is vital that I speak with him.”

“Of course, Gil-Gamesh, give me a moment to retrieve him,” Talbot said, as he stepped out from view. When until Grand Master Jean-Paul Baptiste appeared, he was dressed quite differently since the last time Bryan has seen him. His robes were befitting his new position, made of flowing Elven silks of dark blue with black and red embroidered with gold ornaments and gems. His long red hair was braided with gold ornaments to hold his hair neatly in place. A simple crown of gold adorned his tiny head.

Bryan bowed in respect to the new Grand Master of the Wizard’s Council. “Jean-Paul, I would offer you congratulations on your ascendance to Grand Master, but I know this is not how you wanted it to be.”

“Actually, Gil-Gamesh, it happened exactly as I was told,” he replied. Bryan was taken aback. “Yes, Hugo came to me a few days ago and handed me an envelope with his seal. He told me not to open it until after he died. It was his last will and testament, stating it was his wish for me to be his replacement as Grand Master of the Wizard’s Council.”

“Did he say anything else, about who his assailant was?” Bryan asked. Jean-Paul shook his head.

“I’m sorry, no, but we all know who it was. Abdel Ben Faust’s cursed blade leaves a distinctive mark. Besides the fact that the attendants, who discovered the body, said the room smelled of brimstone and sulphur.”

“Yes, I know, his demon holes. But how did he gain entry to the Keep? I thought your magical wards would prevent such an incursion?”

“They should, but somehow, he was able to bypass them. That means he must have had help from inside the Keep,” Baptiste observed. “Just another mystery to add to my list.”

“That’s why I was calling. Any luck in finding a way to restore the barrier?”

“We have found some promising possibilities, but we still need the additional spell from Merlin to make it complete. I must say, Lord MoonDrake, that your daughter has been a remarkable asset to Merlin. She has a great acumen for magic, especially for an Outlander. He was wise to make her his apprentice.”

Bryan was stunned at Jean-Paul’s announcement. He was unaware that Merlin had asked Ashley to be his apprentice, and Jean-Paul realised it.

“My apologies, Bryan, I thought you knew.”

“It’s all right, Jean-Paul, my family has a habit of not telling me things until the last minute. I’ll get back with you when I know more. In the meantime, keep at it. We need to restore Avalon away from the outside world as soon as possible. I have a feeling the Outlanders will try to take advantage of the shrinking anti-technology barrier.”

“We will continue our endeavours, Gil-Gamesh. You have my word,” Baptiste bowed before the image faded and the light disappeared, leaving Bryan standing in darkness.

“*Ex Flamma!*” Bryan shouted and with a wave of his hand, candles lit themselves all around the room. He sat down and poured himself a goblet of wine. It was the first time that he’d had the chance to rest.

*So much is happening at once*, he thought. But he knew where his focus needed to be right now. He had to protect Avalon from the next attempt by the Outlanders against him. He knew that Secretary Barry was angry, lashing out at him with the superior might of their military forces.

“They’re going to attack, I know it!” Bryan said aloud. “We have to be prepared for anything they might throw at us!”

\*\*\*

Weeks passed and there had been no aggressive movement by the Outlanders. Their ships remained where they were, off the coast of Avalon. The US Navy destroyers, damaged in the battle for Emmyr, departed when new ships arrived to replace them. The two Russian cruisers were quickly abandoned after the extreme damage they had taken and sank into the sea.

Dotted along the coast of Avalon and sitting atop the raised cliff-face were outposts manned 24/7 by the Knights of the Round Table, shield maidens, the Dragon Guard and Elves from the *Hildirägo Boquè*. Their job was to keep an eye

on the fleet off the coast and report any movement toward Avalon by sea or by air.

At one outpost, located directly across where Emmyr once floated in the sky, sat a small group of men in the third hour of their watch. A small fire kept them warm, but it was of little comfort. It was three o'clock in the morning, the air was chilly and the tedious nature of the watch was already getting to some of them.

Of all the knights there, Sir Eadric Cuthbert was the oldest. At nearly 100 years old, he was still considered by many to be in his prime. He had fought in many battles throughout his career as a Knight of the Round Table, evidenced by the many battle scars on his body. He could have had them healed but he preferred leaving the marks as they were, because to him, each one was a story. His shaggy beard of black and grey was the only hair on his body as the rest had either fallen out or was burned off at one time or another. He leaned against his halberd, a two-handed polearm with a broad axe blade and a pike, and tried to shake off the sleep. He knew he had too much to drink before coming on watch, but the young men kept asking for one more story and he couldn't help himself.

As Eadric dozed, Feredir kept his gaze locked off the coast of Avalon. As one of the youngest members of the elite *Hildrägo Boquè*, the Elf warrior was always mindful of his duties while on watch. He memorised all the ships situated off the coast of Avalon and took careful inventory whenever he assumed watch. His stark-green eyes and brown hair highlighted his beautiful features, as did his traditional copper-coloured armour of the *Hildrägo Boquè*. Armed with his longbow and long sword, his normally dutiful attention was interrupted by the occasional snoring of Eadric, a recent bout of which had woken the veteran.

"Are you sure you should be standing the watch when you're so tired, Sir Eadric?" Feredir inquired politely.

"Nonsense, Feredir, why I once stayed awake for four days straight on twenty minutes of sleep at the siege of Kohlwick Hollow," Eadric replied, as he snapped to attention. "I usually need some action to keep my focus, so I don't drift off."

"Well, you're not a young man anymore. You should take it easy on the late-night revelry."

"Speak for yourself, lad," Eadric snapped back. "It's late night revelry that keeps this old man going."

"Lad?" Feredir said, as he glared at Sir Eadric with a look of bewilderment. "You do realise that I'm more than 1,500 years older than you?"

"Ah, it's not the age, lad, it's how you carry yourself," Eadric answered. "You walk like my son, Dabney, used to. Strong, confident and full of life. Me? I'm an old man, past his prime, who tries to be 'one of the boys' by drinking the night away while telling one of a hundred stories of my life as a Knight of the Round Table."

"You speak too harshly about yourself, Sir Eadric," Feredir said. "You have lived a long and fruitful life, serving the people of Avalon with honour. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

“He’s right, Sir Eadric,” interjected one of the other knights. Your presence means a lot to young men like me.” The other men nodded their heads in agreement, chiming in to support the aged warrior.

Eadric said nothing in reply. He just leaned against his halberd and sighed. Feredir saw that something was on his mind. “Is something bothering you, Sir Eadric?”

“My son, Dabney,” Eadric said, his voice turned solemn and sad. “I haven’t thought about him for over a year before now, not even speaking his name.”

Feredir jerked his head, unsure of where Eadric was going with this. The old man continued. “Dabney died last year at the battle of Idlehorn Mountain. We were defending the right flank when a Drow Strider came right at us. I got under the beastie with my halberd while Dabney sliced it right between its eight eyes. The Drow fell off the spider’s back, so I ran it through with the pike.

“We turned our back on the spider, thinking it was dead, but it had a little bit of life left. It grabbed Dabney and ran him through with its stinger. Some lads carried him to the rear while I continued to fight. When the battle was over, I went to find Dabney but...”

His voice trailed off, not finishing his sentence, but Feredir understood and finished the thought. “They had to burn his body because Drow spiders lay eggs inside their victims when they die. The only recourse was to burn the bodies before the eggs could hatch. I’m very sorry, Sir Eadric.”

Eadric wiped the tears from his eyes and took a deep breath to regain his composure. “That’s all right, lad. We all have to go sometime. I’ll see my son again one day; that’s what keeps me going.”

The two remained quiet for almost half an hour until Eadric finally broke the silence. “Do you remember a Storm Giant by the name of Boras?”

“Boras? I remember when he came down from Merlin’s Pinnacle to raid cattle and sheep farms,” Feredir recalled. “His people were starving because they didn’t stock up enough for the winter, so he took it upon himself to get some provisions, as it were. I heard it took more than 100 knights to finally bring him down.”

“101, actually,” Eadric said slyly. “Let me tell you about it, you see—”

“Oh no, Eadric, not the Boras story again!” interrupted a voice from behind. The men all turned to see Sir Hunter and Chancellor Beauchamp walking toward them. Hunter was carrying a Lancer, as if he was ready to fight while Henri carried a teapot.

Eadric walked up to Hunter and greeted him like a brother, embracing him enthusiastically. “What are you doing here, Sir Hunter?” Eadric asked. “I thought you were in Alfheimer?”

“I finally got a clean bill of health from Doctor Bonapat, so I took the first flight back here. My mother was driving me crazy!” he joked. “Actually, I’m just escorting Chancellor Beauchamp out here. Henri thought you all could use some efion tea.”

“*Mais bien sûr*,” Henri said, as he began pouring tea for each of the men. “I wanted to bring you some of Chef Manfred’s world famous Cioppino, but he

would not let it out of his sight. *De toute façon*, the Gil-Gamesh always said that everyone needs a little something to keep them going until morning, *n'est ce pas?*”

Sir Eadric greedily took the cup from Chancellor Beauchamp. “God bless you, Chancellor, this is just what I needed!” He took a big sip of tea, savouring each swallow with a soft moan. “Ah, a Christmas Hot Toddy! Just the way I like it!”

Efion tea was an Elvish drink that provided nourishment to Elves when they travel away from Alfheimer. For humans, its effect was like that of an energy drink on steroids. A unique quality of the brew was that it reflected the drinker’s taste desires, ranging from sweet to savoury.

Henri offered a cup to Feredir, but the Elf politely refused. “No thank you, Chancellor Beauchamp. I had some before I came on watch. I am perfectly...fine...”

His voice trailed off as his eye caught something different on the horizon. Hunter knew how keen the eyesight of an Elf was and tried to see as well. It was a clear night, the moon waning as a small sliver of a crescent high in the sky.

“What is it?” Hunter asked. “What do you see?”

“There’s a new ship out there, one I’ve never seen before.”

“Are you sure, Feredir?” Eadric asked. “Those metal contraptions look all the same to me.”

“I have observed all the same ships for the past few weeks, that one is new.”

Try as he might, Hunter could barely make out the ship in the darkness. “Can you describe it?” he asked. “Do you see any writing on it?”

“It looks like the other large warship...the aircraft carrier, I believe your father called it, but the front of the ship is curved upward like a ramp,” Feredir said. “There is some writing on the side of the main structure but I’m not familiar with the language.”

“Show me!” Hunter demanded. Feredir took a dagger and wrote a few letters in the dirt next to the fire. Hunter didn’t understand the words, but he recognised the language. “That’s Russian, I think,” he said. “It must be a helicopter carrier of some sort.”

“Are those the machines with the spinning blades on them?” Feredir asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Because there are four of them headed our way!”

Feredir drew his bow. Hunter turned to two of the younger knights standing with them. “Pass the word down along the coast that invaders are coming toward Avalon,” he commanded. The two men took off in opposite directions to warn the other outposts. “Henri, go tell my father what’s going on! We need him here immediately!” Henri dropped the teapot and he took off running toward the main encampment.

Hunter reloaded his Lancer with two new spellshots as he and Sir Eadric crouched low behind the protection of some rocks. Feredir acted as lookout.

“How far out are they?” Hunter asked.

“Three of them are holding their position about six furlongs off shore,” he said, scanning the horizon. “I’ve lost the fourth one.”

“What?” Hunter exclaimed and jumped up to look. Eadric followed suit.

“Where did it go?” Eadric asked. Before Feredir could answer, the three men heard a whirring sound from just off the cliff. From below the edge, a helicopter rose up in the air in front of them, threatening them with a rotary mini-gun.

The three took cover as the helicopter opened fire, pelleting the ground around them with rapid-fire spray. Feredir notched an arrow and readied himself. The firing stopped for a moment and the Elven warrior stood up and fired off an arrow. The aim was true, a perfect shot at the helicopter pilot, but it ricocheted off the front windshield. Feredir got a second arrow off, but it had the same result. He dove behind the rock just as the pilot began firing again.

Feredir cursed. “My arrows won’t penetrate that infernal machine!” Hunter weighed all the options and he came up with an idea.

“I think I can help you there,” he said. He pulled up his Lancer, ready to fire. “After I shoot, hit him again. Your arrows should penetrate this time.”

Hunter took a deep breath before he popped up and fired his Lancer at the helicopter. His spellshot—a combination of magic and alchemy loaded into a cartridge the size of a shotgun shell—fired a freezing spray at the helicopter, coating the front of the aircraft in a layer of frost. The windshield froze instantaneously, and the pilot stopped firing.

Feredir quickly popped up and fired another arrow at the windshield. This time, his arrow shattered the glass and pierced the pilot through the chest. The aircraft pitched to the side and the co-pilot tried to regain control. Feredir didn’t give him a chance and he fired another arrow, killing the co-pilot instantly with an arrow through the throat.

The helicopter spun out of control as it flew over the three warriors and careened toward the ground. The engines shut down just before impact, then it crashed, exploding in a giant ball of fire. Sir Eadric and Hunter roared loudly at their victory. Feredir just stood there silently; there was a hint of a grin on his face.

“Now that was teamwork,” Eadric cheered. “Well done, lads; well done to both of you!”

Hunter looked closely and calculated the distance from the cliff to where the helicopter crashed. His face turned sour.

“The barrier has shrunk even more,” Hunter surmised. “It reaches almost 500 feet away from the cliff.”

“We should order the outposts to move in,” Eadric said. “Otherwise, their weapons can reach us.”

Feredir concurred. Suddenly, the sound of engines filled the air. The three warriors turned around to see two more helicopters rising above the cliff and moving towards them. The copters opened fire, tearing up the ground as they strafed toward the men.

With uncanny reflexes, Feredir grabbed Hunter and threw him to the ground behind the outcropping of rocks. Sir Eadric was not as fast. The spray from the mini-guns ripped his body apart, killing him before he hit the ground in tatters.

Hunter cried out in sadness as he looked at Eadric's lifeless form. Feredir lowered his head for a moment. Then something strange happened to Eadric's corpse. "Feredir, look!" Hunter said. The two watched the body glowed briefly as Eadric's spirit rose from his body. It hovered over the corpse for a moment as it transformed into a wraith—an armoured warrior with a ghostly visage for its head. The energy from his spirit absorbed into the heart stone on its chest and pulsed to life.

Once fully formed, the wraith let loose an unearthly shriek before it flew into one of the helicopters. The pilot panicked and swerved into the other helicopter. The collision forced the blades of the copters to shred one another into pieces. The two helicopters fell straight down to the beach below, exploding on impact. The wraith that was Sir Eadric was gone.

The last Russian helicopter was not deterred by the destruction of the first three. It hovered back from the cliff and fired a pair of assault missiles at the two hiding behind the outcropping. Hunter saw the missiles being launched from the aircraft. He grabbed Feredir by the arm and pulled him away from the rocks as quickly as possible.

The missiles hit the rocks, causing a massive explosion that hurled the two warriors through the air. They crashed into the ground hard and had the wind knocked out of them. The helicopter moved in closer. Its mini-gun whirred to life and started firing.

"*Acheron Draconis!*" shouted a voice from behind them. The Gil-Gamesh summoned his dragon form, erupting with magical energy as it formed around him. "*Defendo!*" he chanted, as the dragon's wings folded down in front of Hunter and Feredir, protecting them from the gunfire.

"*Infernus!*" Bryan commanded. The dragon form reared back and breathed fire, blasting the helicopter with full force. The helicopter exploded almost instantly, dropping down on top of the other two wrecked aircraft.

Bryan dismissed his dragon form as Rhona and Amelia rushed to check on Hunter and Feredir. The two men were mostly unharmed, just bumped and bruised from the explosion. Bryan ran over to Hunter, concerned for his safety.

"Hunter, are you all right?"

"We're fine, Dad, but Sir Eadric was mowed down by those bastards and then something weird happened."

"What? What happened?"

"It was like his soul left his body, but it reformed into a ghostly knight. It destroyed two of the helicopters, but I've never seen anything like that before."

"I have," Feredir interjected. "The *Hildrägo Boquè* once ventured into purgatory and were met by the Wraith Legion. Sir Eadric was tormented by not being there for his son at the Battle of Idlehorn Mountain. His self-doubt caused him to become a wraith, but I've never seen one outside of purgatory before."

“Nor I,” Rhona observed. “If the Wraith Legion has left purgatory, who will hold back the demon horde?”

“That’s not our concern right now, Rhona,” the Gil-Gameesh affirmed. “Henri said you saw a Russian carrier off the coast, Feredir?”

“Yes, milord,” he said, looking out over the horizon. “It’s maintaining a position with the other carrier.”

“I want you to go to the other *Hildirägo Boquè* and let them know what to look for,” Bryan ordered. “We need to keep a close eye on them. Amelia, go with him.”

Before the two took off to carry out their orders, Hunter stopped them. “Father, we also need to move the outposts back from the coastline. When the first helicopter crashed, its engines didn’t shut down until they were overhead. The barrier is still shrinking.”

Bryan sighed in frustration but knew that Hunter was right. “Amelia, tell the outposts to move inland another 300 feet. Rhona, get some replacements out here as soon as possible. Hunter and I will stay until they get here.”

Amelia just bowed politely before taking off with Feredir to warn the other outposts while Rhona headed back to the encampment. Bryan wrapped his arm around Hunter as the two walked over to tend to Sir Eadric’s body.

The two pulled his body over next to the remnants of the outpost before Hunter draped him with his cloak. The two men said a small prayer for the deceased knight, both knowing it was probably in vain after hearing Feredir’s story of the Wraith Legion.

There was profound silence between them until Hunter finally spoke up. “Dad, what the hell’s going on? There is something more here than Outlanders and a shrinking barrier.”

“I know Hunter, I know. I just don’t have time to worry about anything else right now.

“The real danger is out there,” he said, pointing out toward the ocean. “We can deal with whatever menace is scheming—whether it’s Abdel Ben Faust or wraiths out of purgatory—once the barrier has been restored.”

“By then, it may be too late,” Hunter said. “You’re taking too much on yourself, Father. You’re the Gil-Gameesh, but you can’t be in every place all at once.”

Bryan took his son’s words to heart. He was right, and Bryan knew it. “All right, Hunter, I’ll have Ocwyn investigate this wraith phenomenon. In the meantime, we’ll get the men ready for the next incursion. Sending helos at us was just the beginning.”

Hunter nodded his head, then added, “Oh, and do me a favour. Please don’t tell Mom about the missiles and gunfire. She’ll never let me leave her sight again if you do.”

Bryan couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, Hunter, not a word.”

\*\*\*



Secretary Barry threw the binoculars across the bridge of the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov. He hoped the Russian's would have had better luck than the US Navy since they didn't have the trepidation that held the Americans back. The Russians were aggressive, but that didn't work either. The Gil-Gamesh and his forces brought down the helicopters with relative ease. That frustrated him to no end.

"Calm yourself, Mr Secretary," General Garasimov stated through a thick Russian accent.

"Calm? How can you expect me to be calm when your inept and ineffective strategy produced the same results as ours?"

General Garasimov frowned, his disposition soured by Barry's assertions. "It is common courtesy for guests to refrain from insulting their hosts, Mr Secretary, especially when your personal reputation is at stake."

"My apologies, General Garasimov, but you can't be happy with results like that!"

"On the contrary, Mr Secretary, I am very happy with the results," he asserted, confusing Secretary Barry even more. "Please understand, the pilots will be revered and honoured as heroes of the Russian Federation. Their sacrifice will help us get the upper hand on these medieval dogs."

General Garasimov escorted him over to a radar console to explain his strategy. "This is where we lost contact with the first helicopter," Garasimov said, as he pointed to a single marker on the screen.

"I'm sorry, General; I don't follow you."

"Look how far inland it is. The last flyover the American aircraft did was here," he continued, pointing at another marker on the screen, well short of the current one. "This barrier that is preventing our machines from operating over Avalon is shrinking at an accelerated rate. Our best estimate is one month, maybe two, until it is completely gone. We should be able to land an assault force and slowly push our way in with aircraft to cover our incursion."

"Not bad. But we may not have one to two months," Barry said. "The UN. General Assembly is moving to legitimise Avalon's claim as a sovereign nation. Once they do that, the President will not allow any further actions against them."

General Garasimov smiled at the thought of beginning his operation. "Well then, let's get started."

## Chapter 8

### The Invasion of Avalon



Of all the magical places on Avalon, Excalibur Cove was the most sacred. It was where Merlin took Uther to receive the sword *Excalibur* from the Lady of the Lake. It was also where Arthur drew the sword from the stone to become King.

The King's Stone sat in the middle of the cove. *Excalibur* rested in place in the stone, returned there over a year ago when the Gil-Gamesh brought the shattered pieces of *Twilight* and *Dusk* to the Lady of the Lake. His original swords were forged from the pieces of *Excalibur* until Morgana destroyed them with the Dark Tides. The Lady of the Lake reformed the broken pieces into *Excalibur* and drove it into the King's Stone. Now, it waited for the King to draw it when he was ready.

On the shore just off Excalibur Cove, as the first light of dawn broke over the calm waters, stood a dark, robed stranger. He stared at *Excalibur*, as if it were calling to him. His machinations were coming together, piece-by-piece. He had his allies, his general and his army. Now, he needed one more thing to assure his place on the throne of Avalon.

He reached inside the folds of his robe and pulled out a crystal globe filled with a smoky mist. He held the orb up to his mouth and whispered an incantation to it.

The mist from inside poured out of the glass orb, spreading across the water from the shoreline to the King's Stone. The man placed the orb back in his robe as he stepped out onto the mist, crossing the lake as if he were walking on stepping stones.

He paused at the King's Stone, examining the sword very closely. He tentatively reached out for the handle, but then pulled away, hesitant to touch the enchanted blade.