

A MIDNIGHT DARK & GOLDEN

ALSO BY HOLLY RACE

Midnight's Twins
A Gathering Midnight

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MIDNIGHT
DARK & GOLDEN
HOLLY RACE

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1

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For Alex
Love is easy, belief is hard
We have both, and that's our concrete



‘And one can, at all events, show one’s own little
light here, one’s own poor little trembling flame,
with the knowledge that it’s not the only light that is
shining in the darkness, and not the only one which
the darkness doesn’t comprehend.’

— E. M. Forster, ‘What I Believe’

‘Surely something resides in this heart that is not
perishable – and life is more than a dream.’

— Mary Wollstonecraft

‘But who can turn the Stream of Destiny,
Or break the Chain of strong Necessity?’


— Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*






Prologue

In the wake of the Great Betrayal . . .



The devastation of Annwn was almost complete. King Arthur had not waged war on the dreams and nightmares and Fay – he had tricked them as the Trojans had once been tricked. Andraste had watched her kin crumble into inspyre, then into nothingness. The only thing holding her together was a memory of an affection. A mutual desire that she knew, from her continued existence, Arthur could not quite shake off.



She would use it against him, even as her skin flaked away and her movements slowed. She could smell the desperation of some of his followers, not far from the cave where she helped to forge the instrument of her own downfall.

There had once been a forest on this mountain, and in the forest a clearing. She could feel the memory of roots and moss beneath her sore fingers as she climbed. All was now bare rock, and even that fell away beneath her feet and hands, making little avalanches. The barren landscape was dangerous. If Arthur saw her, then he would try to obliterate her. She had to hope



that he was too caught up in the success of his treachery to mind a single, helpless woman.

It took many suns to reach the top of the mountain, for Andraste was weary. Her bones cracked. The strength that once flowed through her body was deserting her. Every breath was an expulsion of her life force. At the top, she allowed herself to stop and rest, and she looked back over the landscape of the world which she once ruled. Nothing could be seen but grey. The towers and encampments that used to litter the countryside were gone. So were the beasts and creatures that had roamed there. She looked out over the sea and saw that the empires beyond were crumbling too, beneath the onslaught of Arthur's power. His reach stretched south, to the ancestral homeland where all stories began. It stretched to the west and to the east, where the stories told in distant cultures were kith to the stories told here, their common threads woven into her sinews. All was dying.

It was time to move, but Andraste's limbs had lost their strength. Arthur was killing her last – a final cruelty to the goddess he had promised to worship for a lifetime and beyond. She closed her eyes and sent out a plea to the people nearby. They heard her, thin though her call was.

The knights Lancelot, Bedevere, Palomides, Gawain and Dagonet crested the top of the mountain. They had discarded their helmets and their faces were worn and worried. Palomides was the oldest of the knights, but Lancelot looked the weariest. Andraste could feel the threads of Nimue inside him, winding around those of her brother Lugh – the muse and the warrior, united. Lancelot had come to Annwn an ingenue, delighting



in all that it had to offer, loving the nightmares even though he fought them. Andraste saw him as a young boy – his mind not set in the patterns that had taken hold of Palomides and that were even now taking hold of young Bedevere. She felt his grief over what had happened here as a bolster to her fading existence. He had made the choice, though he didn't know it yet . . .

'My lady.' Bedevere knelt before her. 'We did not know. I am sorry for what has happened.'

'You summoned us, my lady, did you not?' Palomides said, his voice deep and urgent. 'Is there something that we can do? Some way of reversing this?'

Dagonet laughed bitterly. 'Reverse it? How? How can we remake a world when he has such power? We may as well throw ourselves off these rocks and dash our brains out on that grey stuff below.'

'If he can destroy it in an instant, then surely it can be remade?' Gawain said. 'The other knights may have followed Arthur, but we remain true to our oaths. We swore to protect this land, and we do not see its destruction as protecting it. We remain true to Annwn, not to *him*.'

Andraste smiled weakly. 'I know. That is why I called you. My love betrayed me and the Fay, but there is a way back. Not in your living memory, but there have been other times when Annwn has been on the brink of destruction. Always there are people, Immral or not, who seek the death of imagination. And often they come close. But there is always hope.'

'How?' Lancelot said.



‘Tell us and we will do it,’ Dagonet promised.

‘Not do it, find it,’ Andraste said. ‘The font of inspyre that will bring Annwn back. Kill the king, and then find it.’

She groaned. The pain coursing through her spiked. Arthur had become aware of her continued existence. She could feel the focus of his intent bent upon her now.

‘Find what, my lady? Find what?’

Andraste felt her bones give way, twirling into inspyre inside her body. Her muscles and her veins would follow soon. She sank back, and Lancelot caught her in his arms. His youthful face stared in desperation into her eyes, a child witnessing the passing of an elder and understanding death for the first time. As she felt the voice and the life blood leave her body, she croaked out her final words, whispering the clues that would lead them to what they needed.


‘The Grail. Find the Grail.’






Chapter 1

I can't get used to fighting without my Immral. Three months on and I still call on my power in the middle of battle.



My scimitar is moving faster than ever before, almost beyond my control – running on survival instinct. But nothing I do makes a difference. If I had time to think clearly, I'd curse my own lack of skill – my short-sightedness in not practising with my weapon more, back when I didn't really need it. Then I might stand a chance. But back then I had Immral, and I relied on it to get me out of scrapes like this.



'Help!' Nerizan shouts from the other side of the street, as overwhelmed as I am. There's a weak flash of blue light. My brother has freed her. He is the only one of us with Immral now – and the part of the power that was once mine is now his. I won't ask him for help. I won't. I double my efforts, swinging my scimitar back and forth, cutting down dreamer after dreamer, but they still push forward. They know no fear, no emotion but the desire to eradicate me and my kind from existence.

Gone are the times when we protected dreamers from their nightmares. Now it's all we can do to keep ourselves alive. It's

not like there are any nightmares left to combat. Dreams – both good and bad – have fled Annwn, leaving nothing but the focused malice of Medraut’s dreamer army in their place. And it’s defeating us, slowly but certainly, like an ocean eroding a cliff.

A blade I didn’t spot flashes down on my right, cutting deep into my shoulder.

‘You little –’ I swear, and reach a hand towards the dreamer, still expecting the old pull of Immral to run through my brain and arms and erupt in an explosion of inspyre. But nothing happens. I am forced to use the less elegant tactic of slashing my scimitar across his chest instead. He falls, and two more leap to take his place.

A dreamer at the back of the crowd attacking me drops with a muted cry. Another thud and two more go down, speared on the same arrow.

Samson.

Soon his face appears above the scrum, determined and fierce, as he uses handheld arrows to stab and slash at my assailants. In a few swipes he’s at my side.

He grins. ‘Thought you looked lonely.’

‘Bored, too,’ I pant, wishing I looked as calm as he does.

‘What do you think?’ he says. ‘Time to get the rest of the regiment involved?’

What he means is: time to ask Ollie to finish this. I can’t bring myself to say yes, but I don’t say no either. Samson talks into his helmet and a moment later another blue flash has scattered the remaining dreamers. They are unconscious; not a threat for now. My brother stands in the middle of the street,

his chakrams still hanging at his belt, his arms outstretched and his ears bleeding with the effort of using my Immral. No, not mine. *His*, now.

He and Samson had only been waiting for me to say the word. They could have stepped in at any time, and they didn't because they didn't want to injure my pride.

'Thanks for thinning them out.' Ollie smiles at me. 'I couldn't have done that with all of them.'

He's lying. We both know it. It would be so easy to fall back into my old surliness; to take refuge in thinking badly of my brother, and to imagine that Samson is pleased that I no longer have Immral, so he can play the saviour. It's a huge effort not to make a sarcastic comment about damsels in distress. I nod my thanks, which is all I can manage. Ollie can tell that this was the best I can offer, because he virtually sags in relief.

Samson is less aware of how close he just came to having his head bitten off. 'You okay?' he says, touching me lightly. I think he wants to grip my waist, but we're technically still on patrol, so his hand lingers on my arm instead.

The veneurs and apothecaries who've been holed up in a nearby medical unit swarm the street, checking for casualties. Jin, an apothecary and a friend, dearly won – nods at the cut on my shoulder. 'If I bandage that up you're not going to snap at me, are you?'

I pout and turn around in reply, pulling at my tunic to reveal the wound.

'Bloody hell,' Nerizan says, 'you kept fighting through that, Fern?'

‘She’s tough, that’s for sure,’ Jin says, probing the wound. I wince. There’s a tingling in my shoulder, deeper than the cut, that makes me want to scream and lash out. I shake my head to clear it.

‘You dizzy?’ Jin asks.

‘No,’ I reply. ‘You cleaning it just feels weird.’

‘I’m being as gentle as I can,’ she says, with a hint of her old irritation.

‘I’m not saying you’re not.’

I bite my lip and shake my head again. *Must not go back to the old Fern.* I don’t want to be bitter. I have to hold on to the person I had become, even if I can feel her slipping away a little more each day.

‘There, all patched up,’ Jin says, slapping me on the back in an atta-girl kind of way.

‘Cheers. Feel good as new.’

The rest of Bedevere haul themselves onto their horses. There aren’t many of us left. Samson, Ollie, Nerizan and I are the remnants of the regiment that rode out of Tintagel’s gates nearly two years ago. We had no idea that we were about to endure the first of many attacks machinated by Sebastien Medraut that would kill our friends and comrades.

‘Can we call it a day?’ Nerizan asks Samson.

‘Do you want to?’ Ollie replies.

‘What I really want is to find an actual nightmare. Or a good dreamer to protect – one of us,’ she replies.

‘Ah, a palate cleanser,’ I say.

‘Yes, a sorbet, if you will,’ she says, putting on an affected accent that reminds me of my peers at Bosco, ‘to follow the main course of complete and total depression.’

Samson smiles. 'Let's see what we can do.' He relays Nerizan's request to Rachel through his helmet.

A moment later, she responds. 'It's slim pickings tonight, I'm afraid, Bedevere. But I *can* offer you a two for one on some trickster nightmares down by Parliament.'

'Done and done,' Nerizan says, but Samson and I exchange an uneasy glance. No one should be going close to Parliament unless they have to these days – not in Annwn *or* Ithr. Still, none of the other patrols are taking the job, so it's up for grabs. Nerizan looks at us desperately. She needs the hit. I understand. We all do.

'Off to Parliament we go, then,' I say.

'Bring it,' Ollie says, but he can't mask the tiredness in his voice. I know exactly how he must be feeling – the pounding headache in the back of the head. The burst of pain in the sinuses, followed by the warm rush of blood. I know it's ridiculous, but I can't help but feel jealous of Ollie. I hated the pain at the time, but it was proof that I was worth something. That I was exceptional. It turns out, though, that I wasn't exceptional enough. When my Immral was truly tested, I wasn't equal to it, and Excalibur punished me by draining me of my power.

As we draw closer to Parliament, the dreamers become more populous. Crowds of them mill around the streets, waiting for a command from their leader. It's now normal to see dreamers without mouths, and it's a growing occurrence to see them with trepanned skulls, the brain inside extracted – all thought removed. But here, as we approach Medraut's seat of power, I see not one who still has their skull intact. Coming here was a bad idea.



Lamb's haunches jostle a stray dreamer, and the dreamer twitches towards me, their face stretched in a grimace, their arms flailing wildly. I nudge Lamb out of their reach, pulling closer to Samson until our legs rub together. In any other circumstance I'd take comfort in being so close to him, but there is no comfort to be found here. The grey landscape crowds in on us just as much as the dreamers.

Then we see it – up ahead, a wall of people, blocking our path to the Houses of Parliament.

'I don't think this is going to happen, Nerizan,' Ollie says.

'I think you might be right,' she replies. Some of the nearby dreamers are eyeing the hijab beneath her helmet, inching closer to her.

'Humiliating retreat?' Samson says. We all nod.

We back the horses up, unable to find space enough to turn them. The wall of dreamers advances on us. Behind, they close in.

'Might need your help, bro,' I say out of the corner of my mouth.

'God, I wish this was still you,' Ollie says, but he closes his eyes and draws upon his Immral. With a cry of pain, he unleashes a jet of burning inspyre upon the dreamers blocking our way out. They fall back, their skin blistering beneath all that imagination.

'Go!' Samson says, and we wheel the horses round and gallop through the opening. It's not just the dreamers who reach for us as we pass. The buildings press in on us too, narrowing the streets. I curl my legs around Lamb's sides, steadying her as she weaves. Beside me, Ollie urges his



horse, Balius, to leap over a group of dreamers wielding weapons, using his Immral to lift man and horse above the outstretched knives.

Nerizan's leg takes a cut that leaves a vicious, bloody mark on her horse's flank. She leans back to shove the dreamer. 'Hurt me all you like,' she says, 'but don't you touch my horse.'

It's several miles, when we're back in a relatively safe part of London, before we allow ourselves to slow to a walk and give the horses their heads. On our right, the Thames froths and roils. A sea monster rears up out of the water, great chunks of its flesh falling from its bones as it thrashes in its death throes. The blue inspyre that held it together dissipates, like an unheard whisper, and it finally bursts apart. Another creature lost to the drought of imagination.

'Remind me not to ask for stupid things again,' Nerizan says, then adds, 'Sorry.'

'Don't be,' Samson says. 'We get it, Nez.'

I nod at Nerizan. The need to fight nightmares instead of people is like a compulsion. She just said it out loud.

We round a corner, moving into narrower lanes. In Ithr, we'd be approaching St Paul's Cathedral. In Annwn, the cathedral has been replaced by a different building. Tintagel's familiar turrets rise above its neighbours, its central dome reaching for the heavens. The sight is accompanied by the low sound of war.

'Here we go again,' Ollie says.

As the castle comes into view, the source of the noise is revealed. Tintagel, my only haven in Annwn, is under siege.