

## Prologue

*Many years ago, in a time shaped from legends . . .*

The forge burned sapphire in the many-sunmed light of Annwn. The metal that was not metal threw flecks of inspyre into the shimmering air as it was shaped. The Fay bent over their masterpiece, taking turns to bring the hammer down upon the blade. Merlin, the oldest and strongest, thrust his bare hands into the fire to form the hilt from melting crystal.

‘Is it complete?’ The voice came from the darkness at the back of the hall.

‘Soon,’ Andraste answered, throwing her face up to catch her breath. A sea breeze whistled in through the open doors of the hall. The tang of saltwater and seaweed caught in her throat. She glanced towards her lover, waiting in the shadows.

‘There is only one thing left,’ Merlin said, as hilt and blade joined with a hiss. ‘Are you certain you wish it?’

‘I am certain,’ he replied, shifting impatiently.

Merlin nodded, placing one withered hand on the hilt. The rest of the Fay followed him. Andraste was last. She should be happy to do this for him. A goddess and a mortal; she had

fallen in love with many men and women of Ithr before, but never with one such as him. So why did she feel uneasy? Why did her bones – such as she had them – tremble at the prospect of this gift?

‘I am indebted to you,’ he said, seeming to address them all. Certainly Merlin thought he spoke to him, but Andraste knew that the words were meant for her alone. His voice was so sincere that she dismissed her misgivings as the insecurities of a proud woman. She did his bidding; bent her will to the task before them. The forging was the easy part.

They did it as one, untwisting the stories that bound them together and finding the common threads. From Merlin, the firstborn, was cunning. Nimue’s thread was more delicate: fortitude. Puck’s was gaudy: he gave desire. Andraste’s twin, Lugh, gave strength. Andraste’s gift was many-threaded, and it was power. There were other, lesser gifts too, from the myriad Fay: memory, foresight, charm. Each one spun out from the Fay in glistening inspyre, before sinking into the sword. Andraste could feel her own strength diminishing as she pushed her gift into the metal. *It matters not*, she thought, *for when it is done, there will be stories for us all*.

At last, when they saw that it was good, the Fay stepped back. Andraste went to her lover and touched her heat-glistened forehead to his. He looked into her eyes in the way she adored: the way that told her that he *knew* her, as no mortal had before.

‘It is done, my love,’ she said.

He kissed her cheek, then stepped past her to look at what they had made. The others, her family, were panting. The glow of inspyre that surrounded them was hazy. They were

all weakened from the effort of their creation. They watched as he pulled the weapon from the fire. It hissed as it branded his palm, but he didn't mind the pain. He flicked his arm and inspyre flooded down his muscles, healing the burned skin.

His gaze was shrewd.

'It is perfect,' Andraste assured him. She had never made anything so beautiful, or so powerful. The Fays' threads had woven a pattern of violet and gold across the crystal hilt and down into the blade. When he moved it, the light from the open doors threw coloured patterns across the assembled faces.

'Yes,' he said, smiling at last. 'It is good.'

The way he said it made Andraste pause. She reached out to him, but he drew away, casually, moving towards the entrance.

'Our deal is done,' Merlin croaked. 'You are in our debt.'

'We will all have stories, will we not?' Nimue said, her high voice carrying around the chamber.

'We are hungry,' Puck said, flitting towards Andraste. 'When will we feed?'

But Andraste said nothing at all. She followed her love as he moved into the fresh air. Outside, the undulations of Dyvnaint stretched before them on one side. On the other, the hills of Sumorsaet reached out towards a sun-kissed sea.

'We were going to restore Annwn together,' Andraste said sadly.

On the fields below, imps and piskies frolicked. In the distance, a giant paddled in the shallows, fishing for sea-spirits. 'These are creatures of the devil,' he said softly, so that only Andraste could hear him. 'I will brook no danger to my subjects.'

'Please, my lord,' Andraste said.

But he turned away from her, holding the sword aloft. He roared – a roar the like of which she had never heard human make. In that moment, she knew for certain that the true love of her immortal existence had deceived her. As her heart shattered, she vowed she would one day, many years from now, make it right.

## Chapter 1

*Now, in a time when legends are forgotten . . .*

‘Get down, Fern!’ Ollie shouts at me, and without waiting to check whether I’ve heard him, chucks his chakram straight at my head. I duck just in time and feel the blade whisk through the top of my hair. A thud tells me he hit his intended mark.

I’m about to reprimand my brother when an ungodly scream warns of another incoming nightmare. This time, it’s a woman with sunken cheeks and matted hair. She reminds me of the little group of homeless who station themselves at the bus stops in Stratford, near my home. I can’t think about that now. I turn Lamb on the spot with a press of the ankle, and thrust my scimitar into her chest. The blade sucks its way out with my pull, and the woman bursts back into inspyre.

Rachel’s voice echoes through the earpiece in my helmet. ‘There’s more of them coming down the alleyway, Bedevere. From the east, moving fast.’

Samson’s voice is next. He’s close enough that our knees are nearly touching as we sit astride our horses, but I hear him through my helmet. ‘Cantabrian circle.’

Our only acknowledgement of his order is to swing our horses to form a ring around the street, facing outwards. We're not far from the great museums of Kensington, and within hearing of an aria, emanating from the Royal Albert Hall a few streets away. When I first joined the knights, these roads would have been occupied by buskers, sphinxes and the occasional pack of rabid werewolves. Now unformed inspyre drifts listlessly, waiting for someone with enough imagination left to give it shape.

Our patrol was supposed to take us around Trafalgar Square and the maze of Soho, but the Gawain regiment were overwhelmed on their route, so Samson volunteered to cover both. That raised some eyebrows amongst the rest of the regiment, but I can understand Samson's reasoning: he's the Head Knight, and Ollie and I are the thanes' greatest assets – if anyone should shoulder more of the load, it's us.

The thudding of feet on tarmac is growing louder – our harkers have done their work correctly. That's getting less easy these days. Nightmares used to be simple to spot. They would be giants or sprites or huge bugs. Now, nearly every nightmare is human-shaped. It's not impossible to spot them, but it makes the harkers' work – and ours – harder in every way.

The cries begin – the wails and babbles of human-monster hybrids. Lamb whickers gently, and I press a hand to her neck, trying to reassure her.

I look over at Ollie. 'This time I'd appreciate a heads-up before you nearly decapitate me, 'kay?'

He raises his chakram in a mock-salute and smirks, but it's not the same smirk he'd have sent my way a year ago. I pull a

face at him, and Vien and Linnea, sitting behind me, snicker. This is our routine; our way of bringing some levity to the dark work we now do.

The first of the nightmares scurries out of the alleyway and we swing into practised formation. Every one of them is human in shape, but their behaviour is anything but. Some of them swing from lampposts, others scuttle on all fours.

We go to work, silent for the most part, trying to ignore the fact that it feels as though we are killing people, not nightmares.

‘A little help!’ I hear Linnea shout. She’s hemmed in by nightmares, a stone wall behind her and her weapon, a mace, lying just beyond her reach.

‘I’m on it,’ I say into my helmet.

I leap from Lamb’s saddle into the air, escaping the clutches of the earthbound nightmares for a few moments. Calling upon my Immral is getting easier, but it still requires a degree of concentration I can’t achieve if I’m in the middle of battle. The familiar crackle in the back of my head comes quickly, and I direct it full force at the nightmares surrounding Linnea. They resist me. I can sense hundreds of imaginations bolstering their forms; a wave of fear and prejudice lending them strength. I feel the inspyre that winds through the nightmares’ bones and muscle and skin and pinch it with my mind, folding them like origami. Heads meet feet, hinging at the waist. Arms flatten and tuck back; joints pop. It’s horrific, but effective. Linnea leaps out of the way, retrieves her mace and rejoins the fray.

The time was when the final blow dealt to a pack of nightmares would be cause for celebration. Now when Samson shoots the last dream – an old man with wild hair and an

even wilder beard – no one cheers. None of us say it, but we all feel it. These nightmares mark a sea change in the minds of dreamers. Their imaginations are contracting, unable to conceive of anything more frightening than someone who looks like them but isn't.

'Bring the clear-up crew in,' Samson says into his helmet, and a few moments later the streets are swarming with apothecaries and veneurs. This is a recent measure. It's becoming more difficult to avoid hurting dreamers in our skirmishes, hence the apothecaries. The veneurs are an attempt to alter the nearby dreamers' minds a little – to give them a friendly nudge away from the polarised thinking that's become so prevalent of late. It's now common practice to see a morrigan pecking at a dreamer, the veneur guiding the creature to remove the fear and anger dotted there, like pockmarks. Or seeds.

'You alright, old girl?' one of the veneurs asks Lamb, bringing me into the present. A hooded morrigan sits on his shoulder, ruffling its beak through his hair. To anyone else this would be positively alarming – the morrigans feed off imaginations and memories, so keeping them away from your brain would seem like the sensible thing to do. This veneur, however, is unfazed.

'Don't call my pony old, Brandon,' I say to him, trying to keep a straight face.

'She doesn't mind, do you, ancient girl?' he says, patting Lamb's muzzle. 'Ow!' He looks up at me, astonished. 'She nipped me!'

'Told you.'

'No animal has ever nipped me before in my whole life.'



‘Lamb’s special,’ Samson says, riding up behind me. ‘I think you’re wanted with a dreamer over there, Brandon.’

‘Righty-ho,’ Brandon says, giving Lamb another affectionate pat. She flicks her ears at him. I can tell that she regards him in the same way I do: he can be irritating, but he’s basically a puppy, and as such will be tolerated.

‘Ready to head back?’ Samson asks me.

‘So much yes.’

The return to Tintagel is quieter than it once was. It’s not just the nightmares that preoccupy us. It’s the silence. Annwn used to be so full of noise. It was a cacophony of birdsong, dragon roars, the conversations and shouts and whispers of millions of dreamers. It was dizzying and annoying and impossible to hear myself think at times. But it had energy. Life.

Now the only sounds we hear are our horses’ hooves on the cobbles, or the mournful cry of a lonely seal on the banks of the Thames. The sole constant is the quiet murmur of thousands of dreamers: *One Voice. One Voice. One Voice.*

Our route takes us back along the river. Only a few months ago the waters would be peppered with dolphins, and sirens would call out to us from the wreckage of ships. Now the water is still. The sharks and kelpies haven’t been seen since July. The rest of London isn’t faring much better. The streets we ride down were once awash with hardened merchants and weary women plying their trades; with bears and dogs escaping baiting games. The buildings would switch between the stark 1970s concrete of Ithr’s version and the buildings that were razed to make way for it – structures of timber and plaster, stone and straw. Now the area is an exact replica of the one

in Ithr, except here the buildings feel a little greyer than they do in the real world.

‘Sometimes I wish you could just blast every nightmare we meet,’ Nerizan says as we move down the Strand. ‘Do us out of a job. That’d be great.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Ollie responds. ‘Some of us like earning our keep.’

‘Fern isn’t a machine.’ Samson looks back from his place at the front of the regiment and throws me a rare smile. He and Ollie are the only ones in Bedevere who know how much I chafe at my situation. I need to save my power for the truly dangerous situations, given I still can’t use it without getting pounding headaches and nosebleeds. But I also hate it when people assume I’m this all-powerful god of all things inspyre. It only reminds me of my shortcomings.

‘It’s not easy, being the Chosen One, is it?’ Ollie sometimes jokes and, even though I force a smile, I wish I could return to my old, grumpy self and snap at him. *What would you know? You got the shit half of the power. I’m the one everyone’s looking to for hope.*

If I sound despondent and irritable, it’s because I am. Every time I step foot in Annwn, I am reminded of my weakness. I love this world, but it’s dying, all because I’m not strong enough to save it.