

## PROLOGUE

Once, in a time long ago, in a world beyond our own, three goddesses gathered to celebrate the dawn of a new queen. Many who'd traveled across the land and skies, through time and through space, had brought gifts of gold and jewels, of rich silks and precious crystals.

But the goddesses three wished for more unique gifts.

They considered a winged horse, but news came that a traveler had flown in on one, making it a gift for the new queen.

They debated gifting her with beauty beyond compare, with wisdom or uncommon grace.

They couldn't make her immortal, and knew from those who were that this was both blessing and curse.

But they could give her an immortal gift.

"A gift that will shine for her, for all time." Celene stood with her friends, her sisters, on the sand, white as diamonds, on the verge of the ink-blue sea, lifted her face to the night sky, to the swimming moon.

"The moon is ours," Luna reminded her. "We cannot give what we are pledged to honor."

“Stars.” Arianrhod lifted her hand, palm up. She closed her eyes, her fingers. And smiling, opened them again. Now in her palm a jewel of ice glowed. “Stars for Aegle, the radiant.”

“Stars.” Now Celene held out her hand, opened it. She held a jewel of fire. “Stars for Aegle, who will shine like her name.”

Luna joined them, produced a jewel of water. “Stars for Aegle, the brilliant.”

“There should be more.” Celene turned the burning star in her hand.

“A wish.” Luna stepped closer to the sea, let the water lay cool kisses on her feet. “A wish from each for the queen, and into the star. For mine, a strong and hopeful heart.”

“A strong and questing mind.” Celene held the fiery star aloft.

“And a strong and adventurous spirit.” Arianrhod raised both hands, one holding the star, the other lifted toward the moon. “These stars to shine while worlds turn.”

“They shed their light in the queen’s name for all to see.” The Fire Star began to lift into the sky, and the star of ice, the star of water with it.

They spun as they rose, showering light, over land and sea, pulled toward the moon and its cool white power.

A shadow passed under them, a silent snake.

Nerezza glided across the beach toward the water—a shadow smearing the light. “You meet without me, my sisters.”

“You are not of us.” Arianrhod turned toward her, with Luna and Celene flanking her. “We are the light, and you the dark.”

“There is no light without dark.” Nerezza’s lips curved, but fury lived in her eyes, and with it the early blooms of a madness yet to fully flower. “When the moon wanes, the darkness eats it. Bite by bite.”

“The light prevails.” Luna gestured as the stars flew now, trails of color in their wake. “And now there are more.”

“You, like supplicants, bring gifts for the queen. She is no more than a weak, simpering girl when it is we who could rule. Who should rule.”

“We are guardians,” Celene reminded her. “We are the watchers, not rulers.”

“We are *gods!* This world and others are ours. Only think of it, and what we can make from our powers combined. All will bow to us, and we would live in youth and beauty forever.”

“We have no desire for power over the mortals, the immortals, the demimortals. Such matters bring blood and war and death.” Arianrhod dismissed the notion. “To crave forever is to dismiss the beauty and wonder of the cycle.” She lifted her face again as the stars they’d made spilled their light.

“Death comes. We will watch this new queen live and die as we did the last.”

“She will live a hundred years times seven. This I have seen. And while she lives,” Celene continued, “there will be peace.”

“Peace.” The word hissed out between Nerezza’s sneering lips. “Peace is nothing but a tedious lull between the stretch of the dark.”

“Go back to your shadows, Nerezza.” Luna dismissed her with a careless wave of her hand. “Tonight is for joy, for light, for celebrations—not your ambitions and thirsts.”

“The night is mine.” She slashed out a hand, and lightning, black as her eyes, sliced the white sand, the dark sea, and arrowed up toward the flying stars. It cut through the streams of light moments before the stars found their home in a gentle curve at the base of the moon.

For an instant the stars trembled there, and the worlds beneath them trembled.

“What have you done?” Celene whirled on her.

“Only added to your gift, *sisters*. They will fall one day, the stars of fire, ice, and water, tumble from the sky with all their power, their wishes, the light and the dark combined.”

Laughing now, Nerezza lifted her arms high as if to pluck the stars from the sky. “And when they fall into my hands, the moon dies for all and ever, and the dark wins.”

“They are not for you.” Arianrhod stepped forward, but Nerezza carved black lightning through the sand, left a smoldering chasm between them. Smoke streamed up from it to foul the air.

“When I have them, this world dies with the moon, as you will. And as I eat your powers, I will open others long sealed. The pale peace you worship will become all raging torment, all agony and fear and death.”

Through the smoke, she lifted her hands, glowing in her own desire. “Your own stars have sealed your fortunes, and given me mine.”

“You are banished.” Arianrhod lashed out, and hot blue lightning that cut like a whip wrapped its tongue around Nerezza’s ankle.

The scream ripped the air, shuddered into the ground. Before Arianrhod could drag the dark into the chasm of her own creation, Nerezza spread thin black wings, snapped the whip of light as she flew up. Blood from her ankle burned and smoked in the white sand.

“I make my fate,” she shouted. “I will come back, take the stars and the worlds I wish. And you will know death and pain and the end of all you love.”

The wings folded around her, and she was gone.

“She can do nothing to us or ours,” Luna insisted.

“Do not doubt her power or her thirst.” Celene stared into the dark gulf, felt a terrible sorrow. “There will be death here now, and blood, and pain and sorrow. She has left it behind her like a stain.”

“She must never have the stars. We’ll bring them back now,” Arianrhod said. “Destroy them.”

“Too much to risk while her power still stings the air,” Celene replied.

“So we only wait, and guard and risk all?” Arianrhod argued. “We allow her to twist a bright gift into something dark and deadly?”

“We cannot. We will not. They will fall?” Luna asked Celene.

“I can see they will, in a bright flash, but I cannot see when.”

“Then we will make the when, and the where. This we can do.”

Luna took her sisters’ hands.

“In another place, another time, but not together.” Nodding, Arianrhod looked up at the stars, so bright and beautiful over the land she’d loved and guarded since her time began.

“If even one falls into her hands, or one like her . . .” Celene closed her eyes, opened herself. “Many will seek the stars, the power, the fortune, which is the same. And the fate. It is all one. And we, reflected light, must send of us on the quest.”

“Of us?” Luna repeated. “We do not go to retrieve them?”

“No, that is not for us. I know we must bide here and it will be done as it is done.”

“We choose the time, the place. In silence,” Arianrhod added. “Even in our minds. She is not to know when and where they will fall.”

They joined minds as well as hands, and each took her journey, followed her star where it willed as it tumbled from the sky. Each hid her gift, each laid the power of protection over it.

And with minds joined, with no words spoken, each understood what must now rest in the hands and hearts of others.

“Now we must believe.” Luna tightened her grip on Arianrhod’s hand when her sister said nothing. “We must. If we do not, how will those who come of us?”

“I believe we have done what we must. That is enough to believe.”

Celene sighed. “Even gods must bow to Fate.”

“Or fight what tries to destroy them.”

“You will fight,” Celene said, smiling now. “Luna will trust. And I will do all I can to see. Now, we wait.”

Together they looked up to the moon that lived in sky and soul, and the three bright stars that curved to it.



## CHAPTER ONE

Dreams plagued her, waking and sleeping. She understood dreams, visions, the *knowing*. They had been part of her all of her life, and for most of her life she'd learned to block it out, push it all away.

But these wouldn't relent, no matter how she pitted her will against them. Dreams of blood and battle; of strange, moonstruck lands. In them, the faces and voices of people unknown but somehow vitally familiar lived with her. The woman with the fierce and canny eyes of a wolf, the man with the silver sword. They roamed her dreams with a woman who rose from the sea laughing, the man with the golden compass.

And through all of them, strongly, the dark-haired man who held lightning in his hands.

Who were they? How did she—or would she—know them? Why did she feel such a strong need for them, all of them?

With them walked death and pain—she *knew*—and yet with them came the chance for true joy, true self. True love.

She believed in true love—for others. She'd never sought it for

herself, as love demanded so much, brought such chaos into a life. So much *feeling*.

She wanted, had always wanted, the quiet and settled, and believed she'd found it in her little house in the mountains of North Carolina.

There she had the solitude she'd sought. There she could spend her days painting, or in her garden without interference or interruption. Her needs were few; her work provided enough income to meet them.

Now her dreams were haunted by five people who called her by name. Why couldn't she find theirs?

She sketched her dreams—the faces, the seas and hills and ruins. Caves and gardens, storms and sunsets. Over the long winter she filled her workboard with the sketches, and began to pin them to her walls.

She painted the man with lightning in his hands, spending days perfecting every detail, the exact shade and shape of his eyes—deep and dark and hooded—the thin white scar, like a lightning bolt, scoring his left eyebrow.

He stood on a cliff, high above a boiling sea. Wind streamed through his dark hair. She could all but feel it, like hot breath. And he was fearless in the face of the storm as death flew toward him.

Somehow she stood with him, just as fearless.

She couldn't sleep until she'd finished it, wept when she did. She feared she'd lost her mind, and visions were all she had left. For days she left the painting on the easel while he watched her work or clean or sleep.

Or dream.

She told herself she'd pack it for shipping, send it to her agent for sale. And dipping her brush, she signed it at last.

Sasha Riggs—her name on the verge of the storm-wrecked sea.

But she didn't pack it for shipping. She packed others instead, the work of the long winter, arranged for transport.

Exhausted, she gave in, curled on the couch in the attic she'd converted to her studio, and let the dreams take her.



The storm raged. Wind whipping, the sea crashing, jagged spears of lightning hurled from the sky like flaming bolts from a bow. The rain swept in from the sea toward the cliff in a thick curtain.

But he stood, watching it. And held out his hand for hers.

“I’m waiting for you.”

“I don’t understand this, any of this.”

“Of course you do, you more than most.” When he brought her hand to his lips, she felt love simply saturate her. “Who hides from themselves, Sasha, as you do?”

“I only want peace. I want the quiet. I don’t want storms, and battles. I don’t want you.”

“Lies.” His lips curved as he brought her hand to them again. “You know you’re lying to me, to yourself. How much longer will you refuse to live as you were meant to? To love as you were born to?”

He cupped her face in his hands, and the ground shook under her.

“I’m afraid.”

“Face it.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“See it. We can’t begin without you. We can’t end it until we begin. Find me, Sasha. Come find me.”

He pulled her in, took her lips with his. As he did, the storm broke over them with mad fury.

This time, she embraced it.

She woke, tired still, pushed herself up, pressed her fingers to her shadowed eyes.

“Find me,” she muttered. “*Where?* I wouldn’t know where to start looking if I wanted to.” Her fingers trailed down to her lips, and she swore she still felt the pressure of his.

“Enough. It’s all enough now.”

She rose quickly, began to pull the sketches from the walls, the board, letting them fall to the floor. She’d take them out, throw them out. Burn them. Get them out of her house, out of her head.

She'd get out herself, take a trip somewhere, anywhere. It had been years since she'd gone anywhere. Somewhere warm, she told herself as she frantically yanked down her dreams. A beach somewhere.

She could hear her own breath heaving, see her own fingers trembling. Near to breaking, she lowered to the floor amid the sketches, a woman too thin with the weight the dreams had stolen, her long blond hair bundled up into its habitual messy bun. Shadows plagued her eyes of a clear and crystal blue.

She looked down at her hands. There was talent there. She always had been, always would be, grateful for that gift. But she carried other gifts, not so gratefully.

In the dream, he'd asked her to see. Nearly all her life she'd done all she could to block the sight she'd been born with.

Yes, to hide from herself, just as he'd said.

If she opened to it, accepted it, there would be pain and sorrow. And the knowledge of what might be.

She closed her eyes.

She'd clean up—give herself time. She'd pick up all the sketches and file them away. She wouldn't burn them, of course she wouldn't burn them. That had been fear talking.

She'd file them, and take a trip. Get away from home for a week or two, let herself think and decide.

On her hands and knees, she began to gather the sketches, organizing them in her way. The woman with the fierce eyes, the man with the sword, sketches of her dream people together.

Seascapes and landscapes, a palace shining on a hill, a circle of stones.

She laid one of the dozens of the man she'd just dreamed of on a pile, reached for another.

And knew.

She'd drawn the sickle-shaped island from various viewpoints, and this one showed its high cliffs, its undulating hills thick with trees. Showed it floating in the sea, washed with sunlight. Buildings

jumbled together to form a city in the foreground, and the stretch of land, speared with mountains spread in the distance.

The pencil sketch took on color and life as she studied it. So much green, a thousand shades of it from dusky to emerald. So much blue, deep and rich or frothing with waves surrounding it. She saw boats sailing, figures diving off seawalls to swim and splash.

And she saw the promontory where she'd stood with him as the storm flew in.

"All right then, I'll go." Was she giving in, she wondered, or standing up? But she'd go, she'd look.

It would either end the dreams, or bring them to life as the sketch came to life in her hands.

She went over to her little desk, opened her laptop. And booked a flight to Corfu.

Giving herself only two days to pack, arrange details, close up the house meant she couldn't change her mind. She slept on the plane, dreamlessly, grateful for the respite. And still the cab ride from the airport to the hotel she'd chosen near Old Town was a blur. Disoriented, she checked in, struggling to remember to smile, to exchange the expected small talk with the front desk, with the cheerful bellman with the cheerful eyes and thick accent as they rode the narrow elevator to her room.

She hadn't asked for a particular floor or a view. It was enough she'd taken this step, wherever it would lead her. But she wasn't surprised, not at all surprised, when steps into the room she barely noticed, she faced the windows, the blue sea, and the spread of the sand she knew so well.

She smiled away the bellman's offer to fetch her ice, or anything she might wish. She only wanted solitude again. The airports, the plane, so many people. They crowded her still.

Alone, she walked to the window, opened it to cool spring air that smelled of the sea and flowers, and studied the scene she'd sketched weeks before, and carried with others in a portfolio in her suitcase.

She felt nothing, not now, but the fogginess of jet lag and travel fatigue. And some wonder that she'd actually traveled so far on impulse.

Turning away, she unpacked to give herself some sense of place and order. Then just lay down on the bed and dropped into sleep again.

Lightning and storms, the beat of the sun, the beat of the sea. Three stars so bright and brilliant her eyes stung. When they shot away from the curve of the moon, fell in streams of light, the world trembled from the strikes of power.

Blood and battle, fear and flight. Climbing high, diving deep.

Her dream lover taking her mouth, taking her body, making her ache with feelings. So much. Too much. Never enough. Her own laughter, barely recognized, sprung from joy. Tears shed, flooding from grief.

And in the darkness, a light burned through. In the darkness she held fire in her hand. As she held it up, for all to see, the earth quaked, rocks tumbled. What was fury flew at her with claws and teeth.

*For God's sake, Sasha, wake up! Get your ass moving.*

"What?" She woke with a start, the voice still echoing inside her head, her heart still thumping with fear.

Just another dream, she told herself, just one more to add to her collection.

The light had softened, and lay now like silk over the water. She had no idea how long she'd slept, but the dream voice had something right. It was time to wake up.

She showered off the travel, changed into fresh clothes. Since she wasn't working, she left her hair down. She ordered herself out of the room. She'd go down, sit on the terrace, have a drink. She'd come, given up her quiet and alone, and come.

Now something or someone needed to come to her.

She found her way out, strolled under a pergola thickly twined

with wisteria already starting to bloom. Its scent followed her as she turned away from the pool, the canvas sling chairs lined up around its skirt, toward a stone terrace. Clay pots gloriously crowded with flowers of hot reds and purples glowed as the sun wheeled west. The fronds of palm trees hung still.

Tables under shading umbrellas—all in bright white—scattered over the stone. She noted only a few were occupied, and was grateful. Not solitude perhaps, but quiet. She thought to take one a bit apart from the others, started to angle away.

The woman also sat a bit apart. Her short, sun-streaked brown hair had long bangs that swept down to the amber lenses of her sunglasses. She sat back, her bright orange Chucks propped on the other chair of her table for two as she sipped something frothy out of a champagne flute.

The light shimmered for a moment, and Sasha's heart stuttered with it. She knew she stared, and couldn't stop. And understood why when the woman tipped down her sunglasses, and stared back over them.

The eyes of a wolf, tawny and fierce.

Sasha fought back the urge to simply turn around, go back to her room where it was safe. Instead she mentally shoved herself forward and walked over while those golden eyes appraised her.

"I'm sorry," she began.

"For what?"

"I . . . Do you know me?"

The woman raised her eyebrows under the long bangs. "Are you somebody I should know?"

I know your face, Sasha thought. I've seen it countless times.

"Could I sit down?"

The woman angled her head, continued her cool, unblinking study. Carelessly she slid her feet off the chair. "Sure, but if you're thinking about hitting on me, except for a one-nighter in college, I stick with men."

“No, it’s not that.” Sasha sat, tried to find her bearings. Before she could, a waiter in a white jacket stopped by the table.

“*Kalispera*. Could I bring you a drink, miss?”

“Yes, actually, yes. Ah, what are you drinking?”

The woman lifted her glass. “Peach Bellini.”

“That sounds just right. Would you like another? I’ll buy you a drink.”

Under her thick sweep of bangs, the woman’s eyebrows lifted. “Sure.”

“Two then, thanks. I’m Sasha,” she said when he left to fill the order. “Sasha Riggs.”

“Riley Gwin.”

“Riley.” A name, she thought, to go with the face. “I know how this is going to sound, but . . . I’ve dreamed about you.”

Riley took another sip, smiled. “It sounds like you’re hitting on me. And you’re really pretty, Sasha, but—”

“No, no, I mean literally. I recognized you because I’ve dreamed about you, for months now.”

“Okay. What was I doing?”

“I can’t expect you to believe me. But the dreams are why I’m here, in Corfu. I don’t— Wait.” The sketches, she thought, and pushed to her feet.

A picture was worth a thousand, after all.

“I want to show you something. Will you wait until I come back?”

Riley only shrugged, lifted her glass. “I’ve got another drink coming, so I’ll be here for a while yet.”

“Five minutes,” Sasha promised, and hurried away.

Sipping her drink, Riley considered. She knew all about dreams, and wouldn’t discount them out of hand. She’d seen and experienced far too much in her life to discount anything out of hand.

And this Sasha Riggs struck her as sincere. Nervy, wound tight, but sincere. Still, she had her own reasons for being in Corfu, and they didn’t include starring in someone else’s dreams.

The waiter came back with a tray, set the drinks, a bowl of fat olives, another of fancy nuts on the table. “The other lady?” he asked.

“She forgot something. She’ll be right back.” Riley handed him her empty glass. “*Efkaristo.*”

She tried an almond, went back to contemplating the sea, glanced back again when she heard the hurried footsteps—wedged sandals on stone.

Sasha sat again, holding a leather portfolio. “I’m an artist,” she began. “Congratulations.”

“I’ve had these dreams all winter. They started right after the first of the year. Every night.” Waking dreams, too, but she wasn’t ready to share that much. “I sketched the people, the places in them, the ones that kept reoccurring.”

She opened the portfolio, chose the sketch that had brought her to where she sat. “I drew this weeks ago.”

Riley took the sketch, lips pursing as she studied it. “You’re good, and yeah, this is Corfu.”

“And this is you.”

Sasha laid down a sketch, full body, of Riley. She wore cargo pants, hiking boots, a battered leather jacket, a wide-brimmed hat. Her hand rested on the butt of the knife sheathed at her belt.

As Riley lifted the sketch, Sasha set down another. “So is this.” A head-and-shoulders sketch this time, of Riley looking straight ahead with a curled-lip smile.

“What is this?” Riley muttered.

“I don’t know, and need to find out. I thought I was losing my mind. But you’re real, and you’re here. Like me. I don’t know about the others.”

“What others?”

“There are six of us, including me.” Sasha dug into the portfolio again. “Working together, traveling together.”

“I work alone.”

“So do I.” She felt giddy now, both vindicated and a little crazed. “I don’t know any of them.” She held out another sketch. “I have individual sketches of all of them, and others with some of us together, more with all of us, like this one. I don’t know them.”

The sketch showed Riley, dressed much as she’d been in the other, and Sasha, in boots, pants, a snap-brimmed hat rather than the sandals and flowy dress she wore now. Another woman with hair tumbling to her waist, and three men. Three hot men, Riley thought, all standing together on a trail, forested hills around them, grouped together as if posing for a photograph.

“You— Sasha, right?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m Sasha.”

“Well, Sasha, you sure know how to dream men. They’re all smoking.”

“I’ve never seen any of them before, outside of the dreams. But I feel . . . I *know* them, know everyone here. And this one.”

Unable to resist, Sasha touched a finger to the figure standing beside her, standing hipshot, his thumb hooked in the front pocket of worn jeans. Sharp cheekbones, dark hair—she knew it to be a deep, rich brown—carelessly curling past the neckline of his T-shirt. His smile spoke of confidence, and of charm—and a little mystery.

“What about this one?” Riley prompted.

“He holds lightning. I don’t know if that’s a symbol or what it means. And I dream we—that we . . .”

“Sex dreams?” Amused, Riley took a closer look at him. “You could do a hell of a lot worse.”

“If I’m going to have sex dreams with a man, I’d like to have dinner first.”

Riley let out a bark of laughter. “Hell, a girl can eat anytime. Are you a dream-walker, Sasha?”

“Dream-walker?”

“Some cultures use that term. Do you have prophetic dreams? Why



hold back now?” Riley said when Sasha hesitated. “You’re already telling me you have sex with strange men, and you haven’t even had your drink yet.”

“I don’t have to be asleep to dream.” Yes, Sasha thought, why hold back now? “And yes, they’re usually prophetic. I knew my father would leave before he walked out the door when I was twelve. He couldn’t handle what I am. I don’t control it, can’t demand to see, can’t demand not to.”

Sasha picked up her glass and drank, and waited for the wariness or the derision.

“Have you ever worked with anyone on that?”

“What?”

“Have you ever worked with another dream-walker, explored learning how to block it or open it?”

“No.”

“You look smarter than that.” Riley shrugged. “Is it just visions, or do you read minds?”

She might have asked if she painted in oil or acrylics. Emotion clogged Sasha’s throat so thickly she could barely speak. “You believe me.”

“Why wouldn’t I? The proof’s all over the table. Can you read minds, and can you control that?”

“I don’t read minds. I read feelings, and they speak just as loud. I can control it, unless the feelings are so intense they push through.”

“What am I feeling? Go ahead.” Riley spread her arms when Sasha hesitated. “I’m an open book, so read it.”

Sasha took a moment, focused in. “You feel some sympathy for and curiosity about me. You’re relaxed, but on guard. You tend to stay on guard. You feel a need for something that’s always been out of your reach. It’s frustrating, especially because you like to win. You feel a little sexually deprived just now because you haven’t taken the time . . . felt you had the time to fill that need. The work fulfills you, the risks, the adventure, the demands of it. You’ve earned your self-reliance, and

you're not afraid of much. If there's fear, it's more for the emotional than the physical.

"You have a secret," Sasha murmured. "Closed up tight." Sasha jerked back, frowned. "You asked me to look, all but insisted, so don't get angry when I do."

"Fair enough. And that's enough."

"I believe in privacy." She'd never read anyone that openly, that purposefully. It left her flushed, and mildly embarrassed. "I don't dig into people's secrets."

"I believe in privacy." Riley raised her glass again. "But I freaking love to dig."

"Your work brings you a lot of pride and satisfaction. What is it?"

"That depends. At the base? I'm an archaeologist. I like looking for things no one else can find."

"And when you find it? What do you do with it?"

"That depends, too."

"You find things." Sasha nodded, nearly relaxed. "That must be one of the reasons."

"For what?"

"For our being here."

"I've got a reason to be here."

"But at this time, in this place?" Sasha gestured to the sketches again. "I know we need to look, we need to find . . ."

"If you want my attention you have to spit things out."

Rather than speak, Sasha pulled out another sketch. A beach, a calm sea, a palace on a hill, all under a full white moon.

And curved under the moon shone three stars.

"I don't know where this is, but I do know these three stars, the ones near the moon, they don't exist. I'm not an astronomer, but I know they're not there. I only know they were, somehow they were. And I know they fell. See this one." She laid out another sketch. "All three

falling at the same time, leaving those cometlike trails. We're supposed to find them."

Sasha looked up, saw Riley's eyes stare into hers, feral and cold.

"What do you know about the stars?" Riley demanded.

"I'm telling you what I know."

In a fast move, Riley reached out, gripped Sasha's arm at the wrist. "What do you know about the Stars of Fortune? Who the hell are you?"

Though her stomach trembled, Sasha made herself keep her eyes level with the fierce ones, ordered her voice not to shake.

"I've told you who I am. I'm telling you what I know. You know more about them. You know what they are. You're already looking for them—that's why you're here. And you're hurting my arm."

"If I find out you're bullshitting me, I'll hurt more than your arm." But she let it go.

"Don't threaten me." Temper, hot and surprised, leaped up and out. "I've had enough. I didn't ask for this, I don't want this. All I wanted was to live in peace, to paint, to be left alone to work. Then you and these others are crowding my dreams, you and these damn stars I don't understand. One of them's here, I know it, just as I know finding it won't be peaceful. I don't know how to fight, and I'll have to. Blood and battle, dreams full of blood and battle and pain."

"Now it's getting interesting."

"It's terrifying, and I want to walk away from all of it. I don't think I can. I held one in my hand."

Riley leaned forward. "You held one of the stars?"

"In a dream." Sasha turned her palm up, stared at it. "I held it, held the fire. And it was so beautiful it blinded. Then it came."

"What came?"

"The dark, the hungry, the brutal."

Suddenly she felt queasy, light-headed. Though she struggled, what moved through her won.

“She who is darkness covets. To have what she desires consumes her. What the three moons created out of love, loyalty, and hope, she would corrupt. She has burned her gifts and all bright edges of her power away, and what remains is a madness. She will kill to possess them, fire, ice, water. Possessing them, she will destroy worlds, destroy all so she lives.”

Sasha lifted both hands to her head. “Headache.”

“Does that happen often?”

“I do everything I can to stop it.”

“And that’s probably why you have a headache. You can’t fight your own nature, trust me. You have to learn to control it, and to adapt.” Riley caught the waiter’s eyes, circled a finger in the air. “I’m getting us another round.”

“I don’t think I should—”

“Eat some nuts.” Brisk now, Riley shoved the bowl closer. “No way you’re faking this—nobody’s that good. And I’ve got a sense about people—not empathic, but a reliable sense. So we’ll have another drink, talk this through some more, then figure out where we go from there.”

“You’re going to help me.”

“The way I look at it, we’re going to help each other. My research indicates the Fire Star is in or around Corfu—and your dreams corroborate that. You could come in handy. Now—”

She broke off, flicked a hand at her bangs as she looked over Sasha’s head. “Well, well, it just keeps getting more and more interesting.”

“What is it?”

“Dream date.” Riley aimed a deliberately flirty smile, crooked a finger in the air.

Swiveling in her chair, Sasha saw him. The man who held the lightning. The one who’d taken her body.

His eyes, so dark, flicked away from Riley, met hers. Held them. And holding them, crossed to their table.

“Ladies. Spectacular view, isn’t it?”

His voice, Irish and easy, brought a shiver to Sasha's skin. She felt trapped, as if a shining silver cage had dropped around her.

And when he smiled, she yearned.

"Where you from, Irish?" Riley asked.

"Sligo, a little village you wouldn't have heard of."

"You'd be surprised."

"Cloonacool."

"I know it. Sits at the foot of the Ox Mountains."

"So it does, yes. Well then." He waved his hand, and offered Riley the little clutch of shamrocks that appeared in it. "A token from home, faraway."

"Nice."

"Americans?" He looked back at Sasha. "Both of you?"

"Looks that way." Riley watched his gaze shift, land on the sketches. She said nothing when he reached down, lifted the one of six people.

Not shocked, she thought. Intrigued.

"Isn't this a fascination. You'd be the artist?" he said to Sasha. "You've a clever hand, and eye. I've been told I have the same." He smiled. "Mind if I join you?"

Without waiting for assent, he got a chair from a neighboring table, pulled it up. Sat.

"I'd say we've a lot to talk about. I'd be Bran. Bran Killian. Why don't I buy you ladies a drink, and we'll talk about the moon and the stars?"