

## PROLOGUE



They met on the high hill, far above the world, beneath a sky struck with the dazzle of stars and a white, waiting moon. Together the goddesses looked out beyond the castle shining on its own fair hill, to the dark glass of the sea.

“Two stars found, and held safe.” Luna lifted her face to the sky in joy, in thanks. “The fates that be chose well with the six. The guardians’ own hearts are strong and true.”

“Their test is not finished,” Celene reminded her. “And what they come to face will need more than true hearts.”

“They will fight. Have they not proven themselves warriors, sister?” Arianrhod demanded. “They have risked. They have bled.”

“And will risk more. I see battles to come, blood to spill. Nerezza and the evil she created want more than the stars, more than the blood of the guardians. They want annihilation.”

“It has always been so,” Luna murmured. “In her heart, it has always been so.”

“They have weakened her.” Arianrhod put a hand on the jeweled

hilt of the sword at her side. "All but destroyed her. Without the human she turned, they would have destroyed her."

"Did we not think the same," Celene reminded her sisters, "on the night of the queen's rise, on the night we created the stars?"

Celene stretched out her arms, and below, on the edge of the great sea, the images of what had been shimmered.

"A night of joy," she continued, "of hope and celebration. And we three conjured three stars. For wisdom, forged in fire."

"For compassion," Luna added, "fluid as water."

"For strength," Arianrhod finished, "cold as ice."

"Our powers, and our hopes, in a gift to the new queen. A gift Nerezza coveted."

On the beach, white under a white moon, the three goddesses faced the dark one. As they sent their stars flying toward the moon, Nerezza lashed out, black lightning, to strike them, to curse them.

"And so we cursed her," Celene continued, "cast her into a pit. But we did not, could not destroy her. It was not for us, this duty, this task, this war."

"We protected the stars," Luna reminded her. "They would fall, as Nerezza had cursed them, but we protected them. When they fell, they would fall in secret, and remain hidden."

"Until those who came from us bound together, joined in the quest to find them, to protect them." Now Arianrhod's hand tightened on the hilt of her knife. "To fight, each and all, against the dark. To risk all to save the worlds."

"Their time has come," Celene agreed. "They pulled the Fire Star from its stone, gathered the Water Star from the sea. But the final tests of the quest wait. As will Nerezza and her army profane."

"Whatever their powers, whatever their gifts, the six face a god." Luna pressed a hand to her heart. "And we can only watch."

"It is their fate," Celene said, "and in their fates live the fate of all the worlds."

“Their time has come.” Arianrhod reached out, took her sisters’ hands. “And with it, if they are strong and wise, if their hearts remain true, may ours.”

“The moon runs full, and so the wolf howls.” Celene gestured up to the comet streak arching through the sky. “So they fly.”

“And courage flies with them,” Arianrhod said.

“And there!” Luna pointed across the wide, dark sea where light bloomed, then fired, then quieted. “They are safe.”

“For now.” With a wave of her hand, Celene dismissed the wavery images on the beach. “Now begins the future.”



## CHAPTER ONE



A man who couldn't die had little to fear. An immortal who'd lived most of his long life as a soldier, waging battle, didn't turn from a fight with a god. A soldier, though a loner by nature, understood the duty, and loyalty, to those who battled with him.

The man, the soldier, the loner who'd seen his young brother destroyed by black magick, who'd had his own life upended by it, who fought a god's crazed greed, knew the difference between the dark and the light.

Being propelled through space by a fellow soldier, a shifter, while they were all still bloody from the battle didn't frighten him—but he'd have preferred any other mode of transportation.

Through the whirl of wind, the blare of light, the breathless speed (and all right then, there was a bit of a thrill in the speed), he felt his companions. The sorcerer who held more power than any Doyle had known in all his years. The woman who was as much the glue who bound them together as a seer. The mermaid who was all charm and courage and heart—and a pure pleasure for the eyes. The shifter, loyal and brave, and a dead shot as well. And the female—well, wolf now,

as the moon had risen just as they'd prepared to shift from the beauty and battles of Capri.

She howled—no other term for it—and in the sound of it he heard not fear, no, but the same atavistic thrill that beat in his own blood.

If a man had to align himself with others, had to throw his fate in with others, he could do a hell of a lot worse than these.

Then he smelled Ireland—the damp air, the green—and the thrill died in him. The fates, canny and cold, would drive him back here where his heart and his life had been broken.

Even as he geared himself up to deal with it, to do what must be done, they dropped like stones.

A man who couldn't die could still feel the jolt and insult of hitting the ground hard enough to rattle bones and steal the breath.

"Bloody hell, Sawyer."

"Sorry." Sawyer's voice came from his left, and in a kind of gasping wheeze. "It's a lot to navigate. Anybody hurt? Annika?"

"I'm not hurt. But you." Her voice was a musical croon. "You're hurt. You're weak."

"Not too bad. You're bleeding."

Bright as sunlight, she smiled. "Not too bad."

"Maybe we should try parachutes next time." Sasha let out a quick moan.

"There now, I've got you."

As his eyes adjusted, Doyle saw Bran shift, gather Sasha close.

"You're hurt?"

"No, no." Sasha shook her head. "Cuts and bumps. And the landing knocked the wind out of me. I should be used to it. Riley? Where's Riley?"

Doyle rolled, started to push himself up—and pressed a hand into fur. It growled.

"She's here." He shifted his gaze, met those tawny eyes. Dr. Riley

Gwin, renowned archaeologist—and lycan. “Don’t so much as think of biting me,” he muttered. “She’s fine. Like she tells us, she heals fast in wolf form.”

He got to his feet, noted that however rough the landing, Sawyer had come through. Weapons cases, luggage, sealed boxes of research books, maps, and other essentials lay in a somewhat orderly pile a few feet away on the cool, damp grass.

And of great personal importance to him, his motorcycle stood, upright and undamaged.

Satisfied, he stretched out a hand to Sawyer, pulled the man to his feet.

“Not altogether bad.”

“Yeah.” Sawyer combed his fingers through his mane of wind-swept, sun-streaked hair. Then grinned when Annika did a series of cartwheels. “Somebody enjoyed the ride anyway.”

“You did well.” Bran dropped a hand on Sawyer’s shoulder. “It’s a feat, isn’t it, juggling six people and all the rest across the sea and sky in, well, a matter of minutes.”

“Got one bitch of a headache out of it.”

“And more.”

Bran lifted Sawyer’s hand—the one that had gripped Nerezza’s flying hair while he’d shifted her away. “We’ll fix that, and anything else needs fixing. We should get Sasha inside. She’s a bit shaky.”

“I’m all right.” But she remained sitting on the ground. “Just a little dizzy. Please don’t,” she said quickly, and pushed to her knees toward Riley. “Not yet. Let’s just get oriented first. She wants to run,” she told the others.

“She’ll be fine. There’s no harm here.” Bran helped Sasha up. “The woods are mine,” he said to Riley. “And now they’re yours.”

The wolf turned, bounded away, vanished into the thick trees.

“She could get lost,” Sasha began.

“She’s a wolf,” Doyle pointed out. “And likely to find her way around better than the rest of us. She changed, but as we were leaving, and needs her moment. Wolf or woman, she can handle herself.”

He turned his back on the woods where he’d run tame as a child, where he’d hunted, where he’d gone for solitude. This had been his land once, his home—and now it was Bran’s.

Yes, the fates were canny and cold.

In the house Bran had built on the wild coast of Clare, Doyle could see the memory of his own. Where his family had lived for generations.

Gone, he reminded himself, centuries ago. The house and the family, gone to dust.

In its place was the grand, and he’d have expected no less from Bran Killian.

A fine manor, Doyle mused, with the fanciful touches one might expect from a wizard. Stone—perhaps some of it from the walls of that long-ago home—rising a full three stories, with those fanciful touches in two round towers on either side, and a kind of central parapet that would offer mad views of the cliffs, of the sea, of the land.

All softened, Doyle supposed would be the word, with gardens fit for the faeries, blooming wild and free, with the mixed perfumes blown about on the windy air.

Doyle indulged himself for one moment, allowed himself to think of his own mother and how she’d have loved every bit of it.

Then he put it away.

“It’s a fine house.”

“It’s good land. And as I said to Riley, it’s yours as much as mine. Well, that’s my feeling on it,” Bran added when Doyle shook his head.

“We’ve come together,” Bran continued as the wind tossed his hair, black as the night, around his sharp-boned face. “Were thrown together for a purpose. We’ve fought and bled together, and no doubt will again. And here we are, standing on where you sprang from, and

where I was compelled to build. There's purpose in that as well, and we'll use it."

In comfort, Annika ran her hand down Doyle's arm. Her long black hair was a sexy tangle from the shift. She had bruises on her remarkable face. "It's beautiful. I can smell the sea. I can hear it."

"It's a ways down." Bran smiled at her. "But you'll make your way to it easy enough, I wager. In the morning, you'll see more of what it offers. For now, we'd best haul all of our things inside, and settle in a bit."

"I hear that." Sawyer reached down, hefted some boxes. "And, God, I could eat."

"I'll make food!" Annika threw her arms around him, kissed him enthusiastically, then picked up her bag. "Is there food to make, Bran? Food I can make while you tend the wounds?"

"I had the kitchen well stocked." He flicked his fingers at the big, arched double doors. "The house is unlocked."

"As long as there's beer." Doyle grabbed two weapon cases—his own priority—and started in behind Annika and Sawyer.

"It hurts him," Sasha quietly told Bran. "I can feel the ache in him, the ache of memories and loss."

"And I'm sorry for it, truly. But we all know there's a reason for it, why it's here that we've been led to find the last star and end this."

"Because there's always a price." On a sigh, she leaned against him, closed eyes blue as summer and still hollow from the battle and the shift. "But Annika's right. It's a beautiful house. It's stunning, Bran. I'll want to paint it a dozen times."

"You'll have time for dozens of dozens." He turned her to him. "I said it was Doyle's and Riley's as it's mine. It's Annika's and Sawyer's as well. But, *fáidh*, it's yours as my heart is yours. Will you live with me here, at least some of the time in our lives together?"

"I'll live with you here, and anywhere. But now? I should take a look inside and see if it's as wonderful as the outside."

“It’s a true home now that you’re here.” To dazzle her, he waved a hand. All the windows illuminated. Glowing lights shimmered along garden paths.

“You take my breath.” She sighed it, then picked up the case holding most of her art supplies—her priority.

They went inside, into a wide entryway with towering ceilings where wide-planked floors gleamed. A heavy table with curled dragons for its legs held crystal balls and a tall vase bursting with white roses.

It opened to a living area with jewel-tone sofas, more heavy tables, sparkling lamps. And with another wave of the hand, Bran had red-gold flames erupting in a stone fireplace so large the muscular Doyle could have stood upright, arms stretched to either side.

As he walked in from the back, Doyle raised an eyebrow, toasted with the beer in his hand. “You went for posh, brother.”

“I suppose I did.”

“I’ll get more if you’ll see to Sawyer. His headache’s real enough. I can see it on him. And he’s carrying some ugly burns. Annika’s hurt more than she lets on.”

“Help Sawyer and Annika,” Sasha said. “I’ll help Doyle.”

“He’s in the kitchen with Annika.” Doyle glanced at Sasha. “I can handle bringing in the rest. You’ve got your own battle scars, Blondie.”

“Nothing major. I’m fine,” she told Bran. “The dizziness only lasted a couple minutes this time, and the rest can wait. I could use a glass of wine if you have it.”

“I do, of course. Let me see to him, then I’ll help you with the rest.”

She walked outside with Doyle, started to pick up more bags, then just stared out into the woods.

“She’ll be back once she’s run it off.” Doyle took a pull on his beer. “But you’d be happier with all your chicks in the roost.”

Sasha lifted her shoulders, let them fall. “I would. It’s been . . . a day.”

“Finding the second star should put a smile in your eyes instead of sorrow.”

“A year ago I was still denying what I was. I knew nothing of any of you, of gods—dark or bright. I’d never harmed anyone, much less . . .”

“What you fought and killed wasn’t *anyone*. They were *things* created by Nerezza to destroy.”

“There were people, too, Doyle. Humans.”

“Mercenaries, paid by Malmon to kill us, or worse. Have you forgotten what they did to Sawyer and Annika in the cave?”

“No.” Sasha hugged her arms tight against the quick chill. “I’ll never forget. And I’ll never understand how human beings could torture and try to kill for money. Why they’d kill or die for profit. But she does, Nerezza does. She knows that kind of greed, that blind lust for power. And I understand that’s what we’re fighting. Malmon, he traded everything for it. She took his soul, his humanity, and now he’s a thing. Her creature. She’d do the same to all of us.”

“But she won’t. She won’t because we won’t give her anything. We hurt her today. She’s the one wounded and bleeding tonight. I’ve searched for the stars, hunted her for more years than you can know. I got close, or thought I did. But close means nothing.”

He took another long pull from his beer. “I don’t like using fate or destiny as reasons or excuses, but the hard fact is we six are together, are meant to be. Are meant to find the Stars of Fortune and end Nerezza. You feel more than others. That’s your gift, and your curse, to see and to feel. And without that gift we wouldn’t be standing here. It doesn’t hurt that you can shoot a crossbow as if born with the bow in one hand and a bolt in the other.”

“Who’d have thought?” She sighed, a pretty woman with long, sun-washed hair and deep blue eyes. One who’d gained muscle and strength, inside and out, over the last weeks. “I feel your heartache. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll deal with it.”

“I know you were meant to be here, to walk this land again, to

look out at this sea. And not just for the quest for the stars, not just for the fight against Nerezza. Maybe—I'm not sure—but maybe it's for solace.”

Doyle shut down—that was survival. “What was here for me was long ago.”

“And still,” she murmured, “the coming here tonight is harder on you, and the getting here tonight was hardest on Riley.”

“Considering we'd just fought off a god and her murderous minions, it wasn't a ride on a carousel for any of us. All right,” he said at Sasha's quiet look, “rough on her.”

He put the empty beer bottle in the pocket of his scarred leather coat, hauled up suitcases. “She'll run it off, and be back by morning. Grab what you can, and I'll get the rest. We both know you'd be more help to Bran with the injuries.”

She didn't argue, and he noted that she limped a bit. To settle it, he set the bags down inside, plucked her up.

“Hey.”

“Easier than arguing. Is the house big enough for you?”

They passed wide archways and the rooms beyond them. Deep, rich colors, simmering fires in hearths, glinting lights, gleaming wood.

“It's magnificent. It's huge.”

“I'd say the two of you will have to make a lot of babies to fill it.”

“I—”

“That got you thinking.”

She'd yet to regain speech when he carried her into the kitchen. There, Sawyer, looking a little less pale, sat on a stool at a long slate-gray counter while Bran treated the burns on his hands.

Annika, who managed to look gorgeous despite the cuts, the bruises, earnestly sautéed chicken in an enormous frying pan at what Sasha recognized as a professional-grade six-burner range.

“Okay, now you want to—” Sawyer broke off, hissed as Bran hit a fresh point of pain.

“I take the chicken out, and put the vegetables in. I can do it,” Annika insisted. “Let Bran work.”

“I’ll help.” Sasha poked Doyle in the shoulder. “Put me down.”

The order had Bran turning, and moving quickly toward her. “What is it? Where is she hurt?”

“I’m not—”

“She’s limping some. Right leg.”

“It’s just—”

“Put her down there, beside Sawyer.”

“It’s just sore. Finish with Sawyer. I’ll help Annika, and—”

“I can do it!” Clearly frustrated, Annika dumped chicken on a platter. “I like to learn. I learned. I cook the chicken in the garlic and the oil, with the herbs. I cook the vegetables. I make the rice.”

“You’re pissing off the mermaid,” Doyle said, and dumped Sasha on a stool. “Smells good, Gorgeous.”

“Thank you. Sasha, you could tend to Bran’s wounds while he tends to yours and Sawyer’s. Then he can tend to mine. And we can eat because Sawyer needs to eat. He’s hurt, and he’s weak from . . .”

Her eyes filled, glistening green pools, before she turned quickly back to the range.

“Anni, don’t. I’m okay.”

When she only shook her head at Sawyer’s words, he started to rise. Doyle simply shoved him back onto the stool.

“I’ve got this.”

Doyle crossed the rugged wood floor, gave Annika’s tumbled hair a tug.

She turned, went straight into his arms. “I believed. I believed, but I was so afraid. Afraid she’d take him.”

“She didn’t. Dead-Eye’s smarter than that. He took her for a ride, and we’re all here now.”

“I have such love.” Sighing now, she rested her head on Doyle’s chest, looked into Sawyer’s eyes. “I have such love.”

“It’s why we’re here,” Sawyer said. “I believe that, too.”

“He’ll need some time to heal,” Bran said. “Some food, some sleep.”

“And a beer,” Sawyer added.

“That goes without saying. And now you.” Bran turned to Sasha.

“I don’t see that glass of wine.”

“I’m on it.” Doyle pressed a kiss to Annika’s forehead, turned her back to the range. “Cook.”

“I will. It will be very good.”

While Doyle poured wine, Bran rolled up Sasha’s pants leg. Let out a string of oaths at the raw-edged claw marks scoring down her calf. “Bumps and scrapes, is it?”

“I didn’t realize, honestly.” She took the wine Doyle offered, took a quick gulp. “And now that I do, it hurts a lot more.”

Bran took the glass from her, added a few drops from a bottle from his medicine case.

“Drink slow, and breathe slow,” Bran told her. “The cleaning of it’s going to sting.”

Sasha drank slowly, breathed slowly, and when the sting—a dozen angry wasps—struck, grabbed Doyle’s hand.

“I’m sorry. *A ghrá*. I’m sorry. Only a minute more. There’s infection.”

“She’s okay. You’re okay.” Doyle lured her gaze to his as Sawyer stroked her back. “Hell of a kitchen you’ve got now, Blondie. Somebody who can cook like you ought to do handsprings.”

“Yes. I like it—oh, God, okay—I like the cabinets. Not only the fact that there’s about an acre of them, but all those leaded-glass fronts. And the windows. It must get wonderful light.”

“She needs to drink more,” Bran said through gritted teeth. “Sawyer.”

“Drink it down.” Sawyer held the glass to her lips. “We’ll have a cook-off, you and me—and Anni,” he added.

“Challenge accepted.” Then she let out a long, shaky breath. “Thank God,” she said when Bran coated the wound with cool, soothing balm.

“You held up.” Doyle gave her a pat on the shoulder.

“Your turn,” Sasha told Bran.

“Give yourself a minute—and me as well.” Bran sat beside her. “And we’ll deal with each other. And when we’re done, and while we eat, I imagine Sawyer has a story to tell.”

“Believe me,” Sawyer replied. “It’s a winner.”

The kitchen held a long table, backed with benches, fronted with chairs in a wide curve of glass. They sat together, with Annika’s meal, with a loaf of brown bread and fresh butter, with beer and wine. And Sawyer’s tale.

“When I went up—hell of a boost, by the way,” Sawyer said to Bran, “she was fighting to control that three-headed dog she was on.”

“The one you shot in all three heads,” Sasha pointed out.

“Three for three.” Sawyer made a gun with his fingers, said, “Bang. And she was focused on Bran.”

“Knock out the sorcerer, knock out our magicks.” Doyle shoveled in chicken. “It’s not good, Annika.”

“Oh!”

“It’s damn good.”

She laughed, wiggled happily in her seat on the bench as Doyle scooped up more. Then she leaned her head to Sawyer’s shoulder. “You were so brave.”

“Didn’t think about it—that’s the trick. She’s got the eyeball on y’all, trying to get that beast under control. She didn’t see me coming.”

Looking down, he flexed his hand, all but healed now. “I grabbed the bitch by the hair—it was flying around, and handy. And then she saw me coming, baby, and it scared her. I could see that—we need to know that. I took her by surprise, and I saw fear. Didn’t last long, but it was there.”

“We hurt her before, in Corfu.” Bran nodded, dark eyes intense. “We beat her back, got the Fire Star, and hurt her. She should be afraid.”

“She had armor this time, so she’s no idiot. And she’s got a hell of a punch. You’ve got your lightning,” he said to Bran, “and she’s got hers.” He rubbed his chest, easily reliving the burning punch. “Nothing to do but hold on. She thought she had me, and I’ve got to say, maybe for a minute, I figured she was right. But she’d have me where we weren’t because I’d already started the shift. It got wild, really wild, but it was my thing, right? Shifting’s my thing. I know how to deal with the force of that, and she didn’t. Not so fast, so hard. She started changing.”

“Changing?” Sasha prompted.

“I had her by the hair, right? All that flying black hair. And during the shift, the color started leeching out of it. And her face did a Dorian Gray.”

“She aged.”

He nodded at Sasha. “Put on the years. For a second I thought it was my imagination, and the fact that the wind, the lights were burning the crap out of my eyes, but her face started to sag, and she’s aging right in front of me. She’s aging, and her lightning strikes barely buzz me. She’s weakening, man, and I let go. She nearly pulled me with her—she had that much left. But I pulled away, and she fell. I don’t know where the hell, but she dropped. I couldn’t get a bead because I’d about used it up by then. And I really needed to get back.”

He turned his head, kissed Annika. “I really needed to get back.”

Sasha gripped his arm. “Could it have destroyed her?”

“I don’t know, but I put a hurting on her, and that fall’s going to leave a mark.”

“According to legend, it’s a sword that brings her end.” Still, Bran shrugged. “And legends have been known to be wrong. In either case, despite cuts and bruises”—he paused to give Sasha a telling look—“we

hurt her more than she hurt us. If she exists, it will take time for her to recover, and that's advantage us."

"We know she fears," Doyle put in, "and her fear is another weapon against her. With all that, this doesn't end until we have the last star."

"So we'll look, and we'll find." Bran settled back, confident and at home. "As here's where the quest led us."

"I believe we'll find it—the Ice Star," Annika said. "We found the others. But now that we're so close, I don't understand what we do once we have them."

"Go where we're led." Bran looked at Sasha, who immediately poured more wine.

"But no pressure," she murmured.

"Faith," Bran corrected. "All faith. But for tonight, we're all here, we're safe, and we've had a lovely meal."

Pleased, Annika smiled. "I made enough for Riley if she's too hungry to wait for breakfast. I wish she'd come back."

"She will, and soon enough."

"I can feel her," Sasha announced. "I can feel her now. She's not far, but not ready to come in. She's not far though."

"Then we're all safe, as I said. And though Sawyer looks better, it's rest he needs now. I'll show you the bedrooms, and you can choose what suits you."

It didn't matter to Doyle where he slept, so he chose a room at random, one facing the sea rather than the woods. The bed might have been fit for a king with its tall turned posts, but he wasn't ready to use it.

He opened the doors leading to the wide stone terrace that wrapped the sea-front of the house, let the moist air whip through the room, let the rumble and crash of the sea drown out his thoughts.

Restless, anticipating the memories that might flood back in dreams, he strapped on his sword and went out into the night.

However safe they were—and he believed they were for now—it didn't pay to forgo patrol, to ignore the need for vigilance.

Bran had built his home on the same spot where Doyle's had stood—though Bran's was surely five times the size. Doyle couldn't ignore the fact—couldn't pretend there were no reasons for it.

The house stood on the cliff, with a seawall built dry-stone style rambling at its edge. Gardens here as well, Doyle noted, and the scents of rosemary, lavender, sage lifted into the air from their place near the kitchen wall.

He walked out toward the cliff, let the wind stream through his hair, cool his face while his eyes, sharp and green, scanned the turbulent sea, the misty sky, the full white moon that shifted and sailed behind gray fingers of cloud.

Nothing would come tonight, from sea or sky, he thought. But if Sasha's visions held true—and they had till now—they'd find the last star here, in the land of his blood. They'd find it, and they'd find the way to end Nerezza.

His quest, one of centuries, would be done.

Then what?

Then what? he thought again as the soldier in him began to patrol.

Join another army? Fight another war? No, no more wars, he mused as he walked. He was sick down to bone and balls of blood and death. However weary he might be of life after three centuries of it, he was more weary of witnessing death.

He could do whatever he wanted—if he had any idea what he wanted. Find a place to settle awhile? Build his own? He had money set aside for it. A man didn't live as long as he'd lived and not have money, if he had a brain in his head.

But settling? For what? He'd been on the move so long, he could barely conceive the notion of rooting anywhere. Travel, he supposed,

though God knew he'd done more than any man's share of that already.

And why think of it now? His duty, his mission, his quest wasn't done. Better to think of the next step, and leave the rest.

He came around the front of the house, looked up. He could see the good, sturdy manor his blood had built. See how Bran had used it, respected it when adding to it, making it his own.

For a moment he heard the voices, long stilled. His mother, his father, his sisters, brothers. They'd worked this land, built their lives, given their hearts.

Grown old, grown ill, died. And he was all that was left of them. That, just that, was beyond sorrow.

"Bollocks," he murmured, and turned away.

The wolf watched him, eyes gleaming in the filtered light of the moon.

She stood very still at the edge of the wood—beautiful and fierce.

He lowered the hand that had reached instinctively for the sword sheathed on his back. Stood, watching the watcher while the wind billowed his coat.

"So you're back. You worried Sasha and Annika. You understand me perfectly well," he added when the wolf made no move. "If you're interested, Sawyer's healing up, and resting. Sasha was hurt more seriously than we knew. Ah, that got your attention," he said, when the wolf trotted forward. "She's resting, too, and Bran took care of them. She's fine," he added. "One of the bastards gouged her leg, and some infection set in before Bran got to it. But she's fine now."

He watched the wolf angle up, scan the house with those canny golden-brown eyes. "The place is full of rooms, enough beds if we were twice as many. I suppose you want to go in now, see for yourself."

The wolf simply walked to the big front doors, waited.

"Fine then." Doyle strode over, opened the door.

Inside, Riley's things sat in a neat pile.

“We didn’t take them up as no one wanted to choose for you. You’ve plenty to choose from.”

The wolf walked—pausing to study the living area, the fire simmering—then moved to the stairs, looked back.

“I suppose you want me to haul your bloody things up the bloody stairs now?”

The wolf held Doyle’s gaze, unblinking.

“Now I’m a porter,” he muttered, and picked up her duffle. “You can get the rest tomorrow.” He started up, and the wolf kept pace. “Bran and Sasha are down at the end there, in the round tower. Sawyer and Annika, first door there, facing the sea.”

He gestured the other way on the landing. “I’m down here, again the sea.”

The wolf went down, in the direction of Doyle’s room, stood in a doorway, moved on, another, and another, then doubled back and walked into a room facing the forest with an open-canopy bed, a long desk, a fireplace framed in malachite.

Doyle dumped her duffle, prepared to step out again and leave her to it.

But she walked to the fire, looked at him, looked back.

“What? I’m supposed to light a fire for you now? Christ.”

Muttering all the way, he took bricks of peat from a copper bucket, arranged them on the grate as he had as a boy.

It was simple enough, took only moments, and if the scent squeezed his heart, he ignored it.

“Now, if there’ll be nothing else—”

She walked to the door, one leading to a little balcony.

“You want out again? For Christ’s sake. It doesn’t have stairs.” He walked over, wrenched it open. “So if you want down, you’ll have to jump.”

But she only scented the air, walked back in, sat by the fire.

“Doors open then.” Since he’d done the same in his own room,

he could hardly fault her. “Anything else, you’ll need to wait till morning and deal with it yourself.”

He started out, paused. “Annika made enough of a meal for you, if you want it in the morning.”

Unsure, he left her door open, started toward his own room. He heard the sound of her door closing as he reached his own.

So for what it was worth, he thought, Sasha had all her chicks in the roost.

## CHAPTER TWO



Gnawing hunger and shivering chill woke Riley at first light. The fire had burned to embers; rain pattered on the terrace outside the open door.

She lay on the floor in front of the dying fire, naked, disoriented. She rarely slept through the change—it was far too intense. In the rare times she had, it was due to utter exhaustion.

Obviously, a vicious battle followed by a shift via Sawyer’s magic compass equaled exhaustion.

Stiff, shivering, she pushed to her feet, shoved at her short, shaggy brown hair, and looked around. Her mind, her reason, her instincts worked perfectly well in wolf form, so she’d selected the room the night before due to not only its big, excellent bed, but also the desk.

She’d need a good work space for research.

But that was for later. Now she needed clothes, and God, she needed to eat. It wasn’t just the fasting from sundown to sunrise—a hard and fast rule of her pack—but the massive amount of energy the change burned. From woman to wolf, from wolf to woman.

Now she felt weak, shaky, and grateful Doyle had, however

reluctantly, carried up her duffle. She pawed through it, grabbing the first pants that came to hand, and dragged on ancient brown cargoes, then a faded Oxford sweatshirt and warm, thick socks an aunt had knitted her for her birthday one year.

She wanted a shower, a hot, endless shower, but needed fuel more.

Moving quietly, she stepped out of the room, scanned the hallway, thought back. She'd yet to see the kitchen, didn't know exactly where to find it, but went down the stairs.

She thought Bran had done damn well for himself with the big house on the Irish coast. Not just the size—though *wowzer*—but the style, the craftsmanship. And the clever, mystical touches here and there as a testament to his heritage.

Celtic knots worked into the decor—and dragons, sexy faeries. Good, strong colors; thick, rich woodwork. Compelling art—which reminded her she needed to see two pieces in particular.

Two of Sasha's paintings—two in which Bran had magickally hidden the stars. She trusted, absolutely, they were safe, but she wanted to see them for herself.

Meanwhile, with a hand pressed to her empty belly, she wandered. It seemed most likely the kitchen would be toward the rear of the house, so she headed that way in the gloomy half light of a rainy dawn.

She passed a manly sort of office—lots of leather in chocolate tones, dark green walls, big gorgeous desk. Another that surprised her with its old grand piano, a cello—she'd always wanted to learn how to play the cello—a collection of bodhran drums, flutes, and fiddles. A spacious sitting room that managed to look cozy, a gorgeous library that nearly had her putting aside hunger.

All with wide archways, with gleaming floors, with hearths ready to offer warmth and light.

How many rooms did the man need? she wondered. And finally found the kitchen.

Not just a kitchen, for all its spiffy style, but a big-ass lounge with

more leather in big-ass sofas and chairs, a ridiculously sized wall screen. Flanking the kitchen's other side? A game area—snooker table, a full bar that had certainly come out of some wonderful old pub, a couple of old-style pinball tables that again nearly had hunger taking a backseat.

She could have lived in this one huge room for the rest of her life. Especially with the wide glass doors bringing in that bad-tempered sky and gloomy sea.

“You’ve got class, Irish,” she murmured, and all but fell on the fruit piled artistically in a wide, polished wood bowl. Biting into a peach, nearly moaning at the first taste of food, she yanked open both doors of a refrigerator.

Pounced again.

Prying open the container of leftovers, she hunted up a fork, ate Annika’s chicken and rice dish cold, washing it down with a Coke—nearly giddy as her system celebrated the protein and caffeine connection.

Steadier, she studied the coffeemaker on the counter, decided, yes, she could work that. As she did, she heard footsteps. She tried not to resent them, but God, she could have used another hour of silence and solitude.

But when Sasha came in, when Riley saw the relief in her friend’s eyes, she felt small about that resentment.

“Need coffee,” she said.

“Me, too. How are you?”

Riley shrugged, grabbed mugs out of the glass-fronted cabinet. “Good. I inhaled the leftovers Annika left, so I’m good.”

And when Sasha’s arms wrapped around her from behind, Riley felt even smaller. “I had to run it off.”

“I know, I know. I felt you come back, so it’s all good. Are you still hungry?”

“Topped off for right now, thanks. How are you? You took some hits.”

“Bran took care of it. Sawyer got the brunt.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know. But he’s okay?”

“We all are. I hope he sleeps a few hours more—I thought you would.”

“Later, most likely. Had to fuel.” And fueled, Riley leaned back on the counter, smiled. “Some house.”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” With her coffee, Sasha wandered the kitchen. “I haven’t seen half of it yet—and I want to get outside, even in the rain, and just *see*. But it’s amazing. And I slept in a tower room with a magician. What could be more amazing than that?”

“Slept or had sex?”

Sasha’s eyes gleamed at Riley over the rim of her mug. “We did both.”

“I just knew you’d end up bragging.” Riley wandered over to the glass doors, looked out at the slow, thin rain and the gray sea. “It could be out there. In or under the water, like the other two. Another island, so there’s a reason there. I’ll have to see about getting us a boat.”

Sasha stepped up, looked out with her. “I appreciate you not asking, but I’ll answer anyway. I don’t know. I haven’t felt anything, not yet.”

“We just got here. We should have a little time to set things up before she comes at us again.”

“Sawyer said she kicked back at him hard during the shift—and you could see how hard. But he also said she weakened, and aged, before he let go.”

Riley nodded, sipped coffee. “That follows. We put that gray streak in her hair, those lines on her face after we busted her ass in Corfu. Maybe we’ll be dealing with an old crone who can barely work up a bitch slap this round. And no,” she added, “I don’t really believe that.”

“We have two of the stars, and we beat her twice. We’ll find the third.”

“Optimistic’s good.”

Sasha looked over at Riley. “Aren’t you?”

“I won’t diss positive thinking. It’s a good tool—as long as you’re willing to back it up.” Riley gestured. “We’ve got some room out there to train. More in the front, the forest side, but either way. We could set up a decent target range out there. Then there’s the woods. Gotta be at least five, six acres of them from what I ran through last night. Quiet, private. It’s Ireland, so we’re probably going to do a good chunk of training in the rain.”

When Sasha said nothing, Riley shot her a glance. “And we just got here. We all need to take a breath. I’m revved up,” she admitted. “Big, bloody battle, the moon, the shift.”

“Was it different, traveling in wolf form?”

“Exciting in its way, and weird, at least at first because I was healing as we flew, and I couldn’t really focus. The landing was fast and hard, and knocked me back.”

“I hear you.”

“Then I had to run it off. Mostly I like knowing my ground before the moon, so I can judge where’s safe for a run. But I had to work it off. Lucky, like I said, there are acres of private woods. You hooked a big magick fish, Sash.”

“You helped.”

“Me? I don’t remember casting out any lures for you.”

“You were my friend. The first friend I ever had who knew what I was, what I had, and accepted me for me. You gave me advice, you listened, you cared. And all that helped me be smart and strong enough to, well, cast those lures myself.”

“Boy, you owe me.”

Sasha laughed, gave Riley a one-armed hug. “I do. I’ll pay you

back, in part, by making breakfast. Since we're in Ireland, I'll go with Bran's specialty of a full Irish."

"I'll take it. I want to shower first. Didn't have a chance after the war."

"No rush. I want to walk and wander around the house first. I barely took anything in last night."

"Does Bran play the piano?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"He's got a beaut. Viennese parlor grand, mid-nineteenth century."

"Do you know everything?"

"Pretty much. He's also got a cello, violins, violas, flutes, and an exceptional collection of bodhran drums. He must play some of it."

"It's never come up, so I'll have to ask. Do you play anything?"

"Piano, sure, though it's been a while. And he's got a game room area over there that kicks major ass. And one small cathedral of a library."

"I think you've seen more of the house than I have."

"I didn't have sex."

"There is that."

Sasha turned as Annika—flowing hair, flowy dress, bare feet—came in.

"Riley!" As if it had been years, Annika dashed over, threw her arms around Riley.

"Yeah, good morning to you, too."

"We were worried. Doyle said not to, because you'd come back. But we worried. Now you're here! Good morning."

"How can you look like that first thing? Without coffee?"

"I don't like the coffee. But I like the mornings. Sawyer will rest a little longer, but he feels much better. He felt rested enough to mate, and I was very gentle."

"Sex." Riley shook her head. "It's always about sex. Tell me more—no, tell me more after I get that shower."

“I like sometimes to be above—on top,” she corrected. “On top when it should be gentle and slow. Then I can have many orgasms.”

“Right.” Riley let out a breath. “This may be a longer shower than initially planned.”

When Sasha laughed and Riley hurried out, Annika offered a puzzled smile. “I don’t understand. Does she need to get more clean?”

“No, she meant . . . I’ll explain, but I’m going to need more coffee.”

The next best thing to a hot shower was a hot meal. By the time Sasha—with an assist from Annika—put the meal together, the team had gathered in the kitchen.

Riley caught the scent—bacon!—heard the mix of voices as she wound her way back down.

“I keep a car here,” Bran said. “It’ll take all of us, but not comfortably.”

“I’ve got my bike,” Doyle put in. “And I can take one pillion.”

“True enough. I can arrange for a van, a kind of backup, in the event we want or need to go any distance in one vehicle. And there she is,” Bran added when Riley stepped in. “Sasha tells us you’ve healed and rested. And you found a room that suits you?”

“Yeah, thanks. I took one with a good-sized desk, facing the woods. It’s a lot of house, Irish,” she said as she snagged more coffee.

“It is. I thought, why go small? And when I have my family here, it fills up quick enough. We should eat, then I’ll show everyone around the place.”

“I hear the eating part.” Sawyer pulled a platter of eggs and fried potatoes out of the warming oven, left someone else to grab the platter of meat and stack of toasted bread.

The table snuggled in the rainy window showed Annika’s handiwork with napkins shaped into hearts, wooden skewers arranged in

a tepee with tiny flowers draping down and a single white rosebud spearing out of the top. Tea lights formed another heart, its center filled with rose petals.

Bran lit them with a flick of a finger, and made her clap.

“Your gardens are so pretty in the rain,” she told Bran. “I think if I lived in this castle by the sea, I would never want to leave.”

“I like knowing I can come back to it.”

“She likes the rain, too.” Sawyer heaped food on his plate. “I’ve gotta say, I’m going to miss the island sunshine.”

“I’m ready for the rain.” Sasha passed a platter to Doyle. “It’ll give us a day to regroup.”

“It’s Ireland,” Riley reminded her. “We’re likely to get more than a day of wet. But yeah, a little regrouping’s earned, considering. Any clue where you dumped her, Sawyer?”

“Not one. But she was hurting when I did.”

As he ate, he filled her in as he had the others.

“It fits. We hit her where it hurts, she loses ground, her grip gets slippery. It should give us some time. What about Malmon? Or the thing Malmon’s become?”

“Slipped through,” Doyle said. “He’s stronger, faster than he was.”

“Can he stay that way without her?” Riley wondered. “That’s a question. I’m going to assume you’ve got this place locked down, Bran.”

“You assume correctly.”

“So the stars are here, and safe.”

“They are. I’ll show you, as you’ll want to see for yourself. I’m thinking you chose your room for the work space, and will likely use it. But there’s another area you might find useful as well.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“The north tower. We’ll have a look at it after breakfast.”

“Can you dig we’ve got a north tower?” Grinning, Sawyer ate more bacon. “A south one, too. And check it.” He jerked a thumb at the pinball machines in the lounge area.

“Caught that. I’ll kick your ass on them later.”

“You will try,” Sawyer told Riley. “You will fail. We need a new assignment chart.”

Sasha nodded. “I’ll take care of that this morning, but since Annika and I handled breakfast, I hereby assign Riley and Doyle to KP. I’ve had a look at the food and cleaning supplies, and we’re more than set there for now, so that puts off shopping for a while, on the domestic front.”

“I would like to shop in Ireland.”

Riley arched her eyebrows at Annika. “If shopping was an Olympic sport, you’d have all the medals. But at some point, she’s going to need some rain gear.”

“Some extras there in the mudroom,” Bran said, “but we’ll want to get out and about. I know the land here, and villages, but I’ve never looked at either with the quest in mind.”

“We’ll need more ammo,” Doyle pointed out.

“Something else I haven’t had in mind while here.”

“I’ve got some contacts.” Riley shrugged. “I’ll make some calls.”

“And that’s as big a surprise as Annika shopping. We lost some bolts in the last battle,” Doyle continued. “And plenty of bullets.”

“I’ll take care of it, and once I unpack my books and maps, I’ll start working on—”

“Can we take a moment?” Sasha interrupted. “I know we can’t let up. I know we need to take advantage of the time we might have before Nerezza comes at us again. But can we take a moment to just be? We’re all here, around this table, in this place, after facing what seemed like almost impossible odds against survival, much less success. But we’re here, and so are two of the stars. That’s a miracle, I think. It was hard won, but still a miracle.”

“You’re right.” Bran met her eyes, then scanned the table. “We’ll take our moment, and be stronger for it.”

“Works for me.” Doyle spoke casually, then glanced at Sasha.

“When you’re doing that assignment chart, just make time and room for daily training. Including calisthenics.”

Sasha heaved a sigh. “That’s cruel, Doyle.”

“Hey, I need my moment, too. You’ve toughened up, Blondie, but that was in Sawyer’s island sunshine. Let’s see how you handle fifty squats and push-ups in the rain.”

“I may have an alternative to that. If we’re finished here,” Bran continued, “I can show you all. And the stars as well. KP can wait a bit, I’d think.”

“It can wait for eternity in my world.”

“Your world *is* eternity,” Sawyer reminded Doyle, but took Annika’s hand and rose. “I vote for full house tour.”

“Let’s start at the top then.” When Bran rose, he held out a hand for Sasha’s. “I’ve a lot to show you.”

They trooped up the back stairs, followed Bran’s lead as he made a turn on the second-floor landing and veered up to the right.

“Access to the roof area,” he explained. “The views are spectacular from there, even on a wet day.”

He wasn’t wrong, Riley thought once Bran opened a thick arched door, and she stepped out into the rain.

The wide, flat area of the roof afforded a three-sixty view.

The angry chop of the steel-gray sea and its violent slap on rock and cliff. The thunder of it boomed and crashed below dense layers of clouds, sluggishly sailing in a brooding wind.

As she turned, she could see the faint shadows of hills curtained behind the gray mist of sky, and around to the forest, deep and shadowed and green. Beyond where she’d run the night before, she saw now a cottage or two, and fields dotted with sheep, the thin plumes of smoke from chimneys where hearths burned on a wet summer day.

“It’s a good situation.” Doyle spoke from behind her. “Even on a day like this, we could spot an attack from a half mile or more. And it’s high ground, with cover close.”

He moved over, looked down from the crenelated wall. "It'll be useful."

"I can smell the sea," Annika murmured.

"And hear it," Sawyer put in. "Taking a boat out on that's going to be tricky."

"I'll score us a dive boat and the equipment," Riley said absently. "We'll handle it. Is that a graveyard? At about ten o'clock? How old do you figure . . ."

She remembered, belatedly. This had been Doyle's family's land. Cursing herself, she turned to him. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"The first would have been my great-grandmother, who died in 1582, in childbirth with her sixth child. So old enough. Though archaeologists usually want to dig deeper than that, don't they?"

"Depends."

"In any case," he continued as if she hadn't spoken, "it's a good, strategic situation."

"And before we all drown in the rain, let me show you what else should be useful."

As Bran led the way back in, Sasha rubbed a hand down Riley's arm. When Riley mimed pointing a gun at her head, firing, Sasha shook her head, gave that arm a squeeze.

Then they both moved more quickly when they heard Annika's shout of delight.

They followed the sound, made a turn, and came into a third-floor area spread under a half dozen skylights.

"Hot damn!" Riley didn't do handsprings—as Annika did in front of the wall of mirrors that obviously delighted her—but she did rub her hands together.

The excellent home gym had bamboo floors the color of raw honey, a full circuit of machines. Two treadmills and a pair of elliptical machines faced the rain-splattered wall of windows, as did a recumbent bike. A TRX dominated one corner; a full-sized, glass-

fronted refrigerator—already stocked with water and energy drinks—another.

It boasted weight benches, free weights, a rolled stack of yoga mats, kettlebells, medicine balls, balance balls.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you,” Riley said, and immediately plucked a ten-pound weight from the rack.

“Good enough, I’d think, for those calisthenics if the weather doesn’t cooperate.”

Doyle shrugged at Bran’s comment. “Battles happen in foul weather as much as fair. But . . . It’ll be useful. Hmm. Chin-up bar.”

“Oh, hell,” Sasha muttered, and made him smile.

“Why don’t you try it out, Blondie? Show us what you’ve got.”

“I’m still having my moment.”

“Tomorrow then. First light. I can work some circuits into the training, and the weights are welcome. But we run outside, rain or shine. A machine doesn’t give you the feel of the ground under your feet.”

“The walls are so shiny!” Annika executed a graceful and perfect handstand in front of the mirror. “I like to see how it looks.”

“So would I, if I looked like you.” After a few biceps curls, Riley replaced the weight. “Free to use anytime, Irish?”

“It’s yours as it’s mine.”

“Solid. I’m going to grab some gym time later. That’ll be my moment,” she told Sasha.

“It takes all kinds. I intend to set up my easel.”

“Speaking of easels, and paintings . . .” Riley turned to Bran.

“That’s next. I should tell you there’s a wet area through those doors.”

“Wet?” Annika said, coming neatly to her feet.

“A steam room, a Jacuzzi, a shower, and a changing area. I regret the lack of a pool.”

“Oh, it’s all right. The sea’s so close.”

Smiling, he gestured toward the door. “There’s some storage on

this level,” he began as he led them out. “More bedrooms, a sitting area.”

“How big is this family of yours?” Sawyer asked.

“Including cousins?” With a laugh, Bran paused at a door in a rounded wall—a door of dark wood that looked ancient and had no knob, no hinges. “Well over a hundred, I’d think.”

“A . . . *hundred?*”

He laughed again at Sasha’s reaction. “Too late for you to back out now, *mo chroí.*”

Bran held his hand to the door, palm out. He spoke in Irish, had Doyle shooting him a look.

*For me and mine only, open.*

At the words, the gesture, a bolt of lightning scored down the wood, glowed and pulsed blue.

And the door opened.

“Better than a police lock, riot bar, and guard dog,” Riley said.

“It will only open for one of us. As will the doors on the second and the first level to this tower. What’s held inside is safe from any who try to take.”

Bran gestured them in.

Riley didn’t gasp, but it was close.

His workshop, she thought, or magick shop. Sorcerer’s den. Whatever the term, like the rest of the house, it rang all the bells.

It towered inside the tower—which shouldn’t have been physically or structurally possible.

Then again, magick.

Floating shelves held bottles, jars, boxes. She recognized some plants—under eerily glowing lights—the chalices, the ritual knives, the cauldrons and bowls.

Balls and spears of crystal. Books with leather covers, some probably centuries old. Mirrors, candles, charms, statues.

Brooms, she noted, and bones, runes, and tarot cards.

And above a stone hearth, Sasha's paintings.

Here, of course, Riley thought. Magicks within magicks within magicks. Safe from evil, within the light.

"I told you I bought the first of your paintings before I met you, before I knew you." Bran put an arm over Sasha's shoulders as they studied them. "I saw it in a gallery in New York and wanted it. Needed it," he corrected.

"My path through the woods, one I knew so well, leading here. Though only I knew it led here. I often walked that path, toward that light you painted so beautifully, and I thought to hang the painting at my flat in New York to remind me of this. But I brought it here, even then. I placed it here, in my most precious place."

"I dreamed it." Alone, and so long before she'd ever met him. "I dreamed the path and the trees and the light, but I couldn't see the end of the path. Not until now."

"And the second, its companion, you painted from visions as well, visions that guided us here. Not just to home, but to the third star. We'll find it here."

The end of the path, Riley thought, the magnificent house where they now stood, glowing under soft light, festooned with gardens, rising over a turbulent sea.

Things came in threes, she thought—not only the stars, but other things. Would Sasha paint a third?

"Inside your visions, inside your art, the stars shine safe."

Bran lifted both hands. The paintings shimmered, an overlay of color. Red on the path, blue on the house. And they slid out of that world into his hands, closed in clear glass, bright and bold as truth.

"Ours to guard," Bran said. "And the third, the Ice Star, to find."

"And when there are three—fire, water, ice—in the hands of the guardians, the battles will not end." As she spoke, Sasha's eyes went dark, went deep. "When there are three, as three were made, as three were given to the worlds, the dark will seek more blood, more death."

Defeat her in unity. Fall to her in chaos. Choices to make, paths to take. Hold true, hold three, one by two, and then, only then, will the Island of Glass appear. Only then will it open to the valiant and the brave heart.

“Will you travel the storm?” With the vision on her like a thousand suns, she whirled to the others. “Will you leap into faith? Will you see what lives inside the stone and sorrow? Will you hear what calls your name? And find the last, and finding, hold strong, hold true?”

On a long breath, Sasha closed her eyes.

“It’s cold.”

Immediately Bran shot a look at the hearth, had flames leaping to life.

“No, I meant— Sorry. Where it is, the star. Wherever it is, it’s cold. I can’t see it, but I can feel it. And I don’t guess any of that was much help.”

“Beg to differ.” Riley gave her a rub on the shoulder. “You let us know part three’s not the finish. No point looking at it as done when it won’t be. We find it, we fight the bitch, and we find the Island of Glass. And get there, with the three stars. Piece of cake, right? If you like rock-hard cake with dirt icing.”

“I’m up for it,” Sawyer said. “Cake’s cake.”

“I like cake,” Annika said.

“Wouldn’t be the first dirt I’ve eaten.” Doyle looked at the stars. “We find the star, we find the island. Whatever it takes.”

“I’d say unity’s been met, and we’ve already chosen the path.” Bran lifted the stars toward the paintings. They rose to them, slid inside.

To wait for the third.