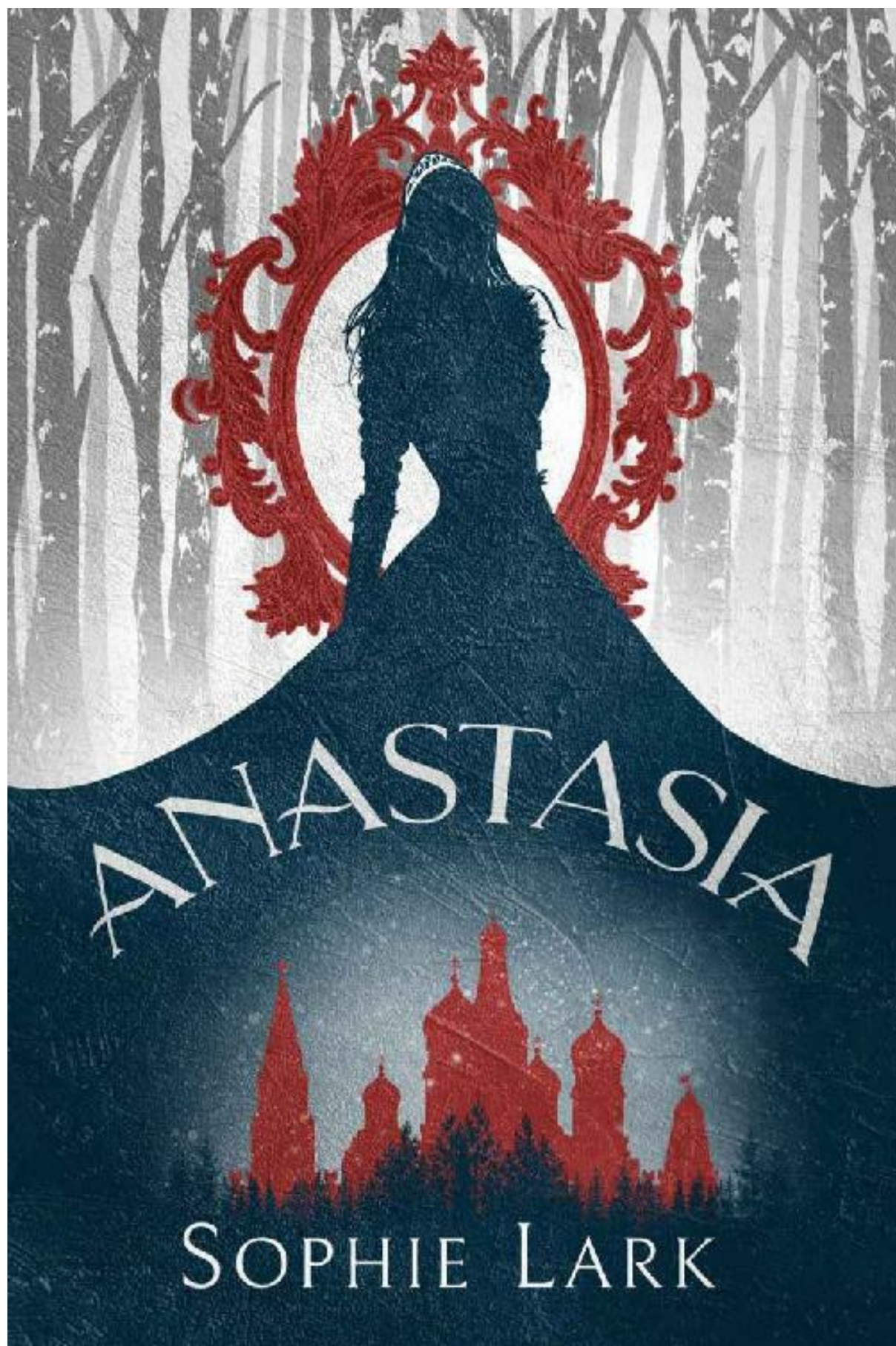
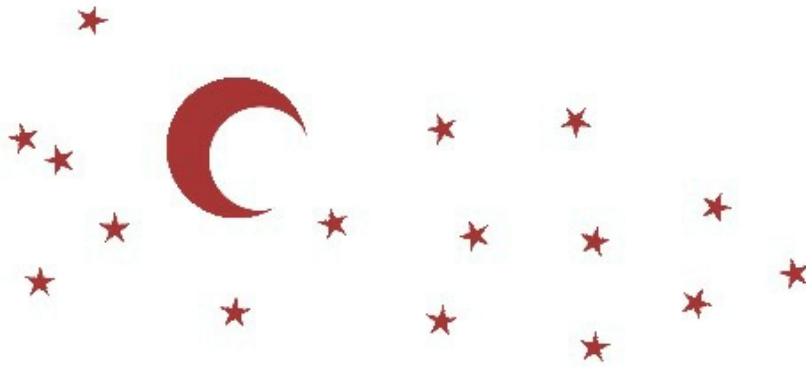


ANASTASIA

SOPHIE LARK





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SOPHIE LARK

WHERE TO START

romantic suspense

BRUTAL BIRTHRIGHT

1. BRUTAL PRINCE
2. STOLEN HEIR

dark romance

SINNERS DUET

1. THERE ARE NO SAINTS
2. THERE IS NO DEVIL



MY WEBSITE



AMAZON



PATREON

ANASTASIA

SOPHIE LARK



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DEDICATION

For D.A.C., who knew it was time for Anastasia to get her happy ending.

For my muse Line, who inspired me every single day with her art.

And for Ry, my other half. I've never felt more powerful than when you charge me up. All the things I've done that matter most, you were right there beside me, giving me everything you have.

Xoxo

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Sophie Lark". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal tail on the "k".

ANASTASIA SOUNDTRACK

1. 10,000 Emerald Pools - BØRNS
2. The Tradition - Halsey
3. Dreams - The Cranberries
4. Retrograde - James Blake
5. Sunlight - Hozier
6. I'm Ready - Niykee Heaton
7. Where's My Love (Acoustic) - SYML
8. NFWMB - Hozier
9. Infinity - Niykee Heaton
10. The Chain - Fleetwood Mac
11. Once Upon a December (from Anastasia) - Emile Pandolfi
12. Imagine - Jack Johnson
13. Better Days - NEIKED, Mae Muller, Polo G
14. Make You Mine - PUBLIC
15. Unstoppable - Sia
16. Rasputin - Boney M.
17. Problématique - Lenovie
18. Kwaak (mazurka) - Andoorn



 Spotify



 Apple Music

PREFACE

I think what captivates us about Anastasia is our dream of what could have been. Anastasia's death was so tragic, I wanted to give her another life.

This book is not a retelling of any other Anastasia story. It's set in 1919 in a world similar to ours, but with magic.

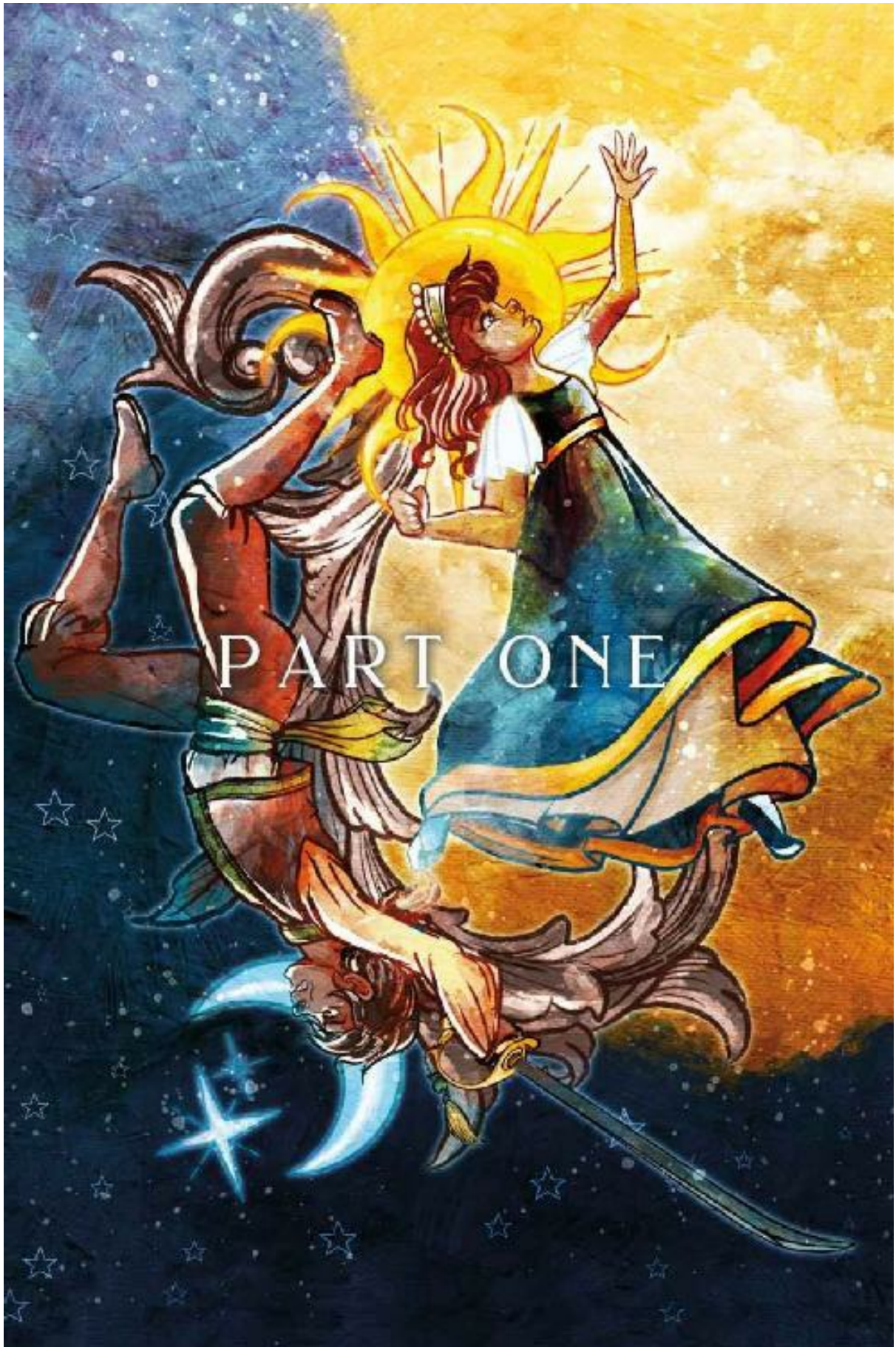
This is my fantasy of the happy ending Anastasia deserved. Not because she was a Romanov, but because she was a human.

I want all of you to have the happy ending you deserve—it's why I love writing romance.

—SOPHIE









prologue
FIRST BLOOD

GEZIRAH PALACE HOTEL
CAIRO, EGYPT

Husani sat in the lounge of the Gezirah Palace Hotel in his favorite seat at the end of the bar. The bartender kept him stocked with free seltzer and mango juice because Husani was hard at work, though from the outside it looked as if he were doing nothing more than leaning on his elbow, watching the queues of Albion tourists waiting to take the steamer up the Nile to view the pharaonic remains.

The guides wore loose white tunics and turbans, while the tourists, ignorant of the blazing desert sun and sand, dressed in layers of dark wool, the men in bowler hats, the women in petticoats that reminded Husani of layered cakes. They looked pink and sweaty and miserable.

Inside the hotel was cool as the breeze from a tomb. The airy archways and marble fountains attracted aristocrats from all over Europe. They ignored Husani, having no idea how much of their comfort they owed to

him.

Husani was a little shorter than average, slightly built, with shaggy hair and a deep brown tan. The hotel paid him enough that he was remarkably spruce for someone born in a brothel and raised in an orphanage. The Serene Sisters had been quick with the switch but they'd taught him to read, which he viewed as the greatest gift he'd ever receive.

He wiled away the long hours at the hotel burning his way through any book he could get his hands on. He'd made a deal with the housemaids where they passed along novels abandoned by departed guests and he provided unlimited ice for their water.

Currently, he was nearing the end of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Husani was lost in a world of ruffly French frocks and false-bottomed picnic baskets when a woman entered the lounge.

All sorts of beautiful and stylish people frequented the Gezirah, yet this girl yanked his head around like she'd hooked a finger in his mouth and pulled. It was something in the way she moved, gliding above the corner of his page like she was underwater and everyone else in dry air.

Husani wondered if she was a dancer. She wore embroidered slippers and silk trousers with a head wrap of the same material. Her glossy dark hair hung loose underneath, black as an Egyptian's though her skin was fair.

She took a seat at the bar, just three down from Husani. With all the empty chairs, she could easily have taken a seat by the window overlooking the fountains. Her eyes met his as she slipped onto the stool. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Her hands looked smooth and soft as cream. Husani could imagine her making shapes with them like a belly dancer.

She asked the bartender for a gin and tonic. Her voice was lower than he expected and sounded close, right in his ear almost. The little hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He could feel every shift in the air.

Even Monto, who'd been serving drinks at the hotel for thirty years, couldn't help staring.

"On the house," he muttered.

Husani wanted to tell the woman she'd gotten the only free drink he'd ever heard of out of Monto. He'd love to tell her just about anything but never would have had the guts if she hadn't turned and looked right at him. Her velvety eyes slid over the spine of his book.

"I've read that one."

She said it like a secret, like they might be the only two who'd ever read it. Husani was dying to reply with something brilliant but his brain

had emptied out like a sieve. He hadn't realized he was even holding a book anymore.

"Did you like it?" he blurted. His voice cracked like a kid's.

The girl only smiled.

"Immensely. I love a good disguise."

"Are you an actress?"

That voice ... it'd be wasted on a dancer.

"A writer, actually."

She might as well have said she was the goddess Isis. Writers were the source of everything he loved best.

"What do you write?"

"Poetry, mostly."

"I'd love to hear some."

Now her smile was both warm and approving.

"I'm glad you know that poetry ought to be heard, not read."

Husani felt tipsy, as if he'd been drinking much more than mango juice.

Rashly, he said, "I might like to be a writer. Someday."

"The man who waits for 'someday' waits all his life ..." She swirled her straw lazily, her nails lacquered red.

"I've written a few things. Just scribbles, really. But sometimes, once in a while, there's a line I think could turn into something ..."

"And what do you do when you're not writing?" she said in that lilting, teasing voice. He found himself leaning closer to her, the way a plant will grow toward a window.

"You're looking at it right now."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Drinking mango juice?"

"No." He flushed, wishing he were allowed to have a proper drink. He'd have ordered a gin and tonic himself, and then they'd have had all the more in common. "I'm ... well, let me show you."

He took his chance to slide off his stool and slip onto the one directly next to hers.

"May I?"

He put his hand close to her glass.

"Go ahead."

She leaned in, lips parting slightly.

He pressed his palm against the side of the tumbler. The drink frosted over in an instant, so cold that a curl of condensation rose in the air like a ghost of a breath.

“So beautiful. Like lace ...” She trailed one dark red nail against the side of the glass where the frost had formed shapes. She raised the glass to her lips and sipped gin so cold it must feel like a thousand tiny blades down her throat.

“Incredible,” she said, almost in a growl.

A shiver ran down Husani’s spine. Something else happened in his trousers that forced him to press his knees together and turn toward the bar. He was sweating, and he turned up the cold automatically.

The girl let out a sigh, her shoulders relaxing.

“Much better. Is that you?” Her eyes closed with pleasure.

“Yeah.” His voice was steady now, confident. “The ice, the frozen sherbet, and all of this ...”

He swept his hand around to indicate the entire hotel at a perfect seventy-two degrees at all times, a literal oasis in the desert no matter the temperature outside.

“Remarkable,” the girl murmured. “I’ve never seen that kind of range.”

Husani thought he might just jump off a bridge to keep impressing this woman. The way she looked at him made him feel ten feet tall.

“What’s that accent?” he said. “Are you ... Italian?”

“Further away than that.”

Her smile showed only the edges of her teeth. Husani couldn’t stop looking at her mouth.

He’d never been in love but he was starting to think he’d like to try it. Surely it was destiny how this girl appeared all alone just as the sun was going down. Husani was only allowed to leave when the heat of the day had all bled away.

He saw a vision of the two of them walking hand in hand down the plaza with strings of colored flags overhead, bathed in sweet hookah smoke and the music seeping from the doorways of the tea shops. She could recite one of her poems to him in that voice that felt like fingers stroking through his hair, and he might possibly have the courage to read her a few lines of a story in return.

“Have you seen much of the city yet?” he asked her. “The spice bazaar or the hanging gardens? I could show you, I’ve lived here all my life ...”

“Could you really? I haven’t seen anything yet.”

Her smile was like fireworks in his head.

His mind leaped far ahead of any reasonable reality and ran straight through a kiss or even a night together, all the way to them curled up in a little flat on the north side of the city, writing all day long while eating sun-warmed figs and laying on cushions with their bare feet entwined.

He saw this vision so clearly that it almost seemed to float in the air before his eyes. When he snapped back, the woman hadn't seemed to notice.



He scrambled off the stool.
The sky had gone completely dark by the time they exited the hotel.

Husani was too used to the stunning desert sky to even look up, but the girl stood still and gazed upward, the starlight turning her cheeks silvery. When she turned to him, she seemed to have come alive in a whole new way.

“Anything lovely by daylight is even better by night.”

“*You* are,” Husani breathed.

She smiled all the way now, teeth glinting.

“I want to see the moon over the river.”

She led him down toward the water. Husani thought he should call out to her not to get too close—the river was thick with crocodiles. But he felt a strange and dreamy warmth that didn’t allow him to believe there could actually be any crocodiles tonight.

“Come on.” She held out her pale hand.

He seemed to fall rather than walk to her.

Her face drew closer to his. He drowned in eyes so dark they seemed all pupil.

Even in that delirium, he held onto a shred of the old caution he’d learned in the orphanage. He only closed his eyes partway. As their lips touched he saw, for a fraction of a second, the way her eyes seemed to flicker and her face changed in some incomprehensible way, as if someone had gripped the crown of her hair and pulled tight, yanking the skin back.

Ice blasted from his palms, smashing into her chest.

The ice didn’t come from him exactly, but from the air directly in front of his hands. It rocketed outward, half-formed, viciously cold, hitting her with a force that should have frosted her heart.

She staggered, making some inhuman sound. Hair stood up all down his arms. She rushed at him and he tried to hit her again and again, throwing ice with both hands, pouring out every ounce of the extraordinary power he possessed. She slipped and darted like an eel, a flash in the dark he could hardly follow.

Her nails slashed out, catching him across the face, the throat, the belly. It was white-hot heat and instant agony. The torn flesh bled heavily, especially at his neck. He clamped his hand over the wound, warmth leaking through his fingers.

“Stop!”

A male voice rang in his ears.

Husani felt himself freeze in place as if he were the one encased in ice. He couldn’t move. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t even breathe. His chest was stiff as iron, unyielding against the automatic hitching of his lungs.

“I told you to wait for me,” the man said quietly.