



**Bernadette  
Gardner**

**More Than  
A Fantasy**

## MORE THAN A FANTASY

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When she lifted her head again, two shadows framed her own on the pale dunes. Startled, she pushed herself up and turned around, clutching her gauzy beach cover-up over her breasts.

Good Lord, this was already an excellent dream. Her vivid imagination had conjured two incredible male specimens.

The one on the left had hair the color of sun-bleached wheat and eyes like polished beryl. He was a mountain of ripped muscle—massive arms, broad chest, narrow hips. Naked and wet, he strolled toward her, a magnificent erection growing between his powerful legs with each determined stride.

The one on the right was her dark fantasy lover from yesterday. Bold blue eyes locked hers in a gaze she couldn't break. He matched the blond man step for step, muscle for muscle. His cock was longer, jutted higher, where the other's was thicker and tautly ridged like some exotic dildo.

Mara licked her lips. Which one would she have first? Maybe both at once?

*Eenie meenie meinie—oh!*

The blond one grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet. "Tell me what you'd like me to do to you, woman."

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BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

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Copyright © 2006 by Jennifer Colgan  
ISBN 1-59279-513-7

Cover Art © 2006 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*For the ladies of RWG and Romance Divas*

# MORE THAN A FANTASY

As she shrugged out of her bikini top and thigh-high denim cutoffs, Mara Zander felt the intoxicating weight of a masculine gaze on her body. Or at least, she imagined she did.

At dusk on the secluded beach of the Zander family prison—or “compound,” as her father preferred to call it—Mara once again found herself with nothing to do but indulge her fantasies on a sultry Aegean night.

Tonight she conjured a dark, dangerous man with eyes the color of the sea, coal-black hair and big, rough hands that ached to caress her sun-kissed skin.

While she made her way down the white sand, tossing her top and shorts behind her, she imagined him watching her from the far side of the tumble of volcanic rocks that kept the alcove secluded from the rest of the Zander family island. Her nipples hardened at the thought, and she swayed her hips for her imaginary hero, enticing him to make use

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of the hot, hard erection he had for her.

“Come on, baby. Come and get it...” she taunted her sexy phantom, imagining him climbing over the rocks and stalking toward her when she knelt at the water’s edge.

She dipped her fingers in the cool surf and spread white foam on her shoulders. She arched her back for her fantasy lover, her breasts jutting into the warm night air for his eager touch. Her skin tingled in the salty breeze and her curvy shadow stretched out beside her, waiting for an equally incorporeal mate.

She sighed and squeezed her thighs together against the rising ache in the sensitive flesh that longed for the touch of a real man.

Since her father had fled the embattled and short-lived city/state of Corcoran as a political pariah, she hadn’t even seen a man who wasn’t a bodyguard or a local fisherman. The bodyguards might have provided her with some diversion during the long, hot nights, but none of them dared touch her, let alone fuck her. The seven burly men all answered to her father. Not one of them would dare his wrath no matter what she did to entice them. As for the fishermen...none of them seemed to be under seventy.

If things didn’t change soon, so she could get back to her life, her job and her various boyfriends in New York, she’d go stark-raving insane.

“Come on! Come and take it!” She rose, then ran into the water, daring her fantasy stud to follow. As she stroked out a few yards, naked in the crystalline waves, she pictured her dark Adonis coming after her, splashing into the surf and overtaking her. She would try to avoid him, pretend to put up a fight. A little bit of resistance made the prize sweeter. But he’d catch up quickly, loop one thickly muscled arm around her waist and drag her against his tattooed chest. The thought of surrendering her body to a powerful man after a playful battle of wills made her so hot, the water around her practically steamed.



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Mara arched and undulated, her eyes drifting closed at the sinful idea of his rough hands on her ass and his hot tongue licking salty water from the deep valley between her breasts. She felt him thrusting that burning erection between her legs to give her a little taste of what he had in store for her. He'd follow the tease with his fingers, long and skillful, exploring her, pushing inside and spreading her until she almost came.

She moaned and swam a few strokes toward shore. Now he'd get angry at her coy refusal. He'd grab a fistful of her auburn hair and pull back her head, exposing her neck, which he'd bite, scraping his teeth against her tingling skin. She'd push him away with her hands, yet at the same time, she'd draw her shaking legs tight around his waist until she felt his cock, like a steel rod settling against her mound. She'd rub against that stiff intrusion, but not take him inside yet. She'd give him a wide-eyed stare that said, "Oh, you're too big for me, too thick and long and hard."

He wouldn't buy that at all. He'd kick toward shore with his massive thighs and drag her onto the sand.

With her hands braced on his chest, her hair streaming in the sand around her and her body on fire from his touch, she'd beg him, first sweetly, then with a touch of fear in her voice—"Be gentle with me, baby. I'm so tight."

Yeah. He'd like that. But gentle? No. He'd know she didn't want it easy. He'd spread her legs and show her his cock. Her mouth would form into a startled "O" at his impressive size, and she'd squeeze her eyes closed as if she couldn't bear to watch.

Then he'd do it. He'd plunge inside her and she'd cry out, "God, yes!" He'd take her so hard, their bodies would inch up the wet sand with each fevered thrust. He'd work her relentlessly, with a single-minded power, like a sex machine. He wouldn't stop, even when she panted his name and begged him to slow down so she could breath

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easier.

She'd feel it in her bones when he started to come. His abs would contract against hers and he'd move faster, pounding her harder until she had to hold her breath. With her legs wrapped around his broad back and her arms flung over her head, she'd gasp his name and let him know he had complete control over her.

They'd orgasm together, screaming, and the sea would wash over their sweating bodies and reclaim the salty spill of his come.

Mara lay on the sand, breathing hard, staring at the stars that had begun to appear like pinpricks in the curtain of night.

*If only...*

She slipped back into the darkening waves to wash the sand off her back and legs, then ran up the beach to retrieve her clothes. Maybe tomorrow, there'd be two men waiting for her when she took her evening walk, one dark, the other blond, both eager to fight for the right to take her into the olive grove up the beach and give her what she craved.

*If only...*

\* \* \*

Prince Tiran gave a low, appreciative moan as he watched the flame-haired human female bring herself to completion on the deserted beach. Unbidden, his long-fingered hand slithered down to caress his straining cock as he imagined levering himself above her nubile body and fucking her.

She obviously wanted it. Even from this distance, perched on the volcanic rocks, his body morphed to blend with his surroundings, he could smell her arousal on the tepid breeze. The taste of her flavored the sea air with a hint of female musk that drove him wild with desire.

A willing human female was the secret fantasy of every Atlantean male. Why were the dry-skinned, land-locked, mortal creatures so enticing? Because eons ago, the leaders of his race had decreed there

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would be no more cross breeding. His ancestors had disguised themselves as gods and used their power to control humans. They demanded worship, raped, pillaged and begot mutated offspring that became the stuff of human myth and legends and the seeds of Atlantean shame.

Now that humans were more sophisticated, more curious and dangerous than their predecessors, and less easily cowed by god-like parlor tricks, his people dared no congress with them at all.

Of course, that didn't stop the young males from dreaming, from spying on the occasional human female, and this one seemed to want just that. She cavorted on the sand and in the shallow water, displaying her pert breasts, running her hands down to the thatch of curls between her legs, and teasing herself until she came in a shuddering orgasm that Tiran felt in his bones.

If she enjoyed sex that much by herself, imagine what she might be like with a male to share her body.

Tiran circled his rigid cock with his hand and began to work himself to orgasm. As his body tensed with need, he imagined her beneath him, her hands roaming his body, her legs locked around him when he drove into her. He pictured her fiery hair splayed around her bare shoulders, and her lips parted in a gasp of delight as he took her to the edge of ecstasy. With that vision in his mind, he spilled his seed on the brine-soaked rocks.

Why did he prefer watching the human to copulating with an Atlantean female? As a member of the royal bloodline, he could command any unmated female to his chambers and order her to perform any sexual act he wished, over and over again. In fact, there were females waiting for just such an opportunity, hoping to secure his favor and earn the privilege of becoming his mate.

And yet, he swam to the small, lonely beach each day at sunset and waited for his sand maiden to shed her clothing for his pleasure.

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Sated now, he watched her gather her clothes and slide her sumptuous body into them. She tossed her long hair behind her and shook the blazing curls free of sand. With regret, Tiran watched her saunter toward the narrow path among the dunes that led to the white, boxy structures where she lived.

“Good night, beauty,” he said, then morphed back into his natural form. He turned to climb down from the rocks, and came face to face with his brother, Poseidon, named for one of those very ancestors whose terrible abuses of humans had led to the decree.

“Watching your land nymph again?” Poseidon mocked, his lips curling in a sneer. He brushed a lock of pale hair out of his eyes and vaulted onto the rocks to sit next to Tiran. “Still wishing you had the balls to break the rules and make her yours?”

Tiran sighed. “I know the penalty, brother. But there’s no law against watching her.”

“I was watching her, too.” Poseidon threw back his head and whistled, his sharp profile lit in silvery tones by the rising moon. “And I read her as well.”

A ribbon of jealousy wound around Tiran’s gut, forming a knot. Poseidon was older, next in line to succeed their father as a member of the Atlantean triumvirate and even more in demand by unwed females of their race. He had no need of Tiran’s sand maiden, and to read her thoughts was nearly as bad as the crime of copulation, and next to impossible to prove.

“You had no right. Leave her alone.”

“She doesn’t want to be left alone. She’s longing for a man—two, in fact.”

Tiran scoffed. From what little his generation knew of humans, one thing was certain—they were monogamous and mated for life, unlike Atlanteans, who made matches based on compatible DNA structures. Sex play, of course, was encouraged, but true mating occurred only

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when all the parameters were considered favorable. Couples wed only when they were prepared to commit to the rearing of numerous children.

“I’m not lying, Tiran. You can read me and find out for yourself. She dreams of two strong men battling for her, each offering her unbridled carnal pleasures. She pictures them trying to best each other physically until they come to blows. When one lies defeated in the sand, she imagines the victor carrying her off to a secluded clearing and using her body in a dozen different ways.” Poseidon smirked. “She’s very imaginative for a human.”

Tiran looked away. “Stop. I don’t want to hear any more.” But Tiran lied. The details of the female’s fantasy excited him. If Poseidon was correct, she didn’t want two mates, only the stronger one. Like Atlantean women, she wanted the male who could prove his genetic superiority.

“I put images of the two of us in her mind,” Poseidon continued. “She’s seen us both now, dark and light, like two opposing sides of a coin.”

Tiran raised his brows in surprise and anger. “I will tell the triumvirate what you’ve done.”

Poseidon laughed. “And have both of us punished for entertaining thoughts of congress with a human? Would you chance being forbidden from even visiting this place? Rather, why not indulge the human’s fantasy? I won’t tell if you won’t. One of us will win her affections and the right to take her, just one time. And the other will promise to keep silent about it. We’ll both be guilty, so confession by either of us will damn the other as well.”

Tiran considered. To touch her, talk to her, perhaps even feel her yield to him one glorious time might soothe his rampant desire and allow him to concentrate on the more important prospect of finding a suitable Atlantean mate.

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But what if Poseidon won their battle?

Tiran eyed his brother and nodded agreement. He would see to it that Poseidon did *not* win.

\* \* \*

Dinner at her father's table was a silent, tense affair that usually soured Mara's appetite before the second course. Tonight was no exception. She sat across from Thanatos Zander while sullenly pushing a salmon croquet around her plate.

More than the forced seclusion, more than being torn from her job and her friends, Mara resented that her father made her feel like an unruly teenager. He still babied her unmercifully, which was why she'd moved out of the family estate at nineteen to start her own life.

Now at the age of twenty-six and back under his rule, she represented his greatest weakness, a weakness his enemies would exploit at their first opportunity, and he treated her alternately like a china doll or a foolish adolescent.

She loved her father. And she hated him.

"You weren't in your studio this afternoon," he said after a contemplative sip of wine. "I looked for you."

"I didn't feel like painting today."

"With all this beauty around you, I'd think you'd be painting all the time." He tried to smile, but the expression looked forced. At sixty-two, he'd lived a major portion of his life as a thorn in the side of numerous governments. He made enemies wherever he went, collecting them like some men collected baseball cards. The stress of a life lived outside the boundaries of society was taking a toll, and lately, he seemed incapable of any genuine emotion except thinly veiled anxiety.

Mara gave her father a pointed look, gauging the level of his tolerance this evening by the squint of his dark brown eyes. "If I paint one more seascape, I'll go berserk. In fact, I'm throwing away every tube of blue paint I own. I want to paint flames or autumn leaves or a

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rainy cityscape, anything that doesn't have blue sky or blue water in it."

"Most people would kill to have the view you've got. You should enjoy it while you can." His gold-plated flatware clinked impatiently on the plate as he scooped a bite of his dinner.

"While I can? How long will that be? You make it sound like our little island vacation might be coming to an end soon." *If only...*

He sipped his wine again and dabbed a snow-white linen napkin against his thin lips. "It will be soon. Then you'll miss this place. I don't understand how you can be so anxious to return to the squalor of that city."

"It's not the city I miss, Papa. It's the people in it. There's no one to talk to here. No one to laugh with."

"I'm no one?"

Mara sighed. They'd had this same fruitless conversation so many times. Her father felt guilty. She understood that. Every time she broached the subject of her loneliness, she intensified that guilt.

"I don't want to argue tonight, Papa. Can we drop the subject for now? I'm going to take a break from painting for a while. Maybe I'll spend some time catching up on my reading or relearning all those piano lessons you paid for when I was twelve."

"Good. Good. You see? You wouldn't have that luxury in New York. You'd be working all the time at that squalid attorney's office, commuting on that stinking subway. Here you can relax and indulge your creativity as a woman of your talents deserves to do."

Mara nodded. She wanted to indulge her creativity all right, but not in the fine arts. She scooped another bite of salmon into her mouth and rose from her chair. "I think I'll get started tonight, Papa. I'm going to grab a book from the library and find a quiet place to read for a few hours before I go to bed." As if finding a quiet place on this damned island would be a challenge, she thought.

"Very good, dear. I'll see you at breakfast. Sleep well."

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“You, too, Papa.”

But she knew he wouldn't. Thanatos took a number of medications to help him sleep, to keep him calm in the face of constant threats to his safety. Even with seven security guards on his payroll, he feared retribution from those who had grievances against him. Of course, he'd made his own bed, but in doing so, he'd made Mara's as well.

She didn't approve of her father's political dealings and she shouldn't have cared, but she had become a pawn in his games and she wasn't keen on being murdered by one of his enemies. So she stayed here where he could keep her reasonably safe until the repercussions of his latest misdeeds died down enough for her to sneak back to her world and resume her life. If nothing else, it was a comfortable bed—if only it wasn't so big and empty.

\* \* \*

The late-afternoon sun cast Mara's shadow, long and straight, ahead of her in the sand. She lay on her stomach, on a double-sized beach towel, with her back to the rising tide and watched a miniature crab dig itself a burrow one damp claw full of sand at a time.

A copy of *Pride and Prejudice* lay unopened next to her. She'd almost begun to read the book half a dozen times, but at the moment, the familiar story just didn't appeal to her. Not that watching a crab was so fascinating, but at least it was something she couldn't do in her apartment back home.

She crossed her arms and lay down her head, letting the breeze from the water lull her. Her breathing slowed and she fell instantly into the shallow sleep of boredom where her fantasies took shape.

When she lifted her head again, two shadows framed her own on the pale dunes. Startled, she pushed herself up and turned around, clutching her gauzy beach cover-up over her breasts.

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Mara licked her lips. Which one would she have first? Maybe both at once?

Her hand dropped away from her cover-up and she arched her back so the material pulled away from her breasts. She spread her legs, wondering which one of them would reach her first.

*Eenie meenie meinie—oh!*

The blond one grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet.

"Tell me what you'd like me to do to you, woman," he said, then laughed. Mara didn't like the sound, but that didn't stop her from letting her thoughts roam to which way she'd let him have her first.

"We should let *her* choose, Poseidon," the dark one said. His blue eyes sparkled when he looked at her, and the sound of his voice made her shiver with pleasure. The blond's response just made her shiver.

"We chose *her*. Any female should feel honored by that, Tiran." He dragged her against his chest and banded her waist with his thick forearm. "Will you walk with me, or should I carry you somewhere where I can bed you properly?"

"Uh..*Poseidon*?" Mara squeaked out the words. Crushed against his hard abs and bulging pecs, she could barely breath. While she had to admit it felt wonderful to be trapped in a strong man's arms, she couldn't help but wonder at how realistic the dream had become. A

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tremor of fear rippled across the back of her neck, making the fine hairs at her nape tingle. “You’re the God of the Sea?” Dream big, she’d always told the art students she tutored on weekends.

“No. He’s no god,” the dark one said. “He’s merely named for one.”

“I’m as *powerful* as a god. Would you care to find out how powerful I am?” The blond squeezed Mara harder. His cock indented the flesh of her thigh and it felt like a branding iron. She arched against it, unable to help herself. When he laughed in her ear, her blood began to cool, though.

“You’re frightening her, Poseidon. Let her go.”

“She wants to be frightened. She wants to be chased and captured and held down...don’t you, pretty one?”

“Maybe later...right now, do you think you could let go, just a little bit?”

He let go.

She wobbled while the blood rushed back into her upper torso. “Thanks.”

Poseidon crossed his massive arms over his chest and glared at her. “Are you losing your nerve? When your fantasies come to life before you, you shy away?”

“Uh...I’ve never actually had a fantasy come to life in front of me before, so I don’t have much frame of reference. Can you give me a minute to process?”

The dark one laughed. What had Poseidon called him? Tiran? God, he was beautiful. They both were exquisite, but Poseidon’s was a cruel beauty, a frighteningly complete perfection that left Mara just a little cold.

Suddenly she felt naked under their combined scrutiny. She pulled closed the edges of her cover-up. “Where did you both come from?”

Poseidon sneered. “Your imagination. You were dreaming of a

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good hard fuck, weren't you? Not pleasant conversation."

The other looked daunted. He extended one hand toward Mara, coaxing her a step in his direction. "Forgive my brother's insolence. Would you like to walk with me?"

Mara's gaze bounced from one to the other. Some dream, she thought. Maybe it's time to wake up. She concentrated for a second, but nothing changed. The two men stared at her, Poseidon with impatience and Tiran with benign curiosity.

"So you're saying you're not real?"

"This is a waste of time, Tiran. She asks too many questions when she should be prostrate, waiting for her champion to make use of her."

"I *what*?" Mara took another step away from Poseidon.

"I'm bored with this game, brother. I'll leave her to you and find sport with a woman of our own race."

With that, Poseidon turned on his heel. In five powerful strides, he stood knee deep in the waves, and Mara's jaw dropped when his body seemed to liquefy into a shimmering pillar of water. She gaped as the pillar folded into itself and merged with the beating surf.

*Definitely a dream.* She gave Tiran a bewildered look.

He laughed. "It wasn't our intent to frighten you. I'm glad Poseidon decided to leave. I wasn't interested in fighting with him."

Me, too, she thought. "You come from the sea?" Lame question. She was full of them, it seemed.

He nodded as if the revelation was of no consequence. "Sit down. Don't fear me. I won't hurt you. I wasn't sure I believed Poseidon when he told me of your fantasies."

"My fantasies? How would he know about my fantasies?" Despite her alarm, Mara felt strangely compelled to sit. She folded herself down on the beach towel and her naked visitor crouched beside her. When her gaze strayed to his impressive erection, she realized he now wore dark blue swim trunks. Where had they come from?

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“Poseidon entered your mind. It’s against our laws and I apologize for him. I will never intrude on your thoughts in that way. I promise you.”

“Oh. Good.” Now Mara felt dreamy and tired. Her surroundings seemed to waver and blur, and she indulged the sudden desire to lie back on the warm towel.

Tiran loomed over her for a second, his broad shoulders blocking the orange light of the setting sun. She imagined he cupped her cheek with one large hand and caressed her skin almost reverently. The gentle touch made her nipples harden and the muscles of her pelvis clench. His hand trailed down her neck, fingers teasing the skin and dancing down her chest. He parted the front of her cover-up, and she felt his feather-light touch skim her breasts, then trail down to her stomach, where he rested his flattened palm just above her bikini.

“Tell me your name,” he said.

Mara obeyed.

He repeated the syllables with an appreciative smile. “If you tell me your fantasies, Mara, I’ll make them come true.”

“I...” A thousand naughty thoughts vied for attention in her brain. Could she really ask him to do anything?

She considered all the possibilities and how to phrase them. *Take me. Claim me. Make me so hot I beg for it.*

Then she asked herself, as she stared into his soul-deep eyes, what did she want most? What was her true fantasy?

Finally, as she drifted off into a relaxed sleep, she told him exactly what she wanted. “Get me off this damned island.”

\* \* \*

“How was she, brother?” Poseidon demanded when Tiran returned to their city beneath the sea. “Was she worth the effort?”

Tiran tried to ignore him. He drifted past Poseidon on a cool current and headed toward his private chambers.

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“Tell me you fulfilled your desires with her?” Poseidon morphed into a stream of blue water and anxiously circled his brother.

Tiran had to change direction to avoid moving through his brother’s widespread molecules. “I left her sleeping on the beach, untouched.”

The confession made Poseidon laugh. “She refused you? In the days when our race ruled this planet, an Atlantean male would never have taken ‘no’ for an answer from a human female.”

“And they brought shame on our people that has lasted to this day. My meeting with her was *not* about conquest, Poseidon. I discovered that she’s trapped. She wiles away her time dreaming up diversions, but her deepest desire is to escape from the island where she’s been exiled.”

Poseidon crossed his newly formed arms over his chest, and considered his brother’s revelation. “So she entices us, but has no intention of making good on the promises of her body?”

“Wanting a man is only a small part of her true desire. She wants her freedom more than anything.” Tiran tried to move past his brother.

Poseidon blocked his way, his brow furrowed with curiosity. “A human female exiled. Why?”

“Her father has enemies who would harm her if they found her. To keep her safe, he has forced her to live here, away from the world.”

“And you took this information from her mind while she lay open to you?”

“No.” Tiran morphed into a strong current and slithered away from his brother. He spoke without words as he headed for the royal burrow and the privacy he craved. “She told me this while we lay on the beach, talking. I put her in a dream state to relax her, since I sensed you had frightened her with your demanding attitude.”

Poseidon shrugged. “So your efforts were wasted. Ah well, there are other females, brother. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble finding a willing one.”

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Tiran slipped into his chambers, where he returned to his natural form. His time with Mara had been both enlightening and frustrating. He'd expected to discover her darkest sexual fantasies and act them out, pleasuring her in ways she'd never forget. He still longed to do that, but now he wanted more. He wanted to give his beautiful sand maiden her most urgent desire.

He wanted to set her free.

\* \* \*

Mara closed the fourth leather-bound volume of Greek mythology and tossed it across the polished reading table. It landed with a satisfying thump next to the others.

Still frustrated, she leaned back in her chair and rubbed her tired eyes. She'd been in the library since sunrise, scouring the stacks for references on Poseidon. She'd found scads of information on the mythological God of the Sea, son of Cronus and Rhea, brother to both Hades and Zeus, among others, and father to illegitimate half-human creatures, demigods, warriors and kings. Nowhere could she locate the name "Tiran." As she read and read, she became more convinced that her strange encounter on the beach the day before had been nothing more than a dream, despite how real it felt.

After all, the two men certainly weren't members of her father's security staff. If they were residents of one of the nearby islands, they'd have arrived by boat and been detected immediately. Even local fisherman approached the island only with Thanatos' express permission.

The fact that Poseidon had seemed to liquefy before diving under the waves cinched it. She'd obviously imagined the whole thing.

The human brain was an amazing construct, she decided, with the ability to create its own reality at times. Phenomena like lucid dreaming, out of body experiences, and visual and auditory hallucinations could occur if someone was stressed, frightened, overly

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medicated, fevered, exhausted, malnourished or mentally ill.

Could abject boredom produce such a vivid dream as well? Mara wondered. Or was she slowly losing her mind?

She rose and stretched, easing the kinks in her back with a yoga posture. Mid-pose, her father appeared, his gray eyebrows raised.

“You’re going to pull a muscle,” he admonished.

Mara straightened and allowed herself to laugh. “I do yoga to *relax* my muscles, Papa.”

“You’ve been reading, I see.” Thanatos fingered the stack of discarded mythology books. “Non-fiction today?”

Mara started returning the books to the shelves. “I just became very curious about the subject and decided to do some research. Maybe I’ll start a series of fantasy paintings based on mythological characters.”

Her father seemed to approve, and for the first time in months, a sparkle lit his dark eyes. “You’ll need blue paint, won’t you?”

She laughed again and put away the final books. “I suppose I will. Good thing I hadn’t gotten around to throwing it out.”

An awkward silence enveloped them. Thanatos stared at his daughter and opened his mouth to speak.

A high-pitched beeping interrupted him, and both he and Mara froze. She’d been trained to fear the security alarms. The Zander family estates always possessed state-of-the-art systems, and when an alarm sounded, it invariably meant real trouble.

“Stay here until I call you,” he said, heading for the library door.

Mara nodded, torn between her own curiosity and the instinct to obey her father and protect herself as she’d been taught. She finally decided to find out for herself what was happening.

At the north end of the compound, farthest from her secluded private beach, Thanatos’ security station ran like a miniature military operation. A secure underground tunnel connected the security bunker and the barracks to the Zander family residence. Mara jogged through

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the tunnel and emerged in the tiny command center, where one of her father's security guards, a man named Zeke, blocked her way.

"Sorry, Miss Zander. For your own safety, please stay back."

"What's happening? Papa?" Mara stood on tiptoe to look over Zeke's shoulder. With two other men, her father leaned over a bank of television monitors and seemed oblivious to her presence.

The alarm claxon abruptly shut off. Mara's ears rebelled, ringing loudly in the sudden silence.

"It was larger than a fishing boat," one of the guards said to Thanatos. "It appeared about a hundred yards off shore. It showed up on radar for thirty seconds, then vanished."

"You've got nothing on the monitors?" Thanatos was all business, like a military commander. Mara often wondered what her father might have accomplished if he'd chosen to work within the law. Thanatos Zander had decades of experience in politics, business, war strategy, electronics and even psychology. He could have been anything. She often felt guilty wishing he had chosen a profession of which she could be proud to tell her friends.

Tears stung her tired eyes as she watched him checking video footage of the calm ocean and deserted shoreline. She grieved for the man her father could have been, a man whose daughter didn't have to hide or fear for her life every time an alarm sounded.

"Perhaps it was a dense school of fish, or a piece of submerged wreckage," the guard said.

Thanatos shook his head. "The shape you showed me on the readout was too regular. It was definitely a boat."

"A boat that sank?"

"Possibly. I want someone out there checking on it. If nothing suspicious turns up in the next twelve hours, we'll consider it a fluke. Recalibrate all the equipment. I want a guarantee that we don't have a malfunction."



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“Yes, sir.”

Mara made sure she was gone before her father turned around. She didn’t want him to find her spying on him, and have to listen to a lecture about keeping herself safe in an emergency. Zeke would probably tell Thanatos that she’d been there anyway, and he would scold her at dinner, but for now, she had a reprieve.

She hurried back through the tunnel and headed for her studio. Since there was nothing else to do, the idea for that series of mythological paintings suddenly appealed to her. If her fantasy men were indeed all in her mind, she could give them life by committing them to canvas.

\* \* \*

Tiran sat in the royal archives, a pile of data chips scattered on the work surface in front of him. After half a day of intense research into Atlantean law and history, he’d discovered a few little-known clauses that might allow him to intervene in Mara’s situation and end her exile. He’d have to approach his father and the Triumvirate—and he’d have to admit to having congress with her and face punishment for his transgressions, but that would be a small price to pay to do as he’d promised and make her fantasy come true.

A familiar shape drifted into the archive structure and settled in front of Tiran before morphing into Poseidon in humanoid form. His brother eyed the data chips and smirked. “You always did have a penchant for learning. What are you submerged in today?”

Tiran quickly gathered together the chips, hoping Poseidon would not be able to identify the subject matter before he put them away. “DNA manipulation. You know I’ve always been consumed with the problem of Atlantean mutation.”

Poseidon yawned. “Oh, that again. Aren’t there enough scientists working on that problem? Why waste your time? You’ve got exemplary DNA, as do I. We both should be out enticing females to

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mate with us, rather than worrying about helping other males make offspring that will one day compete with our own for power.”

Tiran sighed. In truth, he felt guilty that he hadn’t actually been researching his chosen subject. It still confounded Atlantean scientists that some citizens could morph and others could not. Those born without the ability faced a significant disadvantage in the underwater communities.

“My research keeps my mind vital, Poseidon. You should try it yourself.” Tiran rose and dumped the data chips into the sorter, which would automatically return them to their storage units. He felt immense relief that his brother hadn’t questioned him further on the subjects covered by the chips.

“I’ve better things to do, brother. Now, would you like to go to the Gemstone Caverns with me this afternoon?”

“I’ve other things to tend to. Why don’t you take Lalia? She’s anxious to get you alone, and I’m sure you could find a private niche in the caverns together.”

Poseidon considered. “Lalia...yes. That’s exactly what I’ll do. And you, brother? More boring research?”

“Yes. Lots more boring research.”

“Suit yourself.”

Poseidon left the archive, then Tiran waited a few moments to make sure his brother wouldn’t be nearby when he followed. He did have plenty to occupy him, and with Poseidon disporting with Lalia in the Gemstone Caverns, he’d be free to do as he pleased for a few uninterrupted hours.

\* \* \*

To Mara’s surprise, it was Poseidon who took shape on her first canvas. Even though thoughts of Tiran’s blue eyes and sexy smile plagued her while she sketched, the underlying frustration in her soul made her draw Poseidon’s cruel smile and beguiling green eyes.

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He stood naked on a rock overlooking the sea in a pose that displayed his powerful thighs and thickly muscled back. She longed to add his impressive erection, but instead positioned him so his firm buttocks showed rather than his genitals. In his outstretched hand he held his namesake's mythical trident, which he used to command a bolt of lightning to strike a monstrous shape submerged in the surging ocean tide. As an afterthought, Mara sketched a maiden into the scene. Naked except for what would become a pearlescent net of sea foam, the woman's legs ended in delicate scaled fins. Her long red hair whipped about her face in a violent wind, and she reached out with a graceful hand, imploring Poseidon with her gesture.

Whether she beseeched him to destroy the sea monster or spare it, Mara hadn't yet decided.

The story took shape in her mind as she began applying a base layer of dark gray to the sea and the sky to create roiling waves and clouds. In her mind, the woman had befriended the hideous sea creature and frolicked with it in the shallows, but the impetuous Poseidon assumed the monster meant to harm her, so he dragged her away from it. Tossing her behind him in the sand, he set about destroying it to prove his bravery to the maiden.

When the creature lay belly up in the waves, he would turn triumphantly to the nymph and find her grieving for the creature, her friend.

Tears welled in Mara's eyes. She worked in the dark browns of the rocks, the deep blues of the waves and the black of the sea monster's gnarled hide.

"You've neglected a very vital organ."

The voice from behind startled Mara. She dropped her brush, splattering drops of Phthalo blue on the floor.

She gasped when Poseidon put his heavy hand on her shoulder. "How did you get in here?"

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"I blew in with the breeze." He smirked and leaned over her shoulder to inspect her painting.

"The security guards will—"

"They have no idea I'm here."

"Every room of the house has video cameras."

"And I appear on none of them."

"Why?"

"Because I'm only a dream."

Mara's heart pounded. She felt the heat of his skin, and smelled the familiar scent of warm sand and male musk. She permitted herself a momentary downward glance and was relieved to see he wore a normal-looking pair of denim jeans and nothing else.

His hand trailed down her back and settled on her hip. He dipped his head into the curve of her neck. "I'm impressed. You've captured my essence with such a commanding pose."

Mara didn't respond. She stood still, wishing he would go away.

"You have left out one important aspect, though. Vanquishing a sea monster with a beautiful maiden at my heels would give me a raging hard-on."

"Maybe in the next painting," she said, her jaw tight.

"In the next scene, it would be buried deep inside her."

The image sprang to Mara's mind of Poseidon and the nymph tangled on the sand. A traitorous pressure built between her legs, and she wondered if Poseidon were reading her thoughts. "You'd better leave before someone sees you."

"I *will* leave before someone sees me, but that could be a while. I've created another diversion to occupy the men who hold you prisoner."

"What?" She turned, disconcerted by how close he stood. She had to put her hands on his chest and push him back a step. "You created the radar glitch?"

He nodded. "I'm just experimenting now, but eventually I will

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create a diversion that will allow you to escape from your captivity.”

Mara swallowed the words and a sardonic laugh bubbled up.  
“Escape from the island?”

“Yes.”

“And go where?”

“I’ll take you anywhere.”

“Why?”

“Because you wish it. You want to be free of this place. Tiran told me.”

“Tiran? Where is he?” The memory of her intimate conversation with Tiran came back to her. As they lay dreamily on the beach, she’d told him about her loneliness, how she longed for her freedom even more than she needed to fulfill her sexual fantasies.

Apparently, he’d shared her deepest confessions with Poseidon.

“Tiran is occupied below. He has several females to entertain.”

“Ah.” Mara felt an odd twinge. Was it jealousy? Why would she care what Poseidon’s brother did with other females? “Let me ask you this, if you come and go with the wind, how am I supposed to go with you?”

He laughed. “I can show you. My race has many amazing abilities.”

“Your race? You just said you were a dream.”

“I’m many things. A dream. An illusion. A fantasy, but also a man, and the progeny of a god. Atlanteans have roamed this planet since before your people recorded time using knotted string or flint marks on cave walls. We are myth and legend made flesh.”

“Uh-huh.” Mara crossed her arms and leaned back, regarding his muscular torso. “So show me.”

“Show you what?” He leered.

She rolled her eyes. “How you’ll get me out of here without security seeing me leave.”

“Of course.”

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Poseidon reached for her hand and tugged her fingers toward his chest. He flattened her hand into the rigid valley between his bulging pectorals, and she felt a very real heartbeat under her sweating palm.

With one hand over hers and the other sliding down her back to rest on her ass, he pulled her forward just slightly.

Before Mara could protest, the room began to shimmer. Brilliant sparks of light danced between their bodies and swirled outward, forming a silvery barrier between her and her surroundings.

Her body felt light, empty and strangely cool. Her head spun, and she found she could focus her dizzy gaze on nothing but the ice green of his eyes. Reluctantly, to keep from falling, she clung to him as everything around her turned pearly white.

In the next instant, Mara could focus on her surroundings again. Behind Poseidon, she saw the whitewashed outer wall of her studio. Her shadow and his entwined against it in the fading light.

“We’re outside...”

“Without opening a door or a window,” he said, finishing her thought.

Mara pushed out of Poseidon’s embrace and looked around. *I’m definitely dreaming.*

“That was just a momentary trip. I can take you hundreds of miles using only the wind to convey us. In moments, you could be on any of a thousand islands. I could even take you to places no human could ever find you.”

Mara’s heart leapt at the selfish possibilities. “You can really take me anywhere?”

“Yes. For a price.”

A cold pressure closed over Mara’s lungs. Of course there would be a price. Perhaps it was one worth paying to escape this useless existence.

She gave Poseidon a narrow glare that meant she might be willing

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to negotiate, but she wasn't going to agree to just anything. "What do you want?"

He smiled broadly. "The price is one of your fantasies. Let me be the man you've been dreaming about. Let me do the things you long for a man to do to you. Surely, that's not so high a price to pay for your freedom?"

Mara took a few measured breaths, her mind reeling. Did she dare trust him? If this figment of her imagination wanted her to show him a good time in exchange for a one-way ticket out of Zander prison, she was certainly up for it.

If only it had been Tiran making the offer.

"I'll consider it," she said finally. "Give me time to think it over."

"I'll give you a day. What I'm going to do for you is against our laws and I can only do it once. So be certain this is what you want. I'll be on your little beach tomorrow at this time, just before sunset. Bring nothing with you. You must leave everything of this life behind. If you're there, I'll take you." Poseidon laughed, his eyes gleaming. "Then, I'll take you away."

\* \* \*

"What you propose, Tiran, may cause political unrest. I caution against it." Mykonos, father of Tiran and Poseidon, himself named for one of the glorious islands that floated above the Atlantean abode, paced the length of the Triumvirate Hearing Room. Tiran had cornered his father here after a session of the ruling body, and broached the forbidden subject.

"It's not politics that concerns me, Father. It's morality. We've long considered ourselves superior to humans because we have no wars and no physical suffering among us. Don't we have an obligation to help someone in need?"

"The Triumvirate will never agree, Tiran. The implications of bringing a human to live among us with no preparation are too

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immense to consider.”

“All I ask is that you make the suggestion, Father. The Articles of Autonomy allow for granting asylum to someone who is oppressed in their own society. We could allow Mara to leave her prison.”

“It’s too dangerous to bring a human among us. With even one living here, others would follow and our society would suffer.”

Mykonos paced, and Tiran’s hopes for saving Mara diminished with each step. He began to realize, as the argument continued, that even with ancient laws to back up his request, the Triumvirate feared humans too much to begin to change their ways.

“We should help her, Father.”

“No, Tiran. The fact that you’ve shown yourself to her is distressing enough. The Triumvirate could choose to punish you for this, and I could not stop them.”

“I’m sorry, Father. But I feel it’s time we revisited the old laws and considered the possibility that we may one day need to merge our society with that of the humans. This would be a start.”

Mykonos shook his head and began to dissolve into his liquid state, signifying the end of the discussion. “Not in our lifetimes, son. Go now and do not speak of it again.”

Tiran watched the dark current of his father’s morphed form as it snaked out of the Hearing Room. He should have felt ashamed after confessing to Mykonos that he’d been conversing with a human, but instead he felt angry at his father’s narrow-mindedness. Mykonos had a reputation for being fair and just, the most forward-thinking member of the Triumvirate, yet he refused to even consider the notion of bringing a human to live among them, even in the interest of Atlantean superiority.

Despite the fact that another visit to Mara might increase his chances of punishment, he had to see her again and figure out a way to set her free.



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\* \* \*

That night, Mara didn't sleep. She paced the floor of her bedroom until her legs felt weak. Her mind played out all the terrible possibilities and left her no closer to a solution at dawn than she had been at midnight.

Was Poseidon real? Or had she finally gone insane? If he was an Atlantean, could he really get her off the island undetected?

If she left, could she go home to New York and resume her life?

No. Her father would find her, or worse, his enemies would.

She'd lived too long always looking over her shoulder, ready at a moment's notice to go into hiding until Thanatos told her it was safe to resume her normal life.

Maybe riding the winds with Poseidon was the best offer she'd ever get. If she could let her father know she was safe and happy, he could live easier. Maybe that was a gift she could give him, freeing him from constant worry about her safety.

The first pink rays of morning light burst over the horizon, reminding Mara she'd barely blinked all night. Her eyes stung, and she crawled across her wide bed and sank into the soft pillows. Still, sleep eluded her.

She considered Poseidon's price. Of the two brothers, she preferred Tiran, but ultimately, did it matter? Poseidon promised to be her fantasy. What girl could turn down an offer like that?

She forced herself to close her eyes and get a few hours of sleep before breakfast. She had a busy day ahead of her if she were to take Poseidon up on his offer.

\* \* \*

Despite the warmth of the evening breeze, Mara shivered as she walked along the path between the dunes. She wore only her gauzy cover-up over a tangerine bikini. Her hair hung down her back, loose

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and curling, and despite her nervousness, she felt completely free.

She'd left a letter for her father in a spot where he wouldn't find it until morning. Though she'd steeled herself for the possibility that she'd imagined it all and would spend the evening alone on the beach waiting for a figment of her overactive imagination, she did feel a pang of remorse at leaving without a face-to-face conversation. She had no other choice, though. Her father would not understand why she wanted to leave his secluded world forever.

The beach glowed with the vibrant orange light of sunset, and the calm surf sparkled. She might miss this place, but not enough to give up her chance for freedom.

She stood at the edge of the water and let the breakers wash over her feet, wondering if she hoped Poseidon would show up, or hoped he wouldn't. Relief and anticipation flooded her when a warm hand grasped her shoulder and his familiar voice whispered in her ear.

"I wasn't sure you'd come."

"I'm still not sure you're real." Mara's nipples hardened when he blew a cool stream of air over her left ear and trailed his fingers beneath the filmy fabric of her cover-up to rest on her hip.

"I'm about to show you how real I am."

She gasped when he scooped her into his arms and turned away from the rising tide. "Where—?"

"To the olive grove. It's private there."

Mara wrapped her arms around Poseidon's neck and studied his features as he strode down the path to where a dozen ancient trees formed a perfect circle.

Like Tiran, he was beautiful. Mara couldn't deny that. He carried her effortlessly, his expression feral and determined. The feel of his rippling muscles made her tense with desire.

Once within the barrier formed by the twelve gnarled trunks, Poseidon set her down and appraised her with a hungry look. He gently

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pushed her backward, walking step by step with her until her buttocks touched the smoothest of the weatherworn boles.

Her breath caught when he roughly dragged the cover-up and the strap of her bikini top off her shoulder. His mouth came down on her exposed breast. Despite herself, she arched against the heat of his tongue. He drew her nipple into his mouth with such force, that she swore she felt the sensual pull in her womb. Her clit began to pulse. He suckled harder and harder until she cried out in a mixture of pleasure and pain.

Poseidon lifted his head and grinned at her, then knelt before her on the sandy ground. The movement put his face level with the waistband of her bikini, and he pressed his mouth into her belly and bit the elastic, drawing it down her thigh.

With the bikini at her knees, he pushed her legs apart and thrust his fingers into her soft curls. Mara reveled in the intrusion. She put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself and moaned low in her throat when he slipped two fingers inside her.

"You're tight," he breathed, working her with his fingers, drawing her own slick moisture out to coat her trembling thighs. "You're going to feel so good wrapped around me."

Mara nodded, panting. This was sex the way she'd dreamed about it. Hot and hard and fast. If only it were with Tiran.

She imagined Poseidon's brother kneeling in front of her, dragging her bikini to the ground and tossing it aside, nuzzling between her legs and flicking his hot tongue over her clit. "Oh...more!"

She felt barren when he withdrew from her. Trembling with unmet need, she held her breath as he rose before her and freed his cock from his jeans.

"Take me in your hand. Feel how hard I am for you."

She obeyed his command, wrapping her fingers around the swollen rod of flesh. The skin was molten hot and soft as silk. The concentric

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ridges of flesh that banded him grew as she slid her fisted hand over him.

“Imagine what it will feel like inside you.”

She did and her body responded with a surge of drenching moisture. She parted her slick thighs, but Poseidon shook his head.

“Turn around.”

Once again, she obeyed, eager for anything he would do. She spread her legs wide and braced her arms on the tree trunk, thrusting back toward him as he caressed her.

When she felt him position himself between her legs, she pushed back more, letting his huge erection part the swollen folds of her sex.

He tore her cover-up away from her and her bikini top followed. Naked now, Mara felt completely uninhibited. She moaned as Poseidon pressed her forward, taking her breasts in his hands.

The wide head of his cock pushed upward, and she bent forward to take him inside.

“That’s right,” he urged, his breath hot against her neck. “Open for me.”

“Poseidon!” Tiran’s voice sliced through the heady atmosphere in the grove.

Every taut nerve ending in Mara’s body pulsed with relief. As ready as she had been for Poseidon’s claiming thrust, she wanted Tiran more, even though he hadn’t offered her freedom the way his brother had.

Poseidon’s hands dropped from her breasts. When he retreated from her, so did the heat from his body, leaving Mara leaning against the olive tree, shivering in the encroaching darkness.

She turned to see Tiran grab his brother by the throat and throw him to the ground.

The two men wrestled in the dirt while Mara stood, transfixed. She had imagined this very scene only days ago. How could it be happening exactly as she’d fantasized?

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Tiran landed on Poseidon's chest and levered all his weight on his brother's windpipe. "How dare you touch her?"

Poseidon's eyes bulged in anger. With a bellow that rattled the grove, he threw Tiran aside. "She agreed to it, brother—eagerly agreed to take me on in exchange for her freedom!"

Tiran's eyes flickered to Mara, who had bent to retrieve her cover-up. Heat rose to her cheeks. She clutched the thin fabric to her chest, feeling terribly naked.

"You promised her something you couldn't give," Tiran said. He lunged at his brother again.

Mara sidestepped the pair as they crashed into the nearest tree trunk, grappling with each other. Her eyes locked on Poseidon. He'd lied to her? Why wasn't she surprised? It seemed to fit his character. That meant there was no escape for her. She had to get back to the house and destroy the letter she'd written to her father.

While the two Atlanteans fought behind her, she headed for the path that led to the dunes. She'd just passed the tree line when she heard the alarms, distant, but audible in the still evening. Her heart plummeted when the shouts of the security guards reached her. Intruders on the island—her dueling Atlanteans had tripped the alarms.

Mara ran back to the center of the grove and tried to pry the brothers away from one another. "Stop it! Stop! They're coming! Can't you hear the alarms? They'll find you here."

To their credit, the men instantly parted. Both stared at her as though they could not fathom what she meant.

"You have to leave! The guards are armed. They'll shoot first and ask ques—"

Poseidon grabbed Mara's arm and dragged her toward him. "I promised you I would take you away from here, and I will. You will pay me later."

Mara struggled against him, certain now that she didn't want to go

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anywhere with him. Even as she tried to squirm out of his embrace, her surroundings faded to pearlescent white and a cool breeze seemed to waft through her body.

Distantly, she heard Tiran cursing his brother. Disoriented and dizzy, Mara rode the tumultuous wave as the battle surged toward the beach.

When she finally felt solid ground beneath her feet, she flung herself away from Poseidon, landing in the wet sand. Before he could reclaim her, Tiran stepped between them. He shoved his brother backward with enough force to knock him down.

"I won't let you take her away, Poseidon. You'll only abandon her somewhere when you tire of her."

"Perhaps, but I'm certain it will be a while before that happens. She's certainly beginning to amuse me." Poseidon brushed sand from his hands and regained his feet. His shadow fell on Mara, who glared at him.

"I won't go with you. Leave me alone!"

Poseidon laughed. "Atlantean males don't take no for an answer, little sand maiden." He reached for her just as the Zander security force mounted the dunes and cascaded onto the beach.

Mara took little solace from the knowledge that her two fantasy men were quite real in the eyes of the security guards. The six men took aim at Poseidon and Tiran, barking at them to back away from Mara and lay facedown in the sand.

Poseidon ignored them, but Tiran raised his hands to show he was unarmed. He moved away from Mara, drawing the attention of the armed guards from her.

She stood. "It's all right. They're just leaving. No harm done!" She also put up her hands.

Zeke took a step toward her. "Miss Zander, stay down until the intruders have been neutralized."

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“You’re not neutralizing anyone. Leave them alone. They’re leaving peacefully.”

Poseidon gave her a wicked smile. “This is your last chance. Tiran hasn’t got the courage to defy our laws, but I do. Come with me now and you’ll never have to return here.” He thrust out his hand toward her.

The lightning-fast movement spooked one of the guards. A shot rang out, and as it did, Poseidon melted into a pillar of clear liquid. Like a performing dolphin, he arched toward the waves and sank into the surf, the bullet passing harmlessly through his liquefied body to embed itself in Mara’s left shoulder.

\* \* \*

Tiran caught Mara as she reeled backward, propelled by the force of the projectile. She collapsed into his arms, her eyes wide and her mouth moving soundlessly. He looked up and saw the human men, surging over the dunes, weapons aimed, ready to attack even though it had been one of their own who’d injured Mara.

Alone he could not fight them all. He had no choice. He scooped her shivering body into his arms and turned, morphing to stone as he moved. Bullets bounced off his broad back as he trudged with her into the sea, shielding her from further injury.

They submerged completely for a moment, then he morphed their bodies into air. As he did, the bullet dislodged from Mara’s flesh and sank into the sea. They rose together and sailed away, visible to the security guards as nothing more than a whirling patch of fog above the waves.

\* \* \*

Mara felt nothing. She seemed to exist in a dream state, unable to speak or move her body, yet the vista before her eyes changed rapidly as though she were flowing like water over the land.

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She saw the island. It looked so small from above, a crescent-shaped strip of land bordered by pearly stretches of beach on either side. The square buildings of her father's compound resembled toy building blocks nestled into mounds of green and brown clay. As she drew closer, she saw the dark heads of the security guards. They formed a line, like ants, trudging back to the barracks near the north beach. She followed them, aware that her movements seemed to be controlled by her thoughts alone.

Inside the security building, her father stood clutching the back of a chair as if to hold himself up. He looked thin and pale, and his hands trembled against the vinyl backing of the seat. His fingers made deep indents in the cushion.

When the guards had assembled in front of him, their heads bowed, he asked one simple question. His tone was controlled, even, and his voice low. "Where is my daughter?"

Zeke lifted his head, though he didn't meet his employer's gaze. Mara felt as though she was hovering between the two men, and she sensed their emotions. Zeke was angry at the intruders, disappointed in his team and a little bit afraid of Thanatos. Her father was steeped in pure rage; no other emotion clouded his mind except the overwhelming necessity for revenge.

"She was taken, sir." Zeke's emotions weighed heavier on the side of fear now. Mara wondered how she knew that. "She may have been injured."

### *Injured?*

She tried to remember what had happened on the beach. A bullet had hit her, but she felt no pain now. Was she dead? Is that why she was here with her father, and yet felt no emotions other than bland curiosity?

Thanatos sagged. He had never been a tall man, even in his youth, but years of failing health and worry had shrunk his frame. His



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shoulders bowed. “Injured? Or killed?”

“Sir, if she were dead, I doubt the intruders would have taken her with them. I’ve got men gearing up one of our boats to search for her, but...”

Thanatos looked up, but his eyes didn’t seem to focus. “But what?”

“Whoever they were, they went underwater. They may have had a submersible waiting a few yards off shore.”

“She could be anywhere by now.”

“We’re going to monitor all radio bands. We expect a ransom demand.”

Thanatos sank again. One of the guards helped him to sit in the chair. His greatest fear had come true. Mara hovered near her father, wondering if there was some way she could comfort him and let him know she was all right—yet, she wasn’t sure herself if she *was* all right.

Though she felt nothing, she considered how wrong this had turned out. She’d never wanted her father to believe she’d been kidnapped. She’d never wanted him to suffer like this.

She tried to reach out to him, to reassure him, but at that moment, a cold pressure seemed to flood the empty space where her body should have been. The clarity of the images that surrounded her faded and blurred, and her father’s voice reached her from a great distance.

“I want her found. No one sleeps until she’s been found.”

As her father’s voice faded to a distant echo, Mara gasped. Her lungs filled with warm air, lungs that hadn’t existed a moment ago. A searing pain descended with her next ragged inhalation, and she screamed, flailing at the large pair of hands that held her down.

“You’re all right, Mara! You’re all right now.” Tiran’s face swam into focus above her. He cradled her in his arms, shielding her body from the bright sunlight that beat down on them.

She struggled to sit up, but he held her against him, rocking her to soothe her fear.

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“What happened? Where are we?” she managed to ask when her breathing returned to normal. She glanced at her left shoulder, where the white-hot pain radiated down into her chest and her arm. She’d been shot!

“We’re on a neighboring island—a deserted one. We’re alone and you’re safe here. It’s morning.”

“I’m bleeding—”

“Not for long. I revived you, now I’m going to heal your wound.”

Panic gripped her. “Revived me? I *died*?” The faint memories of her father talking to the security guards seemed like a distant dream. The details that had been so clear slipped away piece by piece, and she tried to concentrate on them. “How?”

“You drowned. I had to take you below the water to escape the men on the island. It was only for an instant. Then we morphed into the air and I brought you here. You were dead when we rematerialized.”

Tiran’s voice was tight, hollow. He’d tried to save her and ended up killing her—if only temporarily. She lifted one hand to caress his face.

He kissed her palm. “I’m sorry. It should not have happened, but combined with the shock of your wound...Poseidon should have protected you. He knew the bullets would not hurt him.”

Mara shook her head. Though the pain made her weak, she wanted to reassure Tiran before she passed out. “It’s all right. The guards shouldn’t have fired at him. But Tiran...I have to...I have to...”

Blackness engulfed her. This time, she felt nothing and saw nothing as she sank into oblivion.

\* \* \*

On the tiny island, Tiran nodded with satisfaction at the shelter he’d constructed. From all angles, it looked like a pile of boulders, windswept and moss-covered. No human would look twice at it, nor would most Atlanteans—those that bothered to venture above the waves. He’d never built a shelter above the sea before, and his greatest

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concern was not that it wouldn't stand against the unforgiving elements, but that Poseidon might be led by his curiosity to investigate and find Mara recovering inside.

Since he'd brought her here to tend her wound, Tiran had not returned to the city. He expected that his brother and father would both know he was with Mara. It didn't matter, though. He had no intention of leaving her.

Once he'd placed the final concealing touches on the outside of the shelter, he let himself back inside through a hidden doorway and found his patient asleep, just as he'd left her.

She stirred as he settled himself next to the soft bed he'd created. Her eyes fluttered open, gray as a stormy sky and suddenly full of fear. He put his hand on her shoulder where her wound had been.

"You're safe. But you need to rest."

Her gaze fell to his hand, spread on the perfect expanse of skin next to her collarbone. "What happened?"

"I healed you. My people can rearrange molecules and change their form. I scattered the damaged cells throughout your body and drew healthy ones from other areas. That's why you must sleep. Your body is repairing those scattered cells."

She nodded, though confusion remained in her eyes. "Where are we?"

"I built a shelter on the island. No one will see us. You can rest here as long as you need to."

"I need to get back to my father. He must think I've been kidnapped."

Tiran sat back and blinked. After all she had gone through to escape her captivity, why would she want to return? "It's too soon to go anywhere. You need to complete the healing process."

"Then I need to get a message to him, and let him know I'm all right."

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“Soon, but not now.”

“Tiran—”

He pushed her back down when she tried to rise. A visible wave of fatigue washed over her, and she slumped into the cushions he'd created. “When you're well enough to stand, we'll talk more. Sleep now.”

She obeyed, though Tiran was certain it was only because she didn't have the strength to do otherwise.

While she slept, he settled into a chair to watch her and thought of all the evenings he'd observed her on the beach. From the first moment he saw her, flushed with sexual excitement, windblown and wild, he'd been entranced. It amazed him how her beauty now, relaxed and innocent in a dreamless sleep, surpassed his fantasies of her. If she were Atlantean, he would have chosen her as his mate long ago. But he chose her now, and vowed to do whatever was necessary to give her everything she desired.

\* \* \*

The next time Mara awoke, she felt better than she ever had. She barely remembered the pain of her wound, though a stab of guilt attacked her when she thought of her father and how worried he must be about her.

She sat up and took in her surroundings. The room had sand-colored walls that seemed to shimmer with flecks of mother-of-pearl, as though they'd been fashioned of crushed seashells. The floor looked the same, as did the furniture, a free-form bed that perfectly fit the contours of her body, and a chair, also with only a barely recognizable shape.

She wore only her cover-up, which skimmed her tingling skin as she rose and tested the stability of her legs.

A warm hand caressed her shoulder. She backed up into Tiran's embrace.

“You're awake. I hope you're feeling rested.”

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“I feel fine. Thank you.”

She turned in his arms, liking the feel of his muscled chest under her hands and his hard thighs pressed against hers. His hand fell to her waist and he pulled her hips against his. With only the thin material of her cover-up between them, she might as well have been naked. Despite her confusion, her body immediately responded to him, and she remembered the needs she’d set aside for so long.

“Are you hungry? I can prepare some food.”

She shook her head. She was hungry, but that could wait. At the moment, there was something she wanted more. “Tiran, why did you attack Poseidon?”

His blue eyes darkened and his chest swelled beneath her hands. “He knew I wanted you. He should *not* have touched you.”

“I wanted it to be you. All the while he was...touching me, I wanted it to be you.”

His lips curved in a grudging grin and his hand slipped down to caress the curve of her bottom. The intimate touch caused another immediate response. She parted her thighs and let his leg slip between them so she could feel the power of his muscular thigh. She squeezed her legs around his and arched up, needing his lips on hers.

He obliged her wordless request and took her mouth, drawing her tongue against his. He tasted salty and sweet and she drank him in, reveling in his heat. When she sank against him, he held her up. She moaned as he stripped away the cover-up with one hand and pressed herself against him.

“Is this your fantasy?” he asked when he came up for air.

She felt his erection pressing into her thigh and nodded. “There’s a lot more to my fantasy than this.”

“Show me.”

She pulled him toward the bed and they fell into the soft curves of the unusual mattress. It formed to their bodies, and Mara felt as though

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she were cradled in air, perfectly protected with Tiran's powerful form stretched above her.

He kissed her as his hands roamed her body, exploring every inch of exposed skin. With feather-light pressure, his fingertips danced over her breasts, her belly, and the soft hair at the juncture of her thighs, teasing her. He followed the gentle exploration of his hands with his lips, tasting her wherever her flesh ached from his touch.

When she lay panting, the moisture from his hot kisses evaporating to a tingle on her thighs, he became more demanding with his touch. He pressed his hand between her legs, massaging her pulsing clit in a rhythm that matched the pounding of her heart. At the same time, he lowered his mouth to her aching nipples and sucked one, then the other, until the answering pressure in her sex brought her to a throbbing orgasm. She moaned again as the pulsing of her inner muscles also matched the beat of her heart. Her body tensed, and she held on to the edge for a moment before the wave of incredible sensation washed over her.

She reached for him as she came, impatient to feel him inside her. Immediately, he obliged, pushing apart her legs and sinking himself into her willing body.

"He would not have given you this..." Tiran whispered in her ear as he filled her with a thrust that made her cry out for more.

On a long inward stroke, he seated himself to the hilt and held there, letting her feel the hot length of him. When he began to move with quick, forceful thrusts, she gasped.

"He would have used you and cast you aside."

Mara nodded. She didn't need Tiran to tell her that Poseidon was a liar. Her own desperate need to get away and have a life that didn't hinge on her father's political mistakes had led her to trust Tiran's brother when she shouldn't have. "You won't...you won't leave me, will you?"

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At that moment, the future didn't matter to her. All she cared about was the moment that built between them. She clutched his shoulders and brought her hips up to meet his demanding thrusts.

"I'll never leave you."

She believed him. She came again, shuddering against him and crying out when his cock surged once more. He filled her, pulsing into her and rocking her into the depths of the soft bed.

"I'll never leave you, Mara," he repeated over and over until she slept again.

\* \* \*

At twilight, Tiran chased Mara into the surf. He caught her in the swirling breakers and swung her up into his arms. She struggled to get away, kicking flecks of foam into the purple sky and laughing as she beat her fists against his back.

"I'm not finished with you, woman!"

He turned toward shore and knelt in the wet sand. While she lay panting beneath him, he waved his hand over the ground, which rose up under her to form a wide cushion that held her above the water. Like the bed inside their shelter, he used the molecules on hand and formed them into another substance such as the soft, pliant material of the bed.

With a dark grin, he rolled her onto her stomach and straddled her, pushing his erection between her legs as she rose up to meet him.

"I'd rather be facing the water," she said.

He sighed. They held on and rode the flowing material of the bed until it reformed so that Mara could face the surf.

"Is that better?" he asked, his lips against her ear as he impaled her.

She nodded and groaned, eager to feel him again. They'd played for hours on the beach, and each time they made love, Mara felt the tingling anticipation as if it were the first time. "Yes—ah!"

She bucked beneath him as he rode her, pushing backward to meet him each time he surged forward. When she came, she screamed his

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name and urged him to take her harder. When he climaxed, the rush of heat made her body tremble with fulfillment.

The beach lay dark around them, the moonlight only a silver arc across the waves. Their bed formed into a wide chair. Tiran positioned himself so that Mara rested against his chest. He held her, brushed his fingers through her tangled hair and kissed the salty skin of her shoulder.

“Tomorrow, I will take you back to your island prison.”

She stiffened in his arms.

Sensing her fear, he kissed her again and soothed away the worry. “So that you can speak to your father and reassure him. Then we’ll choose a place—anywhere within my power to take you—and we will go there.”

“What about your world? I’d like to see where you come from.” She looked up at him, her stormy eyes wide.

Tiran shook his head. Regret tightened his chest. “It’s not within my power to take you there.”

“Oh...because I can’t breath underwater?”

“No. I could change your molecules and reform your lungs to be able to live in my world. It would be painless, but it would require a recovery period.”

“I’m willing. I’m sure it’s safe there. I’d never have to worry about my father’s enemies finding me.”

“I would take you there if I could, but it’s forbidden. My father has denied me permission to bring you to live among us. Besides...Poseidon would be there. Would you want to live in his world?”

“I suppose not. Would you like to try my place?”

Tiran laughed. “You have a place?”

“New York. It’s a big city.”

“Is it near the water?”



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Mara made a face. “Near enough. Of course, the ocean there isn’t like this. It’s...colder and not as clean. You probably wouldn’t like it.”

“I’d give it a try, if it’s where you’d like to go.”

Mara sighed and nestled deeper into the crook of his arm. “Actually, I like it right here for now. Do we really have to leave?”

“It would be wise to move on...but there are so many other places like this. We can decide later. For now, let’s enjoy the moonrise.”

\* \* \*

Mara stretched across the bed, sated and sleepy, but strangely alert. In the dark, she reached for Tiran, but felt only the smooth surface of the bed. Her fingers slid into the heated indentation left by his body. He’d only just left.

She rose, led by curiosity more than concern. She imagined catching him in the act of making another surprise for her, as he had that afternoon with a table and chairs overlooking the beach, set with a feast of underwater delicacies.

When she reached the hidden door that led outside, she heard voices and froze.

The words were muffled, but the intent was clear. Someone had discovered their hideout—was it Poseidon?—and Tiran was trying to protect her.

With her heart thundering, she ran back into the bedroom area and found the robe Tiran had made for her from the remains of her cover-up and a net of dark seaweed. She’d watched him in awe as he fashioned the shiny, limp seaweed leaves into a material softer than silk. The robe closed around her and formed to her body.

Now what? she wondered. She didn’t dare go outside.

She went back to the door and listened, but the argument had stopped. Good. Maybe Tiran had convinced whomever it was to go away and leave them alone. He’d be back any minute and she’d be ready to leave with him and head anywhere they had to go to be free.

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A minute stretched to five, and he didn't return. After what seemed like an hour, she finally stuck her head out of the hidden door and looked down the dark beach. She saw no one. Footprints in the sand led from the shelter to the edge of the water and disappeared. Had Tiran gone swimming after his argument, not realizing Mara had woken up?

She had to know. She stepped outside and the night wind whipped her long robe around her legs. For the first time in months, she felt cold.

The voice of reason stopped her before she took another step and warned her to go back inside. She'd been safe in there, and Tiran would return as soon as he could. There was no one around, nothing to fear.

But she wanted him. She needed to know everything was all right.

Yet logic won out. He'll be back, she thought, turning to duck inside the shelter.

Strong arms locked around hers from behind. She screamed as her back collided with a hard body.

"There you are."

*Poseidon.*

Mara struggled against his iron grip. "Where's Tiran? What did you do to him?"

"I did nothing. He's been called back to our city to face punishment for his crimes—and I've been sent to collect the evidence."

"What evidence?"

"You."

She pushed back against him, trying to kick at his massive legs. He held her steady, his arms rigid to the point that she found it hard to breathe. Before Mara could form another question the air around her dissolved into a thousand sparkling pinpricks. Her body faded away and she knew nothing but the sensation of rapid movement. The brilliant shimmer turned dark around her, and a biting cold seeped through her scattered molecules—

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Then, nothing but blackness.

\* \* \*

Prince Tiran took his place before the Atlantean Triumvirate, but he did not look at the three venerable elders who presided over Atlantean law. His gaze, instead, rested on his brother, Poseidon, who stood next to a solid block of sea glass imprisoning Mara, frozen in time like an alabaster statue.

Poseidon made an attempt to look sympathetic, even as his hand caressed the smooth contours of the substance that held Mara in stasis. She could remain there forever, untouched, unharmed and completely unaware of her surroundings. Tiran feared that would be his punishment for being with her—he'd be forced to spend the rest of his long life looking at her inanimate body encased in the blue-green glass.

He would not allow that to happen.

"Tiran, son of Mykonos, do you understand the crime of which you have been accused?" Doremus, another of the elders, asked.

The question drew Tiran's attention away from Mara. "I understand, but I wish to speak on my own behalf."

"You may, though an excuse will not lessen your punishment if you are found guilty."

"I understand. I'd like to cite the Articles of Autonomy which make provisions for granting asylum to members of other cultures. I submit, regardless of the punishment I receive, that the human woman be granted her freedom and be taken away from the island on which I found her, where she had been held prisoner."

Doremus looked back at his colleagues. Mykonos frowned, his expression one of unyielding disappointment in his younger son. The third elder, Niros, seemed sympathetic. He consulted a portable data chip reader that he held in his hand and Tiran hoped he might be reading the Articles of Autonomy for himself.

Doremus stepped back. "It seems we have two different matters to

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decide here. One is whether your congress with the human is a punishable offense. You don't deny that you spoke with her, and told her of our existence, and you had a sexual liaison with her that may have resulted in conception?"

Tiran felt a surge of pride. If Mara had conceived, there was an even greater argument to allow her to remain in the city with him. He nodded. "I don't deny any of that."

"The second matter is the one regarding your interpretation of the Articles. You say this human is oppressed, and that she asked you to free her from her captivity?"

"That's correct."

"Did you also broach the subject with Mykonos and continue on your course of action against his advice?"

Tiran glanced at his father and saw no sympathy in his dark eyes. "Yes. That is correct."

"I must ask, did you do this with the knowledge and assistance of your brother, Poseidon?"

At that question, Poseidon's hand dropped from the glass. The satisfied expression on his face dissolved. Tiran would not have had to implicate Poseidon in the events that had taken place. The Triumvirate had the right to search his thoughts for signs of guilt. Lying was pointless.

"Poseidon was aware of my intent to become involved with the human. Yes."

"And Poseidon has also had congress with this human?"

"I have not!" Poseidon spoke out of turn, and all eyes in the Hearing Room turned to him. "I have not."

"Only because I stopped you," Tiran countered. "But Poseidon's guilt is not the issue at hand. I ask that you decide my fate and hers before you pursue his involvement."

Doremus nodded. "In that, I concur. One problem at a time. Have

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you anything else to say, Tiran, before we deliberate?”

“Only that I ask you to review the Articles and decide if I should have ignored a request for help.”

“A request the human could not have made, if you obeyed our laws and stayed away from her.”

“Regardless of the circumstances, a request she made without knowledge that I possessed the power to help her. Her need was so great that she asked a stranger for help, and so immediate that she also relied on Poseidon, believing he would give her aid as well.”

Doremus turned to the others. “I believe we are ready to discuss this matter in private.”

With that, a wall of water solidified between Tiran and the members of the Triumvirate. Though he could hear nothing, he could see them discussing the matter. He kept his eyes on Niros, who gestured to the data chip reader in his hand. That gave Tiran hope that perhaps he might have a champion among the three, even if it wasn’t his own father.

On a cool current, Poseidon swirled over to Tiran. “You should not have interfered, brother. I would have taken the female away and no one would have been wiser.”

“You were using her, Poseidon.”

“But she’d have been well used—and completely satisfied. Now, because of you, she may end up nothing more than a decoration in the Gemstone Caves.”

Tiran raged inside. The thought of Mara remaining forever encased in her glass prison, no more than a curiosity among the other ancient creatures that had been similarly captured and put on display in the caves, incensed him. But he didn’t dare fight with his brother in the Hearing Room in view of the Triumvirate.

“I will not allow that to happen,” he said, his voice even.

Poseidon laughed. “Don’t you think she would make a fine addition

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to the gallery? The other creatures we keep in stasis could use a new companion.”

Tiran turned away and settled his gaze on the three men still arguing beyond the solid wall of water. It seemed that Niros held court now. While he spoke, Mykonos shook his head and Doremus nodded. Two against one in Tiran’s favor, it seemed.

Forbidden to leave during the deliberation, Tiran and Poseidon had little to do but wait. To avoid further conversation with his brother, Tiran dissolved into an invisible current and floated above the glass that encased Mara. She looked so fragile to him, her helplessness a reminder that as a human, she would never truly fit into his wondrous world beneath the sea. Here, even free of her incarceration, she would be at the whims of his people, always an outsider, regarded with mistrust. He decided that if she were sentenced to remain encased and taken to the Gemstone Caves, he would free her and take her away, even if it meant once again facing the wrath of the Triumvirate.

\* \* \*

When deliberation finally ended, the wall of water melted into a wide blue current that seeped into the floor. Tiran morphed into his human form and stood ready, his gaze averted from that of his father.

“Prince Tiran.” Doremus addressed him, and he stepped forward. “In the matter of your disobedience, we have decided we cannot make an exception to our rules merely because you are the son of one of the Triumvirate. Your punishment will be the temporary loss of your air-breathing capabilities. This will prevent you from going above to have congress with humans. The period of your punishment will be two years.”

Tiran bowed his head. He’d expected no less.

Doremus continued. “In the matter of your interpretation of the Articles of Autonomy, we must agree that Atlanteans have the right and responsibility to help those in need. This human asked for help in

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freeing herself from captivity and you agreed to provide it. Therefore, before your punishment begins, we will allow you to return her above, and find a suitable place where she may exist free of her captivity. We regret that we cannot grant her asylum to live among us, but our society could not bear the intrusion of a human at this time.”

Tiran nodded. At least he could help Mara escape from her island prison.

“You may dissolve the glass, Tiran, and take her away. Understand that you have one day to complete your obligation to her, then you must return here or you will forfeit your freedom entirely and be placed in stasis yourself.”

“I understand.” Tiran turned and put his hands on the glass. How could he tell Mara that he would have to break the promise he made to stay with her forever?

\* \* \*

Mara awoke in Tiran’s arms. They lay on the bed in their shelter, warm and dry, covered with a gossamer blanket and nothing else. When his face came into focus above her, she smiled and he kissed her.

“It was a dream, wasn’t it?” she asked through a yawn. “I dreamed Poseidon came and captured me.”

“He did. It was no dream.”

Mara tried to sit up, panicked that Tiran’s brother might return. He put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her into the soft contours of the bed. “Don’t worry. He’s not coming back. We have only a short time together. Let’s make it count.”

“What do you mean? You’re leaving?”

“I can’t stay. Be with me now, then I’ll take you to see your father, as I promised. After that, I’ll take you to a neighboring island where you can find your way home or wherever you want to go.”

“No! You’re coming with me! You promised you would come with me!” Tears burned in the back of her throat. This wasn’t how her

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fantasy was supposed to end.

“It’s forbidden. I must return to my city. I have no choice.”

“I’ll stay right here, then. You can visit me and I’ll live here.”

Tiran shook his head. “I can’t. Be with me one more time, Mara, before I have to go.”

She searched his eyes, hoping to see a hint of mischief, wishing he were playing a trick. His expression was earnest and his eyes didn’t lie. He truly had no choice.

She kissed him through salty tears and wrapped herself around him, reveling in the warmth of his skin, the taste and feel of him.

They made love without words, first tenderly, then savagely. This time, Mara left Tiran sleeping and walked along their little beach. The foamy waves washed over her feet and gently drew her deeper into the embrace of the sea until she floated on the shallow breakers, lost in a perfect dream. She would have stayed there forever, buoyed by the water, but Tiran found her. He carried her back to shore, where he helped her put on the robe he’d made for her, then swept her up in a sparkling whirlwind and whisked her back to her father’s compound.

Tiran didn’t materialize with her. He hovered around her like a soft breeze as she walked up her secluded beach and took the path through the dunes. The moment she approached the buildings of the compound, the alarms began to sound. Within seconds, the security force surrounded her. Though they looked relieved to see her, they treated her suspiciously. They refused to lower their weapons until Thanatos arrived, breathless and pale, and ordered them to stand down.

Mara held out her hand to her father. Although the guards remained vigilant, they stepped back to allow him to take her hand.

“Did they hurt you?” he asked, his voice whispery and weak. The creases around his eyes and mouth seemed deeper than she remembered, and his silver hair was uncombed.

“No, Papa. I’m fine. And I’m always going to be fine. I’m going



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away so that you don't have to worry about me anymore."

He dropped his hand from hers and sighed. "I'll have you taken back to New York immediately, if that's what you want. I'll assign a security force to stay with you there and keep you safe."

"I don't want that. I'm going away where you won't have to worry about me. I'll contact you when I've settled. I'll change my name and no one will know who I am. I promise, I'll be safe."

Mara hoped it were true. Without Tiran by her side, she wondered if she would be able to build the life she wanted. A warm breeze stirred between her and her father, and in it, she felt Tiran's gentle touch.

"Mara, you know I'll do anything to keep you safe. You don't have to be alone." The desperation in her father's voice chipped away at her resolve. The gray cast to his skin, and the thinness of his lips, belied that fear for her safety had nearly destroyed his health. He would never stop trying to protect her from the world, and the stress would eventually kill him.

"Papa, I won't be alone. I promise. I'll be safe and happy, and if you ever need me, I'll come. But I can't live in your gilded cage anymore. This life is killing us both."

He bowed his head.

Mara put her hand on his shoulder. "I promise I'll be all right." She hugged him and kissed his cheek, then stepped back and melted away into Tiran's prismatic embrace.

Together they surged over the sand and out to sea, leaving Thanatos Zander surrounded by his bewildered security guards, tears glistening in his dark eyes.

\* \* \*

Tubes of blue paint lay in a semi-circle on the workbench next to Mara's latest canvas. An arch of ivory sand divided the cerulean sky from the white-capped waves below and the whole scene looked more like a photograph than a painting. Bathed in crystalline rays of light, a

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man with eyes the color of the sky stood at the edge of the surf, his gaze focused on a point in the distance where the faint outline of a woman's face seemed to melt into a bank of cumulous clouds.

Mara surveyed her work and decided the scene needed something that she couldn't see from the back of her Oceanside bungalow. Maybe during her usual afternoon stroll along the marina, she'd take a few photographs of the seascape to inspire her.

She glanced at the time. It had been two blissful hours of quiet this afternoon and now it was time to take a walk. She covered her canvas with an oilcloth and wiped her hands on the damp rag that hung from a hook on her easel.

Before she woke the dark-haired toddler sleeping on the couch in the sunroom, she'd have to wash the smell of oil paint from her hands.

As she slipped past him on the way to the kitchen, her baby stirred, stretching his bare toes and blinking sleepy eyes at her.

"Mama will be right back, Ty," she whispered and patted his silky hair as she passed.

When she returned, the boy was fully awake. He grinned and reached up chubby arms to encircle her neck as she bent to lift him off the couch. She took in his powdery scent and the comfort of his sleep-warmed skin as she cradled him against her and rubbed his back.

"Hi!" he said over her shoulder.

"Hi, baby! Ready to go for our walk?" Mara asked.

"No, Mama! See, Daddy?"

Mara laughed. "Yes, Ty. Mama painted Daddy into another of my pictures. Let's go look."

She stopped mid-turn. Her heart kicked against her ribs at the sight of the tall, broad-shouldered shape in the doorway that led to the back deck. The man wore jeans and a white shirt, and his eyes were the color of the oceans, the color of Ty's.

Her knees felt weak. He hadn't changed at all from the image in her

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fantasy, the image she painted as often as she could, whenever she found a way to put him into the seascape fantasy portraits that paid her rent. He was still beautiful and as perfect as he'd been the day he left her on an Aegean beach and returned to his city beneath the sea to face his punishment.

And his son instantly recognized him.

"Hi!" Ty said, waving at their visitor.

"Hello," Tiran said, a sparkle of moisture in the corners of his eyes. He stepped over the threshold.

Mara walked forward so he could see the face of the beautiful boy he'd given her. "His name is Ty," she said, and her voice caught. "I was hoping you'd get to meet him one day."

"I've thought of nothing else for two years."

"How did you find us?"

Tiran smiled at his son and let the boy clutch his large hand in chubby baby fingers. "Poseidon kept tabs on you for me. As soon as I was free to leave the city, I came here. I can never go back."

"Then you'll stay here with us, won't you?" Tears laced Mara's hopeful laugh.

"I was hoping you would ask."

"They won't come to take you away from us, will they?"

"Not this time." Tiran caressed her face, and she leaned into his touch. "I'm sorry I couldn't fulfill your fantasies that day, Mara. I hope I'll have a chance to make it up to you."

She laughed and threw her free arm around his neck, catching both of her men in a desperate hug. "You gave me everything I ever wanted—much more than any fantasy."

## BERNADETTE GARDNER

As a child, Jennifer Colgan (who also writes as Bernadette Gardner) regularly spent all her allowance on books. She quickly progressed from Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew Mysteries* to Nora Roberts and Gary Jennings. Her search for the perfect mix of adventure and romance finally took her from the bookstore to her computer where she began writing the kinds of stories she loves to read.

"I'd been experimenting with different genres and decided to try a romance novel. Now I can't imagine writing a story without romance in it," she says.

Jennifer is a native of the NY-NJ Metropolitan area, but her travels have taken her as far from home as Sydney, Australia. Her writing regularly takes her far into the future and deep into distant galaxies.

You can learn visit her websites to learn about her works in progress at [www.bernadettegardner.com](http://www.bernadettegardner.com) and [www.jennifercolgan.com](http://www.jennifercolgan.com).

\* \* \*

***Don't miss Conjured In Flames, by Jennifer Colgan,  
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*Swept into another world by the desperate spell of an evil sorceress, real estate agent Gillian Lawrence figures she must be dreaming. Her dream becomes a nightmare when she realizes her resemblance to the sorceress has embroiled her in the ambitious plans of the handsome*

*Lord Rodan to save his people from an army of ruthless barbarians. Rodan demands that Gillian use her magick and join his cause, or spend the rest of her life as his prisoner and even possibly face death. But with no powers of magick at her disposal, what's a transported real estate agent from present-day America to do? A deadly battle hinges on her ability to convince two armies that her magick can stop an invasion and save the Southern Kingdom...as well as winning the heart of the man she loves...*

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