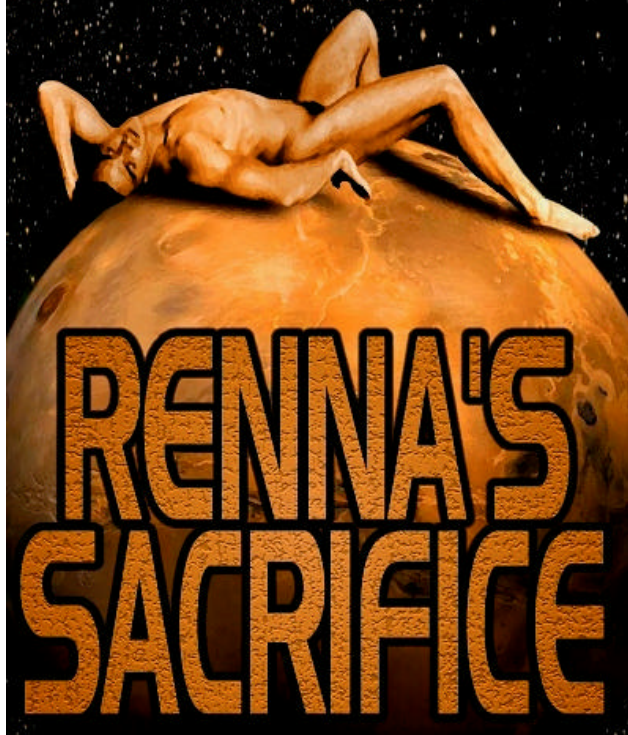


**Bernadette  
Gardner**



## RENNA'S SACRIFICE

Moonlight bathed the meadow in quicksilver and stretched long, inky shadows from the surrounding trees. A faint breeze stirred the leaves at her feet. The thin shift she wore swirled against her legs making her feel light and free.

Renna craved that feeling more than anything. That was why she left the Refuge each night and walked alone through the surrounding hillsides. This was the only time she could sing to herself and dance and feel the air on her body and the wind through her hair.

This was the only time she could undo the tight braids that bound her golden tresses and let the silky strands hang down her back. It was the only time she could remove her shoes and walk barefoot in the dew-soft grass without fear of reproach. No one would look sternly at her and lead her off to one of the Refuge's chapels to pray for forgiveness of her sins...

ALSO BY BERNADETTE GARDNER  
(*writing as Jennifer Colgan*)

*Conjured In Flames*

# RENNA'S SACRIFICE

BY

BERNADETTE GARDNER

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RENNA'S SACRIFICE  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*For Tom, who told me to go for it.*

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Renna had a lot to ask forgiveness for. Each day she prayed with the acolytes and petitioners from early morning until late afternoon.

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Then she helped prepare evening meal for the priestesses who cared for her. She ate with them in silence, said evening prayers, and retired to her room with the stub of a candle to time her evening ablutions.

When the flame died, she went to sleep.

At least, that's what she pretended to do.

By that time each night, the priestesses and acolytes were all asleep. Their days of chanting, chores, and penance exhausted them so, Renna had little fear anyone would wake and catch her.

Nevertheless, she held her breath every night as she hurried down the stone staircase, through the larder, and out into the herb garden. She always took a breath there because the air was sweet from the flowering plants. Then, free of the confines of the damp granite walls, she ran.

Her long legs carried her faithfully down the sloping pathway to the meadow where, every night, she fell into the grass panting, her shift damp with sweat.

She would lie in the grass and stare up at the moons and regret — but only for a moment — that before dawn, she would have new sins to atone for.

It didn't stop her, of course. Twenty years at the Refuge, a ward of the Sisters of the Moons, must have earned her some dispensation with the Great Mother. After all, running wasn't forbidden. Taking one's shoes off outdoors was not a sin and reveling in the beauty of the night sky warranted no punishment that she knew of.

So, most of her nocturnal activities were harmless.

But not all.

For five years she'd been running in the meadow at night and she'd never seen him. Never thought to look.

Then, one evening when the moons were full and high in the sky, she'd noticed a shadow at the edge of the clearing beneath the trees.

He moved when she moved. He lurked.

She was frightened at first but in watching him she discovered a



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boldness she hadn't known she possessed.

One evening, by the silvery moonlight, she followed the tall, shadowy figure through the trees and came upon a place she had never known existed.

A pond with a flat surface mirrored the brilliant sky. On the far shore he sat on a rock watching her. That night he became more than a shadow.

Renna saw his masculine form, all sinewy muscle and long legs. His hair was blacker than the sky and his eyes were dark. Around his head he wore a golden circlet that marked him as a disciple of the Sun God.

Renna had been taught by the Sisters that the men who worshiped the Sun God had often warred with the Sisters. She had been told they lived on the far side of the valley and would not dare venture near the Refuge, as an age-old treaty forbade it.

She had wondered, as she stared at him across the calm surface of the pond, if he would do penance for his nightly jaunts, just as she did for hers.

They watched each other across the water until moonset. Then Renna hurried back to her room on legs that were sore from exertion. The Sisters wondered in the morning why she walked so slowly to the breakfast table. They worried that she might be ill.

On the next night when Renna arrived at the pond, he was not perched on his rock. She feared he'd gone already. Perhaps he'd grown bored with their wordless exchange. But when she turned to leave, she found him standing before her.

A strange feeling shot through her at the sight of him up close. His skin glistened with droplets of water and there was humor in his eyes.

He shook his head. "You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you."

He smirked at her quick response. "What brings you out here each night?" he asked.

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"At first it was to escape the rules of the Refuge for a while. Now, I come to look for you."

"It's the same with me," he said. "Are you a Priestess?"

"No. A ward. They took me in as a child and I live their life, but I'm not one of them. Are you a disciple of the Sun God?"

He nodded.

"What is this place? I never knew it was here."

"This is a sacred pool," he said. "On certain nights, if you stare into the reflection in the water, you may see visions."

Renna's eyes widened. She'd never known someone who saw visions. "What visions have you seen?"

"You."

Renna gasped. His voice sent shivers down her spine. Beneath her shift, her flesh pebbled at his revelation. She let her cautious glance skim down his body and back up to his handsome face. "You saw me?"

"Many times, even before you found this place. I've wondered when I would meet you."

Renna crossed her arms over her breasts to combat the ache she felt there when he looked at her. "Why would I be in your visions?" She cocked one eyebrow at him and grinned.

"I don't know. I suppose over time, I will find out."

\* \* \*

And so it went. Night after night Renna met him by the sacred pond and they talked while the moons raced across the heavens.

She learned his name was Benar and he had served the Sun God since he was a young boy. She also learned that on the night when the two moons were dark, he would complete his dedication and partake in the Great Rite of the Sun God. Though she begged him, he would tell her nothing about the Rite. He said only that it would change him forever.

Renna shivered at the thought. She liked Benar exactly the way he

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was. She loved his deep laugh, his long-fingered hands, and the sharp planes of his face. She loved that he told her about myths and legends the Sisters said were forbidden.

Even though it meant more prayer during the day, more penance, Renna continued to meet Benar by the pond and listen while he wove amazing tales of the great people that had once ruled the land. He told her of the small, blue planet their distant ancestors came from, and how lonely they were when they'd first set foot on the barren red soil of their new world.

He knew so much about the world, and Renna knew so little. The Sisters said too much knowledge was dangerous, yet Benar said knowledge was power. She believed Benar. And that meant even more penance.

In a way, it saddened Renna to learn that there was so much she would never see, so many people and places that were forbidden to her because the Sisters remained apart from the world. Benar told her a time would come when she would see more of the world, but she doubted that would ever happen.

When the breeze grew cold, Renna shivered beneath her shift. Her body was taut with the chill and she quaked with the cold as well as the strange sensation that skittered over her whenever Benar was near. When he saw her huddled into herself for warmth, he put an arm around her shoulders and drew her to him.

Her shivering stopped instantly and she went still. Within her, a strange warmth began to grow. She dropped her head onto Benar's shoulder and closed her eyes, reveling in the masculine, sun-warmed scent of his skin. She heard him sigh and wondered if he felt the same unnamed longing she did whenever they were together.

\* \* \*

A few nights later as Renna ran through the trees to their meeting place, a sharp branch caught her shift and tore it at the shoulder. Fear

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gripped her for a moment. The priestesses would wonder how she could damage her nightdress while sleeping. What would she tell them?

She would have to mend it before dawn, but that would mean leaving Benar sooner than usual and she couldn't bear that. The nights were too short as it was.

Clutching the torn shift to her breast, she made her way to the pond. Benar met her on the shore as usual. Concern darkened his eyes when he saw her torn dress.

"What happened?" His fingers brushed hers where she held the thin fabric.

"A branch tore it," she said and let the cloth drop slightly. Beneath the material, a shallow scratch marred her skin. When Benar saw the small wound, he drew in a breath and his brows knit together.

He ran his thumb over the thin red line of broken skin and the contact sent a jolt of awareness through Renna. The muscles in her legs tightened and her nipples came erect.

Benar must have sensed the change in her because he stared curiously for a moment. Then he moved his fingers along her skin and pushed the damaged shift off her shoulder.

The torn edges of the dress fell, exposing Renna's breast. The pink tip was hard. It ached more than usual. When Benar covered it with his palm, Renna gasped. Her knees felt like warm candle wax. They could barely hold her up. Something deep in the core of her body clenched, waiting.

She looked up at Benar and his eyes were heavy. He held his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Renna..." The sound of her name brought her towards him. She stepped forward and allowed her breast to fill his palm. He took the soft mound and caressed it reverently. The feel of his work-roughened skin on the sensitive tip sent shock waves of pleasure and need through Renna's body.

She arched her back.

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Benar reached down and caught the hem of her shift in his free hand. He raised the fabric over her thigh, her hip, and up to her waist. The feel of it sliding over her bare skin drove her mad. She had never experienced anything like this before.

Some spot inside her, just above the cleft of her thighs, began to tingle and throb. She wanted Benar to touch her there, but she didn't know how to ask him.

She raised her arms above her head, giving him unspoken permission to remove her shift entirely.

He did and she kept her arms stretched above her head while he ran his fingertips down the soft skin from her wrist to her breast.

He dropped the shift and took both of her breasts in his hands. He rubbed her nipples gently and cupped the swelling mounds as Renna dropped her arms and tilted her head back to give thanks to the Great Mother for this moment.

She cried out a second later when Benar brought his lips down on one pink nipple and drew the hard bud into his mouth. The heat of it traveled directly to that spot that needed attention so badly and the force of it made her weak.

Benar caught her as her knees buckled and slid one arm under her legs. She wrapped her trembling arms around his neck as he scooped her up.

"I should send you back to the Refuge," Benar growled. His voice was husky in her ear as he carried her to the shelter of the nearby trees and placed her on the dewy grass. He knelt beside her and placed one hand on her stomach just below her ribs.

Renna's muscles tightened and her body convulsed with the pleasure of his touch. Hot moisture pooled between her legs.

"I won't go!"

Benar smiled at the force of her protest.

"Touch me, Benar, please!"

Obediently, he rose up and threw off his own shirt. His trousers

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followed and then he took the golden circlet from his head and placed it on the ground beside them.

Renna stared as his body was revealed. Every part of him was beautiful. His chest and the rippling muscles of his abdomen drew the attention of her hands. She trailed her fingers down the dark arrow of hair that pointed to the thick erection between his legs. Her touch there made him moan.

Renna opened her legs and beckoned him to kneel between them.

“Are you sure of this, Renna?” Benar asked, though he complied readily. He lowered himself onto her and she took his weight gratefully.

She arched her back to bring her slick feminine folds closer to his erection. Her urgent desire grew as she ran her hands along the bulging muscles of his chest.

“I know what to expect. I’m not afraid.”

“I am. I don’t want you to be punished. The Sisters will not be pleased to learn you have given your body to a disciple of the Sun God.”

“They will never know.” Renna’s voice rose. She ached so badly for Benar that the thought of stopping now and drawing away from him made her eyes burn with tears.

“They may find out one day...”

“Benar! Please!” Renna raised her hips, impatiently bringing the soft curls between her legs into contact with the tip of Benar’s cock. His eyes widened.

She spread her legs farther and slid her eager hands to his hips. She guided the tip of him to her opening, and waited, writhing eagerly beneath him. “Make me yours, Benar. I need you.”

Benar took her mouth in a kiss that left them both breathless. He swallowed the gasp of surprise that left her lips when he nudged the silky tip of his erection inside her.

“I’ve wanted this since I first saw you,” he whispered. She moaned softly as his hot shaft penetrated her, pushing slowly against her aching

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inner muscles.

Renna drew in a shuddering breath and held it. Benar sensed her hesitation and stilled. "I don't want to hurt you, Renna...but—"

"Please, Benar! I want this." She clenched her eyes shut tight against the sudden stab of pain when Benar thrust deeply into her body and broke the barrier within. As he moved within her in gentle strokes, the discomfort faded rapidly, and Renna found herself arching to take him in farther. She wrapped her legs around him as the sweet sensation of his deeper thrusts drew her muscles taut.

"Oh...oh..." She made small, wondrous sounds each time he pulled out and plunged back in. Her voice rose in pitch as the most usual feeling began to build in the flesh that sheathed him.

The aching emptiness grew more and more intense as Renna moved. All she could think of was pulling him in deeper until he finally touched the spot within her that had been waiting for him for so long.

Benar's movements quickened and she stared into his eyes. They were so dark, and held limitless love for her. He brought his mouth down over hers and plunged his tongue past her hungry lips in a movement that mimicked their lovemaking.

He whispered to her, "Renna, you're mine. You'll always be mine."

The words brought the ache to a shuddering peak and she cried out for him, begging him to fill the emptiness inside her.

He did just that. The explosion of his climax rocked their sweat-slicked bodies and sent Renna over the edge of reason. Tears spilled down her cheeks as her body took fulfillment from his. She felt the muscles deep within her pull and tighten around the hot shaft inside her.

They came together and then lay spent in the cool grass stroking each other with trembling fingers.

"Renna," Benar whispered her name reverently. His voice was like a caress. "My beautiful Renna."

"Benar, I don't want to go back to the Refuge." The words slipped

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out and hung in the still air. She began to shiver. The confession frightened her as much as it exhilarated her. "I want to stay with you."

He rose on one arm and looked down at her. His eyes roamed her face and when his gaze fell on her lips, he kissed her.

"You must go back for now. There is no other place for you."

"What about the Temple of the Sun God? You told me there are women there."

"Yes. We have female disciples, but if you were one of them, we could not meet like this anymore. We could not even speak to each other."

Renna felt the tears again. This time they weren't tears of release but frustration. Her life up until this point had been a useless routine. She lived as the Sisters did, but she was not one of them. It was time she found a purpose of her own and ceased spending her days praying for forgiveness when her only sin was wanting a life.

In Benar's arms she'd found something. If all she ever did from this moment on was be with him, her life would have new meaning.

"You told me, Benar," she began quietly, "that you saw me in your visions. If that is so, then it must be because I have a purpose in your life."

"You're right, my love. Don't cry." Benar stroked her hair and gathered her against his chest. Wrapped in his arms, with his strong heart beating next to hers, she felt complete. She no longer needed to search for freedom. "We'll find a way, Renna, but tonight, you have to go back."

Benar kissed her again and gently drew her to her feet. He found her discarded shift and examined the tear as he helped her slip the thin dress over her head.

"I will sew it before daybreak," she told him. "If I don't have time, I'll tell the Sisters that it ripped some other way."

Benar nodded, but his attention was elsewhere. His hands had settled on her hips and he drew her body toward him for another deep



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kiss.

Later, when Renna finally stumbled through the trees toward the Refuge, her legs were weak. Her lips were swollen from his kisses and her breasts were tender from his touch. She still ached, but in a different way. The memory of Benar inside her brought a hot flush to her cheeks and a shy smile to her lips.

If not for his insistence that she go home, she would have turned and raced back into his arms. She wanted him so fiercely she could hardly breathe.

Somehow she managed to drag her tired body up to her room. There, she changed into a day dress and sat at the small table to work on mending her shift by the first gray light of dawn.

\* \* \*

When the morning bell rang, Renna woke at the table with the sewing needle in her stiff fingers and only a few stitches taken. Exasperated, she put the garment aside and made her way to breakfast.

The priestesses gathered as usual at the long table in the main hall. They welcomed the female acolytes with silent nods and wan smiles as they did each day. When their benevolent gazes fell on Renna, there was sadness in their eyes.

Her heart lurched. Could they know already that she'd spent the night in Benar's arms? The thought that someone may have followed her, spied on her intimate time with her lover, made Renna more angry than afraid.

She met the stares of the priestesses with bold defiance and smiled broadly at their shocked expressions. She refused to allow them to shame her.

When morning meal was over, she rose and waited as the others did, for the acolytes to clear the plates and cups. When the students were gone, Renna bowed her head in prayer and waited for the Sisters to dismiss her.

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To her chagrin, they gathered around her instead. Renna's breakfast formed a hard lump in the pit of her stomach when Medea, the High Priestess, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Renna, today is a sad day." Medea said. There was a tremor in her melodious voice. Renna kept her eyes on the scarred surface of the table where her thoughts raced along the cracks and indentations in the ancient wood. Should she apologize and beg their forgiveness or should she turn and walk away, leaving behind the archaic rules by which she had never chosen to live?

"Renna, today we must prepare you for the purpose for which you were bred."

Air escaped Renna's lungs in a whoosh. "What?"

She brought her eyes up to Medea's and the High Priestess guided her gently back to her seat. The others clustered around her, murmuring among themselves. Some stroked her hair and Dejel, Renna's favorite and the closest to her age, actually began to sob.

Panic lanced through Renna at Medea's expression. "What do you mean, 'the purpose for which I've been bred'?"

"Renna, you've long believed you came to the Refuge as an orphan and grew up as our ward. That is the truth, but not all of it," Medea said. "You are different. A child born to a special woman, a High Priestess who, twenty-one years ago, sacrificed herself to the Temple of the Sun God so there would be peace between the Sisters of the Moons and the Brothers of the Sun."

Renna said nothing. She could scarcely believe this new knowledge.

"Now, on the last day of your twentieth year, you must make the same sacrifice."

Renna stilled. Medea's words blurred in her mind. "What kind of sacrifice?"

Dejel wept.

"You will be delivered to the Temple and given to the High Priest. You will...receive his seed."

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Renna raised one pale brow. "His...?"

"Let us explain."

Renna listened with her lips clamped tightly shut. She twisted the hem of her day dress in her hands while Medea gently explained the process by which the High Priest of the Brothers of the Sun would implant his seed within her.

Images of Benar and the things they'd done by the silver pond played through her mind in vivid detail. Renna battled the urge to laugh at Medea's flowery words and suddenly timid voice as she explained everything Renna had experienced with Benar. But she also battled tears at the thought that now she must allow another man to use her body thus. She belonged to Benar and only to him.

The thought of allowing the Sun God's High Priest to impregnate her, perhaps while Benar stood chanting above them, made her dizzy and sick.

When tears leaked from her closed eyes, Dejel took Renna in her arms. "It's all right to cry, little Renna. We know this is a terrible day, a frightening sacrifice, but you will endure as your mother did and you will bring forth a beautiful child whose destiny will be to keep the peace just as yours is."

"What happened to my mother?" Renna cried. It was a question she'd asked often while growing up. The Sisters had long told her that her mother was with The Great One, the Mother of All Things. The answer had always comforted her. Today, Renna would not accept it. "How did she die?"

There was a choked silence and Renna turned to glare at Medea.

"She gave her life for you. She died giving birth."

Medea's confession frightened Renna and made her feel terribly responsible. Perhaps that's why they had never told her before.

"Don't fear, Renna. It's a rare thing. The same *will not* happen to you." Dejel's voice shook as she rubbed warmth into Renna's cold fingers with her own.

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“Will I ever come back to you?” she asked. “Or will I now live among the Brothers of the Sun?”

“You will stay with them, if the High Priest desires it.” Medea bowed her head as if the answer shamed her.

“Why was I not told of this sooner?” Renna rose and flung herself away from the throng of women. “Why was I not given a choice?”

“There is no choice. If a sacrifice is not made, the Brothers of the Sun will come for us all. We have kept the peace this way for thousands of years, since the first settlers came here from the blue planet.”

“Perhaps they should come for you all.” Renna’s voice was low. Her limbs shook with fatigue and anger when she turned back to the Sisters. “What must I do?” Her heart ached, but she was determined to uphold the honor of her mother’s sacrifice.

Medea wiped guilty tears from her eyes and reached out a trembling hand to Renna. “Come, we will do everything we can to ease your way.”

\* \* \*

At sunset the following day, Renna knelt on the warm stone altar at the apex of the Temple of the Sun God. The robe she wore was pure white and flowed along the lines of her body like cool cream. A hot wind rippled the fabric and stirred her hair, which had been set free of its plaiting and hung in waves around her face.

Between her brows, a blue jewel hung from a silver cord that encircled her head. A matching jewel hung between her breasts, heavy and warm on her tingling skin.

Beneath her robe, she wore nothing but a silver chain around her waist. It suspended a third blue jewel just below her navel. Medea explained the jewels were meant to channel the power of the sun to her mind, her heart and her womb. Renna wore them with pride, for they had touched the skin of no other woman since the day of her mother’s

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sacrifice.

The drums began to beat a rhythm that Renna felt in her very core. Like her own heartbeat, the tempo was consistent and perfect. The sound grew louder as the disciples of the Sun God, both male and female, climbed the steps to the altar.

Renna peeked at their faces as they gathered around her. Even in the waning light, she could see that, so far, Benar was not among them.

Perhaps he waited in vain for her by the silver pool. Or perhaps, having learned she was the vessel for the High Priest's seed, he had refused to attend the ritual. She prayed to the Mother of All Things that Benar would not have to watch while another man claimed her body. She could not bear to see Benar's face.

When all the disciples had assembled, they filled the platform around the altar. Men and women alike smiled at Renna. They bowed their heads to her as she rose and stood straight upon the altar.

The Sisters had explained to her that the ritual took place at night, because eons ago it was thought to bring the sun back from oblivion. To perform it during the day, would banish the sun from the sky.

The chanting began as a low hum. Then words Renna didn't understand filled the night air. One by one, stars appeared in the sky and Renna shivered as she opened her robe and let it drop. A female disciple stepped forward and collected the garment from the rough stone of the altar floor.

"May the Great One bless you this night," she murmured reverently.

Renna nodded and dropped gracefully to her knees again. Naked now, she stretched out on the altar. The stone was warm against her back and buttocks. A disciple that she couldn't see slipped a pillow beneath her head.

She took a deep breath and forced her body to relax by concentrating on how comfortable the huge stone slab actually was.

Her heart fluttered when the drumming stopped, leaving a fulminate

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silence in its wake. The disciples all turned their backs to her and stepped away in unison, widening the circle of bodies around her.

Renna turned her head reluctantly when the circle parted and a figure stepped up to the altar.

He wore a mask of feathers that obscured all but his mouth. He raised a hand and held it over Renna's abdomen. She felt a sudden heat in the jewel that rested there.

Despite her fear, her nipples hardened as the High Priest brought his hand flat against her skin. He bowed his head and mumbled a quiet prayer. His voice was so low she couldn't hear the words. The pounding of her blood in her ears drowned out all else.

The High Priest threw off his own white robe, exposing his muscled body and engorged cock. He was ready to perform his solemn ritual.

Renna closed her eyes. *Oh, Benar. I'm sorry.*

In a swift movement the man mounted the altar and knelt between Renna's legs. She spread them willingly for him but kept her eyes on the sky where the stars seemed to dance in dizzy circles above her.

He bent his head low and the feathers of his beautiful mask touched her skin. She drew herself up slightly as the frisson of sensation made her muscles tense. Guilt overwhelmed Renna at the pleasure she felt as the hot tip of the High Priest's erection found the moist entrance to her body. She closed her eyes against the swirl of stars and held her breath against the heady scent of his richly oiled skin.

She cursed silently at her body's reaction when his cock slid within her. Her nerves tensed and her nipples tingled. Instinctively, she thrust her hips forward and jutted her breasts into the air to meet his eager hands as his body bore down on hers.

Hot silk. Raw power. She felt the length of him but she ached inside for Benar even as her muscles drew him deeper. She clasped his hips, urging him to complete his task.

Renna sighed and gasped. She rose to meet him, wishing all the while she'd had the courage to run away and leave the fulfillment of

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destiny to others.

His hands on her body warmed her even as she longed for Benar. His movements drove the ache within her to new heights until the pressure built to a taut peak. Renna cried out as she came, clenching her legs tightly around his waist. As she rocked back and forth beneath him, she felt him stiffen in her arms. His rough palm cupped her hard against him and with a low moan of pleasure, he delivered his seed into her. The liquid heat spread through her and the blue jewel pressed tightly between their slick bodies burned like a spark against her skin.

Renna gasped at the sudden discomfort and when she did, the High Priest brought his mouth down to hers. She tried to turn her head away. Taking his erection within her and accepting his seed was part of her duty to the Sisters of the Moons. Taking his tongue into her mouth was not.

He grasped her chin and turned her head firmly. Despite her protests, he kissed her.

Renna struggled for a moment, her body growing cold until she realized the taste of him was familiar. Rich. Sweet. She moaned and suckled and clasped his hips to keep him inside her for a moment longer.

He broke the kiss and reached up to draw away the feathered mask. His dark eyes held hers and caressed her face gently, wiping away the tears that spilled there.

“My Renna. I told you, you’re mine forever,” Benar said as he drew Renna into his embrace.

“Did you know that I was the sacrifice?” Renna asked as her body began to shiver. The evening breeze had cooled now and her limbs began to tremble with the cold as Benar helped her climb down from the altar.

The female disciple who had taken Renna’s robe stepped forward and gave the garment back to her before Benar answered.

“I knew. But like all the others, I was forbidden to tell you. The

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sacrifice comes in the form of your willingness to do your duty even though you thought you were betraying me. You could have run away. Others have. You could have refused me. But you didn't because of your dedication to the Mother of All Things and her plan for peace on this world. You are truly a Blessed One, Renna. And so am I to have earned your love as well as your sacrifice."

Renna took Benar's hand. She blushed when he kissed her fingers. He then led her to the edge of the high platform to look out across the crimson sea that stretched toward the horizon.

"Mars awaits, my sweet Renna," he told her as the red tide of the man-made sea swept in. "And you are its new Queen."



## BERNADETTE GARDNER

As a child, Bernadette Gardner (who also writes as Jennifer Colgan) 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.newoa.com/bgardner](http://www.newoa.com/bgardner) and [www.newoa.com/jcolgan](http://www.newoa.com/jcolgan).

\* \* \*

***Don't miss Conjured In Flames, by Jennifer Colgan,  
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