

A morous Passageways



The Seven
Wonders
of the
Ancient
World

FIRELIGHT

Foreword by
Ciar Cullen

Starla Childs

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Amorous Passageways - The Lighthouse of
Alexandria
Firelight

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FORWARD: THE ORIGINS OF THE WONDERS

BY CIAR CULLEN

Psychology, the occult and numerology aside, we can possibly blame the ancient Greek mathematician Pythagoras for some of this affinity for things in quantities of seven, the prime number he favored and considered 'not too big and not too small'. The number was firmly established in Greek literature by the time the historian Herodotus (484 BC-425 BC) listed seven great ancient 'sites' in his *magnum opus*. (Some scholars attribute this list to a mechanic named Philo of Byzantium.).

So what's so wonderful about these wonders? Did they all really exist? Who built them, and why? For one thing, all seven wonders are big—really big by ancient standards—and opulent, each requiring years, even decades of labor and unfathomable financial resources. Thus they represent the pinnacle of human achievement at the time Herodotus listed them.

Two are tombs, two are statues of gods, one is a temple, one a lighthouse and finally, a fantastic garden. Two are in Egypt, two in modern Turkey, two in Greece, and one in modern Iraq. Ironically, the oldest of the wonders—the Great Pyramid of Giza—is the sole survivor of the ages. But researchers have

unearthed fairly convincing evidence for the rest of the structures either in ancient literature or through archaeological investigations. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon remain the most shrouded in mystery.

One interesting note: the oldest, the Great Pyramid, was already about two thousand years old when the next oldest (likely the Temple of Artemis) was erected, and already nearly three thousand years old at the birth of Christ. The Pharos Lighthouse was constructed not much longer ago than two thousand years. The wonder, magnificence, mystery and sheer romance of these great works of art and architecture increase with each passing century.

Within this series are seven tales of love and wonder. Perhaps by reading these stories you'll now be able to remember the names of the wonders, and become a believer in the magical power of the number seven. If you still have trouble, try this visualization: You are an ancient sailor, traveling the Mediterranean. You spot a lighthouse (1) and head for port. You steer your ship between the legs of the great Colossus of Rhodes (2). You disembark and head down the paved road. You are flanked by two tombs—a great mausoleum on the left (3) and a huge pyramid (4) on the right. You proceed up the hill and encounter two gods. On the left, Artemis (5) resides in her temple. On your right is a massive enthroned Zeus in his temple (6). You rest from your long hike under a flowering fig tree in the luxurious gardens of Babylon (7), where you await the arrival of your true love.

THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD - THE LIGHTHOUSE OF ALEXANDRIA

Finally, the most practical wonder lay on the small island of Pharos at the harbor of Alexandria in Egypt. Ptolemy Soter, Alexander the Great's commander, commissioned Sostratus to build the lighthouse, but his son, Ptolemy Philadelphus ensured its completion. The lighthouse used fire at night and a massive lens that reflected sunlight during the day. As with many ancient monuments in the area, massive earthquakes brought the structure down, in this case during the 1300s. When a Sultan moved into the area in 1480, he built a medieval fortress on the site, using the fallen stones. A few images of the lighthouse graced ancient coins, giving us a fair idea of its look and size. Contemporary writers fill in the picture—at the top; a statue of Poseidon gazed upon the seas. In recent years, French archaeologists have launched underwater excavations at the harbor, uncovering what they assert are remnants of the edifice. Again, the most lasting impact of the 'Pharos Lighthouse' may be linguistic—giving us the French, Italian, and Spanish words for 'lighthouse'.

DEDICATION:

For all the weary travelers and those
who wait for them...

CHAPTER ONE

“How long have you been diving?”

Julianne shrugged on her dive pack and hooked the latch in front of her solar plexus. “Long enough, Jacques. I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t like the idea of you going down alone.”

“You don’t like the idea of anything, from what I’ve seen on this expedition so far.” She spat into her mask and coated the inside of the glass.

The Sea Mystic rocked and swayed with the outgoing tide while the sun traced a path over the Mediterranean Sea. The water glittered with tiny diamonds in a blue so unique, people had marveled over it for thousands of years. She had only an hour or so of daylight left and if she was going to untangle the cords feeding their mapping equipment, she had to leave in the next few minutes.

Jacques, the fearless leader of their party, tapped his fingers on the steel railing of the forty-seven foot vessel and growled. “I still don’t like it. If something happens to you, it’s my ass.”

“I’m a big girl. Tell them I overpowered you.”

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Her employer's frown deepened into a scowl.

Julianne sighed. "Listen. We have only a finite amount of time to finish this project if we're going to have proof of the exact location and structure of the Pharos before the dedication of the new maritime museum. We don't have ten hours to waste, which is what will happen unless I get down there, untangle and reconnect the damned cables."

Heat flushed her cheeks and she pulled her mask over her head.

"You have less than one hour. Do you hear me? If you aren't back in one hour—"

Julianne laughed. "You'll do what, Jacques? Come in after me? I'll be back in an hour. Don't worry."

She slipped off the deck and onto the diving platform at the rear of the ship. Once she'd pulled on her flippers, she settled her mask over her eyes and threw Jacques a wave.

He made a face--either exasperation or fury, she couldn't tell--and tucked his hands into the pockets of his off-white Bermuda shorts.

Just before she drifted into the water, she glanced at the island. Only a few short centuries ago, it had been home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World; a lighthouse so sophisticated it had served as a basis for every house to come after. Huge in its design and first in its function, it represented everything in the world of ancient civilizations--the desire to come home again. The unadulterated longing for each man to have a home and return safe. The fundamental need for a safe harbor.

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Now, it lay in ruins at the bottom of the sea. So far, they'd mapped roughly half of the projected site. They'd come up with some interesting readings and core samples, as well. Much of the debris seemed, at least in preliminary analysis, much older than the lighthouse should have been.

Many of the ancient civilizations had used pieces of existing structures to build new ones. The Knights of St. John obliterated the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus to build a simple curtain wall. Perhaps the builders of the lighthouse had done the same.

Not that it mattered much. The pieces of the puzzle lay on the sea floor, and she would find them. Each and every one.

Almost an hour later, according to the electric blue glow from her dive watch, she finally unwrapped the last length of cable. It looked as if someone, more likely something, had deliberately twisted the heavy, plastic-coated wires into a five-strand braid. A school of fish, or something larger, could have done it. Still, it was odd. Julianne didn't like odd.

Intriguing, she liked.

Puzzling, she liked.

Odd was a waste of her time.

She focused through the bubbles from her regulator and plugged the final cable into its housing.

She checked her watch again. Fifty-seven minutes. She'd be lucky if Jacques didn't have the Egyptian Special Forces searching for her by now. Still, she swam to the surface with deliberate care. Jacques' impatience was no reason to suffer the bends.

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When she finally reached the surface, she raised her hand in the direction of the ship.

But it wasn't there.

She spun a quick circle and ripped off her mask. Why in the world would Jacques move the ship? He knew she was in the water. They had another two weeks scheduled on site. Had the authorities come and forced him to leave?

The sun sizzled on the watery horizon. Julianne stomped on the beginning of what could only be fear and gazed heavenward.

Heaven wasn't there, either. Instead, filling her vision from north to south was a wall. A great stone wall that hadn't been there when she slipped into the water an hour ago. A dozen or so men in long, coarse tunics scurried around the base, each of them carrying ropes or crates of tools.

Stunned, she followed the course of the wall skyward, like a tourist in Paris gazing at the Eiffel tower for the first time.

She treaded water and craned her neck to the uppermost portion of the building where half of a cupola peeked over the edge.

The Lighthouse of Alexandria. And it wasn't finished.

CHAPTER TWO

Ptolemy II, Pharaoh. King. Military leader of strength, courage and a legacy greater than a thousand civilizations. For the whole of his lifetime, twenty-two years in which he'd seen and done unspeakable horror, he'd been groomed to lead warriors into battle and protect this quarter of Alexander's vast empire. His father had done it with skill and unsurpassed power.

Now it was Ptol's turn.

He paced on the great verandah outside his council chambers in a palace that was itself a small city. The lights of Alexandria twinkled through narrow, rough-hewn windows in low houses along the weaving city streets. Somewhere in the night, a child cried for his mother.

Behind him, on the far side of a bank of silk curtains, inside the massive, gilded chamber, fourteen grown men, some of them old enough to have served with the great Alexander himself, argued war strategy and decided which group of unfortunates would suffer the wrath of Alexandria next.

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Ptol wanted no part of it. Were it not for the nations who attacked him, he would live in ease and peace for the remainder of his days. In his earliest memories, images of blood streaming in rivers over the vast desert floor mingled with the debauchery that was his father's lifestyle. Pleasures of the flesh and the inherent destruction of any number of peoples...it seemed incongruous at best that such opposites could exist. Yet they were somehow the same.

Even now, in his bedchamber, eleven women, experienced courtesans marked with bronzed cuffs on their wrists and necks, waited for him. They would bathe him, pleasure him and before the morning came, sleep in a twisted mound of arms, legs and breasts at the foot of his massive bed. Or the floor.

He'd rather sleep in the stable with the asses.

A sigh formed on his lips and he released it while he ran both hands through his hair, pulling the long strands on the sides to the back and binding them with a piece of leather.

"Something troubles you, my son?" Memnon shuffled across the mosaic tiles, his frail shoulders hunched beneath the weight of his office and his robes.

Ptol groaned, turned and leaned his backside against the wall around the terrace. He folded his arms over his chest and shrugged. "It all seems so worthless. The bloodshed. The carnage. Haven't we seen enough of these things, *mehwet*?"

"One would think, certainly. I know I have seen

enough to last more than my one, meager lifetime.”

“Alexander has been dead for a generation, and still we fight among ourselves over his leavings, like dogs for table scraps. Sometimes, I wish I could simply walk away from the whole, ugly world and live on a ship in the middle of the sea forever.” He turned to the harbor and studied the blackened outline of his father’s legacy, a structure so vast it rivaled the great statue of Zeus in size and proportion. In function, there was no greater marvel.

Within the next month, he would personally light the fire atop the *Pharos* and the beacon would shine for the world. If only it could light the darkened seas in the hearts of men...

“I’m going for a walk. Tell the counselors to make a decision before sunrise and I will do as they advise in this, as I do in all things.”

“Be careful, my liege.”

Ptol swung his leg over the wall and gripped the vines that grew in a random pattern over the outer wall. As a child, he’d escaped the palace in this same manner too many times to count, when he grew weary of his father’s war councils.

Once he set his feet on the soft, even earth at the base of his palace, he still had to maneuver himself through a myriad channel of guards, watchtowers and slaves’ quarters.

It took him only a few minutes of skulking through the shadows, however, before he left the confines of his gilded prison. He meandered along a narrow street. Inside their dwellings, the citizen of his

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kingdom laughed and took their meals in flickering amber light. Their lives consisted only of what they would accomplish when the sun rose. They ate, they slept and many of them worked for him, completing the construction of a modern city. Most of them worked on the lighthouse.

Of all of the legacies his father had left him when he died, the lighthouse was the greatest. It was the one symbol of hope in an otherwise bleak existence. As if it already beckoned to lost souls, Ptol wandered through the streets until he reached the dike that led to the *Pharos*, the island on which the massive structure had been built. The sounds of the city faded behind him and the few homes scattered near the harbor were dark.

Moonlight glistened on the choppy waters of the dual harbor on either side of the natural dike. It shone on the lighthouse as well, as if the gods cast their blessing.

A muted crash came from his left and he spun toward the sound, his hand immediately falling to the hilt of his sword. The night grew silent again. Only the gentle lap of the waves against the marshy shore disturbed the quiet. A nightbird called from the island.

He frowned and turned his attention back to the sea. His hand remained on his hilt.

Another thud, this one louder, broke the silence. "*Merde! Cela va partir une contusion.*"

What odd words were these? And who spoke them?

Ptol crept into the shadows of a house, from behind which the mysterious language had emerged. The voice was distinctly female, apprehensive and more than a little furtive. He pulled his sword from its scabbard slowly, wincing when the steel blade scraped gently against the bronze casing.

"Get it together, Cormier," the disembodied voice continued.

With his sword at the ready, Ptol pressed his back against the corner of the house and, holding his breath, glanced around the uneven edge. A woman balanced on a windowsill, her long legs, encased in some strange form of clothing that resembled the flesh of a shark, dangling toward the rocky earth. He traced the odd clothing upward until his eyes settled on her breasts, confined within the same freakish attire. His lips quirked and he raised an eyebrow. The clothing left very little of her charms to his imagination.

She leapt from the window and landed on bare feet.

She faced the wall, her hands still clutching the sill. Her rounded bottom shimmered in the moonlight and Ptol would have given his prized golden scepter for a chance to see what lay beneath the thick, black casing of her outfit.

"*Merde!*" she winced in a loud whisper. "This can't be happening!"

Though the foreign words made no sense, she sounded frightened, and he frowned.

When she turned, her wide, open features caught

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the moon's light and reflected in a brilliance he'd never seen. She was more beautiful than the most attractive of his courtesans. Her hair was a light color, like finely spun silver blended with gold. The strands hung in long waves around a face with large eyes, a narrow, defined nose and full, lush lips made for kissing.

His body grew hard beneath the short cloth around his waist. Breaths louder than they should have been raised his chest, and the moonlight glistened off the gold in his collared breastplate.

The odd woman glanced in his direction, squinted and seemed to hold her breath before she moved across the courtyard to the next house. He followed her stealthy movements and waited. His friends, a fisherman and his wife, lived in this house. The window she would need to gain entrance rested only an arm's length from where he stood. She would find it, and he would take her before she hauled herself onto the ledge.

Another whimper came to him on the night breeze. He sucked in a breath and lunged. His free hand came into contact with the odd, smooth clothing and the woman screamed, then twisted out of his grasp.

"Halt!"

She swatted his hand and backed against the wall, her black eyes darting about the courtyard, obviously looking for some route of escape. He raised his sword to within an inch of her black-shark-skin-covered breasts.

Her eyes darted from one end of the courtyard to

the other with jerky, frightened movements. Finally, her shoulders squared as if she prepared to fight and she focused on him. She did more than focus. She glared. Like a tiger in a cage.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Me partir seul. Partir."

"I don't understand you. What language do you speak?"

"Cher Dieu, s'il vous plaît ne pas me tuer. Je ne sais pas que je suis arrivé. Merde. Vous ne pouvez pas me comprendre." She stomped her foot and her breaths came in frantic gasps.

He lowered his sword. She didn't seem dangerous. She seemed terrified.

His mistake.

The woman bolted around him. He reached for her, but was again unable to grasp her slick clothing and she twisted away.

He gave chase. For a little thing, she ran like the wind. His only advantage seemed to come from the fact that she cried out when her feet came into contact with the earth, as if she had never walked before.

They reached the city and the pathways between the buildings reflected the lights of the nearby houses. At least he could see where she was headed. When she passed a cross street, she hesitated, glanced both ways and chose the right. He frowned. Was she headed to the palace?

Finally, a group of five guards emerged from a low, unkempt house known for the woman who resided within. "You there!" he called.

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To a man, they blanched. "My lord!" They bowed.
"Did you see a woman pass?"

They glanced sheepishly at each other before one of them turned to look back inside the house they'd just left.

"Not her. A foreigner."

"No, my lord," the eldest of the group replied.

He gripped the man's cloak. "Find her!"

They scattered in three directions and Ptol leaned against the wall. He wiped the back of his hand over his forehead and resheathed his sword.

When he'd caught his breath, he walked in the wake of his guards. A scream split the night.

It was her. He ran down the street and turned into the tiled courtyard between two richly appointed homes. She bared her teeth and screeched at his soldiers, who held her by both arms while she writhed between them. "*Me permettre d'aller!*"

When she saw him, she froze. He approached slowly, carefully and the firelight in her eyes blazed to new, terrified life.

He reached his fingertips toward the line of her jaw, but she backed her head away before he could sample the delicate flesh. He dropped his hand. "Take her to the palace and find her something decent to wear. Then put her in my chamber."

CHAPTER THREE

Julianne struggled against her captors' rough hands as they half-carried, half-dragged her through a series of wide passages. Finally, they reached a large set of double-doors, opened them and cast her inside.

She fell to her knees, catching herself on the palms of her hands. The hard tiles burned her skin and white-hot pain shot from her knees to her hips. Immediately, she spun onto her bottom and crab-walked backward several paces. The guards hadn't followed her inside. Instead, they leered at her with lust in their dark eyes before they closed the doors.

A sob formed in her throat and she choked on it. Forcing herself to swallow, she climbed to her feet and scanned the room. It was as if she were in a golden box. Linen wallpaper decked the walls, trimmed in shimmering gold that led her gaze to the ceiling, at least twenty feet in height. Intricate golden sprays decorated the ceiling, centering on a chandelier that held no less than a hundred candles.

She turned a slow circle. The furniture would make any archeologist wet himself. Tables sparkled with

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gold and embedded jewels, a coupling of chaises, also jeweled, held scarlet cushions. A huge statue of Bast, probably carved from onyx, filled one corner. The floor was an elaborate mosaic of the sun.

Behind her, sheer white curtains billowed in the evening breeze. Suddenly, the tinkling of female laughter carried to her from beyond the draperies. A group of seven women emerged. Totally self-absorbed, they giggled among themselves until one of them saw her.

She alerted her companions and they froze. Curious expressions marred their black-lined eyes and rosy cheeks. Julianne backed up a step. Then another.

Each of the girls wore a bronze collar around her neck with matching bracelets. They were dressed in identical clothing, or lack thereof. Thin, transparent panties in black and white, thinner linen shawls covered their shoulders, but did little to hide their breasts.

Slaves.

The sob finally broke free. *This could not be happening!*

Somehow, through some weird, Einstein-inspired nightmare, she'd been sent back in time. The Lighthouse of Alexandria was still under construction, the original golden city of Alexander's empire was in its infancy and Dr. Julianne Cormier, archeologist and oceanographer, was about to become a sex slave to some pagan-god-wanna-be.

This could not be happening.

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The words had become a mantra in her head, echoing and repeating with increased fervor as the women approached, surrounded her and poked at her wetsuit.

Other than as a curiosity, they seemed not to notice her at all—like she was simply a part of the wetsuit instead of wearing it. They obviously spoke ancient Egyptian, which Julianne could read, both in hieroglyphics and phonetically, but she had never heard spoken aloud. It made the translation impossible. Just as it had when that armed guard had found her by the harbor.

It was equally as obvious he had no knowledge of French. Not that it would have made a difference if he had. She spoke modern French and any similarity between that and the ancient births of the language were...well, they didn't exist. It would have been like a modern Britain arriving in an ancient Celtic village and having to communicate with a Gael or a Celt.

Hopeless.

The doors swung open behind her. The women scattered, leaving Julianne alone in the very center of the sun on the floor. She squared her shoulders and faced the doors.

She would be no man's slave. Ever. She didn't give a rat's ass what century she was in. He would have to rape her first, and then she would kill him while he slept.

Her stomach burned. She was going to be sick.

Then he stalked into the room. The guard who'd ordered her here. Her heart leapt into her chest for the

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second time in one night. He was divinely handsome. Brushing six feet, he was taller than most men of his era—a giant among them, in fact. Instead of a wig, he wore his hair loose, long over his shoulders, with the sides brought back into a ponytail. The amber light reflected off the shining smoothness. His shoulders, hidden behind the intricate collar that served as his only shirt, were wide and if the rippled muscles of his arms were any indication, strong. His bare chest was smooth, like some waxed supermodel, and the indentations of a perfect six-pack decorated his stomach. He wore a short skirt, so thin it was almost transparent—probably was, in the right lighting. The thought sent a tremor of lust to her belly. Her stomach clenched.

He approached her with measured steps, as if he gazed upon some alien from another planet. So much for the theory aliens had built the pyramids.

In a rush of hurried voices, several men followed him into the room. They spoke in frantic, insistent tones and when one gray-haired man in particular glanced at her, his eyes flew wide. He backed away and redoubled his efforts to convince the man...of something.

It wasn't difficult to read. The gray-haired man was an advisor of some kind. From the manner in which they spoke to her captor, they were all advisors. Counselors.

Which would make him...

Pharaoh.

Merde.

"All of you, quiet!" he shouted.

The knot of old men silenced at once. The power and ultimate command issuing from the king encircled the room with a vice-like grip. It made her insides tremble. What would he do with her? Worse, what would she allow him to do?

The thought struck her with the force of a Polo mallet.

"Leave us."

Whatever he'd said, the others didn't like it. They argued, but he silenced them with a glare. Finally, they shuffled out of the room and the resounding click of the door latching into place echoed from the ceiling.

He walked a circle around her, never once taking his hot gaze from her. When he traced one finger over her shoulder and down her arms, her entire body burst into flames. There was something about him—something powerful and basic—that drew her to him. It made her want things she shouldn't. At least not when she needed to figure out how she would get home.

Still, she swallowed and stamped on the ever-present flame in her belly.

The door opened again and a young woman with thick, straight black hair, obviously a wig, wearing a linen gown pleated around her hips and falling to her ankles, handed a similar garment to him. She raked her kohl-lined eyes over Julianne, huffed and departed as quickly as she'd come.

The king handed the gown to her and nodded.

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He obviously wanted her to change into the dress. She shook her head. Her wetsuit might be more than uncomfortable, might have even begun to chafe between her thighs, but she would need it to get home. What if whatever scientific anomaly had brought her here opened the portal again? What would happen if she suddenly appeared in her own time wearing an ancient robe? What if she couldn't travel in anything but her wet-suit? Hell, no. She wasn't changing.

She tried to hand it back to him and he frowned. He shoved it back toward her.

"Change," he demanded.

"Non," she answered.

He set his feet wide apart and folded his massive arms over his chest. He glared at her, and the message was as clear as if he'd spoken in her native language. She would change, or he would change her.

A repeated glance around the room revealed no alcove. She turned and headed for the curtain. He grasped her arm and spun her to face him, shaking his head.

He didn't expect her to change her clothes in front of him, did he? She scoffed internally. Of course he did. Ancient Egyptians had no concept of shame or nudity. Clothes were decoration, like jewelry. Nothing more.

Still, she just...couldn't.

As if he sensed her misguided modesty, he called to the far side of the curtain.

A moment later, a dozen women, including those

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she'd encountered earlier, filed from the antechamber. They glared at her with ice in their eyes and stony expressions before they left through the main doors.

With one strong hand outstretched, he indicated the curtain. She went through and found herself in a chamber even wider and taller than the one she'd left. A massive circular bed covered in scarlet and azure linens took up the center of the room. Easily large enough to hold a dozen or more writhing bodies, the bed was the definition of decadence.

She made an immediate about-face and collided with the king's chest. He smelled of sandalwood and candlewax. Her stomach lurched into her throat.

This could not be happening.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ptol blocked the woman's path with his body. He didn't want to scare her any more than absolutely necessary. Hell, he didn't want to scare her at all. But she was obviously lost in an unfamiliar place, she had no knowledge of their language and some fear was inevitable.

She would have to change her clothes, however. That was unavoidable. When his highest-ranking advisor, Tjety had seen her, he'd cried curses of the gods being responsible for her appearance. For her own safety, she must conform.

He pointed to the dress and she paled. A sigh formed in his chest and he released it with a frustrated groan. "Change your clothes. I will not harm you."

"Non."

His patience was wearing thin. It crawled up his spine and filtered out through the pain in the back of his neck. More than a day and a night of war council, an escape that should have relaxed him had turned into a foot chase, and now his mysterious prisoner

would defy him.

Defy him!

He took a deep breath and remembered how she must feel. What had happened to this woman who was so lost, so alone, to bring her to his feet in the middle of the night? Had she been cast out of a passing ship? Had her husband abandoned her?

He pointed to himself. "Ptolemy."

A crease appeared in her forehead and her eyes focused on his hand before raising to meet his eyes.

"Ptolemy," he repeated. Then he pointed to her.

A tear escaped her heavily lashed, kohl-free eyes. "Julianne."

Julie Anne. He repeated her name in his mind, gathered a breath and whispered, "Julianne."

He pointed to the dress. "Dress. Wear it."

She shook her head.

The battle of wills continued for several moments before he finally understood. He chuckled and she frowned, her head canted to one side. Taking the dress from her, he shook it open and held it to her shoulders. As if by instinct, she clasped it to her breasts. Then he turned around.

He didn't take even a single step forward and he made a point of planting his feet wide apart, hands on his hips, so she would know he didn't plan to. But he gave her his back.

Silence reigned. A moment passed, and then another, before the subtle shift of someone taking off their clothes wrapped around them. His shaft grew hard at the thought of Julianne naked less than an

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arm's distance away. He was sorely tempted to turn around, and almost did, but ultimately gave her the privacy she obviously sought.

Julianne cleared her throat and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and the heavy, legged garment she'd arrived in sat in a puddle on the floor. His new guest was a vision in the silver-threaded gown he'd provided.

He reached forward and she backed away. Not to be dissuaded, however, he followed her and finally ran his finger along the gentle curve of her jaw. Softer than anything he'd ever come into contact with before, her jaw sent a shock through his arm and straight to his soul.

He dropped his hand. Perhaps she was a gift from the gods after all. A gift for him.

He pointed to the bed and Julianne's eyes moved from fear to fury in the space of a heartbeat. She set her lips into a firm line and wrapped her hands around herself in a protective hug.

He pointed again. She shook her head again.

Running a hand through his hair, he growled. They could do this all night. She thought he meant to ravish her. It was her fear clouding her common sense, obviously. Had he wanted to ravish her, she would be beneath him on the bed at that moment and he wouldn't have dressed her first.

Unable to effect his desire that she rest, he turned and left her alone in the chamber.

Outside the doors, he encountered his courtesans. All of them. They waited in the hall with heated

expressions and crossed arms. What blessing was this? Eleven women furious with him.

Twelve, if he included Julianne.

"Go inside and make sure she doesn't escape. Her name is Julianne." He glared at the five most powerful of the group. "Be kind to her."

They glared back.

"I mean it. No harm should come to her and if it does, you'll find yourselves sleeping with my dogs."

Reluctantly, they nodded and filed into the chamber.

When he entered the council chamber from which he'd previously escaped, Memnon and Tjety met him at the door.

Tjety's brow furrowed and he pointed to the ceiling. "She must be killed immediately, Pharaoh. She is an omen sent to destroy you."

He brushed past Tjety and guided Memnon to a chair. Climbing into his massive golden throne, he replied, "She is a lost woman in need of our help."

"How do you explain the odd clothing she wore?" another advisor asked.

"She is of foreign nationality. How do we know what strange manners her people might possess? Including her garments."

Tjety seemed less than satisfied. "And her language? I have heard nothing like it in all of my travels with the Great Alexander."

"Enough. She will not be touched. Is that understood?" Ptol stood and descended the steps from his throne. "My friends, I often bend to your

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wishes in many things. On this, I will not. The girl is not to be harmed." He glared at Tjety. "If she is, I will know exactly the source."

He stormed out of the chamber and hurried to his apartments.

* * * *

Julianne had spent her entire life learning. From her earliest years in school, she had absorbed the sights, sounds and culture of her surroundings. Excelling early, she'd graduated from one of Paris's most elite girl's academies, entered Oxford at the age of sixteen and completed her Masters degree in ancient cultures at the unprecedented age of twenty-one. She would find the connection between the written and spoken words.

With hands that still trembled with the remnants of fear, she swathed through the dirt she'd poured on the floor—dirt she'd taken great satisfaction in stealing from a potted fig tree in the corner of the massive chamber. She drew a hieroglyphic figure.

The young girl at her side, Nebetawy, answered, "Woman."

For the past hour, she'd partnered the basics of human communication. From those base roots, she had managed to follow a rudimentary conversation between several of the other women confined in the chamber with her.

They didn't like her. Not that she'd needed to hear it from them. Their hatred was evident in the killing

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glares cast her way every few minutes.

The curtain was drawn aside, capturing her attention and her heartbeat. Ptolemy II—she had done the math, and he could be no other—held the curtain in his finely muscled fingers. With a nod, he dismissed his harem.

A final death-glare touched her before the women departed. Pakhet would prove a formidable enemy, with her strong, prideful saunter and black eyes. A shiver moved up Julianne's spine.

Once the room cleared, Ptolemy allowed the curtain to fall behind him. He watched her with dark, tired eyes. He'd washed his face free of the black eyeliner and for the first time, she noticed the fine lines around his eyes. Odd, for one so young. But then, people aged more quickly in ancient times, didn't they? Harder lives. Warrior spirits.

He couldn't be more than twenty-two years old, if she remembered her dates and if they were, in fact, accurate. But he appeared older, wiser.

His hands moved to the belt at his waist. Crossing in front of her, he removed his sword and leaned it against a pillar. The scabbard followed. He took off his jeweled collar and laid it on a table covered in mosaic tiles depicting a row of dancers. There, he rested his palms on the surface and leaned forward. The muscles in his back ripped beneath skin the color of bronze. "I wish you could hear me."

His voice was soft, almost a whisper. But more than that, it comforted. She didn't answer, in her language or his. Not yet.

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He sighed and straightened to his full height. Turning to face her, he removed his belt and the length of fabric covering his midsection fell away.

Divinely beautiful. It was the only way in which she could measure his naked form. He stood before her proudly erect, yet made no move toward her. No move to cover himself. She licked her lips and swallowed. Hard.

He chuckled. "So, you are a woman after all."

Her eyes flashed to his face. He mocked her! "You have no right to hold me here against my will."

Ptolemy's gaze darkened and he frowned. "You *can* hear me. Why did you not answer me before?"

"I was...frightened." Her eyes strayed to his erect shaft again. It was like an accident on the side of the road, for crying out loud. No matter how hard she tried not to look, she couldn't stop herself. Finally she turned away. "You must release me!"

He considered her words for a moment, it seemed. But ultimately, he shook his head. "You will remain."

A tremor passed through her womb. She shook it off and took what she hoped was a menacing step forward. "There are many warriors who will come looking for me."

"I hope they do not. For if they do, they will be killed."

The look in his eyes defied explanation. Cold and hot together. There was nothing lukewarm about him.

"You must be tired. Come to bed."

"*Non!*"

She couldn't stay here, in his chamber, indefinitely.

She couldn't even stay for one night! She had to make her way back to the lighthouse...back to her own world.

If she told him, he would think she was insane and might very well follow the advice of his counselors. Her life wouldn't be worth the price of a ticket to the moon. Of course, she wasn't entirely convinced she *wasn't* crazy.

"Lie with me, Julianne." He approached, glorious in his nakedness. Unabashed. Unashamed. He reached toward her with one hand, nodding at the bed. "I promise, no harm will come to you."

That entirely depended on his definition of harm.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Julianne cracked open one eyelid and prayed she'd find herself neatly tucked into her berth aboard the Sea Mystic. Instead of her cramped cabin with its chart-covered walls, her eyes fell on a set of heavily muscled thighs visible through the almost transparent fabric that came to rest just above a set of lightly scarred knees. She followed the line of his body, over his delightful nether-region—proportionally formed to his hulking frame even at rest—over his bare chest and Pharaoh's collar to settle on his eyes, freshly lined with kohl.

His lips formed a harsh line a moment before he spoke. "You may wander the grounds of the palace today. But you mustn't try to leave. You will be guarded."

Without another word, he left the chamber.

Julianne pushed herself to her elbows and scanned the massive bed. She'd slept on one side and he the other. To her shocking dismay, he'd never once tried to touch her. The bed itself was so massive, she could have laid spread-eagled and he the same, and they

wouldn't have come into contact with one another.

She should be thankful for small favors, but a part of her was...

Offended?

Merde.

She threw off the covers, stood and straightened her gown, which had managed to twist to her waist during the long night. She cast aside her juvenile infatuation with an ancient and, as far as she was concerned, long dead Pharaoh and set her mind on escape. Not leave the grounds? Not on your life, buddy.

She found Nebetawy in the elaborate gardens she'd been marched through the night before. The girl, not more than sixteen, it seemed, sat beneath a lemon tree peeling a piece of fruit.

At Julianne's approach over the crushed-shell path, Nebetawy lifted her face, then smiled. "Did you enjoy Pharaoh last night, Julianne?"

Mon Dieu, what a question first thing in the morning!

Different culture, she reminded herself. "No. That is, we didn't..."

Nebetawy nodded. "I see. He must have been tired from his war councils. We were unable to treat him with the herbs and oils last night. Perhaps you will enjoy his manhood this night, instead."

Not if she had anything to say about it. "Hear me. I need your help to leave the palace."

Her new friend paled in the dabbled light filtering between the thick, dark-green leaves. "Oh, you

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mustn't. Slaves are forbidden from leaving the grounds. If you're caught—"

"I'm not a slave!" Julianne held out her wrists as if to prove her point. "I must return to my home. People depend on me. People will mourn me." It wasn't exactly true. There was no one on the other side who would miss her. Not really. But if it helped her cause...

"Very well. But you mustn't tell anyone I helped you."

"Agreed. Now, how do we get out of here?"

"Come. I will show you the way."

Twenty-seven minutes later, again according to her dive-watch tucked into the palm of her hand, Julianne walked across the dike to the island, Pathos. The sun baked from high in the sky and she judged the time roughly noon, which meant her watch was incorrect by several hours. That would make sense when she took into consideration the uneven rotation of the earth around the sun and the inconsistencies with the modern calendar. She should probably wait until nightfall before she found her breathing apparatus and attempted the dive again.

In the meantime...

Her head tilted back as she followed the stark, straight lines of the lighthouse into the brilliant blue sky. Workmen scurried from one corner of the observation deck to the other, as did several dozen around the base. Did she dare march past them to get a look inside?

She bit her lip. *Oui*. She couldn't pass up an

opportunity like this.

On bare feet that stung each time she landed them on the stony earth, she sauntered past the workmen who traversed the dike on foot or in wagons. When she reached the base of the lighthouse, her hand moved to the stones of its own accord. She was *touching* the Lighthouse of Alexandria. A giggle burst from her throat. How was this even possible?

She hurried inside and gazed up through the great, hollow expanse. In a spiral around the outer edges, a ramp, as wide as any modern thoroughfare, ascended the full height of the tower. At least a dozen horse-drawn pallets laden with tools and debris made their way down the ramp. Julianne skipped to the base and began to climb.

By the time she reached the observation deck, her breath came in short gasps and her body was damp with sweat. But it felt wonderful! Any minute now, she'd step onto the highest platform of the ancient world and look out on the Mediterranean Sea. Just a few more feet.

Sharp ringing came from behind her and she pressed herself against the wall to make room for whomever practically galloped their horse up the ramp.

Her heart lurched. No. It couldn't be him...

Could it? She had been out of the palace for less than an hour.

The rider stopped his mount and climbed out of the narrow, undecorated saddle. Dark eyes raked her face, her body.

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Ptolemy cursed, grasped her arm and tossed her over the horse's back.

"Let me go."

He seemed to consider his frustration.

"I told you not to leave the palace!"

She twisted her torso on the saddle and the hard surface bit into her ribs. In the end, her struggles only helped him reposition her body as he mounted behind her. "You have to let me go!"

"Say nothing more until we reach my chamber. If you speak, I will silence you myself." His voice was a low, feral growl and if he meant to frighten her into quiet submission, he succeeded.

He rode like a demon through the streets of Alexandria, and when they arrived at the palace, he carried her to his room as if she weighed nothing at all.

He set her on her backside in the center of the bed, ran his hands through his long, black curls and paced toward the verandah. Several strong, heavy breaths escaped before he spoke. "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"I..." she swallowed. "I'm lost. I want only to return to my home."

"No."

"You can't keep me here!"

"I can."

"Oh!" She slammed her fist into the soft mattress.

"Merde!"

"You cannot leave until it is safe. I will allow no harm to come to you."

“What are you talking about? What do you mean, safe?” Heated frustration pooled in the back of her throat. She would not cry! “How can I be safe while you hold me prisoner!” Her screech ended in an echo of silence.

“Some of my advisors believe you bring the wrath of the gods. You precede many losses in battle.”

“That’s nonsense. I’m just a woman. A lost woman!”

“I will not lie to you about it. There are those in a palace who would see you dead, Julianne.”

* * * *

Ptol cringed. How he loathed the abandoned, horrified expression that made Julianne’s eyes wide. Fearful. “I won’t let them harm you.”

“They want me dead?” She stared at him as if she couldn’t see him, but some monster.

“Sacrificed to Bast.”

She leapt from the bed. “*Je dois sortir d'ici!*”

“What?”

“I must leave this place. I can’t...I have to...” She paced a circle, her hands wringing white in front of her wide belt.

He stepped in front of her and she collided with his chest. Surprised, she glanced upward until her eyes snapped and battled with his. Taking her upper arms in his hands, he marveled at the softness of her flesh. His thumb stroked the skin and fire shot to his loins. “You will be safe here. Stay in this chamber and I will

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post a guard."

"But —"

"Shh." He pulled her into his embrace and to his amazement, she didn't struggle. Instead, she laid her head on his bare chest. Her breath teased his nipple to a desirous erection. As well as a more potent part of his body.

"I don't know how I got here. I just want to go home."

"We'll solve this puzzle together."

She canted her head, her arms around his waist. He brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers, stroked her bottom lip, then trailed his hand to her throat. Her pulse beat a dangerous, passionate rhythm against his hand. Soft, sweet breath came from parted lips, full and made for a man's kiss. He licked his lips. He could already taste her.

Tentatively, he lowered his face to hers, half-expecting her to turn away, push him back. Instead, a soft moan formed in the back of her throat and vibrated against his fingertips.

She tasted of fruit and desire. Her tongue played against his while he delved and explored. He darted into her waiting warmth, then withdrew and tasted the flesh of her neck, just beneath her ear. Her head tilted backwards, granting him even more access.

It was different than with his Courtesans. Pleasure of the flesh with Pakhet and the others was a numbing, physical act that brought intense pleasure, but an emptiness of heart inevitably followed. The knowledge that they loved him only because they

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must.

Never had he been left with the fire in his blood
that spoke of love.

Never had his blood run with such fire simply
from a kiss...

What kind of witch was his Julianne?

CHAPTER SIX

Julianne's body reeled with a passion she had never known. Ptolemy's body seared her wherever he touched. His lips, his hand on her collarbone and his fully engorged cock against the soft mound of her belly...and lower.

Liquid heat tugged at her stomach, and her womb seized.

What would it be like to have a man like this love her? Not just make love to her, but to love her? All of her?

What was she saying? She didn't belong here! She had to leave and she sure as hell couldn't take Mister Hunky Pharaoh home with her.

Her mind and body rebelled, but she forced herself away from Ptolemy's embrace. The back of her hand pressed against her lips, still tingling and swollen from his passionate attentions.

Don't look at him. But she couldn't stop herself. His features formed a mask, but an ineffective one. His pain shone through. "I'm sorry, Ptolemy. I just...I can't."

“Remain in these rooms. Open the door for none save me.”

He squared his shoulder and marched out of the room.

Julianne’s heart swelled until it burst in an explosion of want and lust. A click sounded from the gilded doors, ricocheting of the golden walls.

Suddenly, the weight of her situation fell on her with the force of an ancient lodestone. She fell on the bed, curled into a tiny ball and hugged one of the massive, body-sized pillows. It smelled of Ptolemy; sandalwood. How could this be happening to her?

When he’d held her, it had felt so...right. As if she belonged with him. She’d wanted him to make love to her, but she meant nothing to someone like him. He saw sex as something due him, not something to be cherished. But why had he seemed so wounded when she’d pulled away, saving herself from a broken heart on top of everything else? Why, if he believed she owed him whatever carnal wishes he desired, did he not force himself on her?

Her body tingled with the remembered sensation of his hands on her body. Slowly, her eyes drifted closed and her tears escaped.

When she opened her eyes again, the room was dark. No one had lit the myriad candles, and the oil lamps lay idle in their sconces. Shifting moonlight streamed through the billowing curtains by the verandah, giving the chamber a ghostly atmosphere well-suited to a gothic novel.

Something had woken her up. Of that she was

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certain, as she strained to hear whatever sound it was again. A scrape came from behind her.

She spun, expecting some ancient warrior to drive a dagger into her heart. Blackness met her straining gaze.

Finally, a tapestry shifted and then moved forward. Ptolemy crept into the room from a secret passage. He pressed his finger to his lips, indicating she should be silent.

Why in the world would he sneak about in his own palace? The implications made her body taut. He'd lost control of his council. They meant to destroy him, through her.

He grasped her hand and guided her into the passageway. The rough walls caught on her dress and she couldn't figure out how Ptolemy's giant frame negotiated the narrow space. A moment later, he released her hand, and the void he left was cold. Empty.

"We can not leave the palace through these passages, but we will hide you in another section."

"What's happened?"

"They are coming for you, Julianne. I am powerless to stop them."

"But you're the king!" Her voice cracked.

"I am Pharaoh, but they hold the ear of the gods. If I disobey when they speak of prophecy, my power is weakened. The people will rebel and do as they wish anyway. My reign comes as a gift from the gods, or so they believe, and one word from them that says the gods have abandoned me..."

“Oh, God. They’re going to kill me,” she whispered.

Ptolemy stopped and spun in the tiny corridor. He gazed into her eyes with determination. “I will not allow that to happen.”

For some reason she couldn’t name, she believed him. At least, she believed he would try.

He took her hand again and led her through the remaining passages. After several turns and curves, he pushed open a panel. They emerged into a much smaller chamber, as elegant as any other she’d seen in the lush palace. The ceilings weren’t quite as high, but the abundant furniture lent themselves to a distinct feminine appeal.

“My sister’s chamber,” he explained.

“They won’t look for us here?”

“They will search the palace. Eventually, they will come here, but I’m working on something to get us both out of the palace, where I can take you to safety.”

He wrapped his arms around her, and she realized she was trembling. “Where will we go?”

“I have friends. They can hide you. You’re shivering.”

She nodded. “I don’t spend a lot of time running from people bent on killing me, believe it or not.”

Ptol grinned, leading her to the bed where he indicated she should sit. She didn’t want to sit. She wanted to run. Unfortunately, her legs refused to obey, keeping her trapped beneath the heady gaze he trailed over her face. The charming grin vanished and in its place his mouth formed a determined line. “I

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believe you. I don't know where you come from or why you're here, but I'm happy you are."

"You are?"

"It hasn't been boring," he replied with a chuckle.

Silence followed. The kind of silence that sizzles and cracks because something unknown hovers just below the surface of conscious thought. With steady, warm hands, Ptol caressed her arms. His touch brought her blood to the surface, throbbing in her veins like the beats of a war drum. Every part of her body anticipated...something.

When his hands reached her shoulders, he drew her closer. Her head tipped backward even as her eyes refused to leave the full outline of his mouth. Gentle pressure appeared on the side of her face and she leaned into it. Realizing it was his hand cupping her cheek and jaw, she'd never felt so cherished.

Her eyes drifted closed. If she could only enjoy the feeling, as unreal as it probably was, for just a few minutes before the real world crashed in on her...

His mouth covered hers in a gentle, probing kiss. She opened for him and his tongue teased hers for a moment before he deepened the kiss. He placed his other hand on the side of her face and held her fast, torturing and caressing her very soul.

Light flew behind her eyelids. Coupled with a white-hot flame of desire, it drenched her with wanting. Her legs grew weak and her arms found their way around his wide chest for balance. Muscles played beneath the surface of his flesh in a fluid, graceful dance.

Breathless, he pulled away long enough to capture her gaze. His expression was universal. He asked for her permission. Without words, without preamble, he offered himself to her.

Lightning shot through her stomach, settling in a molten puddle between her legs. If she gave herself to this man, there would be no going back. A man like him wasn't one she could forget. She couldn't blame her behavior on too much drink at a local pub. Hell, she couldn't even blame it on the stress of her unusual surroundings. She knew what she was doing, and she knew what she wanted.

Stepping into his embrace, she trailed her fingers over the severe planes of his chest, his abdomen and then lower still. When she cupped his cock in the palm of her hand, Ptol's breath hitched.

He stroked her hair and tucked a loose strand behind her ear. "You are certain."

"*Oui*," she answered, reverting to her native French. Not that it mattered. The language they spoke with their eyes was more universal than math.

The gentle, persuasive lover was gone. Even the light in his eyes changed into something altogether wild and possessive.

Strong.

He picked her up and settled her in the center of the bed, following her down with cat-like grace. When he kissed her again, the connection was fierce and demanding. She met the thrust of his tongue with her own, wrapping one leg around his backside at the same time. Her body exploded, imploded and turned

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to mush in a single instant. She wanted nothing more than him inside her. Her hips rocked in affirmation.

His lips trailed fire over her jaw and throat. Furiously, he pushed the thin fabric of her gown away from her breasts before devouring first one hardened nipple and then the other. Wicked pleasure wound from her breasts to her stomach, with spurts of naked lust thrown in for good measure. She'd never experienced anything so passionate, so real.

The ragged sound of ripping cloth sliced the chamber. His mouth found her navel, then the hot, wet nucleus of her being. He spread her wide with his nimble fingers and locked his mouth to that one place that screamed for attention. He gave her no quarter, no mercy. Instead, he assaulted her with a fury of licks and tiny, erotic bites that made her entire body shiver with exposed heat. A sheen of sweat formed on her flesh. Her heart beat faster and faster in direct tandem with the battle he waged between her legs.

As though the world ceased to exist in a brilliant explosion of passion, her frame tensed, then released a shattering orgasm. Unable to contain the earthy, heavenly delight, she screamed.

Instantly, Ptol appeared over her, capturing her cries with a deep, throaty kiss. He parted her legs with his own, settled his shaft for a teasing second over her crevice, then thrust his entire length inside of her.

He froze. Jaw clenched and eyes squeezed closed, he panted for a moment, unmoving. Barely breathing. "Don't move." His voice was raw and tight.

She couldn't stop her hips from pulsing. They thrust against him, eliciting a guttural moan. And a small smile. "You have been sent here to kill me, yes?"

"Non," she replied.

The laughter left his expression when he began to move slowly inside of her. Gentle, long sweeps brought him out and then inside again. Each time he pushed himself farther and her body took him in deeper. Soon, the dance grew frantic. Throwing his head back, he drove himself to the brink of heaven and took her with him.

Rapture engulfed her in a river of flames. After what seemed like hours of impatient, expert lovemaking, Ptol pulled away, rolled her to her stomach and entered her from behind. Again, he released all of his passionate fury into her. Again and again he plunged himself into her center, bringing her closer to the edge with each orgasmic thrust. Her arms grew heavy and her breasts tingled. Heat began in her womb, merging outward to each of her limbs until finally the world imploded in glorious, bright color.

Ptolemy groaned and thrust one last time before he stilled. His cock throbbed in tandem with her own orgasm, and her body milked his. At last, he collapsed on the bed at her side.

She fell to her belly, forcing herself to roll into his arms. Breathless, she tried to form a thought, a word, but couldn't.

The door burst open and a dozen or more men

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rushed into the chamber, their colorful robes designating them as royal counselors. Ptolemy leapt to his feet, either unaware or undisturbed by his lack of clothing.

Julianne screamed, hid behind him, reaching for the linen sheet. It was too far away to retrieve without exposing herself to the others.

“There she is. I told you we would find her still within the palace!” Tjety pointed at her with an evil glare that spoke of a black heart and blacker soul. “And as the gods warned, she has already begun to work her magick on Pharaoh. Seize her!”

Ptolemy shoved her further behind his back. Finally, he stood up to the advisors who would take her life for no good reason. Finally, he would reclaim his true kingdom. “Touch her and you will be executed before the dawn.”

Over Ptolemy’s shoulder, Julianne watched Tjety’s stunned expression change from fury to fear to loathing in the space of a heartbeat.

“The gods have spoken.”

“And they have said there are some fates worse than death.” Ptolemy’s words hung in the air like some profound, unanswered question. “You are too late, my friend.”

Too late? Too late for what?

“You have loved her, then?”

Ptolemy stepped away, revealing Julianne’s naked breasts and loins, still moist from their lovemaking, to the room’s occupants. She covered herself with one hand and dove for the sheet with the other. Ptolemy

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stopped her, hauled her to her feet and stood her before them. Heat flushed her thighs, her abdomen and finally her cheeks. "Let me go!"

He held her firmly, his fingers, capable of such exquisite pleasure, cut into her arm. "I have loved her. She is well suited and fits a man's shaft nicely. She belongs to me in a fate worse than death." He never once took his eyes off Tjety. "She is my slave."

* * * *

Julianne sobbed as she stood in shock by the metalworker's forge. Already, she wore bronze cuffs around her wrists and ankles, each of them melded in one great circle. No hinge. No clasp. Each piece contained a small loop large enough for a rope or a chain, should there be need to restrain her.

Her head jerked to the side as the smith tugged the bronze collar around her neck and applied the final piece at the back with a red-hot soldering tool of some kind. When he finished, he leered at her breasts, still uncovered for all to see. Modesty was something she would be forced to live without, it seemed.

Ptolemy stood only an arm's length away, arms folded over his chest in some prehistoric he-man posture of dominant authority. How could she have made love to him? How could she have allowed him to do so many amazing and wonderful things to her body? Her body! The only part of her she had left. If she even had that.

The collar rubbed against her collarbone in a

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constant reminder of her fate.

She stifled her tears. "*Bâtard.*"

He raised an eyebrow. "I think I know what that means without a translation."

Tjety laughed. "She will make you a good lover, my king. And when you tire of her..." He licked his lips.

Julianne's stomach lurched, but not before she caught the feral hatred in Ptolemy's eyes.

Once the smith had nodded his compliance with the current task, Ptolemy fisted his hands at his sides and fastened his glare on her. Something deep inside the black depths called to her. Something...kind.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Julianne stood at the foot of the lighthouse. The sun set behind her and darkness encroached over Alexandria. Again.

She'd been here for one month. Four weeks of living among the king's courtesans, enduring their stilted, frigid stares and gloating boastfulness when, night after night, he chose them over her.

Not since the night of her enslavement had Ptolemy seen fit to call for her. Not that she should mind. It simply stung that he would use her so vilely, imprison her and then neglect her. It was as if she were a slave with no master.

Not even good enough for mindless sex.

She scoffed at herself. How far she had fallen in so short a time.

The king's caravan approached amid the cheers of his gathered people. He rode at the head of a column of soldiers, each one like a giant toy soldier carved from gold. Ptolemy outshone them all in his full battle regalia. A breastplate carved with hieroglyphics that spoke of bravery and conquering one's enemies. He

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hadn't worn his ceremonial wig or headpiece and his black hair shimmered in the twilight. A sea breeze caught the strands and lifted them around his strong chin.

She should hate him. But over the course of long, sleepless nights on the floor of his chamber, she'd grown only to love him. Long for him. Despise herself for it.

He glanced at her as he passed and rode his mount into the lighthouse. The animal balked, then obeyed his command. They disappeared.

She closed her eyes. Nepatawy grasped her arm. The touch stung. Ptolemy had made love to her just last night.

"Look, Julianne," she breathed. "They have reached the top."

Despite her promises not to watch, the archeologist in her took over. Julianne glanced to the highest portion of the lighthouse, where Ptolemy leaned over and waved to his people. A moment later he disappeared. A second after that, a huge, bright beam of light cast forth from the giant mirror built to concentrate the light of the sun. A deafening cheer rose from the crowd.

Once she'd accepted that she wouldn't be returning to her own century, she should have been elated to witness such an amazing, impossible, historic event. But the light did nothing but remind her of one man. A man she loved with all her heart. A man who wasn't capable of returning it.

She wished Tjety would change his mind and kill

her after all.

* * * *

Ptol removed his regalia and stepped into the deep pool in an alcove off his chamber. The water was hot, steaming, and did nothing to soothe the ache in his loins or the tight muscles in the back of his neck.

Only one thing could do that.

He wanted to make love to Julianne more than he wanted to breathe. He'd avoided her since his decision to enslave her. He would not force her to come to him. He would not make love to her in chains.

When Tjety and the others had burst into his sister's chamber that night, he had been lost. There had been no escape. At least, not for him. For Julianne, there had been only one.

The collar she hated, the wristbands she despised, had saved her life. Tjety was satisfied the gods were appeased. Tomorrow, they would sail for Greece, destroy their enemies, with the blessing and guidance of the gods.

And Julianne would be safe.

What's more, his father's dream had been realized and the Pharos lit the sea with a guiding, passionate light.

In all, it had been an exhausting and futile month. Except for Julianne. How he wished he could take her with him. But he would not put her in harm's way. Such was not why he'd saved her.

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The curtain opened and Pekhat slinked into the bathing chamber. Her narrow waist and full hips swayed in the candlelight, her naked breasts reflected the amber glow. Kneeling beside the basin, she delved her hands below the surface and stroked his shaft. He was already hard, but not for thoughts of her.

"You want me, my king?"

He sat up, moving her hands out of reach. "No."

She looked stunned. As the eldest of his courtesans, she had been his first. She'd taken her position of power within the harem far too seriously. He'd received complaints.

"You want her, then?"

"Be careful, Pekhat."

She scoffed and threw a hand into the air. "I am too old for you now? She is older than I. Perhaps you are simply bored with my body. I do not satisfy you?" She spat on the floor, storming out of the room.

He called his guard. When the young man entered, he stood fully erect as if he waiting for some battle to begin from the depths of the basin. "Don't panic, Kehmet. I want you to go to the women and bring Julianne to me before Pekhet throws her off the balcony."

Eyes wide, the guard raced from the chamber.

Ptolemy sighed. In a few days, Pekhet would forget her jealousy and live in peace with the others. In the meantime, Julianne could use his chamber.

He climbed out of the basin and paced to his bed. He stared at it for a moment. It would be a long time until he slept in such comfort again. Something drew

him to the verandah and he passed beneath the sheer linen draperies. The night's cooler air kissed his still-wet flesh, chilling him to his very bones.

"You wanted to see me?"

No, I wanted to love you. He cleared his throat. "I want you to use my chamber while I am away. Pekhet is displeased, and it should make your life a bit easier."

"You want to ease your conscience." She turned away and waved a hand behind her. "I won't help you do that. I'd rather take my chances with the other slaves."

How could he explain to her he'd only done what he had to in order to keep her alive? What if she revealed the farce to Tjety while he was on campaign? His chief advisor, the regent who would rule in his stead, would slit her throat without batting a curled eyelash.

He captured her retreating form. "As my slave, you will do as I say. You will live in this chamber. You will behave yourself. And you will cause no trouble."

"I just wish I'd never come here. I wish I could go home."

Her voice cracked. How he hated that sound, especially from her. "You will be here when I return."

She shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

Now her voice did more than crack. It gave up. The woman who had captured his heart had been broken. Worse, he'd been the one who broke her. "This is for your safety, you understand."

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“Uh-huh.” She turned away, staring through the gauzy curtains to the balcony. At least, she looked like she was staring, but she didn’t appear to focus on anything in particular.

“I didn’t plan any of this, Julianne. I had no choice.”

“I don’t want to hear explanations, Ptol. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course, it matters.”

“Not to me. Not anymore.”

“Have I treated you so badly?” He’d done everything he could think of to make her as comfortable as possible. He hadn’t forced himself on her. He’d given her freedom to roam the grounds as she willed. He’d assigned a tutor to help her adjust to his language. What more could she want?

But he knew the answer. Or he hoped he did. She wanted the same thing he did. She wanted to be loved. If he believed such a thing were possible between them, he would sacrifice everything to be with her. But how could he? What would happen to his empire? To his people, if he wasn’t Pharaoh?

“*Non*,” she whispered.

“What?”

Turning slowly, she faced him again. A single tear glistened on her cheek, hovering as though it transcended time. She wiped it away. “*Non*. You haven’t treated me unkindly. Except for the golden cage you’ve placed me in.”

“For your own protection,” he amended quickly. A part of him rebelled. A cage was a cage, regardless of

why the bird was kept within. "For that, I am sorry."

"Then let me go!" Fury leapt into her flashing eyes. Color stained her cheeks.

"You know I cannot!"

"You are Pharaoh. You can do anything you like!" She stomped away, but he caught her by the arm and spun her to face him.

"Exactly. I am Pharaoh, and what I choose is to keep you safe. If that means keeping you in a gilded cage, then so be it."

"You're hurting me!" She squirmed in his grasp, but he suspected her words referred to something other than his grip. "Let me go!"

"I will not."

"Why?" she screeched. The previous single tear returned, followed by a shower of identical drops. She sniffed as though she struggled against her emotions and wiped them away. "Why don't you love me, Ptolemy?"

"What?"

She slumped into his embrace, her body lifeless. Exhausted.

He pulled the black-haired wig from her head, dropped it and stroked her soft, light hair. "How can you say such a thing?"

"You used me," she growled, pushing him away. "Times certainly haven't changed, have they? A man uses a woman for one thing and then casts her into chains." She laughed, but the sound failed to reach her eyes. "This is the first time you've called for me and you did so to talk. I don't want to talk. Damn

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you, Ptol. When I'm near you, my heart races and my blood boils. Do you have any idea what kind of torture it is to see you every day, to know you make love with Nebetaway and Pekhat, yet you seldom even deign to speak to me? I don't know whether to love you or hate—"

He cut off her words with his lips, swallowed them and poured all of the love he'd ever possessed into tasting her. The salt from her tears tainted her mouth, yet she was still sweeter than any wine. She struggled against his iron-like hold, but he only deepened the kiss. Her fists pounded his shoulders. Her moans quickly turned from angst to pleasure and her fists loosened until she turned soft as warm molasses in his arms.

Unable to form the myriad emotions, the unearthly quickening in his belly into words, he allowed his kiss to speak for him. He gentled his attentions, giving her the tiniest option to push him away. When she didn't, he guided her to the bed.

He made love to her slowly this time. His hands trembled when he touched her. It seemed as though he'd never been with a woman, despite the fact he'd enjoyed the most basic physical act for years. Everything about her made him feel new and worthy.

Apparently overcome with some unseen battle of will within herself, Julianne succumbed to him. She kissed his chest, pulling him closer. When he entered her, his heart joined with hers. She became a part of him. Together, they moved in glorious abandon. Their bodies floated in a gentle cloud of desire, taking

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from each other what they needed so desperately. With every thrust, she owned another piece of him. An insistent fire spread to his limbs, gathered in a tight knot somewhere in his gut until her cries of ecstasy purged his soul. Matching her heights of pleasure, he came undone in her arms.

No. He could never let her go. Not if he expected to take so much as one more breath.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Julianne was no longer a prisoner. At least she had free run of the city, under protective guard, of course. She had the world, or this small corner of it, at her fingertips. Ptolemy had made certain of that before he'd left Alexandria more than eight weeks before.

Standing on the observation deck of the lighthouse, she watched the passing ships as they moved in languid lines over the Mediterranean Sea. Low ships with square sails, or no sails at all. Those contained dozens of long oars that rose and fell in steady rhythm against the beat of a distant drum. If she didn't know better, she'd believe she watched some seafaring reenactment troupe.

But it was all too real.

Her hand moved to the slight mound of her belly.

The morning after she and Ptolemy had made love, he'd summoned his household into the great throne room in his massive palace. She'd been present when he'd instructed each member of the staff, his family members, his counselors and even Pekhat and the rest

of his harem, that Julianne should be treated with the same respect they would treat him.

They'd taken the instructions to heart and since his departure, she'd been treated like a queen.

But her wrists were still raw from the bronze bracelets that distinguished her from queen and denoted her as slave. She sighed and glanced at her feet.

She'd ordered her escorts to wait by the litter at the base of the lighthouse, facing the city. Alone, she'd negotiated the marshy shoreline until she found a trio of stones. Five paces to the west and she unearthed her S.C.U.B.A gear. It rested now at her feet, high above the sea.

There was no going back. She lifted the tank and rested it on the ledge. Biting her lip, she held her breath and pushed. The tank with the rest of her gear attached plunged forty stories to the earth below.

Someone might find it, but they wouldn't know what it was. Perhaps, in the grand scheme of the universe, this was the birth of the UFO myths. She smiled.

It didn't matter. She would never find her way home, because she suspected she could only travel alone. She certainly couldn't arrive in the twentieth century with someone else in tow.

And regardless of whether Ptolemy accepted her love upon his return, she couldn't leave her child behind.

* * * *

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Eight months later...

Julianne screamed her agony. Nebetawy smoothed a cool scrap of linen over her forehead and brushed away her sweat-dampened hair. The huge mound of her belly tensed and the muscles of her uterus contracted in the throes of transition.

She couldn't take much more. She'd been insane to think she could actually deliver a child in a time well before... the...goddamned... "Epidural!"

She sucked in a breath and cried.

"It's almost over. The babe will come soon, Julianne."

The chamber was filled with people—women who strained to give her some kind of comfort and the counselors, who would witness the birth of, as yet, the only heir.

She needed a doctor. She was certain something had gone wrong with the delivery. Perhaps her child was breech. It felt like it was sideways. Certainly, she hurt more than was normal!

"I can't do it. I can't. Please. I don't want to anymore."

A midwife parted Julianne's knees and peered at her privates. She'd long since abandoned any pretense of modesty and allowed the inspection with resigned humility.

"I can see the babe's head."

Thank God.

"You must push the babe out."

Merde. Did they all believe she was an idiot?

She raised herself on her elbows and Nebetawy slipped behind her to hold her shoulders. She bore down with each contraction. It seemed as if hours passed, days. Someone gave her a fig branch, which she bit on with the force of a wild dog. Still, no cry filled the chamber. The contractions raged onward.

"We have it, now." The midwife shoved Julianne's legs farther apart. "Push!"

"I can't. Too...tired. I changed my mind."

Nebetawy lifted Julianne's shoulders and whispered in her ear. "You would bear our Pharaoh a child with black eyes and his father's golden heart, my Queen. You must try."

An image of Ptolemy's handsome features, the memory of his whispered promises, floated above her. His smile gave her strength she hadn't known she possessed and she pushed one last time. One last time, because if the child wasn't born now, she would surely take him with her to their deaths.

The sensation of floating lifted her hips. A moment later, her child cried and the newborn appeared on her chest. Blood and moisture coated a blue body with a mass of black hair.

She cried, not from pain, but from the love that instantly bonded her to the baby.

Nebetawy hugged her shoulders. "A son. What shall we call him?"

Julianne collapsed to the pillow while warmth spread over and around her. She smiled at her friend. "We will call him William."

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* * * *

Ptolemy walked among the dead. Around him, the slain bodies of his enemies stretched in seemingly endless lines. His back ached and he had yet to clean his sword and see to his army's welfare.

He would leave his generals in command with the sunrise, and once he'd settled a few remaining matters—distributing the spoils to his commanders, assigning the noblewomen to new husbands—he would depart for Alexandria. In a matter of weeks, he would again gaze upon the land of his birth and the lights that beckoned him from such a great distance. The *Pharos*, and his beloved Julianne.

* * * *

"The king returns!"

Julianne dropped the tiny rattle at her son's chubby feet. Gathering her skirt, she stood and ran through the curtains to find Nebetawy skipping over the tiles.

"His ship has been sighted from the lighthouse." Her face, always so pure and full of life, glowed. Her eyes danced.

"How long?"

"I heard the guards say we should prepare for one hour, hence."

Julianne's nerves rattled and spiked in her limbs. After more than a year, he finally returned. Would he find her to his liking? Would he be proud of his son? She spun a quick circle and verified the room was in

order before she laughed aloud. "Watch William for me! I'm going to the lighthouse!"

She raced from the chamber, through the long, golden corridors and found her personal escort in the garden. Instead of the excitement of a returning king, they were stone-faced and donned their breastplates. One of them sat on a stone bench, sharpening his sword.

"What's wrong?"

"We've been called to guard the shore and will make our way there in a moment. You must stay within the palace walls and...protect your son."

She swallowed. "Why?"

"Pharaoh's ship is under attack. His enemies have followed him our very shores. He's outnumbered and will more than likely not survive. We prepare for a siege."

No. She hadn't sacrificed all hope of freedom, all hope and desire of returning to her own time, only to lose him now! She tore out of the garden and managed to sneak past the preoccupied guards at the gate. She ran through the city streets in a mockery of her original flight—so many months ago.

By the time she reached the lighthouse, the entire city had heard the horrible news of their king's situation. Men, women and children lined the shores of the twin harbors, straining to see Ptolemy's ship. Overhead, the sun beat down on them with ferocious clarity.

The sun.

In all the studies she'd conducted about the

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lighthouse, she had been proven wrong more than half the time. The base was much larger than she'd thought. The fire smaller. The mirror convex, not concave.

And a legend existed. Everyone, including herself and her peers, believed it an old wives' tale. But what if it wasn't? What if she'd been wrong about more than she'd thought?

She shoved through the crowd for a few harrowing moments before word of her arrival parted the bodies like the Red Sea. When the space opened, she ran into the lighthouse and ascended the steep ramp. Sweat poured over her face, stung her eyes, by the time she reached the top. Not the deck where she'd spent endless hours watching for Ptolemy's return, but the light itself.

The firekeeper stood openmouthed as he watched the ships, their sides brushing against each other in the heavy surf.

"You, help me reposition this mirror!"

The stunned man leapt at the sound of her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"We must redirect the mirror."

After a cursory explanation, the keeper removed several ropes and the mirror slackened in its frame. Struggling beneath the massive and unwieldy object, they managed to capture the sun's powerful rays.

They adjusted it until a sharp beam appeared, then focused the beam on the sails of the enemy ship. Thankfully, the ships had stopped and were now fighting the tide and each other, but were no longer

moving towards the shore. While the keeper held the mirror in place, his grunts and moans indicative of the weight, Julianne tied it off.

Her stomach in her throat, she ran to the edge and stared out of the huge windows. "By the gods, it's working," she breathed.

"What is working?"

"Look." She pointed out to sea. "The sails are burning."

And they were. First a single tuft of black smoke rose above one massive enemy sail. But soon, the fabric burst into flames under the concentrated onslaught of the sun...she could only imagine what gods the ship's master believed responsible.

The men aboard the burning vessel looked heavenward and leapt into the sea, apparently preferring the wrath of Poseiden over the Egyptian sun-god, Ra. She laughed, jumped up and down like a schoolgirl and clapped her hands. "It worked, it worked, it worked!"

Spinning the moment Ptolemy's ship unlocked from the engulfed vessel, she hugged the keeper. "I'll send someone to help reset the mirror. You shall be rewarded for your kindness!"

She ran from the tower, down the winding ramp and went straight to the docks. When she arrived, Ptolemy had landed and was descending the ramp from his ship.

He hadn't shaved, his hair was a tangled, sweaty mess and his clothes were covered with blood and ash. He had never looked more beautiful.

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Without thinking, she forced her way through the crowd, past the guards and...

Ptolemy saw her and raised one hand, as if to keep her at a distance. Her heart sank into the soles of her feet, bare against the rough wood of the boardwalk. All of her hopes shattered in that one gesture.

Her lover fell to his knees. "I want to gaze upon you, my queen. Only the vision of your face, the remembered taste of your skin has kept me alive these many months. You are as I remembered; the key to a locked heart and the passion that fuels my blood."

A tear formed in her eye and she took a tentative step forward.

"I am unworthy of your love, but if you can forgive me, I shall make all restitution this very day. The collar and cuffs that make you slave shall be placed upon my person for eternity, if you will but be my wife and rule this land at my side. If you say no, I shall climb the lighthouse and toss my wretched loins into the sea."

"Marry you? You want me to marry you?"

Ptolemy gained his feet and opened his arms. "It has been my intention since the first night I saw you, my little thief."

Julianne raced into his arms and he wrapped her in an embrace born of longing and desire. "I am so glad you asked me now, before I could tell you."

He kissed the top of her head and she felt the moisture of his tears on her hair. "Before you tell me what?"

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She pulled away, studied his furrowed brow and the spots of soot and spattered blood on his cheeks. "Let's go home, husband, so you can meet your son."

CHAPTER NINE

“**M**ama,” William called in a high voice, filled with fear. He ran across the tiles of the decorated throne room and struggled up the step leading to her golden chair.

With a smile, she rushed to greet him, sweeping him into her arms. “There, there, baby boy. There’s nothing to fear. He is only playing.”

Ptolemy rose and joined them. Wrapping them in his strong, finely muscled arms, he dropped a kiss on his son’s hair, black as ink. “Perhaps the fire-eater is too much for him?”

Julianne scanned the chamber. Filled with people, including royalty from several courts throughout Europe, it looked like a grand circus. Jugglers, dancers, fire-eaters and one baby elephant dressed in jewel-toned silken wraps—imported from India—milled among kings and her son’s fellow princes. As birthday parties went, it was, perhaps, a bit over the top. But Ptolemy had insisted. After all, he’d mentioned, how often does his son celebrate his third birthday?



She swayed on her feet.

"Are you well, my love?"

She glanced into Ptolemy's concerned eyes and canted her head. How had any of this been possible? Swept into a barbaric land by some unknown power only to find the gentlest heart in the history of mankind in the guise of a warrior king? She thanked whatever power had brought her here every morning when she woke, wrapped in Ptol's desire. "I'm just a little tired. The celebration has been going for hours now, and will continue until after the feasting."

He took their son and cradled him against his chest. Absently stroking William's long prince's braid, he kissed him again. "Why don't you go lie down? William and I will have a grand time learning to ride an elephant."

She smiled. "Very well, my king. I'll return soon."

She stepped onto the stairs leading from the raised thrones to the main floor. Her escort rapped their long spears on the tile. The sharp report echoed off the high ceilings as the gathered masses parted for her to pass.

Once in the corridor outside the festival, she leaned against the wall and held her stomach. Her guards surrounded her. "Are you well, my queen?"

"Yes," she laughed, but not too much as it upset her stomach. "You mustn't say anything, but this evening I will inform your king he is to be a father again."

The guards, to a man, broke into proud grins. Their shoulders straightened as if they would become

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fathers as well. How his people loved him!

She pushed off the wall and strolled down the hall. "You men return to the party. I'll be fine by myself."

They did as she bid. She'd lie down for a few hours and when she had regained her strength, she'd whisper her news in Ptol's ear during the feast.

The hallway shifted, danced, before her eyes. She must be more affected by the pregnancy than she'd thought. She shook her head to clear it, but the hall continued to sway as if caught in a strong wind.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard her name. She turned, but only blackness met her eyes. "Ptol!"

"Julianne! Julianne...don't leave me!"

Cold, black. Wet. She coughed and found she couldn't breathe.

"Charging!"

"Back away!"

"Clear!"

Something ferocious racked her body and she sucked in a heavy breath.

With her eyes closed, she could only sense the myriad activity surrounding her. Familiar voices, from another time, bounced from one side of her consciousness to the other.

"Open your eyes, Julianne!"

Jacques?

She forced her lids to obey her commands and found herself staring up. A bright blue sky, a blazing sun behind a worried male face with long blond hair falling in spiky tresses.

She screamed. "My baby!"

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Jacques frowned. "We need to get her to the hospital. God only knows how long she's been underwater."

Blackness claimed her again.

It seemed only a moment had passed since the last time she'd opened her eyes, but from the inky darkness outside the glass-covered window, it had been hours. *Merde*...it could have been days.

She pushed herself up and glanced around her room. Monitors beeped, an IV station pumped something, probably saline, into her veins through a long, clear tube. The rails of her adjustable bed were raised and she wore a hospital gown.

She ran a hand through her hair. No wig, but her own hair, smooth and clean.

The door creaked open and Jacques entered with a bouquet of flowers. And a doctor.

"How is my most unique patient this morning?" The doctor smiled. He looked somewhere around twelve years of age and when he smiled, dimples formed in both cheeks. "I have good news for you."

"How long was I missing?"

Jacques frowned. "One night. You failed to come up from your dive and we looked for you most of the night. We thought you'd been swept into the sea somehow, but the next morning, there you were. Thank God."

She found something on the wall behind him to focus on and whispered, "It was a dream." Her voice cracked. "It was a damned dream."

But it had felt so real. So wonderful. She wanted to

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cry, to mourn the loss of a man she'd never known, a man she'd created somewhere in her fantasies. Weep for a son she'd never borne and a baby...

The sobs broke free and she clutched her stomach. How could she grieve for something that had never really happened? How could a dream be so vivid that the memory of it stole her breath, her heart and her soul?

The doctor took her wrist and glanced at his watch. "You must try to remain calm, Madame Cormier. Truly. Your baby is fine, but you've been through so much stress, I fear any more may have a lasting effect on your pregnancy."

She froze. "What did you say?"

* * * *

"If your tests come back normal, you can go home today."

Julianne smiled and rubbed her swollen belly. In the past few months, she'd spent more time in hospitals than she'd ever thought she would. She'd always been healthy. But thankfully, the technology existed to help her unborn child. Her daughter, growing inside of her from the distant, ancient past.

Spina Bifida. The words had been the final blow of a series of life-altering, shattering realizations. She'd been sent back in time. She had fallen in love. She'd been living a goddamned romance novel and she'd had a child. All of it had been real. The proof existed in the rough patches of skin on her ankles and wrists,

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left over from more than year in bronze slave's cuffs. It lived in her womb in the form of her husband's child.

But to learn her child would have died, had she remained in the past? That had been a freakish blessing in disguise that still rocked her to her very core.

But it was well now. Together, she and her unborn daughter had faced another challenge. Surgical repair of her birth defect in utero. And it had worked.

She smiled and placed the last of her things into a small suitcase. "I'm sure everything is fine and I can't wait to go home."

Alone. But not for long. In another few weeks, her daughter would arrive.

Something stirred behind her, and she turned an awkward circle.

A boy of approximately fourteen years stood in her doorway. One hand held the door open and the other fisted at his side. He had black eyes, black hair and fair, beautiful skin. Though very young, he had wide shoulders and a firm, fit body that promised to break more than a few hearts when he grew up. Wearing a bright red polo shirt and khaki slacks, he reminded her of a little prince.

Her heart stopped. He reminded her of...

"Father! Father...I've found her!" He spun and raced out of the room. The door swept closed behind him and clicked.

Julianne's hands covered her mouth and the nurse rushed to her side.

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“Is something wrong, Madame? Do you know this child?”

“It can’t be.” She wiped her eyes. “It’s not possible!”

The door creaked open again.

A man, a king, filled the doorway with strong, firm shoulders. He’d aged. The fine lines of worry around his eyes had turned into weathered grooves and a few hints of gray spotted the much shorter black hair at his temples. He also wore a polo shirt, but instead of pressed khakis, his long, muscular legs were encased in worn blue jeans. His dimples matched the boy’s.

“How? I don’t understand,” she sobbed.

Ptolemy crossed the room and took her in his arms. “I don’t know. I only know we saw you leave, William and I. I tried to stop you, I tried to bring you back. But you couldn’t hear me.”

She shook her head. “I did hear you, my love. Dear God, I did hear you, but I couldn’t—”

“Nothing matters now. Only that we found you. It took a lifetime, but we found our own way through. When we arrived, we searched for you and now, finally, we’ve found you.”

She traced the lines around his eyes with her trembling fingertips. “How long?”

William approached and touched her cheek. “Mother.”

She tore away from Ptolemy long enough to include her son in their embrace. She kissed the top of his head, only an inch below her mouth. He was so tall. “Baby boy!”

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"I am twelve years old now, Mother."

Twelve years!

"But it's only been a few months."

Ptolemy held her at arm's length and stared at her belly, as if noticing it for the first time. "You've been back only for a few months, you say?"

She nodded and rubbed her tummy. The frightening news of their daughter's health could wait. "I was..."

"Carrying my child when you were taken. I know. Your escort told me the night you disappeared." He fell to his knees and kissed her distended stomach. "I hope you are a girl-child with the same beautiful eyes as your mother."

She laughed. Everything had fallen into place. She had her family, she had her new daughter. For the first time in her life, the future burned bright.

The firelight beckoned them home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Starla Childs is a pen name for romance novelist Marjorie Jones. Before she learned to print, Marjorie would create her own 'books' by cutting notebook paper into quarters and stapling the binding. Then she'd fill the pages with scribble and read the stories to her family.

She wrote her first full manuscript at the age of twelve and her first romance at nineteen. While this sweeping epic of the old South will probably never see the light of day, she has since turned her attentions to a wider range of genres. Her works encompass contemporary, historical and all things paranormal.

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