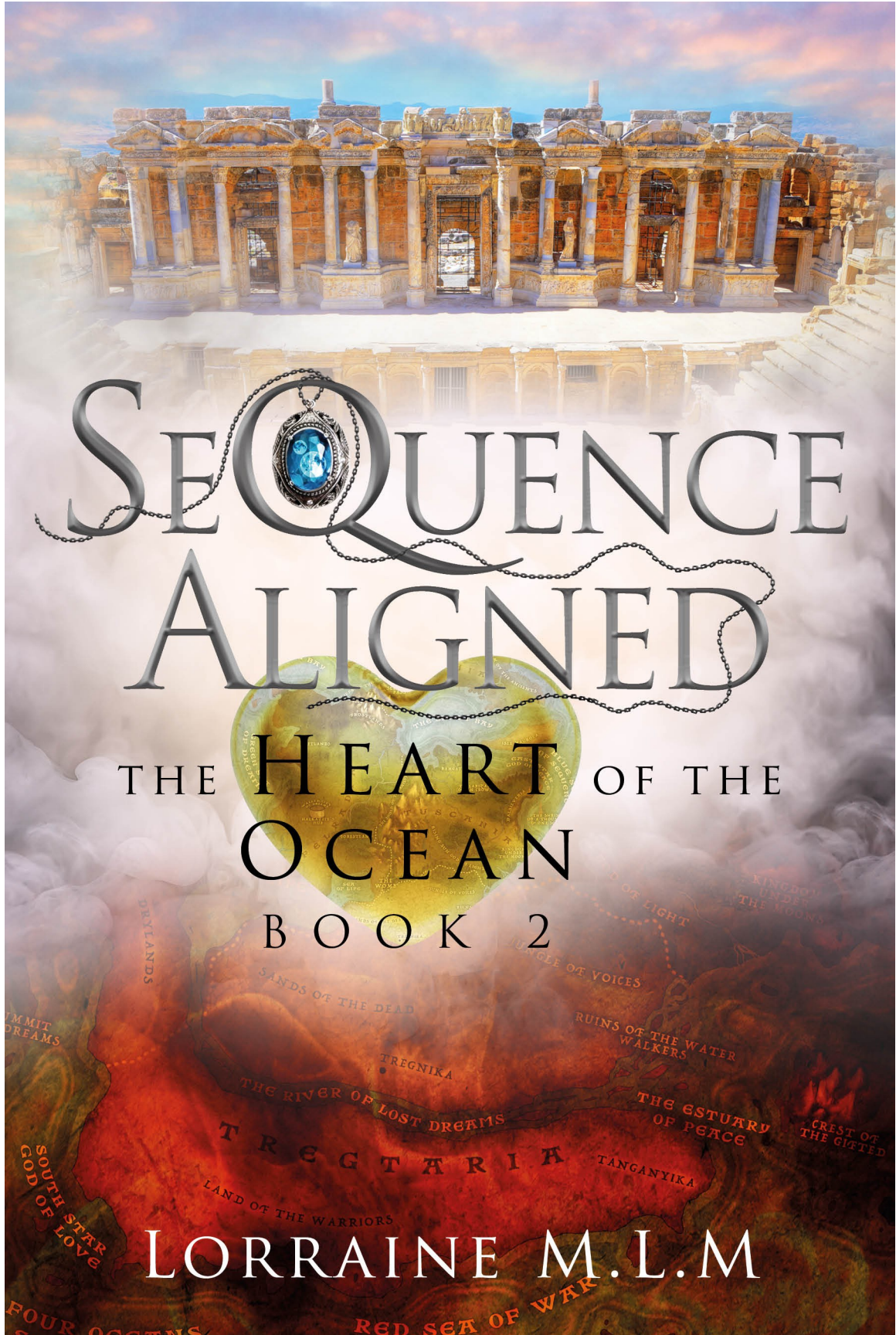


SeQuence Aligned

Lorraine M.L.M

The Heart of the Ocean Series

Book Two – Chapter One



SEQUENCE ALIGNED

THE HEART OF THE
OCEAN
BOOK 2

LORRAINE M.L.M

Moon-Day Two

My Felradian Gift to you...

A Game of Sequence

A Game of Sequence is as complex as a pyramid and as simplistic as a triangle. A Sequence is a natural order of elements, thoughts, and beliefs that brings about a nation. It is a journey from birth to death, a path from genesis to exodus, a number from one to infinity. A Sequence never ends. It rekindles, rejuvenates, and refreshes with time. When the Sequence gains total control of the Game, the players have no choice but to align with the Sequence.

Signed,

Halkateiy Valeima Mautilus

of House Regai-Rallias

Preface

Dante's Chain of Thought

In a Game of Sequence, when you're faced with certain death, there are only two options to you—Zeneshians and humans alike. Be bold, or cry yourself to sleep, but neither makes you a hero, for death is, without question, the *master* of all life.

Each moon-day that you're alive, you're running from *him--death, such is his nature to chase...* like a hunt...only *this* hunter is unyielding, unmerciful, tenacious. For as long as you can, you dodge this unalterable shadow or *try to...* but relentlessly, death pursues you. You stop, and *he*, too, takes a breather, watching you from a distance.

You pick yourself up, stagger across the land, running when you can, plodding, crawling, feeling as if your breath is being sucked out of you. Succumbing to your fate, you finally trip and fall. Death stops and appears to feel *your* pain.

Again, not wanting to concede defeat, you find your willpower. You wobble to your feet. At that time, the rain is thumping so hard you feel each bruise. A moment after, the sun is scorching the life out of you, but still, you carry on. Why? Because you have a path to follow, a destination to reach, a Sequence to fulfil. With hope and faith, you aim to make your life worth *something*.

Inevitably, death catches up, for *he* is the result of living. What eats you up and threatens to kill you before death has done his final deed is regret.

What could I have done differently? What did I do with the time I was given to live? You forage for answers. In those final moments, when you get into *that* empty space and invisible walls are caving in, what makes you strong is one greater than death and denser than life. Love. To live is to love—loving is living! There's a sequence to life, love, and death, and regardless of how hard one tries, no one can escape it!

Part I

Alessia - The Dawn of my Training

1. The Ocean is you

Lessi! Dante's melodic and deep voice echoed fluidly inside my head, more refined than ever. *I can't quite make up my mind what's more spectacular, you in the ocean or the ocean in you?* Telepathy was a thing in Tuscania and even now, I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that this was real. It had been seven months since my arrival in my new world, and I still had no idea how to switch on or off the 'mind thing.' My mind just did its own thing. And I did mine.

Dante! I said with zest, albeit telepathically. *You're back!* I jerked up from the refreshing cool ocean water, whipped round, and gazed upon the guy who made my life a real every day fantasy. On his approach, four *gisbornias*—protectors dipped their heads in greeting.

Since the day I met him my life was like an unwritten story of something along the lines of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, except it read: *Alessia and Dante, the deepest depths of the oceans*. Being loved by him and loving him back, what I would have deemed as *fantasy* in my home world, and what I saw and lived as my *reality* were the same thing.

No distinction—no separation. Everyday was bliss.

Dante stood tall by the shoreline, fifty metres away, hands tucked deep into his beautifully tailored midnight-blue twilled cotton shorts, his vinous-red eyes drinking me in from a distance.

I wiped water off my face, breathed in the fragrant ocean-air, and smiled my heart out to him. He was millions of leagues out of my realm, yet when he regarded me unflaggingly with his luminous eyes, he suggested otherwise. Of everything else, it was something inside his eyes that always drew me to him. They were sensuous and exciting; they oozed freedom, strength, and hidden depths of mysteries I had yet to discover.

What are you doing here? I asked. A frisson of excitement flew through me. *I wasn't expecting you this week!*

He was meant to be discussing the kingdom's strategy with members of the highest council—the Dhareka—not standing in my line of view, looking like one of the gods of my new world. He chatted to the four gisbornias who stood to his left, and then turned to me, a playful smile lingering on the corners of his mouth. *Are you intending to swim back to the shore, or shall I come and get you?*

I gazed at him for a prolonged moment, delighting in the way his olive-toned skin shimmered effortlessly in the midday sun. *To get to me you'll have to catch me first!* I dipped my head into the invigorating water and breast-stroked across the curvature of the ocean. Every time I dipped into the water, the jewel of the ocean that hung around my neck glimmered a rich cobalt. It was as though the longer I was in Zeneshia, the more colourful the pendant became.

Dante's light laughter bubbled free inside my head, bringing immense joy to my heart. Everything was just perfect!

The boundless deep-sea water was varnish clear, pleasing to the eye and untarnished by seaweed. The sand at the bottom of the sea looked lush and inviting, unspoilt by pebbles.

When I surfaced, I drew breath and sought Dante's gaze. Brows raised, a slight smile gracing his face, he carefully considered my proposal. He was a cautious guy, that I knew from the day I met him, at the banquet. Everything he did was well thought out. Even the occasional times that he broke the rules, rest assured, he would have weighed every option until he was certain the benefits outweighed the risks.

A second later, he took off one shoe, a dazzling smile lighting his face. "Don't make me come in, please," he pleaded, choosing to speak the normal way rather than the mind thing—telepathy. "I miss you!" He raised his voice just high enough so I could hear.

“And I miss you!” I called. “But I’ve missed the ocean, too.” I raised my arms and swivelled around, loving the feel of water against my skin. My toes sunk into the sand, the texture fine and soft like puffy cushions. “If you truly and desperately want me, come and get me,” I said playfully, my gaze locked onto him.

His laughter echoed inside my head. “I love it when you throw caution to the wind, but—”

“No buts, Dante Erajion! Dive in, or I’ll drag you in,” I warned to his added amusement. “The ocean is beautiful, but it’ll be divine with you in it!”

From a distance, his red eyes twinkled, in competition with the golden-white sand glittering in the afternoon sun. The all-round view was incredible, like glitters had been sprinkled across the shoreline.

This was Tuscania, the land of my mother, the peaceable kingdom under the dual moons, the mystical world of moonbows and myths under the sea. With the midday splendid sun at her peak, she blazed the land of the rising sun, emitting strokes of light that added to the radiance of the beach sand.

At peace, I glanced up to the sky, and my gaze settled on the azure dome. It was Tuscanian spring time, yet it looked like summer, felt like summer, and with Larize Charming, Dante Erajion of house Hantaria in my line of sight, it *was* summer!

Yet this beauty was untouched, untainted, and unspoilt. A soothing hush cloaked the land, the ocean creating an invisible mirage of peaceful sounding silence. Every so often, the hush was penetrated by the lulling whisper of the waves crawling gently to the shore. There were no inquisitive tourists, no hotels, and no form of commercialisation that I had become accustomed to in my home world. This was Shangrila, a hidden slice of paradise...private, pristine, and exotic.

A hundred metres from where Dante stood across the beach, towering sand dunes hid the bay from normal day-to-day life in Tuscania. Beyond was a massive parsley-green veld that led into the forests and a backdrop of heaven-kissing mountains looming mysteriously in the distance. Something about those jagged mountains gripped me. They had an enigmatic and secretive air around them that kept me absorbed every time I glanced in their direction.

My home, okay, my grandparent's enormous white house with contrasting mahogany-framed windows, sat to my left on higher ground. I could just about see my bedroom window from where I stood.

Down below, the refreshing vanish-clear water mirrored the sky! Taking it all in, there was no comparison to my usual coastline in my home world with grey waters and pebbled beaches. Here, the sand was soft, fine, and pure, like powder. Following my unexpected arrival, today was my first revisit to the same waters that had brought me to this kingdom. Early that morning, I had begged Zaira, my grandma, to allow me into the boundless ocean.

"Here." Grandma outstretched her arm towards me and placed a shiny diamond bracelet into my open palm. "Something I've wanted to give you for some time, now."

"Oh, Grandma!" I exclaimed, swivelling around on my bed. "It matches my necklace!" I flipped the multi-coloured white, blue, red, and silver glowing bracelet.

"The Larumia, jewel of the ocean, is a set of three, my velici," she said after a short thoughtful pause. "I gave Kaylinah the necklace and the diadem, so she could pass one to her daughter should the gods have blessed her with one and keep one for herself. I retained the bracelet." Her warm smile matched the sun-yellow chiffon dress she wore. "That way the three of us would forever be linked."

"It's beautiful," I said, lips parting.

“Not as beautiful as you are. You see beauty because you’re made of beauty. It’s impossible for you to see anything less.”

Smiling, I rested my head on her shoulder. My mind drifted to my childhood days. “I never saw Mum wearing a diadem. Dad just gave me the necklace, n-nothing else.” My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat.

“Perhaps she was buried with it, my dear.” Grandma curved an arm around my shoulder. “The diadem is a heavy jewel. If she had it in her hair, you couldn’t miss it.”

A sad silence descended over us. Grandma settled her gaze on the jagged mountain tops that loomed in the distance. With the curtains drawn, my bedroom window was like a stunning picture of sun, sea, sand and mountains, a view people would pay for, yet thoughts of my mum’s death tainted the beauty. Something was missing.

“The undertakers didn’t allow anyone to view her body,” I whispered through a constricted throat. “They said her body was too damaged.” Tears formed in my eyes. I bit them back and drew in a sharp breath.

“There’s a sequence to life, love, and death, my dear. Kaylinah completed hers remarkably well.” She squeezed my shoulder. “Enough with the heavy. What would *you* like to do today?” With her free arm, she reached for her chalice on the bedside table and took a swallow of her *mamaira*, her breakfast soup.

“Swim,” I said almost immediately. “Swim. I’ve missed the water.”

“In the ocean?” Grandma’s thin yet perfectly shaped eyebrows lifted. “That’s too risky, *velici*.”

“Please, please, please, Grandma!” I begged, coming shy of kneeling down on the floor. “Since I’ve been here, I’ve always watched the ocean from a distance.”

She placed her chalice down. “Velici?” Her calm voice oozed a pleasantly rich tone that was in parallel to the humming sound of flowing water cascading down the waterfall in the corner of my room. Bliss.

I held her hands in mine and gazed into her eyes. “I want to feel the sea again. I want to swim against the waves just like Mum and I used to do. I want to be at one with the water.” I bit my lip. “Just once before I leave all of this for the birdhouse in the thick of the forest.”

“Birdhouse?” Zaira raised her eyebrows, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“That’s what Gradho said.” Gradho was one of the twenty-four Dhareka councillors who relished in having the last word...everytime. After a short thoughtful pause, I went on. “He said Ralda likes to live a simplistic life and that he’s always lived in a birdhouse in the middle of nowhere, away from the perks of modern living,” I babbled. Ralda, on the other hand was one of the Seven Voices of Sequence, a wise and calm old man who had a lot of secrets cocooned inside him. “And—”

“You’re worried about your training?” She gazed at me for a lengthy moment.

“A little.” I dropped my gaze. It wasn’t just my impending training that worried me. It was everything else: Leaving Dante! Being away from home. Saying goodbye to my family. “I’m more worried about leaving home...and the ocean behind.”

“The ocean is you. You’ll carry it with you inside your heart.” She pressed the aglow moons pendant, the jewel of the ocean that hung around my neck gently against my chest.

“So, may I have a swim, Grandma, before I start my training, *please*.”

“I don’t know about that, my dear. You’re young and full of spirit, but Raldarinda will not be remotely amused,” she said after a contemplative pause. “The ocean is you, but the water is not safe for you, velici.”

“Grandma, I’ll be fine. There’s nothing lurking in the waters anymore. Even Ralda agrees the Nadeira are gone.” My mind drifted to the time my utopia vanished and I was

lured out of my room and woke up in the moving forest face to face with the most hideous creatures ever, the Nadeira. My heart skipped. I drew in a deep breath. *The Nadeira are just a memory.* “I was born to sail the Four Oceans of the Surging Tide. That’s what you always say,” I reminded her with a cheeky grin. “I’m in this world because of the wonders of the ocean. I’ll swim close to the shoreline. I promise.”

Through my bedroom window, Grandma and I gazed at the majestic waters at length. The mellow crash of the sea waves against the shore was like a dance of water and sand, inviting and alluring, calling to me.

“Please, Grandma!”

She gazed at me intently for a while and then smiled. “You’ll wait until midday, and you’ll have three, no, four protectors with you.”

At her words, I let out a sudden yelp, threw my arms around her with eagerness, and pecked her cheek. “Thanks, Grandma! Oh! What do we use to swim around here?” I asked to her added amusement.

Her blue-green eyes sparkled. “I’ll be right back.” She left my room with haste, and in a few minutes, she returned and handed me a pair of wine-red shorts and a white tank top. “Don’t ask,” she said after my eyes widened. “Despite their elegance, these robes and dresses will drag you down to the bottom of the ocean.” She held my head in her hands and shook her head. “We can’t have that!”

I smiled, reminiscing as I paddled around in the water. The powdery sand slid through my toes like silk. Then I noticed that the gisbornias had vanished. I swung my gaze around the shoreline toward Dante. *Hey! What have you done with my protection detail?* I asked teasingly.

A warm and glowing smile lit up his face and spilled into his eyes. Unbuttoning his shirt slowly, he now stood barefoot under the Sun god of Light. My stomach fluttered.

I've given them some time off. I'm all the protection you need! His smile broadened, and he tossed his shirt to the ground.

I was dazzled to numbness. I'd never seen him without a shirt before. Every second he stood in my line of view with the sun's rays bouncing off him, my heart lurched toward him, like a candle that beamed to infinity. He lit up my world.

Oh my god! I'm staring. I'm totally staring! I gasped, struck by his enthralling athletic build, muscular yet not overbearing physique and well-formed abs. His blue shorts contrasted his russet skin tone effortlessly, like he'd been born in them.

My mind drifted to the first day I'd met him. He had swept me off my feet. The only complication was that he could read my thoughts, *all* my thoughts, of which ninety-nine percent were of him, how fascinating he was, how enticed and enchanted I'd been... Yeah, I still cringe with that knowledge. To my defence, I blamed the gene that our houses shared. The Sequence of First and Forever was inescapable. If someone had mentioned it on day one, I wouldn't have believed them, but that would have avoided a lot of death by embarrassment.

Auspiciously now, I could rely on my mind to reveal only what I wanted him to know...at times. I was still trying to work out the 'mind thing,' the range of telepathic communication and how to ensure that it was airtight.

Red is the colour for you, his low and smooth voice sounded inside my head.

A burst of heat rose in my face. I glanced down at my swimsuit, okay, my red shorts and tank top. It was the first time he was seeing me in minimal clothing too, considering every day was dress day in Tuscania.

Red is you! I said.

He favoured me with yet another dazzling smile. His red shock of hair glinted with the midday sun, creating an enthralling contrast to his skin. He seemed disinterested in the beauty around us, his complete focus rested on me. The cool breeze ruffled his hair, lifting the soft tendrils, and he ran his hands to try and manage them. Behind him were a scatter of coconut L-shaped trees, which reminded me of pictures of Caribbean paradise islands I'd only seen on screensavers in my home world.

I glanced back and looked at my starting point, a two-metre cliff into the ocean. I smiled. On earth, swimming was my thing from a very young age, and in my teenage years, it was my sanctuary. An invasion of voices inside my head had been part of my life since the age of fourteen. Torture. It was as though a crowded stadium continuously screamed inside my head. Without my water pouches or being in a body of water, every thought—every memory—every emotion from people within a three-hundred metre radius of me thronged my mind, piercing right through me. Death by voices.

Swimming hushed the voices, and underwater, it stopped the voices completely. Now I was in the world below the sea, swimming in the midday sun, and the voices that had made my life miserable were no longer a form of psychosis but a surreal gift from the East Star god of Peace. After months of not swimming, I doubted myself, so I stayed close to the shoreline, and enjoyed the cool-warm sensations of the ocean against the sun.

Dante paced into the waters slowly, leisurely, and slickly. His gaze never left mine. A thrill of elation bubbled inside me, a cool breeze touching the warmth of my cheeks. With each step, he took in my direction, my pulse raced. Any second, and I could see myself melting into the sea. Once the waters were waist deep, he dove forward effortlessly and swam toward me. My breath hitched.

Before I'd composed myself to breathe properly, a swirl of blue water lifted into the air from my left. A majestic bird leaped out of the ocean through the whirl. Astonished, I

brought my hands to my mouth and caught my breath. In a hypnotic rhythm, the bird fluttered its watery wings in the air gliding over me.

Dante! I couldn't get any words out.

It wasn't a bird. It was shaped like a bird but looked like the ocean. It hovered over me, flitting and chirping like it was in a dance of some sort. I ducked, fascinated yet terrified by the surreal beauty of the creature.

In seconds, Dante surfaced inches from me and instantaneously swooped me into his warm arms.

"What species is that?" I breathed, mouth agape.

"*Larushia*—bird of the ocean," he said easily. "Larushias hardly venture above water."

He raised his hand towards the most stupendous bird I'd ever seen. At least two feet tall, the bird had wings as beautiful as a dove's and a serrated beak that beamed like glitters in the daylight. Magic. The bird gracefully glided towards us and nestled in Dante's free arm. Friendly, too.

"She couldn't resist your presence in the ocean," he said.

"You're a bird whisperer now?" I puffed a light laugh and stroked the bird's cool feathers.

Dante burst into a light chuckle. "I could be," he teased. "But not today. Today it's all about you." His voice was low.

At his words, the bird chirped and flitted its wings, and in seconds, she darted underwater as quickly as she had emerged. Dante wound both arms around me and drew me a fraction closer. A spark of delight went through me. For a long interval he held me close. I snuggled into him and curled my arms around his neck. I welcomed this haven. I embraced

the feeling of rapturous excitement that he invoked in me every time he cuddled me this close.

His touch was like some stimuli that elicited a mix of sensations that kept me wondering whether I was hot, cold, warm, cool, or just right—I could never be sure, yet I was certain of one thing. Given the option, I would choose to nestle in his arms forever and never ask for anything else!

“Now that I’ve got you, what next?” he asked against my neck, his voice gentle and soothing, in perfect harmony with our surroundings.

I leaned back, met his wine-red sparkling eyes, and then bit my lip. “It depends,” I whispered with a smile, my breath catching in my throat.

“On what?”

I paused before answering, “On whether you can hold onto me long enough!” I slipped free from his arms, swivelled around him, and before he could catch me, I breast-stroked away from him.

A burst of laughter escaped his lips. *Now you’re making me work for your love, Lessi! It’s only fair. You got me so easily from day one, I teased. It’s time you did some work, my Larize!*

I swam farther into the water, dancing to the rhythm of the waves and listening to the calm murmuring sounds of the ocean. Behind me, Dante swam close, chuckling inside my head. He was a good swimmer, something I didn’t know until then.

You’ve got to stop, Lessi.

Not until you catch me! My heart beat unsteadily, working itself up into a frenzy, an every time thing when Dante was around, yet this time, it was in sync with the wave music of the ocean, too. I was having a blast in true oceanic sybaritic splendour. I did all my favourite

strokes one after the other, spinning to my back and rolling to my front, always ensuring I stayed closer to the shoreline. Within minutes, I had swum much farther than I had intended.

After some time, fatigue got the better of me, and I stopped. Breathless, I whipped around. In a trickle, Dante rose from the blue watery wonderland, like a sea god. I tugged gently at the pendant dangling on my necklace, enthralled. A charming smile played at the corners of his lips. He blinked. His long dark lashes seemed thicker, his wet hair shimmering in the afternoon sun seemed longer, and he, well, he was simply captivating.

His eyes flashed brazier-red! My short breath shortened even further. Something strange yet stunning hung the air. He crossed towards me and halted inches from me. Unsure what I wanted to do next, I flicked water at him, trying to get his face. All I managed to do was arouse an amused chuckle that made my heart flip.

He returned the favour with a large volume of water that hit me right in the face. I shut my eyes.

“My moons! I’m so sorry,” he said remorsefully sweeping me into his broad arms. “My big hands! I didn’t think. I am so—”

I laid a hand over his lips. “I’m fine, Dante. I’m not made of soft cotton wool,” I whispered. “Besides, I’m old enough to get hurt and still keep a straight face.”

“I wouldn’t want to be the one to hurt you,” he said slowly in a honeyed tone, emphasising each syllable. I knew there was more to his words than he was letting on.

He gathered me close and drew me hard against his well-toned body such that I was pressed firmly to his bare chest. A burst of heat streaked through me in circular waves that intensified with each breath I took. I felt at home in his arms. Before I could soak in the embrace fully, he drew back, musing. That was his thing: death by cogitation!

Momentarily, he leaned a bit closer. A new surge of warmth pulsed through me like a charge of electricity. Suddenly, he curved both arms around my waist, and in one swift

movement, he lifted me to him. I gasped. As my feet left the ground, gravity seemed to have given up total control, and aquatic microgravity took over. I curved my legs around his waist.

My pulse quickened. He drew one hand and cradled my jaw and cheek, telling me without words that he was ready. I was ready. I inhaled one last breath. My hands securely wrapped around his neck, and I didn't have to be a genius to know that this was it.

The moment was right. The timing was great. With my feet off the ocean floor and tightly curled around his waist, my heart thumped so hard against my ribs. Gravity ceased to exist. No ocean—no land; just me and him! The fresh scent of the ocean filled my lungs, yet now I couldn't breathe or even remember how to breathe. I couldn't afford to breathe. I couldn't blink. I couldn't risk missing out on this moment.

This was the moment I had awaited for a while now, so patiently, too. My very first kiss!

He edged his head forward, pausing a little, and then inched closer until I could feel the gentle caress of his breath on my lips. As my gaze soaked in the sparkle in his irises, I shut my eyes, unable to keep up with the dazzle.

I hate to spoil this sequence and all, but you've got to save that for another moon-day!

Our bliss, the beautiful sound of silence, and my almost first kiss was ruptured by Tan-tan's voice. My heart sank. I flung my eyes open and met Dante's unreadable gaze.

Tan, your timing! Leave! Dante's now frustrated voice echoed inside my head.

I let out my breath. Talk about breaking the moment. It was shattered. The kiss and everything else that mattered then flitted away like a wasp in the air.

I would leave, Tan-tan said, but it's not me you should be worried about. If you hadn't been too engrossed, you'd have noticed. You've got company," he said with a short pause. *And not—*

They can wait, Dante said, still holding me. He had no intention of letting me go; his arm clasped tightly around my waist said it in more ways than one. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed.

I smiled, feeling a bit flustered.

Not this company, Tan-tan went on to say. *Not everyone is here in peace*.

With the moment definitely lost, Dante and I spun round simultaneously and noticed Zaira, Gradho, and Ralda watching us from the shoreline.

Dante made a low grumble but kept his arm firmly around me. *What is Gradho doing here?* He seemed more annoyed than concerned.

I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Tan-tan said. *Gradho is what he is. A sequence crasher!*

I drew in some breath. A telling off was imminent, I could sense it. Still everything I needed was right there with me. I could face anything as long as I had Dante. I flicked him a glance and flashed him a coy smile.

“What’s that smile?” He lowered me gently into the water.

“I’ll give you one guess. No cheating,” I whispered, withdrawing reluctantly from his warm touch. I kept my eyes locked onto his for a drawn-out moment. “I’m your Delilah, and you’re my kryptonite!” I laughed at my own jest. It didn’t seem right at all.

“Delilah and Kryptonite?” A contemplative frown rolled over his forehead. For a lengthy moment, he wore a reflective expression on his face, smiling. His eyebrows rose.

“My moons! Is that supposed to be good?”

“Hey, you breached my shield?”

He chuckled, smoothing his hair. “She opened up for me.”

“She did it again! My mind is...is...” I feigned frustration as his eyes twinkled with subtle amusement. “She’s something else.”

I lifted my gaze to the immeasurable expanse of the Tuscanian skies then swung my gaze back to the shimmering ocean, musing. Streams of light danced over the ocean water, generating hypnotic illusions, like someone was constantly sprinkling diamonds into the sea.

I beamed, stood on my toes, and gave him a light kiss on the cheek. “Whatever she’s up to, I want you to know that I love you more than she does,” I whispered into his neck, and then brushed my lips lightly against his shoulder.

He smiled against my neck. “And I love you both!” he said.

**The fantasy romance story continues in this enchanting novel for young adults* SeQuence Aligned and more books in the series are available in both E-book and Paperback formats from all Amazon stores. You can also read the series books for Free with Kindle Unlimited! **

