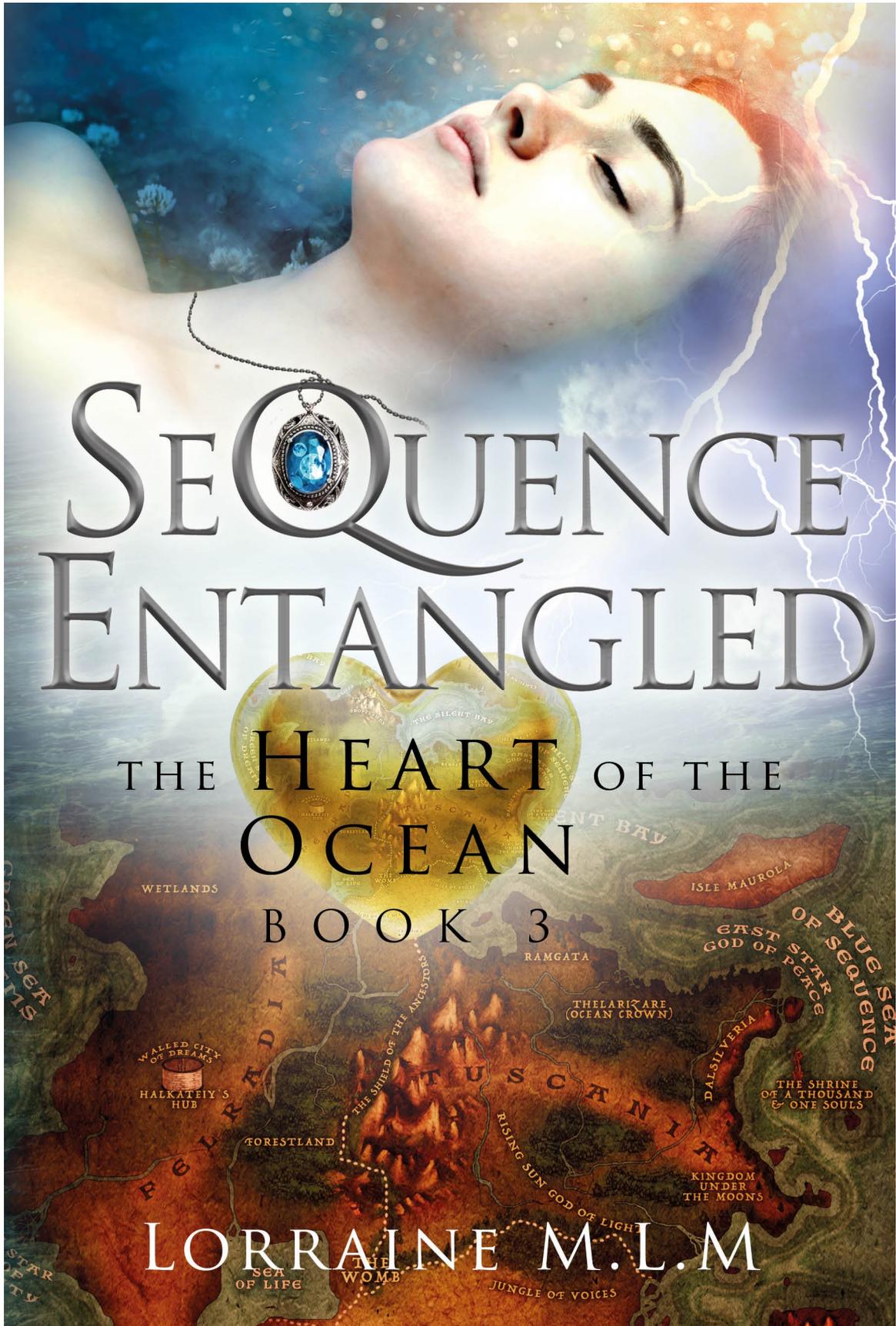


SeQuence Entangled

Lorraine M.L.M

The Heart of the Ocean Series

Book Three – Chapter One



SEQUENCE ENTANGLED

THE HEART OF THE
OCEAN
BOOK 3

LORRAINE M.L.M.

Moon-Day Three

My Felradian Gift to you...

A Game of Sequence

In a Game of Sequence, when the vital player swings left, the Dreamers of Sequences counter with a move to the right. She leaps. They drag her down. She cries. They shut her up. She gives up and takes a knee. They drag her up. Dreamers have a game to play. They find nothing more fulfilling than to play the gods at their own game. Not death, not life, not love will put an end to a Game of Sequence. That leaves one question...what will?

The fundamental player must not succumb. Her goal is to force the Dreamers to dance to the rhythm of her choosing. Her objective is to claim the gods-given supremacy to shift the Game to her benefit. She will murmur a melody like no other. Her enchanting musical will make rivers flow uphill, trees shriek into the moon-night skies, and flowers whisper to the sounds of the ocean. Her radiance will beam across the kingdom accompanied by the Sun god of Light and the Heart god of Thunder.

When she jumps, the Dreamers must leap. When she cries, they must wail. When she wills, they must yield. But to master the Dance of Sequence, she must first master how the light, shadows, wind, and water move when she moves. The quadrant of components to a solid Dance of Sequence are the Heart, Blood, Mind and Soul. When the Quadrant converge, she'll hold the Game of Sequence in her hands.

However, when four becomes three, a triad is born. Hearts will be tested. Blood will be shed. Minds will be strained. Souls will be taken. A Triad of Hearts, Blood, Minds, and Souls entwined in a Sequence of Doubles is a tangled web of a complex sequence, unsullied yet entangled.

Signed,

Halkateiy Valeima Mautilus of house Regai-Rallias

Preface

We have experienced dynasties of love, in our ancestors, our parents, our families,
and now all the kingdoms under the moons will witness the birth of a love that defies the
principles of gravity!

A love based on the Sacred Values of a Sequence of First and Forever

In greatest honour of the union between

Alessia Appleton of house Serenius

&

Larize Dante Erajion of house Hantaria

The pleasure of your company is requested at the Star gods anointed

Larizare Union of Hearts ceremonial celebration

at House Serenius

on Loveday, April 10 4590

We begin under the shimmering gaze of the Sun god of Light,

and end under the watchful eyes of the almighty Moon gods of the moon-night skies.

Tuscanians are never late.

Dress for serenity. Dress for Sequence. Dress for love.

Part I

Alessia - A New Hope & Stolen Dreams

1. Dance of Sequence

The great expanse of the heavens alight with the stunning hues of sunset unveiled the full splendour of Tuscanian skies. The uncomplicated majesty of the Kingdom under the Moons was timeless, emotive, and a constant allure. Earth was somewhere out there in the vast universe, a distant dream.

It had been eleven months since my arrival from Earth, twenty-seven days since my return from the warrior Kingdom of Tregtaria, twenty days since Dante's enchanting proposal at the Fountain of Diamonds, and nineteen days since I had begun my mind training. Yes, I was counting. Training was hard, long, and exhausting.

"A dance of Sequence is powerful, methodical and much more fluid, chosen one." Ralda, the epitome of riddles, my mentor, and the Voice of Sequence, struck his walking stick hard on the ground. The flowers that stretched across the immensity of the garden swayed as if they concurred. Magic. Four protectors manning the West side of the flower farm briefly settled their gaze on us.

"Again!" Ralda instructed.

I drew in a deep breath. A fresh scent of ocean-air, blooms, and wet soil filled my nostrils. Hurriedly, I sidestepped left and stared with absolute concentration at the gleaming three-metre water pond two metres away. In seconds, the water bubbled, swirled, and shape-shifted into a humongous ball. Magical twirling soon followed. The water-ball spiralled up, now caught in the calm and soft ocean-breeze.

I beamed. This was new. This was spectacular. This was Sequence. My mind was finally dancing to my silent tune, now.

Since I regained consciousness three weeks ago, my training had resumed. Fortunately, this time I wasn't in the heart of the wilderness, but in the comfort of my own home, Grandma's vivacious garden. At a little flick of my thoughts, I could move matter with

my mind. Two weeks ago, I had begun to lift stones, twigs, and tiny ornaments inside the house but with each day, my powers increased tenfold.

Like a light switch, at a little tap, I could reorganise books on a book shelf, shuffle papers from at least five metres away, and transfer objects from one location to another. Rearranging my bedroom furniture was fun. Shifting people, yes, real people from one position to another was phenomenal, but propelling Dante from the hallway and into my arms at the speed of lightning was priceless. I wasn't the first Serenian to exert such mind strength, but I was the first one in at least two-hundred moon-years.

Despite my ability to move solid objects, liquid had been my biggest challenge, but not today. Today was remarkable. I had finally resurrected my dance with water again! Like a rippling wave, the water-ball surreally hovered in the air, mimicking my body movements.

Dressed in my rich-purple ankle length dress, I could easily be mistaken for a cattleya orchid. Yet the invisible energy beaming from me was too enormous to mistake for anything other than what it was. Magical Sequence.

I turned left, and the water ball jiggled left, too. I stepped backwards, and it wobbled back in return. "Hold it," Ralda demanded, eyes drooped with fatigue. "Keep still, regulate your breathing and maintain nature's solidarity with you."

He eased himself on the bench, his grey wizened hair flowing in lengths over his shoulders. A smile of satisfaction graced his features.

Old age, his unique connection to the weakening shield, and fatigue was eating him up slowly. His health and the future of our people lay in my hands, which made this training even more important. As the shield weakened, so did Ralda. The shield's collapse would be the death of him. I couldn't let that happen. I would do whatever was needed to reinforce it. From daybreak to midday, my time was my own. From noon to sunset, my responsibility was

to muster my abilities, with the goal of strengthening the Tuscanian shield. I still had a long way to go, but I had come a long way too. I had to press on.

The soft glow of orange-yellow light from the pearly sky pierced through the rolling clouds in the skies. A zephyr ocean wind swept through, lifting the hemline of my dress. I didn't flutter an eyelid. Soft tendrils flew into my eyes, and I kept still. I couldn't afford any lapse in concentration. The ball of water hovered in the air like a floating balloon.

"Move to the right." Ralda's voice sounded strained.

I sidestepped, and the ball trailed me like my shadow.

"Quicken your pace, chosen one!"

I hurried left.

A flash of yellow shone in my eyes. A tiny break in concentration, and the water ball rippled like a wave in the evening wind. It disintegrated and the droplets started to fall. I gasped. Frantic, I hastily raised my hands towards the water, and it reformed into an unsteady ball, but compacted enough to remain afloat.

My brow creased. With an incredible amount of concentration, I held it above ground. It stabilised, but for how long? My legs jiggled. My body tremored. My head throbbed. I hadn't slept well the previous night, and exhaustion crept up my back. I pushed it to the back of my mind. I blinked. The ball wobbled again. "No. No. No." I raised my hands in the air.

"You're losing rhythm." Ralda wasn't a tad impressed. "More concentration. Hands behind your back. Eyes on your target."

More concentration? I'm at my limit, Ralda.

A cloud of mental fatigue fell over me like a block of ice. Last night, I had woken up in the early hours of the morning after the worst nightmare ever. I hadn't managed to go back to sleep afterwards.

"I'm trying, Voice of Sequence." I murmured.

He huffed. “The shield of our ancestors was not built by trying. It was built by doing.” His voice dragged. It had been almost six hours since the start of today’s training, and my legs had pins and needles constantly stabbing me.

“I’m tired,” I said.

He smoothed his long, grey beard. “You’re tiring too quickly. You are the Mother of the Shield. The Sacred Sequence of birth does not allow room for fatigue. A mother doesn’t stop giving birth because she’s fatigued. She overcomes exhaustion for the greater good of bringing life into the world,” he said.

“Some may need spears, swords, bones, and sticks to define their destinies. You are a flower that dances in the breeze. You have a mind of a conqueror and the heart of a goddess. You will conquer the world with no arms but your mind,” he drawled. “Are we on the same sequence, chosen one?”

“Yes, Voice of Sequence.”

“Your fight is not a fight of arms. It is a smooth, calculated and methodical dance of water, light, and shadows. Just like the flow of music.” He scratched his brow. “Did you play any musical instruments in your father’s world, chosen one?”

Keeping my concentration and chatting to Ralda at the same time was even more exhausting than training in silence.

“I used to play the violin, Voice of Sequence.” I bit my lip, my mind briefly drifting to my younger days on Earth. “I stopped when my parents passed away.”

“A loved one’s passing is not the end of a Sequence. The music resounds inside you.”

“Zera-pe-ladha.” Gradho’s strident voice broke through my concentration. I hadn’t seen him approach. He was one of the High *Dhareka*, a council member. He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind. “You will not build us a shield by controlling a miniscule amount of water,”

he continued. “If you’re to stand any chance of protecting this kingdom, you need to practice with larger bodies of water like the Blue ocean of Sequence, perhaps. Hmm.”

I darted a glance at the ocean. The rhythmic lapping of waves against the sand in the distance created an orchestra of sound that perforated the evening silence. I closed my eyes for a second and flung them open.

“Have you ever heard the term, baby steps, High Dhareka Councillor Gradho?” I raised my brows and decided to do one better. Quickly, I turned to him and propelled the water-ball next to him. “You want to give it a try.”

He leaped back, and the water mimicked him. “My moons! I came to offer my support. Don’t make me wet, now. This is one of my finest attires.” He fixed his cowl over his back.

“I thought you might want to give the dance of Sequence a go,” I joshed.

“Me, practice a dance of Sequence?” He shrugged and ran his hands over his ivory and brown trim cloak, as if he was considering my dare. “If it means the shield will be strengthened any quicker, yes, by all means, hand me the gene and see if I won’t turn the Blue Ocean of Sequence upside down.”

I broke into a bout of laughter. Before I composed myself, a hauntingly loud voice perforated my peace of mind and cut across my head. *Impressive, but surely you can do better than that!*

A shudder rippled through me.

Don’t crumble now. Never crumble. We never crumble. Concentrate...play, dance, the strange voice said, loud and distracting. A girl’s voice. My voice. *You can do so much more! More! More!*

My parched lips parted, and I took a lurch back. Shivering, I wanted to run, but my legs were heavy. Where would I run? What was I running from?

Let it go higher! You can do better! Higher!

The voice, my voice, boomed so loud my head was seconds away from an explosion. My temples throbbed. Unnerved, breathing heavily, I brought my hands to my temples. My concentration drifted. In a trickle, the ball of water crashed and splashed in bountiful quantities over Gradho. I looked up and met Gradho's horrified gaze.

His lips parted, hands dripping water in the air. "My moons! Alessia! This is my best cloak!" he boomed.

"I'm so s-sorry." I sank to my knees, my head pounding. "I didn't mean to."

Higher! Higher! Higher!

Each word was like a knife cutting through me.

In agony, I wrapped my hands around my head. *Get out of my head!* I cried inside my mind. Death by voices...one voice...my voice.

Torture.

Ralda staggered towards me. "Speak, chosen-one."

The voices...they are back. One voice. My voice. It didn't make sense.

I shut my eyes. "I um, I, the... My head is pounding, Ralda," I cried. A piercing pain thronged the sides of my head. "My head is killing me."

"Open your eyes," Ralda demanded, unfolding my hands from my head. "You've lost all colour."

I flung my eyes open and blinked a few times. Hush. The voice vanished. A quiet and haunting silence remained inside my head. The throbbing lessened, more manageable but still unsettled. I breathed.

Ralda gripped my hands and flipped them a few times. "Your blood is not flowing as it should. We have done too much in a short space of time. Strength like yours is best summoned in smaller doses." His face clouded with concern. "If we are not careful, we will

burn you out before you're strong enough. You have done exceptionally well, young one."

The stress lines underneath his drooping eyelids deepened. He turned to Gradho. "Young Tuscanian, is everything ready for tomorrow?"

Gradho, drenched to the bone, smoothed his wet hair back. "Everything is on schedule, Voice of Sequence. I'm not sure about the Flower of Sequence who's decided to soak me in a cold and unamusing douse of pond water."

"I'm so sorry, Gradho," I said remorsefully. "I didn't mean to. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"No harm done." Since my return from Tregtaria, three weeks ago, Gradho was way too agreeable. "You have a big moon-day tomorrow," he said, invoking a jolt of much-needed excitement from me. Tomorrow was my Union of Hearts—my official engagement to Dante. Yes, tomorrow was huge...epic. "A quick dinner, bath, and bed...in that sequence. I've worked tirelessly for your moon-day. You can make it up to me by being at your best."

I nodded and scrambled up. Colourful butterflies fluttered their velvet wings over the sides of the pond adding a dash of colour. Did they have a worry in the world? Doubtful. Jewel-green grasshoppers hopped and bounced over the garden floor. Again, they looked at peace.

"I suppose I need to change before dinner," Gradho said. "Alessia, the East-fronting garden is out of bounds until tomorrow."

"I know," I said respectfully. Gradho had ensured I stayed away from the East-facing garden so my training took place at the West side of the house instead. Whatever he had planned was massive. "I'm looking forward to the surprise."

He waved, already on the move, and hurried down the boardwalk before disappearing.

“May I help you up, Ralda?” I reached for his frail hand. I worried for him, for me, for the land. He was a living Google of wisdom. Without him, the entire kingdom and I would be at a loss.

He gently lifted his arm, and I steadied him as he slowly rose to his feet. Once he had a firm grip of his walking stick, we strolled across the boardwalk towards the house. The sweet and strong scent of exotic blooms wafted across the garden, uplifting and calming yet none of it squelched my anxiety.

The voice freaked me out. If it were any other voice, that would have made it easier to accept, but my voice? Too strange. Maybe I was losing it for old times’ sake, or perhaps I was just zonked. Either way I had to figure this out fast. Already my mishap had added ten years to Ralda’s age. The wrinkles underneath his eyes had deepened, brow furrowed. I would not add to his troubles. Not now. Not until I knew why my mind decided to talk to me.

“Chosen one.” Ralda broke through my abstraction. “Why do I call you the Flower of Sequence?”

I smiled and patted his hand. “You’ve given me a lot of names, Voice of Sequence. I’m losing track,” I joshed.

“You must not lose track of this one. You’re an exceptional flower.” He halted and plucked a buttercup from the sea of yellow and white hues on the ground. Hands shaky, he offered it to me. “For a flower to grow, it requires a triad of components. Light, Water, and Soil. The Sun god of Light favours the young Larize. As such, he is the light of your Sequence. Your Sequence of Hearts is as integral to the health of your mind and to the rebuilding of our ancestors shield as is the training of your mind.”

He wheezed and drew in a steadying breath.

“Tomorrow is a union of your houses, a union of your hearts. The Kingdom will feed your heart, and I am assured that all our hearts will be nourished, too,” he grinned, “thereby nursing your mind for the greater good of our people.”

I flashed a heartened smile. “Who’s my Water and who’s my Soil?”

“Light is fundamental, hence why the gods graced us with the dual moons. Light is the first step of your sequence. Once you have light, you can see. Once you can see, you will find everything you desire to assist your growth...water and soil.” He staggered forward, his tread slow. “Our responsibility and yours is to use the light to travel across the kingdoms, swim across the vastness of oceans, and fly across the lands below and above the seas until you find your water and your soil. Only then will you rebuild the shield and strengthen it for all generations to come.”

Amerey, one of the *dreyziz*—helpers waved as we approached the house. “Good evening, Voice of Sequence.” She dipped her head slightly. “Alessia.”

“Hey, Amerey,” I greeted. “Is Grandma in?”

“In the kitchen, preparing dinner.” She smiled and took in my raised brows. “Tomorrow is huge for us all. She wants everyone well rested tonight so we’ve been given some time off. See you tomorrow.” She patted my shoulder, took in my nod, and breezed away.

I spun round to Ralda. “I’ll need to help Grandma prepare for dinner. Shall I get you anything?” I flung the door open and waited for him to step in.

“I have everything I need right here.” He dropped into the couch on the landing, and his walking stick fell with a thud on the marble floor. “Go and prepare for your light, chosen one. Don’t allow it to die on you.”

He shut his eyes. I picked up his walking stick and leaned it on his side.

“If my soil and my water are as dazzling as my light, then I’m in for a treat,” I whispered and pecked him on the cheek, summoning a light chuckle from him. “See you at dinner.” I swooped up a couple of stairs, my heart fizzing with excitement, then realised quickly enough I was going the wrong way. I turned and flew to the kitchen instead. “Grandma,” I called. She would demand that I got some rest, too but I wasn’t having that. Tomorrow was my day and I would help as much as I could.

That night, my dreamworld was troubled. *Where am I?* I shifted my gaze sideways. Nothing familiar. The twisting trees sagged, lifeless and dehydrated.

“You will not do this!” Dante, my fiancé—my heart-stopping, real-life fantasy—said, hands clenched into fists.

That’s not his voice! I shuddered. My Dante’s voice was smooth, crisp and velvety. This voice was strange—strained—forced.

Rolling her jade-green eyes upwards Lavia, Dante’s former intended, responded coldly, “Watch me!”

Mystified, I stood at least fifty metres away from them, motionless, my face cold as a winter’s moon. “No! I won’t allow you.” Dante gritted his teeth. The bitterness in his tone echoed around the drooping and somewhat unfamiliar trees.

I darted a desperate glance around the peculiar forest, yet I couldn’t move a muscle. The hair at the back of my neck bristled. I gripped the sides of my head, my mind whirling with confusion.

“You had your chance.” Lavia—my nemesis—the only person in my new world who never gave me the time of day flounced away and gave her back to Dante. She had been promised to marry Dante, but Dante had called it off for me.

I looked up to the sky. A dark veil blanketed the heavens. The moons, the gigantic, and alluring moons that glowed like melted silver every single night without fail, were absent. Vanished!

What swallowed the moons? My heart pounded. What's going on?

Nothing was as it seemed. Nothing felt real. Nothing was right.

“This is not Tuscania! Where am I?” My words never left my lips. A deep sense of unreality washed over me. I twirled round, tears blurring my vision. Thick layers of mist hung to the air in a strange coating. There was no colour, nor smell except the whiff of fear clutching at my stomach.

My gaze rested on the two figures partly engulfed in wreaths of dark mist. A howling strong wind flicked Lavia's black hair viciously, making her look like a ferocious lioness.

Dante jerked Lavia's shoulder and forced her to face him. “Don't test my patience! I said I'll—”

“As if that would scare me!” Lavia yelled, looking straight at Dante. “I'm not afraid of your curse.”

She waved her hands in the air, and I spied a tattoo in her right-hand palm. An Osiria Rose. My heart leaped. *I've never seen that on her before! That's my most favoured rose!*

“But you should,” Dante warned. In a fit of fury, his eyes, his sensuous and stunning eyes, oh my God, they flashed dragon blood-red, pupils dilated.

“You made a promise to me! I didn't waste seven moon-years of my life waiting.” She emitted a shrilling bitter laugh. “You'll keep that promise, or you'll die before your time! I'll complete my mother's wishes, and you...I'll make sure you live long enough to feel the pain of your betrayal!”

Breathing short, choppy and heavy breaths, I'd heard enough! My world crashed down on me. I darted backwards slowly, unsure where to head to next. Heart racing and head

pounding, I shrank farther back. *I have to go home. I need to go home. Which way is home?*

A pang of panic shot through me.

Dante's my home! I brought my hands to my chest, and a radiant eye-catching sparkle emanated from my ring finger. In the darkness of the night, a yellow gold diamond ring with a blue sapphire stone shimmered on my ring finger. *Oh my God! Where did this come from?*

My hands shook. My fingers mirrored the ring. They gleamed in the dark night, the dazzle so bright. *Why can't I remember wearing this?*

In a frenzy of perturbation, I twirled round continuously, dizziness creeping up on me. A shocking scene made my blood boil.

"No!" I cried, a spine-chilling wail. A tight knot formed in the pit of my stomach. *This isn't happening.*

Dante stared back at me, hands on his stomach, blood gushing out of his chest. A knife was sunken into his heart. Lavia had vanished. "Dante!" I shrieked in horror.

He dropped to his knees before tumbling to the ground with a thud.

My heart exploded inside me. The tiny fragments pierced me, cutting through my veins. All blood fled from my face. Shivering, I died a torturous death and died many times over. *Death by death...by death.* Yet, I was inhaling cutting breaths that lacerated my throat like dozens of razors piercing through me. I tried to run to him, but my feet were rooted to the ground.

Amidst my anguish, a sudden loud and screeching sound resounded in the thickness of the night. I brought my hands to my ears, trembling. With an inevitable scream, I gripped onto the tree. A hissing noise cut through the air.

Tree-branches swayed like wind-snakes in the night. The howl of the wind was like a calling from the undead. The ground below me cracked open. In desperation, I held onto a

fallen branch and tried to pull myself up. The trees shrieked. The fissure was merciless. The harder I tried to avoid it, the more it dragged me down.

Inevitably, gravity heartlessly swallowed me into a dark hole. Groaning in panicked agony, I hit the surface at high speed and landed on my back. The eerie silence in the deep, dark, and sickening hole was like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Blood dripped from my forehead. A flash of lightning zapped. I cowered. Seconds after, a grumble of thunder echoed, followed by a drumming of heavy rain. My hands shook. My mouth quivered. I trembled.

Then I realised my ring was no longer on my finger.

“No! No! Not my ring!” I bawled.

The last fragments of my heart now in my mouth, I searched for my ring in a pool of blood and water. *It's all I have left. Dante! It's all I have left of you!*

“There’s too much blood!” I cried, shivering.

The rain beat down mercilessly. The water rose to my knees. Now, I lay in a sea of blood and water. My worst nightmare. A revolting and nauseating stench filled the air, I stifled a retch. On my knees, I ran my hands over the water-logged ground countless times. It was all in vain. My ring had vanished.

“Alee,” an all-too-familiar voice came from above, rendering me motionless.

Drenched, I stopped my frantic search.

“Reach for the rope,” the voice carrying warmth and promise said.

I looked up. Jad gazed down from above ground, dangling a thick red rope. My only hope. “Reach for the rope,” he instructed as a stroke of lightning pierced the heavens.

I tried to move towards the rope. I failed. My limbs felt alien. Blood oozed out of my head wound, paralyzing me slowly drip by drip, a vampire’s delight.

“Alee! Alee!” Jad’s voice sounded from a distance away now.

“The rope!” It was a girl’s voice, fragmented. “Lil, the rope.”

My eyes lifted. There were two ropes now. Red and blue. *Which do I choose?* I dithered. Suddenly, a weird, piercing shrill got to me. “Wo-o-omb!” A loud snarling sound echoed.

I wasn’t alone.

Hushed whispers rose into the air. “Protect the womb—safeguard the seed!” The words were repeated over and over again.

My stomach churned. Gathering all the strength I had in me, I recoiled and crawled forwards. I had to get as far away as possible from the creepy sounds. In desperation, I took a lurch and reached for the blue and red ropes. Shuddering, I tied the two ropes together. *I’ll get to safety. I’ll get above ground.*

Before I could see who or what was the reason for the sounds and voices, I woke up with a jerk. Panting, I took a moment to gather myself. *It was a dream! A horrid dream. A nightmare.* I had to remind myself so I could breath. My body was wrapped up in a tangle of wet sheets and drenched in cold sweat. Fear spiralled through me.

Oh my God! I drew in a heavy breath. *Not again!*

Two nights in a row, I’d had the exact horrid and strange dream. Nightmare. Both times I awoke engulfed in something that appeared to be sweat...water? I had a horrible feeling that I couldn’t easily shake off. Clutching dearly to my wet sheets, I lay in my bed. Shivering, I turned to face the window. A glint of daylight shone through the curtains.

Then I remembered what today was. With haste, I untangled myself, jumped out of bed and flew to the window. I parted the flowery curtains and flashed a tremulous smile. I had to. Today was epic. No nightmares would spoil it for me. Singalling a bright day ahead, a milk of morning mist shrouded the heaven-touching apex of the mountains in the distance.

As I gazed out at the sea, an unrivalled gown of jewel-blue, the lash of cobalt and sapphire hues of the waves on the beach were calming. Already a swelling buzzed from dozens of people in Grandma's garden preparing for the biggest day of my life!

I have to get ready! I shut the curtains, raced to my bed, and stripped it bare. Minutes later, I shoved the wet sheets into the washing basket and loped past the dressing room into the bathroom for a quick bath. I planned to take my soiled sheets to the laundry room after my bath before the dreyziz or Grandma had noticed.

"Nightmares are simply your fears that manifest themselves in your subconscious mind," my shrink had told me more than enough times now.

Today, almost a year later, after my time in the asylum at Isle Speranza, I chose to agree with him. Nothing would spoil this day, the day of my official betrothal to the man I loved, the keeper of my heart.

Soon after my bath, the sound of soft steady footsteps echoed from the marble stairs. "Your moon-day has arrived!" Zaira, my beautiful grandma said from the doorway. Her voice sounded more refined than the first time I'd heard it. She padded flawlessly towards me, holding a glass of milk in one hand, wearing a fond smile. Elegance was Grandma's name. Even when she was dressed in a plain white robe and a pair of slippers, she looked stylish.

"You look a bit weary, velici." She handed me a glass of warm milk and observed me for some time.

I leaned back against the couch, and a little sigh tore free from my lips. I couldn't tell her about the dream or the voice inside my head without spoiling her day. But keeping my troubles to myself wasn't helping me either. They were constantly on my mind.

"I didn't sleep too well," I said, my voice low.

She eased herself next to me and put her arm around me. Her blue-green eyes glinted. “Your mother was about the same age as you are now when she left. She never liked being centre of attention either.”

“She didn’t?” I took a sip of the milk. My mum was one of the most confident people I knew.

Grandma shook her head and inclined towards my shoulder. “Nerves are perfectly acceptable on such a moon-day.” Her soft voice was calm and soothing. She sat up straight and smoothed my hair back. “This is a big moon-day, not only for you and my soon-to-be grandson-in-law, but for both of our houses. Serenians and Hantarians have a bond that goes back centuries, and today, we’re set to rekindle and rejuvenate that precious bond once more. We are all nervous, darling.”

“Grandma.” I shook my head in disbelief. “You don’t do nerves.”

She emitted a light laugh. “Velici, your grandma does do nerves! She dresses them up. That’s all. When she’s done dressing you today, you’ll be the most adored Lilarize the land has ever set their eyes upon.” She smiled, pressing her palms gently against my cheeks. “My soon-to-be grandson-in-law will have a hard time, keeping away from you.”

Two hours later, I stood, alone, in my room, dressed and ready to begin my new life. Since the news of my upcoming ‘Union of Hearts,’ aka engagement, to the majority, I was now known as Lilarize in waiting, Alessia of house Serenius. But the title was already given to me. I was now addressed as Royal Lilarize, as though I was already married. To the Dhareka, I was always going to be the chosen one, the reinforcer of the shield. To Dante, I was simply Lessi, and that’s all I wanted to be.

My hands shook with nervous elation. Getting engaged was the easy part. The challenge was the responsibilities that came with being a Lilarize. I had to adhere to my

people's traditions and beliefs whilst upholding the rules of the land. The Sequence rulebook was at least a thousand pages long. Apart from that, I had to somehow strengthen the shield and bring peace to our Kingdom. In addition, I had to look and be the part.

I breathed. Being in a battle with strange dreams coupled with weird voices inside my head, and worse in my haven, was not in the cards. I laced my fingers together and gazed at my reflection in the oval, standalone mirror, a new addition to my room. Mum's turquoise and white bedroom didn't feel like hers anymore. It was mine—ours. For a shocking moment, I could almost see her through the full-length mirror smiling back at me.

"Mum, you're watching me. I know you are." I tugged gently at the jewel of the ocean that hung around my neck. Mum only wore it on special occasions. Today was such a day. "I'm here to stay and do what I'm destined to do." I breathed, glanced up as if to check the time on a non-existent clock, and then exhaled. "I'll never let you down."

I straightened my dress, out of uneasiness, an unnecessary habit for the dress was a flowing crease-free ankle-length ivory-white and ruby-red chiffon embellished gown with lace overlay at the back. It was elaborately beaded with alternating red and silver sparkling gemstones. I lifted my dress up and stared at the gorgeous nude shoes I wore. "It's you and me, today!" I murmured under my breath. "You can't let me down now."

A vision of me tripping and falling presented itself to my mind. *No, it'll be a doddle, as easy as a doddle.* I inhaled and counted to three.

A reflection in the mirror caught my eye. "Mum!" I gasped, and staggered back.

She faded away as quickly as she appeared. I let out my breath. Remaining was my reflection staring back at me. A surreal radiance encircled me like a head-to-toe halo. I brought my warm palm to my cheeks. *My skin has never been this glossy before.* My tummy fluttered, and my hands slipped to stomach. *I'm glowing.*

A quiet knock interrupted my thoughts. Quickly, I turned to the slightly ajar door. I held my breath. Today, he was heartstopping. An automatic smile of delight flickered across my face. The figure in the doorway didn't just look fabulous in a well-cut navy suit with no buttons or tie, shiny clasps, a cool-blue shirt, and a delicately fastened matching silk scarf. He was a real reminder that this was happening.

"When nothing is going to plan, you can't breathe," Jad, my best friend, protector, and self-proclaimed brother from the land of the warriors, said in his even and cool tone of voice. A whimsical smile lingered lightly on his face. "And when everything's going your way, you still can't breathe. What I would give to know exactly what's going on in that beautiful mind of yours." Today of all days, he teased.

"You're back!" I exclaimed with zest.

He strode lightly towards me, his gaze sweeping over me. "It's only been two moon-days, and already you were missing me?"

"Keep telling yourself that, Jad." I stretched my arms towards him, and he swiftly drew me closer and embraced me in a warming hug. "You look amazing. A couple of days with Tan-tan and you're setting the trend, now?"

He smiled against my neck. "I had to make an effort for your Fusion and all," he whispered, releasing a warm burst of courage in me.

I stood silently in his embrace for a few heartbeats before gently freeing myself. "So, tell me honestly, how do I look?" I twirled round and faced him. He was one person who would tell me as it was.

"You're glowing," he stated.

"You see it too?"

"Tuscania agrees with you," he said in a quiet tone. "But how do you feel inside?"

"Like a princess." I curtsied playfully.

Ever so gently, he took my hand in his before placing a light kiss. “In that case, my Lilarize, you have a cool, graceful yet stunning look. You’ll make one fine Lilarize on your Fusion.”

“Hey, it’s not my Fusion.” I patted him on the shoulder and padded to the bed. “I’m not your Lilarize. I’m certainly not your lady. I’m just Alee!” I bit my lip. “Besides, why do you keep referring to it as my Fusion of Hearts. It’s my welcome back home party revamped into my engagement party. Not my wedding day.” I took my shoes off to rest my feet until I was called for.

“That’s a mouthful, Alee, but, honestly, it’s as good as your Fusion.” He put his hands deep in his pockets, strode to the open window, and then turned round. With the backdrop of the sea behind him and the breeze lifting the soft tendrils of his hair; his stunning look was bound to get him noticed. A faint smile played at his lips. “Have you seen what’s happening out there? Your people don’t do things in halves. It’s not a Union. It’s a Fusion all right!”

A rush of panic went through me. I slumped onto the bed and looked up at him with wide eyes. “It’s over the top?”

“Not when it’s all for you.” He regarded me, seeming to approve of my attire and smiled. “You deserve much more than normal in your life. Today, you’re an enchantress and the most captivating Lilarize under the dual moons.”

“Thanks Jad!” I beamed.

He was quiet for some time, an expression of sorrow clouding his face before his red gaze hardened. My eyebrows rose. His lip twitched.

“Alee, you do realise there’s no coming back from this.”

“Coming back from what?”

“From this bizarre Sequence of First and Forever I’ll marry you yesterday thing.” His brow creased, lips pressed tight.

A weird silence followed his unexpected words.

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“You’re declaring your love to the Larize in the presence of *his* people. This is a promise for life, Alee. A dissolution is something they do only in Felradia, not here!” He strode towards me and drew me gently to my feet. “Everyone already calls you Lilarize. You can’t turn round and change your mind later. It’ll be too late to call it off.”

“Why would I ever want to call it off?” Flummoxed, I looked up at him and back to our still intertwined hands. I tried to snatch my hands back, but his grip was firm. “What’s all this?”

It was a moment before he answered. “I only want what’s best for you. I need to make sure you’ve thought through this.”

“I don’t need to think about—”

He dropped my hands and jerked back, a frown of frustration gathering on his face. “Here me out. Please! Don’t you think this is a bit rushed!” The muscles in his jawline contracted with each word. “You’ve been away from him for the past however many moon-months. You return, and on the *very* first moon-day you’re awake, he asks you to marry him! Just *twenty-one moon-days* later, the kingdom is here to witness your Union of Hearts?”

“You were counting?” I whispered, my breath catching.

“That’s not the point.” He swallowed hard, his lips thinning into a hard line. “Your time in Tregtaria *changed* you, Alee. It transformed him! What you both went through is life changing...sequence shifting.” He edged closer and touched my cheek. “Don’t rush into this. Please. Get to know him again. Look around you. Search *your* heart to see if he’s *right* for you, if *he* makes you happy, makes you laugh.”

The bleakness in his voice transported me to our time at the Ruins of the Water Walkers. He had saved my life and expected nothing in return.

“Search your soul to see if he’s the one for you.”

Gently, I waved off his hand from my face and took a few steps back. My throat ached. Jad was still trying to protect me. Back in Tregtaria, he’d tried to say goodbye in the same manner, after risking his life and throwing away his freedom for me. Now, he was afraid of being alone, in a land he didn’t feel he belonged.

“Jad.” I strode back towards him and searched his face for the warmth I knew was there somewhere. I laid my hand on his shoulder reassuringly. “Dante is *my life*—my future—my sequence. He does everything you said and much more. It’s time you stopped protecting me. I’m home. I’m happy.”

“I’m your protector, lest you’re developing amnesia.”

“It’s just a formality, Jad. This isn’t goodbye for us.” I flashed a smile. “If you’re worried that you’ll lose me because I’m marrying him, don’t. I’ll never turn my back on you. You know that. When I run, you run. Wherever I go, you go, right?”

“When *you* run, *he* runs, and *I’ll* run, too.” A low chuckle escaped his lips. “Wherever you go, he goes. If I tag along, that may become a bit overcrowded, don’t you think?” He smoothed his hands down my arms.

I beamed. He was coming round.

“Not crowded. A tad warm, yes, but there’s enough room for all of us and even more room for you.” I stood on my toes and swiftly pecked him on the cheek. “Lose the sombre look. It doesn’t complete your style.”

I grabbed my shoes and slipped my feet into them. He watched me in quiet contemplation. Then he flashed one of his usual endearing smiles.

“Perhaps you could find room for this instead.” Jad slid his hand into his pocket and brought out a fashionable shiny rose gold ring necklace. He dangled it in the air. “Call it a Union of Hearts gift.”

“Oh my goodness, Jad!” I gaped, my hands coming to my chest. The stone on the ring glowed a twinkling ruby-red, melting my heart. “It’s gorgeous!”

Smiling, he gently untangled my hands from my chest and placed the ring necklace into my palm.

“But, this is too m-much,” I stammered, amazed, touched, and shocked at such a grand gesture.

“The story of the *larubia*—scarlet heart...my goon of a father gave it to my mother. She gave it to me when I was born so that one moon-day I could find her. That moon-day is past now.” His endearing smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I would be honoured if you could wear it...around your neck.”

“I’m heartened you’d give me such a valuable keepsake, but I’m sorry. I can’t accept it.” My voice wobbled. “This is a timeless treasure. It’s too precious to give away.”

“So are you.” He stared at me with defining emotion in his red eyes. “The *larubia* is all I ever had that’s worth something. *All* I have to give to you.” The muscles around his mouth quivered. “It’s a little piece of my heart. I want you to have it.”

I’d promised him he’d be happy in Tuscania. That promise now weighed heavily on my mind. Because of his sacrifice for me, he’d lost his home and the only chance he had of finding his mother. I took a deep breath and gave my back to him, my throat suddenly dry. A quiet silence followed.

After a while, he spun me round and gathered me close. “As much as I want to be wherever you are, Alee, I can’t. You know that. But my mother’s ring can. I have no need for it anymore.” His lips pressed into a hard line. “I always knew I would give it to someone special, and that someone is you.”

“It’s a ring, Jad.” Startled, I edged back, creating some much-needed distance between us.

“A ring in a necklace,” he corrected.

“Same difference.” I shook my head.

“Will it make a positive difference if I told you that the necklace was once your fiancé’s mother’s?”

I gasped then gaped all in one moment. “It’s the necklace that Dante’s mother gave to you when they escaped?” I found the answer in his eyes. “You never told me what happened to the necklace. I thought you might have sold it or something.”

“Some things are more valuable than others.” He stepped towards me. “All I want is for you to carry a part of me with you.”

The thing is, I carried him inside of me, perhaps more of him than he knew.

In the wilderness of Tregtaria, the Jungle of Voices and the Sands of the Dead, when it had been just the two for us for countless days and nights, he had provided and given everything to me first before him: food—water—shelter—protection. In return and with nothing else to offer in exchange, I gave him the only thing I had.

My love.

“Jad!” I sucked in a shaky breath. I gazed at the piece, my hand shaking. “You’re giving me a ring on my engagement day—a ring!”

He held my hand steady. “That’s why I have a fitting necklace for it. Wear the larubia round your neck, Alee. Not on your finger. It’s perfectly acceptable.” He took the necklace from my palm, unfastened the clasp, and twirled behind me.

Without more questioning, I lifted my curls up and watched him through the mirror as he fastened the radiant necklace around my neck. Three precious jewels hung around my neck. My mother’s jewel of the ocean, Jad’s mother’s scarlet heart, and Dante’s mother’s gold necklace. I laid my hand over them and pressed them against my bare chest.

“It’s stunning,” I whispered, heartened, but then a thought struck me. “Oh my god! Jad, is this the precious keepsake from Rizo’s bosom?” I gushed.

Rizo was the tavern keeper I had met briefly in Tregtaria. She had kept something for him in her bosom. Yeah, it was strange, but it all made sense now.

Jad laughed. “From one bosom to another.” His lips curved into a slanted smile, visible as a reflection from the mirror.

That only made me chuckle. “You can’t possibly be comparing our bosoms!”

Thoughts of Rizo’s striking and larger than average bosom flooded my mind.

Jad burst into a peal of laughter, but it was short. A shadow crossed his face.

“I’ll keep it close to my heart until you claim it for a worthy bosom,” I played along to bring a twinkle in his eyes.

“I’ve had it polished to achieve a mirror finish,” he whispered against my neck, “so it shines from every angle, just like you do.”

“Thank you!” I held his hand lightly over my shoulder and smiled. He had come so far. He was no longer Lord De-Deganon’s slave. “You’re free, Jad!”

He flashed an adorable smile. “You’re home...and safe. No sand-snakes can touch you, now.” His lashes swept downwards, concealing the glow in his eyes. Seconds later, he looked up, and his eyes narrowed. He spun me round and smoothed his palm against my forehead. “Are you feeling okay? You’re heating up!”

“It’s just nerves.”

Brow furrowed, he grabbed a glass of water from the bedside table and handed it to me. “Why are you so anxious?”

I galloped the water in one go. “The usual mishaps,” I answered casually. “What if I fall or do something embarrassing?”

“That would be hilarious.”

“See? You’re thinking it, too!”

His endearing smile quickly faded. “Dante would never let you fall. He’ll hit the ground first before he lets anything happen to you.”

“You’ve changed your tune?” My gentle reminder seemed to bother him, somehow.

He sighed heavily and gave a strained smile. “Right this moment, he’s impatiently waiting to walk the plank with you all the way to the podium...against tradition. The rules of the land say you’re meant to be brought to him, as he is the Larize and all, but as far as Dante’s concerned, Gradho and his ‘*Sequence Book of Principles*’ can find a new home,” he said. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Doesn’t she look like a diamond?” The sound of Zaira’s voice from the doorway brought a smile to my face.

“She’s a persistent dazzler! Even when she’s spurring half of her stomach contents out.” He smiled cheekily, but I was horrified. We had agreed never to bring that subject up... ever.

“Jad, seriously!” I smacked him hard on the shoulder only to cringe with real pain. I’d forgotten just how strong he was.

He laughed. “Don’t go breaking your hand now! Just stay off the meat, today.”

“Only if you had a part in cooking it!” I threw at him.

He nodded appreciatively at my come back. De-Warrior Dranisha’s uncanny hospitality was not something one could easily forget.

Zaira burst into a peal of laughter. Jad and I helplessly joined in.

“Two decades ago, I watched your mother and your uncle Erajion, in a state of bliss like you both are. Today, I’m reliving that moment. The gods are smiling down on us!” The divine frock she wore swayed like it concurred. “This will complete the look.” She held out her arm revealing a small bottle.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Hair perfumed spray infused with diamond dust. Only the best for my granddaughter.” She sprayed the perfume on my hair. A burst of peach and cocoa fragrant filled my nostrils. She gave me a warm and thorough assessment and nodded. “There. Now you glow outside and in. I’ll call for the dreyziz to walk you down the stairs.”

“Allow me, Zaira, if it’s all right to do so,” Jad said sincerely. “I’m already here. I might as well do something useful and earn my keep.”

“Jadherey” Zaira strode towards him and laid her hands on his shoulders, before straightening his scalf like a mother would. “You are family and a worthy protector for my granddaughter. You don’t need to prove anything to anyone or me. You are *Jadherey of house Serenius* now. I will blow that trumpet until everyone accepts it.” She turned to me and held my face in her hands. “Your parents would be so proud of you. I am proud of you.”

“I haven’t done much, Grandma, except fall in love.”

“Falling in love is a wonderful experience, *velici*. Finding love without looking for it, now, that’s a gift from the West Star god of Love, the greatest gift of all. Love never forgets where it was reared. *Never!* You were raised knowing how to love. It comes naturally to you. Love follows you everywhere you go. That is gratifying.” With a smile in Jad’s direction, she turned to leave. “I’ll alert your fiancé that you’re on the way!” She breezed out of my room.

I took a silent deep breath. It was time!

Jad took my elbow and shepherded me towards the door. Atop of the stairs, a buzz of voices emerged from the living room. I stood still, entranced by the beauty around me. A fresh array of cherry-red Osiria Roses festooned the grand tree-staircase. The silky-smooth red petals were smooth against my fingers. The elegantly adorned walls had been freshly painted, the marble floor polished to mirror finish.

A deliriously rich fragrance permeated across the high-ceilinged landing threatening to melt my senses. For a split second, I drifted back to the first day I'd met Dante and how I had embarrassingly and dramatically fell over into his arms on these stairs. How was I supposed to hold it together? I gripped Jad's arm tightly and let out a huge sigh.

"I can feel your nerves from here," Jad said.

I kept my gaze firmly on the stairs. "I've fallen enough times on these stairs. I can't today."

Something flickered in his eyes before I could recognize it. "When have I ever let you fall?"

"Never," I said. Even on the first day I'd properly met him, he stopped me from hitting the dungeon floor head first.

How I'd fallen asleep on a stone table half my size is its own mystery.

"So it won't be today "I've got you."

I closed my eyes for a split second and inhaled a steady breath.

"If you do that again, you'll find yourself lying on the ground," he teased.

I smiled. "Thanks, Jad, for everything!"

"Anytime." His face was unreadable. "Hold on tight. You're not falling on my watch! Even if you do, I'll catch you. If that fails, I'll just have to make a rope out these roses—"

"What did you say?" My heart took a lurching dive.

"Which part?" he asked, perplexed.

"You said something about the rope..." I broke off, my head in a whirl.

My haunting dream came flashing with a vengeance across my eyes. A vision of Dante falling to his knees with a dagger stuck to his heart jabbed my mind like a screwdriver had been forced into my head. A nerve throbbed in my left temple. I brought my hand to my head. *It's just a dream. Get a grip.*

Clearly puzzled by my disturbing expression, Jad sketched a smile. “It was a joke, a really bad one, it seems. I’m hardly going to make a rope out of roses. Even if it were possible, it wouldn’t be strong enough to hold your weight,” he teased. When I didn’t return his grin, his eyes narrowed. “What is it this time?”

I didn’t answer right away. “I’m not sure. I’ve been having these strange dreams and hearing this weird voice inside my head. It’s been two nights...”

“Moon-night visions?” Shock registered in his eyes. “Like De-Deganon’s visions?”

“Something like that.” I drew in a shaky long breath. “But worse.”

“You want to tell me about them?” He raised his neat eyebrows.

“You’re turning into my shrink by the second,” I whispered.

I stiffened and took the first step down the marble stairs. Nothing would spoil this day. My fiancé was expecting me, and I couldn’t keep him waiting any longer.

He leaned towards me and lowered his voice. “I thought you said something along the lines of...you never needed a shrink... and you’re not crazy.” His voice was tinged with silky sarcasm. “Do you need one now?”

I shrugged in mock surrender and rolled my eyes for effect. “Bring up ‘crazy,’ ‘meat,’ ‘rope,’ or my ‘stomach contents’ one more time, Jad, and see just how crazy I can get!” I warned to his amusement.

“It’s your moon-day, my lady.” He dipped his head. “I’m at your service.”

I beamed and squeezed his arm. My heart bubbled with a nervous thrill. *Be brave, be free, be happy!* Six small words echoed like a gurgling river inside my head. It was time for my Union of Hearts.

**The fantasy romance story continues in this enchanting series for young adults* SeQuence Entangled 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! **

