



A
MERMAID'S
CHOICE

AN ENCHANTED ROCK IMMORTALS NOVELLA

SHARLA
WYLDE

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THE ENCHANTED ROCK IMMORTALS

Demons and Vampires. Elves and Fairies. Mages and Witches. Werewolves and Dragons. Psychics and Telekinetics.

These magical beings and more exist, rubbing shoulders in their daily lives with unsuspecting humans. But a supernatural society doesn't happen without order. Millennia ago, the Clans—Sanguis, Fae, Magic, Shifter, and Human Paranormal—wisely formed a Council to maintain that order. The end? To ensure the worlds of human and paranormal beings didn't collide and break out into a war that would result in the extermination or subjugation of either.

As human civilization progressed, the first council formed the All Clan Charter at the natural vortex in Great Zimbabwe, giving each clan a voice in the administration of affairs both between the clans and with humans. Next, Asia formed its council at Chengtu Vortex. Then European at Warel Chakra Vortex. North America came next at the natural vortex humans called Enchanted Rock, in what today is known as Texas.

Now, thriving communities of paranormal beings exist in and around the granite outcropping. Humans scrabble over the dome, not suspecting an entire city exists within its confines: the North American Council and all its departments—Legislative, Administrative, Security, Medical, Vortex Transportation, and Legal, plus restaurants, clan hotels, and shops catering to the paranormal crowds.

Also under that dome? Intrigue, politics, and most importantly, love.

These are the stories of The Enchanted Rock Immortals.

CHAPTER 1

Fighting back the overwhelming pain and loss, General Rezi Vasiliki watched the crowds gathering from the royal pavilion. Her sister, Empress Diona, and the Royal Consort, David, were expected any moment. The day's festivities would not begin until the two were present. The annual Karkharias Festival cumulated over four days to their most exhilarating contest—The Shark Marathon. Spectators began gathering early in the day to obtain the best advantage point to watch the finest Atlantean athletes challenge each other.

How she envied Diona. Not because her sister was the empress of Atlantis, but because the love of her life, her mate, was alive and at her side. Her own mate was dead. Killed by a kraken which had invaded the Karkharias Festival two years prior. The crowds and noise had awakened the giant squid, drawn the beast from the deep, and had driven it to destroy those who caused the disturbance to its slumber. She shuddered at the memory. Her soldiers always took precautions, but their efforts hadn't been enough to save Kiril.

Thousands of meters under the ocean surface, Atlantis had survived Zeus's wrath and now existed under a dome of magic. Nestled a few kilometers from Puerto Rico and on the edge of what the Landwalkers called the Bermuda Triangle, Atlantis had gone undiscovered for millennia. How much longer they could remain hidden was anyone's guess.

Rezi sighed.

"Dramatic sigh, Rezi."

She froze at the deep, sensual voice. Gregor Marinos. Rezi turned to face the only other man in Atlantis who had stolen her heart. With a lean swimmer's body, his muscles rippled as he flexed his powerful tail. Dark

hair. Dark eyes. An alluring sexual vibe radiated from him. Years ago, he had vied for her hand but had walked away. In the end, she had married his friend, Kiril. Gone for several years, Gregor had returned a few weeks ago. Never expecting him to reappear, she now found him at every turn, always solicitous and helpful, and turning up when she least expected.

“Gregor.” She tilted her head in acknowledgement. “Will you be taking part in the games this year?”

His gaze pinned her with a green-eyed intensity. She’d always loved his eyes. They pierced her soul, as if he could tell everything she was thinking and feeling with one look. Even now, as a grown woman, her heart sped up and a fluttering began in her belly.

“Actually, I haven’t decided yet. Might be time to let the younger generation win a few games.” His wink stirred memories. Memories of carefree days best left in the past. He gave her the wicked, crooked smile that had always made her younger self laugh and blush.

She flashed her best smirk. “I never thought I’d see the day where you turned down a challenge.”

“Happens to the best of us.” He paused. His mouth turned down and his tone became serious. “Tell me the truth. How are you holding up? I know this time of year is unpleasant for you.” The previous year, Rezi had been mourning Kiril and refused to take part. This year, she realized it would be a mistake not to attend. She would only prolong her grief.

She shrugged, not wanting him to know his concern chipped away at her frozen soul. He’d broken her heart once before. She refused to let it happen again. Only her sister and niece were privy to the extent of her misery after losing Kiril. “I’m fine. Life goes on. I have my work to keep me busy.”

His jawline stiffened, and his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. He took a small step toward her, closing the gap. Her breath hitched and her belly tightened. This time his voice went low and soft. “Rezi. You shouldn’t bury yourself in your work. You have so much to live for. Kiril wouldn’t want you to wither away to nothing.”

Anger surged through her, erasing all semblance of lust. She stabbed a finger at his hard, muscular chest, causing a twinge to radiate up her hand. “You have no idea what Kiril would want or not. I do not need your advice.” She stabbed her finger at him one more time for emphasis.

Gregor reached up and enveloped her hand with his. Warmth and something akin to pleasure seeped up her chilly arm. His thumb caressed her

skin. “I lost a dear friend two years ago too. You don’t have to suffer in silence.”

Her heart cried out in agony. She didn’t want to suffer. She wanted Kiril alive and well. If she could only turn back time, she would protect him. Save his life. As the military commander, it was her job to protect everyone in Atlantis—from the youngest child to the oldest woman to her own husband. And she had failed.

She yanked her hand away. “I have work to do.” She turned, swishing her powerful tail and pushing through the water toward several of her officers. As general of the Atlantean military, she did indeed have work to do. Protect their people, even when she couldn’t save her own husband.

CHAPTER 2

KRIANN

Taking a step back, Gregor felt as if she'd slapped him. After seeing her standing alone, he'd wanted to offer comfort and ease her pain. Everyone saw how much Rezi hurt. The woman acted as if she were granite, but she wasn't. Frustrated he couldn't gain her attention today, he made a rash decision to take part in the games. He wasn't that old yet. He'd only been making excuses to stay by her side.

As a Mer, Gregor was in the prime of his life. Gods, how he loved her, and she failed to see past her pain to even acknowledge him. Years ago, when it became apparent Rezi and Kiril were being pressed to marry, he'd bowed out. It had killed him, but he recognized the decision was in Rezi's best interests. Kiril would be the best man. Gregor, as a merchant's son, couldn't offer her the life she deserved. Not one to agonize in his loss, he had left Atlantis.

Now, years later, news of Kiril's death had reached him. He'd mourned his old companion, mourned the years he'd been gone, and mourned their lost friendship. Gregor came home, not thinking about reestablishing a relationship with Rezi...until he saw her. Annoyingly, she still wouldn't speak to him for more than a few sentences. He grumbled his displeasure, turned to leave, and almost ran into the Empress—Rezi's older sister. Gregor executed a short stiff bow in greeting. Her husband, David, addressed him first.

"Gregor, it's a pleasure to see you. Will you be taking part in the games today?"

David had been a Landwalker who fell in love with Diona when she'd been on her Outing. Gregor liked and respected the man who had left his home on land and followed his true love under the dome of Atlantis. Anyone

looking at David knew he wasn't a true Mer, although after all these years no one thought about it. His blond, rugged features and broad, bulky body stood out from the dark visage and slim physiques of the native Mers. It was good to see more Landwalkers within their world give their small biosphere a variety of people.

"Yes. I think I will." His tone was harsher than he expected. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Rezi convinced me I should."

Pity passed over Diona's eyes. Her words confirmed her sympathy at his situation and her sister's recent and all-too-common stinging retorts. "She's trying, Gregor. I know it's been two years, but she loved Kiril deeply."

"I know. I just wish..." He trailed off. Shaking off his discontent, he made up his mind. He was determined to ignore Rezi's barbs and enjoy himself. "Thank you for your concern. I think I'll join the revelers in the gaming crowds for a while. Then I'll bring back the biggest, baddest shark in the pod today." He dipped a bow and hurried past her and her husband.

With a powerful swipe of his tail, he surged off the pavilion and down through the crowds until he reached the registration area. The younger men and women were teasing each other, placing bets, and showing off their muscles. The older participants watched in amusement. He recognized their expressions. They'd been in the young Mers places before. The more seasoned participants longed for the exuberance of youth but relied on their experience of age.

Once registered for the major race, Gregor found a spot to kick back and relax with confidence. He had no doubt of his ability. Over the past twenty-five years of self-imposed separation from Atlantis, he'd kept his skills honed by spending hours in the ocean. The race would be tough but not out of the realm of his capabilities. He spent the next three hours waiting and watching—waiting for the race and watching for Rezi.

CHAPTER 3

The day progressed as expected. Rezi sent her squadrons out to patrol and protect the citizens. The festivities consisted of several races and competitions ranging from the children digging for oysters in the city's private oyster beds, freeing the pearls inside, to the last race of the day when a few select women and men would catch and ride sharks.

The pearl searching had gone off without a problem. Rezi watched the children squealing with delight when they found their prizes hidden within pre-opened oysters. One little boy continued to brush at the longish hair falling into his eyes. A stab of pain hit her chest. Kiril used to do the same gesture. At one point in her life, she had considered having children. Her and Kiril's babies would have been beautiful. But she was an officer of the military. Her destiny had been determined from the day she entered the academy. Kiril knew and accepted her decision. A matriarchal society, Atlantean women determined the family structure.

By accepting her future in the military, Rezi had sworn not to have children, but it didn't stop her from wondering what it would be like to be a mother. Instead, she embraced the role of surrogate mother to her one niece—the one who would replace her as general. Other women in the city took it upon themselves to have babies and families. Carefully controlled, reproduction was an honor. Their entire civilization was vigilantly maintained, unlike in the days before they had sunk into the ocean. Unlike the days when men ruled Atlantis and reproduced with their wives, concubines, and mistresses. Those days were long gone, their histories mere recollections written and stored in the Great Library.

Rezi spotted Gregor multiple times within the crowds. Each time, memories of the two of them together came flooding back. He was always

talking and laughing. Never once did he look in her direction. *Doesn't matter.* He meant nothing to her anyway. Not really. Not that he should.

Halfway through the day, her niece slipped up beside her. Now an adult, she would one day take over the military. "I'm glad you're back this year. Things are running smoothly." Zephyr, more commonly known as Zee, groaned. "Last year was a fiasco. I don't know how you keep everyone in line."

"It's a matter of knowing and trusting your staff. You'll learn soon enough. I let them do the work, manage their subordinates, all while monitoring them." She glanced at Zee and smiled. "How's it going? I heard there are a couple of young mermen following you around lately."

Zee snorted. "They think they're in love. I have no interest. You know work is my primary focus. That and being the next general when you retire. If you ever retire."

"Not for a very long time." Proud of her niece's decisions, Rezi winked. "At least that's my plan. You should at least give those Mers a little attention. Maybe a slow swim through the coral beds. You never know. One might grab your consideration." Zee would eventually need someone by her side. The role of General in the Atlantis military was demanding and a partner eased the worry and loneliness. Not unlike the role of her sister as the Empress.

Her niece scoffed. "Not a chance. I'll leave finding a husband to my sister. She might be younger, but she's made for ruling and children. I'm not." She cleared her throat. "Are you ready to hear the names of the contestants for the shark race?" Rezi had the final decision on who participated. Straightening, she put herself back into her general mode. It was a never-ending balance. Anyone physically unable would be immediately disqualified. Luckily, her people knew their limits, and she'd never had to pull anyone. Zee read the names of the women and men signed up for a death-defying mission to catch an angry great white shark and ride a full loop around the city dome before the other contestants—all without being thrown off, or worse, bitten.

Zee's voice faded as Rezi marveled at how their society had transformed over the past millennia. Once a thriving city in Ancient Greece, the upper society—comprised of all men—had played with sorcery and finally pissed off the Gods. Zeus had taken it upon himself to throw their little world far into the ocean. Luckily, those same sorcerers had flung up a dome for protection.

Through the generations, they had evolved into their present state—Mers with powerful tails to propel them swiftly through the water, eyes with a protective lid and adaptable night vision, the ability to swim in the deepest parts of the ocean, and telepathy to ‘speak’ to other Mer under water. Even remnants of the magic which had driven them into the deep clung to them. Many Mers had powers to varying degrees to control water and, in some cases, manipulate objects or communicate with the sea creatures.

“Wait.” She turned to Zee. “Did you say Gregor?” Barely listening to Zee read from the list, Rezi’s brain snagged on his name.

“Yep. He signed up last minute.” Zee turned a puzzled gaze toward her. “I thought you knew. He said it was your idea.”

Rezi gritted her teeth. Great, blame it on her. If he died in the jaws of a great white everyone would accuse her of sending him to his death.

“Do you want me to pull him?” Zee chewed on her lower lip.

It would serve him right, but then he’d be pissed. He’d tell everyone she cared for him. She mused for a moment on which would be worse, being accused of his death or being accused of caring for him. Either way, she couldn’t stop him. She shook her head and sighed. “No. He’s an adult. Let it stand.”

Zee nodded and swam off into the crowd.

No, let the arrogant, sexy merman be eaten. She didn’t care.

CHAPTER 4

Gregor watched thirty pissed off, aggressive, and massive sharks that would rather rip off a leg or arm than swim away. The only thing standing between the sharks and the racers was the strength and psychic ability of each participating Mer. At a young age, Mers showed signs of magic. Some were telepathic and could control the animals of the ocean, while others could manipulate water by freezing, swirling, or heating it. Both talents were used to control the sharks, depending on what abilities the individual contestant had mastered.

Gregor possessed both. He'd won this same contest years ago to impress Rezi. Maybe it would be beneficial in gaining her attention this year. Unless a younger stronger Mer also had both talents, he had a good chance of winning. He'd been listening to the others over the past few hours and thought at least two had both skills.

A naturally formed area made from thick layers of coral, with the fourth side and the top guarded by a web created from electric eels, held the sharks. It was ingenious and had worked for as long as anyone could remember. At a sign from Rezi, the eels would be released with a telepathic command, and the sharks would race free.

Fifty contestants waited just beyond the barrier. It was first come, first grab at the sharks. Excitement and trepidation raced through Gregor. Seconds ticked by. He had already picked out the one to take him across the finish line. Over the past hour he had tested the creatures with his telepathy to see which responded best. The other contestants had done the same. Or they should have.

The particular beast he had chosen was roughly four meters in length or thirteen feet by some of the Landwalkers' measures. The females had to

weigh over forty-five hundred pounds and were the larger of the sexes. Scars from fighting other sea monsters crisscrossed the thick hide. The shark was aggressive, tough, and alpha.

No equipment was allowed. Anyone caught with seaweed ropes or shark tooth jabbers or even the hideous eel electric club were instantly disqualified and tossed into prison for no less than thirty days.

“Attention! It’s time for the great race!” Empress Diona began her announcements from a makeshift stand far enough away she wouldn’t be injured by a stray shark. A squad of warriors surrounded her for protection. “Today is the final day of the Karkharias Festival, the Shark Festival. The past three days have led up to this event. The mermaids and mermen who are risking their lives and limbs will demonstrate the power and skill we Mer people have evolved into. They embody the tenacity of our ancestors to survive in this cold, dark ocean. Survive and grow stronger, more powerful. Good luck to all the contestants. Our prayers and thoughts are with you during your endeavors. May the gods watch over and protect you. General Vasiliki, release the sharks!”

Rezi swam to a position overlooking the women and men ready to race. Gregor watched her pause and survey her surroundings. Undying love and devotion rushed through him. She was beautiful, strong, confident, and in command. He had always admired her and knew she would make an outstanding general. She took a deep breath before motioning to the Mers maintaining the eel barriers. With a single mental command—*Release*—the eels escaped and the sharks burst free. All thoughts of Rezi fled as he concentrated on his target. With a swipe of his tail, he burst ahead of the others, propelling him into the fray of massive, milling beasts.

Adrenaline pushing him on, he dodged three different sharks who tried to take a bite out of him. Once distracted by other contestants, the sharks ignored him. The one he concentrated on remained still mere feet in front of him. With its eyes on the side of its head, it hadn’t noticed him yet. The beast appeared focused on the action going on around her and determining the best escape route. It turned slightly and Gregor caught sight of one eye. With a blue iris surrounding the black pupil, the eye rotated within the socket until it focused on him.

Gregor grinned in excitement. It was time to get Rezi’s attention.

Rushing forward, he dodged the massive jaws and serrated teeth. The beast pushed away with a swish of its powerful tail, brushing past him. In a

single movement, Gregor grabbed the fin and swung himself onto the shark's back. Satisfaction caused him to grin. He shoved down a desire to search for Rezi but pulled back his excitement to concentrate on the task at hand. Using his unique telepathy, he mentally directed the shark onto the race pathway.

The three challengers who had already claimed their rides pushed ahead of him. Determined to prove himself to both the crowd and Rezi, he pressed low over the shark's tough skin and flattened out to lessen the pull of the water. Soon he began gaining on the rider directly in front of them. Meter by meter, foot by foot, the gap gradually closed. Then Gregor and his shark zipped past. Gregor glanced behind him with a grin. Exhilaration drove him.

At the halfway mark, he surged past the next contestant. Only one more shark and rider to overcome. A dark form appeared out of the corner of his eye. Before he could turn his head, something massive smacked into the side of his shark and sent him flying off the beast. Panic engulfed him. Gregor flew through the water, spiraling out of control. Tucking his body into a small knot, he attempted to manipulate the water to swirl around him and cushion his landing. He brushed against another rider, slid across a short expanse of coral reef before tumbling head over heels along a bed of seaweed and strewn boulders. A single image flooded his mind before it went dark.

Rezi.

CHAPTER 5

Shouting orders to her fellow soldiers, she darted onto the race course and flew toward him. Dodging the other contestants and several loose sharks, she slid to a halt over his body bunched into a tight bundle. She knelt beside him but hesitated before reaching out. *Please don't be dead. Please don't be dead.* She could never live with herself if he died. Images of Kiril lying in a similar position flashed through her mind.

With complete confidence her troops would protect them as they huddled on the ocean floor, she placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Gregor." Her voice sounded frightened, even to her. Not a good thing in front of her troops. She tried again. "Gregor. Are you injured?"

When he didn't move, horror built. *Not again.* Attempting to regulate her breathing and remain calm, she gently pressed on his shoulder and rolled him onto his back. Though his eyes were closed, he still breathed. Her fear ratcheted down a notch, but only slightly. A quick check reassured her his pulse was strong, yet he refused to open his eyes. He didn't acknowledge her. He didn't move.

Panic pulsed through her, brushing tendrils of terror against her normally calm mind. This couldn't be happening. She couldn't lose Gregor too. Despite him annoying her at every turn, she did like him. Okay, maybe she still loved him but she would never admit it.

Turning to the nearest soldier, she attempted to remain calm. "Get a medic here. Find a stretcher so we can carry him back to the dome."

She twisted back toward Gregor, brushing the hair away from his face, and murmured, "We've got you now. Just rest."

She stayed by his side until the medics, an older woman and younger man, arrived. They pronounced the initial prognosis not encouraging. Her

soldiers loaded him onto a stretcher and carefully transported him back to the dome. Rezi remained behind. She hated feeling helpless, but there nothing she could do for Gregor at the moment. Time ticked slowly by as she was advised of the situation with the race. Less than half of the riders finished. Out of the remaining contestants, five more had suffered injuries. None as serious as Gregor's.

Rezi had seen the rogue shark pop up out of nowhere. She didn't think it was one of the originally captured animals. Most likely it had come across the race and acted out of fear. Not unlike the fear that gripped her when she watched helplessly as Gregor was shoved off his beast and then spun out of control.

Between herself and her sister, they announced the winner. Finding it difficult to keep her mind on the remaining activities, Rezi fidgeted and rushed through the motions. Awards would be handed out at the celebratory banquet later in the evening. In the meantime, the sharks were released after verifying none were injured. The massive crowds of Atlanteans dispersed. Assured the area was secured and people were leaving, she hurried back to the dome. Gregor's injuries weighed heavy on her.

In moments she transferred from the ocean side to the city side via one of their many water tubes. The conduits took Mers from the water directly to the city streets. Their tails transformed into legs and feet. All Mers completed the transition naked but were immediately clothed with what little magic remained within the dome's environment. She always wondered what would happen if the magic ran out. No clothes, no portal, no tubes, no dome, no Mers.

Their city was strictly maintained. Anything out of the norm was a potential threat to someone's life or to the dome. Atlantis still consisted of the original structures, with streets and pathways. They had long ago learned how to take crushed shells and coral to make a material adequate enough to maintain their city.

However, no grass or trees or plants grew. Outside the dome, the ocean shone dark as midnight. They were too far beneath the surface for sunlight to reach. Their source of light within the city was achieved through bioluminescence materials and magic. Their expanded eyesight assisted both in the dome and out.

Once she arrived at the medical facility, she made a point of visiting all of the injured. After inquiring about Gregor's status, she stopped at his room.

He was a big merman but, in the dim lighting, he appeared pale and weakened. Pain struck her with a flashback of Kiril after his accident. He had lived for two days before dying from his injuries.

She pulled a chair to the side of Gregor's bed and reached for him but immediately pulled back. Did she have the right? She'd been pushing him away from the second he returned to Atlantis. After a moment, she gave in to her need to touch him and assure herself he was okay. The feel of his warm skin and large hand brought back memories. Both Gregor and Kiril had vied for her hand. The two men had teased her, making her smile and laugh. They'd made her promises of love and support. They'd kissed her. She had allowed them to make love to her. She was not about to marry a man she was not compatible with, but frustratingly they were both excellent lovers.

The only reason she had chosen Kiril was because Gregor had fled. After Kiril had asked her to marry him, she posed the question to Gregor. He had backed away. His reply was that the best merman had won. Then he fled Atlantis, leaving her and Kiril to their happiness.

Except she had wanted Gregor; had wanted him to declare his love and beg her to marry him. She leaned close to Gregor and whispered, "Not this time. You are not leaving me again, no matter what the circumstances."

CHAPTER 6

Pain throbbed through his body. His head pounded. His ribs ached. And believe it or not, his backside pulsed with agony. Gregor didn't have to search his memories for an answer to know what had happened. The memories came flooding back. A rogue shark had slammed into him and sent him spiraling through the water.

That much he remembered.

Everything afterward he had trouble recalling.

Opening his eyes, he glanced around the room. Empty. No one waited for him to wake. The story of his life. Never to marry. Never to be part of a family. His parents were long gone. With no siblings, as most families only had one child, he had no living relatives. If he had stayed and fought for Rezi, he might have won her heart. Except he'd seen the way Kiril and she had looked at each other. Kiril would be better for her. Safer. Not the crazy *I'll-race-a-shark-to-get-your-attention* kind of guy.

A nurse popped his head in the open door. "You're awake. Excellent. I'll let the doctor know."

Before he could scurry off, Gregor croaked out a single word—*water*. After refreshing his dry mouth, he allowed the nurse to hurry away. The sooner he saw the doctor, the sooner he could get out of here.

One thing the Mers purchased from the Landwalkers was medicine. Every month they with met Mers who lived on land and loaded up on medications and medical supplies, as long as those items did not require electricity. The electric eels used within the dome did not generate enough power for medical equipment or lights or computers or modern-day gadgets.

Eventually the doctor addressed him. "You're damn lucky to have only three cracked ribs, a broken arm, a cracked tailbone, and a concussion. You'll

need to spend several days with before we'll release you to a relative or friend."

"No relatives." Sadness engulfed him. Fond memories of his now gone parents trickled through his mind.

The doctor's voice yanked him back to the present. "A friend then? Someone who can monitor you for a couple of weeks. You don't need to be straining your body while you recover."

He huffed. "I've been away a long time. My family is all gone. I have few friends if any. Let me know when you find one."

She blinked. "Surely there's someone."

"Nope. I've been away for a long time. Years. Things change. People change. I've only been back a few weeks."

Pity showed in her gaze. "I'll inform the General. She's been stopping by every day to check on your progress."

What? The announcement sent thrills zinging through him. He shifted his head on the pillow to look the doctor in the eye. "Excuse me?"

"Days. You've been unconscious for three days."

That wasn't what he'd been asking, but no need to arouse any suspicions. Rezi had been visiting him. *Interesting*. Excitement and giddiness had him attempting to sit up. He froze as pain forced him to lie still.

He had to know. "Has she been in today?" Holding his breath in anticipation, he waited for the answer.

"Not that I've noticed, but she comes and goes at all hours of the day and night. She is busy."

He murmured, "Of course." Did she feel guilty for badgering him into the race? Or did she have feelings for him? He hoped the latter since he had never stopped loving her. Either way, he planned on taking advantage of the situation and pressing his case. His main reason for coming home was he hoped to convince her that she loved him too.

CHAPTER 7

The day dragged on and on. Nothing had gone right. First one situation then another for her to scramble and resolve. Rezi hoped with the festivities over things would quiet down. *Not happening.* She left most of the problems to her niece. One day Zee would take over the military, and she needed the experience. Some of the issues they dealt with ranged from the city's elders complaining of the noise the younger generation created late into the night to sharks blocking the entrance into the city. At one time, she had been that younger generation. She and Kiril and Gregor.

Then someone on the outer edges of the city complained their patio was disappearing. Rezi knew what was happening—the dome was receding. Not cracking, just getting smaller. Concerned, she ordered several of her guards to transfer the homeowner and her family further into the city central. They also moved stored supplies from an out-building that was ready to be swallowed up by the ocean. The ever-receding dome meant the magic was failing. All of their lives were at stake, but their scientists agreed they had years before they had to react. Rezi wasn't so sure.

The general population suspected something was wrong, but no one spoke of it. She and her sister discussed the matter occasionally, but they hadn't come up with a solution yet. The dome was made of magic. Somewhere on land there had to be magical beings who could help. Another discussion with Diona was in order.

Pushing aside her disconcerting thoughts, she strolled toward the hospital. At least there, she could sit by Gregor's bed, relax, and forget about the day's activities. The last few nights she had slipped in, not waking the hospital staff, and spent several hours sitting in his room. Occasionally, someone came in to take his vitals or administer medication, but they would just nod a

quick greeting, do their work, then leave. As far as she knew, he hadn't even woken up yet. Maybe he would tonight. Anticipation increased her pace.

Upon stepping into his room, she found him sitting up with a tray of food sprawled over his lap. When he looked up and grinned, the one that always seemed to melt her insides, her knees almost buckled under the relief. He was fine. He had survived. Hoping he hadn't seen her hesitate, she strode into the room and stopped at the foot of his bed.

"Looks like you're doing well."

"I've been told I can go home in a couple of days."

She raised an eyebrow. *Was that true?* His injuries seemed to warrant more recovery time, and he surely shouldn't be heading back to his home away from Atlantis. Her stomach churned, but she kept her expression neutral. "That's great. Just don't overdo it. I've seen many women and men end up back in the hospital after trying too much too fast."

He took a bite of his steamed fish and chewed slowly while watching her. He swallowed then spoke, "I heard you've been visiting me. Why?"

Rezi knew it was a defensive move but she crossed her arms over her chest. "You were injured on my watch. I'm only making sure you're well. Since you're okay, I'll head home."

She turned to walk away but was stopped by his voice and outstretched hand. "Stay. Please."

Halting, she glanced in his direction.

"Seriously. I could use the company. It's boring here. Have you eaten yet? Maybe they have an extra tray of food."

Tendrils of pleasure spiraled within her. Solicitous of her needs, he wanted her to stay. "It has been a crazy day. The last time I ate was breakfast this morning and that looks good."

"It is." He held out his fork with a generous portion of fish clinging to it. "Want to try a bite?"

A smile drifted over her lips. The same man she'd always known, ready to give up the clothes on his back or the food on his plate if he thought someone else needed it more. "I'm good. Let me check if they have another one. I'll be right back."

Soon she had her own tray of food resting on her lap while she sat on a chair across the room. Neither spoke as they took their time with their meals. Rezi was grateful for the quiet. Kiril had understood her need to regenerate in silence. He'd been protective of her time alone and made sure no one

interrupted her unless a genuine emergency occurred. She shook off her memories of her husband and focused on the moment. The moment shared with Gregor.

Once they finished, Rezi set both trays on a small table in the hall. Prepared to leave and let him rest, she stepped back inside Gregor's room to say goodbye, only to find him dozing while still sitting upright. Slightly slumped over, he looked horribly uncomfortable. No way was this man going home to his own place in a couple of days.

With great care, she gently removed most of the pillows propping him up to allow him to lie more comfortably. He murmured something as he stretched and relaxed, then began to softly snore. *Cute. The man snores.* She grinned. After brushing the hair away from his face, she left his room and went in search of his doctor.

The woman wasn't hard to find. In fact, she was looking for Rezi.

"General. I'm glad I caught you."

"I was looking for you too. You're not really going to let him go home alone, are you?"

The doctor's eyes widened. "Of course not. Who told you that?"

Rezi grunted. He'd lied to her. Maybe he had misunderstood. "He did, who else?"

Rolling her eyes, the doctor explained. "He claims to have no immediate family. Unless he hires someone to watch him, he cannot go home alone. I was hoping you would recommend someone."

"He can stay with me." Rezi froze in shock. *Where had that come from?* Ready to take back the comment, she realized she wanted him to stay with her.

At least the doctor had enough sense not to question or even gape at her. "Excellent. He'll be in good hands."

"When can he be released?"

"Let's give him at least two more days. He's only just woken up. I want to make sure he's responding to the pain meds and nothing else crops up."

"Sounds good. I'll be back then. If you need me for anything else beforehand, just send word."

She strolled away and headed home. The home she'd shared with Kiril for so many years. Now she'd share it with Gregor. Heart pounding, head throbbing, she attempted to keep the two men separated in her mind. The man she had married and lived with for years was dead, but the man she had once

loved would soon be in her home. *Once loved*. She knew it wasn't true. She still loved him.

CHAPTER 8

Two days. He'd sat in this room for two miserable days waiting for her to visit. She hadn't shown, not even while he'd slept. He'd asked, so he knew she'd avoided him. What had he done? They'd enjoyed a quiet dinner the other night. He'd let her relax and decompress. He remembered that about her. *Crap*. Maybe he didn't know her after all. They'd both changed since their youth. Had Kiril's death changed her? Made her cold and dispassionate? Could he even break through her barriers?

"Who's ready to leave?"

He glanced at the over-exuberant nurse who walked into the room, a brilliant smile on the man's face.

"Where do I sign up?" Gregor grumbled.

"You sound grumpy. This will cheer you. You're being released. We just need to get you dressed and out the door."

"Good. Send me home. I can take care of myself." Scowling, he crossed his arms. He'd go to his little apartment on the edge of the city until he could travel back to the surface. His attempt to reconnect with Rezi was obviously not going well.

Nurse Cristo, who had introduced himself the first day, clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Definitely not. In fact, you wouldn't be going home if that was the case. Nope. General Vasiliki is coming by and taking you to her house." He leaned forward slightly. "I think she feels bad that you were injured. You know her husband died two years ago at the same festival. It wasn't a shark, but still. Way too similar."

Rezi? Seriously? She'd agreed to take him in? *Damn*.

"She'll be here soon, so let's get you up and dressed."

As much as Gregor tried to aid with getting his clothes on, he was all

fumbles and soon too exhausted to help. All the more reason he couldn't be by himself.

Eventually he heard a commotion in the hallway. Instead of Rezi though, her niece walked into his room. He tried not to look disappointed.

"You look like you're heading somewhere." She winked and smiled. "Rezi sent me to get you. You ready to leave?"

"More than you know." He struggled to stand, but she quickly moved to stop him.

"Oh, no you don't. You're not moving a muscle. I have help to escort you to her place." She called out into the hall. Two large brawny soldiers hurried to answer her command.

All businesslike, Zee explained the day's strategy. "These men will assist you on moving to the General's place. Her maid service will let you in. There will be a nursing student to get you settled. Rezi will be home later tonight, but she wanted me to let you know to make yourself comfortable. She promises not to wake you."

Great. He was moving into Rezi's house. Even though he'd be in the same building, he would probably never see her. He knew she would too busy to stop for even a few minutes. *Wonderful. Not.*

"Might as well get going then. I'm sick of lying here."

Between the two men, they created a platform with their arms and transferred him outside. Gritting his teeth, he dealt with the humiliation of being carried by knowing he would be free of the hospital soon. There, two more soldiers waited beside a wheeled chair, one of those devices the elderly used to get around, but it made their trip easier. Exhausted by the time he arrived at Rezi's, he was quickly tucked into bed by the nursing student. Once ensconced between the cool sheets, Gregor closed his eyes and slept.



IT WAS dark when he woke again. A soft light glowed in the corner of the room. Needing to relieve himself, he struggled to sit up.

"You need some help?" Rezi's soft voice came from the open doorway.

He turned his head in her direction. "Are you watching me sleep?"

"No. Why would you think that?" Her defensive tone cut through the room.

“Hmmm. Maybe because you’re standing in the doorway to my sleeping chamber.” He cocked his head and chuckled. “Go ahead. I dare you to deny it.”

She snorted and pushed away from the frame. “I thought I’d check on you before I go to bed.”

“You’re just now getting home? What time is it? It feels late.”

“More like early morning. Do you need help?” Weariness seeped from her voice.

He paused. She was exhausted but he urgently needed to get up and across the room. “If you have a cane or walking stick, I can make it myself. I don’t want to trouble you.”

“I’ll have one delivered tomorrow. For now, let me give you a hand.”

She didn’t ask for details. Embarrassing as it was, he was desperate. He jerked his head in a nod. Rezi wrapped an arm around his waist and allowed him to lean his weight against her. He grunted from a stab of pain.

“Easy. Let’s take it slow.”

They did. Inch by painful inch. Once in the bathing chamber, she steadied him against the sink before leaving him alone. Gods, he’d never been so banged up. Even the simple task of standing made him hurt all over. He finished his business and even slapped some water on his face before shuffling to the door and opening it.

Rezi still waited. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“No. I want to sit. I’ve been on my back for too long.”

She wrapped an arm around his waist. “There are a couple of chairs in the private courtyard just out that door.” She pointed with her free hand. “Let’s see if we can get you there.”

This time, hobbling across the room wasn’t as horrendous. Her arm around his waist, her body brushing against his, her scent drifting to him all made the exercise less painful. His muscles were loosened up, and he was determined not to slump back into the bed any more than necessary. After what seemed forever, they made it outside. He paused for a moment to take in his new surroundings.

A typical patio in Atlantis, it was sectioned off from the other residences by concrete and granite. Fake plants in pots and small statues were sporadically placed around the small area. Lighting from a mixture of natural bioluminescence and battery-operated devices shed a romantic glow. There were even two wooden chairs with a small table between them. Too bad his

pain prohibited any thoughts of romance.

Their people had learned long ago to repurpose what they had and gather new items from the Landwalkers. With no manufacturing or building capabilities, they had to buy what they needed, including food, clothes, and supplies. Using the one portal they had, they could bring in items no larger than five men wide and two men tall. They cultivated pearls to sell to the Landwalkers to have money for necessary purchases.

“This is nice.” Gregor released his hold on her shoulders and shuffled to the nearest chair. The moment he plopped into it, he realized how exhausted he was from the short distance they had maneuvered. Anger at not being able to walk the short distance on his own made him growl under his breath. A fisherman by trade, he was accustomed to doing things on his own and being responsible for his own actions. This weakness frustrated him.

“Stay there. I’ll be right back.”

Rezi strode back inside and returned in a few moments with a glass of water. Something else they had learned to adapt. Their ancestors discovered a way to distill and filter salt water until they could bring clean water from above through the portal. More modern discoveries had simplified the filtering process.

She handed him the glass and watched as he slowly sipped. Rather than sitting, Rezi leaned against the wall and stared off into the black abyss cocooning their world. The silence between them was easy. There was no need to fill in the gaps or make small talk.

Except he wanted to talk. He wanted her to reminisce and remember their history together.

“Do you recall the times we would go to our private beach? The dolphins in the bay were always playful.”

Her gaze met his, the touch of a smile teasing her lips. “We would pat one and it would chase us around or we’d grab their fin and get a ride. They enjoyed interacting with us—playing tag, goofing off. Very different than the sharks the other day.” Her quick smile turned into a worrying frown. “Kiril didn’t enjoy the dolphins. He preferred deep swimming with whales.”

“Did you share the beach with him?” He held his breath. The beach was theirs. It would kill him if she shared it with anyone else.

She shook her head and whispered, “No. That was ours.”

Their beach. Although they called it theirs, he knew for a fact other couples spent time on the same beach. The beach was where they had first

made love. The memory was seared into his brain. He would never forget that day. Never. Had she?

CHAPTER 9

The beach. Rezi remembered the beach. She went there occasionally to think. Time away from her duties, away from her sister, and even away from Kiril. She had loved Kiril, and through the years he had supported her. *Most of the time.* Too often over the last few, however, he had avoided his duties to her, but not enough to denounce their marriage.

Years ago, two suitors had courted her—Gregor and Kiril. Kiril was sophisticated, the son of a government official. The perfect spouse to her future military station. He'd been trained to support a high-profile spouse. Their parents had determined they were perfect for each other.

In comparison, Gregor was the son of a merchant. He had learned how to interact with Landwalkers, evaluate pearls for sale, and determine the best value of goods from above. The three of them had known each other their entire lives and were best friends.

Her thoughts drifted to the beach and the dolphins. Gregor and she had visited there often. The first few times had been innocent enough. They were young adults exploring their options in life. She was already a lieutenant and knew she would be the general one day. Her older sister was being groomed for empress. It was their family plight.

Then one day, their visit to the beach changed them forever. They swam with the dolphins, laughing and splashing. Retreating to the sandy shore, their tails transformed back to legs, and they lay in the sun. As Mer, they were used to being naked. Shifting back and forth, they had seen nude bodies since they were babes. The only time Mers wore clothes was inside the dome or traveling on land.

She hadn't thought about Gregor being naked beside her. They had lain this way time and time again over the years. Until one day their hands

entwined. On an impulse, she lifted her hand, taking his along, and placed it on her breast. Hearing him groan, she turned her head toward him. His gaze devoured her.

“Don’t tease me, Rezi. You know what I want.”

She’d swallowed hard. Although her family pushed her toward Kiril, she wasn’t ready to commit to him yet. Her reply was a whisper, “I want you too.”

He hesitated a moment before scooting closer and pressing his lips to hers.

Rezi jerked herself out of her reminiscing. She wasn’t the young Rezi he used to love. She blinked rapidly before turning her head to gaze at Gregor. He hadn’t moved. He hadn’t spoken.

The silence became uncomfortable. Pushing herself to her feet, she offered him a hand. “I need to get some sleep before I meet with the Empress in a few hours. Let me get you back to bed.”

He waved her off. “I’m fine. I’d like to sit here awhile longer.”

Dismissed, she dropped her hand to her side and she nodded. “I’ll send someone to check on you later.” With that, she turned and fled. She would give him his privacy.

Once ensconced in her own quarters, she leaned back against the closed door. Taking a single slow deep breath, she attempted to calm her racing heart. Both men had always affected her, but Gregor had been different. He was stronger, bigger, more dominant, and forbidden. She could have chosen either man, but she had preferred Gregor.

Kiril would always be the one she had married and shared a life with for almost twenty-five years. Gregor would always be the first man she had loved, both physically and emotionally.

He was also the first person she had truly despised.



HOURS LATER, Rezi dragged herself to the throne room to find her sister and her niece waiting.

“You look like crap.” Her niece wasn’t one to pull punches.

Rezi gave her a rude gesture. Zee laughed.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Diona’s expression was neutral, but Rezi could see the

mischievous dancing in her sister's eyes. She knew Gregor was in her home. What did she expect they were doing? The man could barely walk without assistance.

Ignoring the teasing words, Rezi slid into a chair. "No. Too many things on my mind."

One of Diona's perfect eyebrows lifted. "Thinking about Gregor?"

"Gregor? Why Gregor?" Zee's gaze darted between the two.

Rezi rolled her eyes. *Here we go. Couldn't people mind their own business?*

"They had a relationship years ago before she married Kiril."

Rezi glared at Diona.

Zee leaned forward and winked. "And now you've moved him into your house. Maybe you couldn't sleep because you were too busy warming his bed."

Cheeky little pup. "Mind your own business. The man can barely get out of bed."

Her niece giggled, "I think that's the point."

Rezi rolled her eyes and addressed her sister. "Did you teach her to be so mouthy?"

"Not me. That comes from you and your soldiers. Let's change topics. I've been discussing the dome situation with our scientists. Now I want to share and review the status with you, our military."

Rezi and Zee both straightened and gave their Empress the attention she deserved. Diona pointed to several papers in front of each of them. "These are lists of alternative sites. We need to investigate our viable options."

"Viable options?" Zee spoke out loud the question Rezi was thinking. Glancing at her sister, she realized the seriousness of the conversation. They knew about the failing dome, but this was the first talk of creating a plan. A shiver ran down Rezi's spine. The situation was more dire than she had suspected.

"Locations. Places to move our people." Diona paused, biting her lower lip. "We need to investigate sites where we can transfer the citizens. I won't jeopardize their lives. If we find a suitable location, we'll move the elderly, the families, and the supplies. When it becomes unsafe here, everyone will leave."

Their home. How could they even consider moving to another location? But once the thought sunk in, it made sense. Move the weakest of their

society to a safe location.

Zee took up the conversation. “How do you plan on finding the best locations?”

Diona sighed, then seeming to gather her strength, she sat up straighter and addressed them as the ruler she had been trained to be. She pulled out one specific paper and pointed to a hand-drawn map. “We’ll send scouts out in groups of two or maybe three. Never alone. Multiple locations have been identified around the world. Our map keepers have identified places we can reach via portals near saltwater and not populated by humans. This way we can remain isolated.”

She continued to describe the new plan. A strategy to save their people, even if it meant splitting them into smaller groups and sending them across the world. Rezi hated every moment of their discussion. However, when Rezi returned home hours later, her anger had turned to hope. They had a plan. All they needed now was a location. Mentally exhausted, she went straight to her quarters, tumbled into bed, and slept.

When she woke, Rezi took time to grab a plate of food before checking on Gregor. Sound asleep, he appeared as young and carefree as in their youth. She headed back to the main city courtyard. Before she retired to her bed earlier, she had asked Zee to issue a proclamation to her warriors, asking for volunteers. Now she found them gathered in the square, prepared to answer her call to arms, prepared to leave their home and seek a new one.

The moment she stepped into the courtyard her heart swelled with pride. The small space overflowed with women and men willing to risk their lives. Venturing out into the world was a ritual known as an Outing, which all Mers completed, but this was different. They planned on searching out uninhabited sites where Landwalkers feared to tread.

Dressed in her finest, most impressive military uniform, Rezi stepped onto the podium. The crowd immediately quieted, and every single soldier stood at attention. These were her people, her squadrons, her children. Diona had known they would come forward for their General. Presenting a professional facade, she wanted to die inside. This was a huge undertaking for their people.

“Today I am asking for volunteers. Our home is threatened with destruction. Our dome is receding.” She paused, waiting for the quiet murmurs to recede. “Our little world will not last forever. Because we don’t know how long we can remain here, we need to search for alternatives. In

short, you will explore the outside world for a new Atlantis. A new place for our people to live. I will order no one to this mission.”

She paused, letting this news sink in, but no one uttered a word. In awe at the dedication of her people, she glanced at Zephyr standing at the forefront of the crowd. Her niece gave her a solemn nod of confirmation. They both knew these women and men would brave the unknown to save their little world.

“If you are willing to spend weeks, possibly months, outside to save our people then step forward.”

Without knowing details, every single warrior advanced one step forward. Pleased with the response, she grinned. “I see I need to rethink my strategy.” Laughter rippled through the crowd. When they quieted again, she named off several warriors who had shown outstanding integrity and bravery in the past and asked them to meet Zephyr in an hour.

Stepping off the platform, she joined her second-in-command and watched the crowd disperse. “Was that our entire military?”

Zee chuckled. “I didn’t count, but it looked like it. You know they all want to serve.”

“Then let’s work out a few groups and get them deployed. The sooner we find a quality location, the sooner we begin moving.” She placed a hand on her niece’s shoulder. “I don’t have to remind you of the seriousness here. I know our scientists have determined the dome is stable...for now. But I’m not willing to put our people’s lives at risk. Let’s get this campaign moving quickly.”

The two of them headed toward Rezi’s office to discuss their options. The more she thought about it, the more she realized this expedition was enticing. Although a serious undertaking and critical to their survival, there was an element of exploration and excitement. If she weren’t their general and needed here, she would have volunteered too.

CHAPTER 10

The beach. Gregor would swear Rezi had remembered the beach and their first time together. Not to mention all the other times. Her expression of longing gave her away. He dreamed of the beach. An insistent nagging in his head made him determined to take her there as soon as he was healed...if he could convince her to go along.

It'd been five days since he had moved into her home. Three days since he'd last seen her. Rezi had turned elusive, slipping in and out of her house while he slept and healed. She hadn't stopped to visit even once. Although the man hired to care for Gregor had informed him of the General's daily inquires after his wellbeing, Gregor wanted to see her. See her smile. Hear her laugh. Touch her skin. Taste her lips. Smell her scent. He wanted all of her.

It was time to search her out. Time to confront her.

Healing quickly with daily seawater baths, he had no difficulty slipping outside and strolling along the city streets toward her office. If she threw him out, maybe they weren't meant to be together. He would use the portal and head straight back to the tiny Greek island and small village where he'd been living. However, if she gave him only a few minutes of her time, he'd continue to work on her. He'd left her with Kiril years ago. He didn't want to leave her again.

Her office was deep in the bowels of the palace. Guards stopped him at multiple check points and questioned where he was heading. Then they walked him to the next guard who repeated the process. No less than five military personnel escorted him. The last one knocked on her door and stuck her head inside the room. She announced his presence and waited. Gregor listened carefully for her answer. Seconds ticked by before he heard Rezi's

muffled reply. The guard stepped to the side and motioned for him to enter. Sucking in a deep breath to steel himself, he stepped around the guard and into the sparse room.

Rezi stood and walked around her desk. She looked tired, although he thought he saw a brief flash of surprise. “You’re looking well. How do you feel?”

“Much better.” He glanced around the meagerly decorated room. “This is boring. You need paintings on the walls.”

She blinked then laughed. “Maybe I should hire you.”

He knew nothing about paintings. *If that’s what it takes to be near you, sign me up.* He laughed along with her. Shifting gears, he kept a smile on his face but deep inside he was trembling. It never failed to amaze him how she made him feel vulnerable. “I needed some fresh air and wondered if you’d have time to go for a swim. Maybe visit our beach.”

She froze, her eyes widening. Then they narrowed. “I’m busy right now. Maybe in a few days.” She returned to her seat behind the desk and began shuffling papers.

Not a total failure, his hopes raised a tiny bit. He reached across and placed his hand over one of hers, which effectively stopped her movements.

“You’ve been avoiding me since I returned. We need to talk, Rezi.”

She continued to scan the papers on her desk, not focused on him. “Why?” The single word came out in a preoccupied whisper. She cleared her throat, raised her gaze to his, and tried again. “Why?”

Time to bite the bullet, as the humans say. Releasing her hand, he stepped around the desk, effectively invading her space. It was now or never. Fear ranged through him. Would she even listen to him? Would she even want to be with him? “I have feelings for you.”

She blinked, reminding him of an owl he’d once seen, eyes wide and blinking. He would love to show her the creature and others like it.

“I can’t, Gregor. Kiril’s been dead—”

He cut her off. “For over two years. It’s time to move on.”

She stood abruptly, putting their bodies mere inches apart. His body reacted to hers, hardening in all the obvious places. His breath quickened. His gaze dropped to her parted lips. Gods, how had he lived all these years without tasting her? On impulse, he lowered his head but paused for a count of three before pressing his advantage. She hadn’t protested. In fact, he could have sworn he heard a slight intake of breath. When his lips touched hers, she

sighed and stepped into his embrace. Delight spiraled through him.

Suddenly she pulled back, the back of her hand hovering over her mouth, horror written across her face. “I shouldn’t have... We shouldn’t...”

He punched down his anger. What was so horrible about his kiss? “Don’t pull away. I’ve waited twenty-five years. Don’t make me wait any longer.”

He instantly realized he’d said the wrong thing. An icy coolness draped over her. He could almost feel the burning cold before he took a step back. “If I remember correctly, you left me.”

Gregor opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. “No. Just go away. Leave. I don’t want to see you again.”

“Rezi.”

“Don’t Rezi me!” Her roar of fury brought a small contingent of warriors at her door, all armed with weapons and looking for action. She ground out, “Get him out of here.”

He’d been defeated by his own words. Unable to believe what had just transpired, he stepped back. Rezi’s anger and horror with him was obvious. How could he have gotten this so wrong? Brushing past the guards, he left the building. No use going back to her home. She would never welcome him. He’d only return to his small room to gather his items and return to Greece. He was no longer welcome in Atlantis.



BEFORE HE FINISHED PACKING his bag with his scant belongings, someone knocked on his door. Yanking it open, he found the Empress herself. His mouth parted to speak but nothing came out. He didn’t need another Vasiliki woman screaming in his face. “Whatever she told you, it doesn’t matter. I’m leaving.”

Diona cocked her head slightly. “May I come in?”

He swallowed hard before stepping aside and letting her pass. Her husband David followed. Several guards waited outside. The Royal Consort crossed his arms and looked as intimidating as the husband of an Empress should.

Gregor forced himself to ask, “Why are you here?”

She laughed and turned to face him. “Oh please, Gregor. We grew up together. I knew you when you were a boy tagging along behind my little

sister. I know that despite being a strong alpha male, you are a softie inside.”

He let out a slow sigh. She was right. Even more so with Rezi. She could twist him around like an eel. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s more what I can do for you. I heard you had a run-in with Rezi. Something about wanting back in her life.”

He stiffened and cringed inside. *Great. Had everyone heard?* “Something to that effect.”

“Good. It’s about time. You’ve been wasting precious days. Do you realize she’s been mooning over you? We even had a wonderful discussion concerning your many attributes.” She winked, teasing him.

Gregor blinked. “Excuse me?”

She waved his comment away. “You can’t just leave. Whether or not she knows it, my sister needs you. You’ve put the first spark of life into her in a long time.” She paused. “Even before Kiril died.”

That can’t be right. “I don’t understand.”

“Kiril was good for her, but not the right man for her. He wasn’t strong enough. Oh, don’t get me wrong. They made a good show of it. She carried the load for both of them. Zee, David, and I assisted when we could. She would never admit it was difficult or that Kiril wasn’t there for her.”

Kiril had promised to care for her, protect her, love her, and yet he’d failed. Gregor ground his teeth together. He shouldn’t have left, that much was obvious. He should have fought for her.

“I’ve never stopped loving her.”

She smiled. “I know.”

He leaned casually against the wall, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “So, what do you suggest? She’s kicked me out.”

In a commanding tone, Diona directed him. “I suggest you take a short break on the beach she talks about. Stay there for a few days. You never know, she might just show up.”

He snorted. “Doubtful. She looked too busy for a quiet day on the beach.”

“Little do you know. She’s made it a habit of visiting there every few months. She claims she needs to get away and think. And if I know my sister, which I do, she’ll need some quiet time soon. Someone has been stirring up old memories.”

It took a moment before excitement crept through his body inch by agonizing inch. Gregor straightened and searched her face. “You’re serious.”

“I’m the Empress. You don’t think I go around lying to my people, do

you?”

His lips twitched. “No. I can’t see you doing that.”

“Smart man.” She moved past him to step outside then paused. “I can’t guarantee what day she’ll join you, but it’ll be soon. I promise.”

Then she left on David’s arm with her guards keeping pace.

Several moments passed before Gregor smiled and closed the door. He now had a plan. No matter how long it took, he would wait.

CHAPTER 11

Gone. Just like the last time. Rezi cursed Gregor. After she'd cooled off, she'd hurried home to speak with him. When she hadn't found him there, she tried the apartment he'd been staying in originally. He was nowhere to be found. Now she had to deal with her warriors and send them out into the world. She refused to concern herself with him or follow him.

“General, what are your orders?”

Jerked out of her thoughts, Rezi lifted her head to find Zee and a second lieutenant, Karo, waiting for instructions. She frowned. *What had they asked?* Damn the gods, she was losing her mind. Her mind kept getting dragged back to Gregor.

Zee spoke. “We’ve settled on twenty couples. We tried making them more realistic to the Landwalkers.”

The forays into the outside world. Rezi hated sending her people far and wide across the globe, but their survival depended on it. The risks to her soldiers were many—being discovered, injured, or lost were only a few. “A sound strategy. If any of them come back with good news, we’ll send a larger contingent. Are they ready to leave?”

Karo provided the answer. “Yes. They have supplies and enough pearls to exchange for local money. All of them are experienced with the outside, so they should fit right in.”

Despite the risks, she was confident her warriors would prevail. “Good. Excellent. Let’s get them moving.”

Zee and Karo glanced between each other, then back at her. *Now what had she forgotten?*

Her niece cleared her throat. “We weren’t sure if you wanted to see them off or not.”

Why did she have to monitor everything? Gods on fire, can't they make any decisions on their own? Rezi held back the sudden rush of anger. It wasn't fair, and she knew it. They were doing their job. She had to do hers. Every one of these soldiers grew up under her watch. The least she could do was see them off with encouraging words.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

The two nodded. Zee flashed her a quick reassuring smile before they turned and hurried away.

"General. May I have a word?"

Startled, she snapped, "Now what?" before turning around. One of her youngest cadets, the daughter of an old friend, stood before her. Nerissa's eyes widened, her mouth dropped open, and her gaze darted from side to side. Rezi swore the young girl was ready to bolt and immediately regretted her outburst. She'd been snapping at everyone the past three days since Gregor left. "I'm sorry. What can I help you with?"

The girl backed away one step and began stammering. "No. No. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were busy. I can come back later."

"No, you're fine. I've just had a lot on my mind." She waved the girl forward. "How are your parents? You'll have to tell them we should have dinner soon." Even as she spoke the words, she knew they wouldn't. She'd drawn away from all her friends since Kiril's death. Most had been his anyway.

Nerissa smiled weakly. "They're fine. I'll let them know you asked about them. The Empress is requesting your presence. Again. She'd like to see you later today. When you have time. She said that. The when you have time part. I didn't add it."

Babbling was a sure sign of nervousness and wanting to be far away from the current situation. Rezi would go easy on her. "Please tell my sister I'll stop by later. And thank you for relaying the message."

It was the girl's job, but it didn't hurt Rezi to thank her. Nerissa turned and fled, actually running toward the Empress's quarters. Rezi hated herself at that moment. She was turning everyone against her, and all because one man couldn't stick around. It was time to get far away for some quiet. Time alone on the beach where she could remember the days spent alone with Gregor.



THE MOMENT REZI waded onto the sandy shore a sense of peace engulfed her. She paused, closed her eyes, and took a slow, deep breath. The beach held pleasant memories and quiet moments. She would come here every few months to calm her mind and let the stress of her work roll away.

“Diona was right.”

Rezi whirled and discovered Gregor standing ten feet behind her, striding out of the waves. Naked, his physique had matured over the years. She hadn’t failed to notice him the past few months but right now, in this place, her desire flared and her memories darted back to their trysts a lifetime ago. She dragged her gaze up to his face as proper Mer etiquette demanded.

“What are you doing here? What are you talking about?”

Gregor continued to walk forward, stopping less than four steps away. “Your sister mentioned you come here to get away. She had a feeling you would show up eventually.”

Figures. Her sister enjoyed interfering in her life. He took another step. A deep longing to retreat overcame her. She shoved it down and took her own step forward. She was the Mer military commander, and no one forced her to back down.

“She had no right to tell you about my habits. I suggest you turn around and leave. Now.”

He didn’t. He didn’t even blink, just gave her one of his devastating smiles. Her knees wobbled. Her heart thudded. Her stomach did flip-flops. *Why doesn’t he listen and go away?*

“I don’t plan on going until we talk. You didn’t give me a chance in your office.”

“Why should I give you a chance? So you can profess your undying love? That you’ve never stopped thinking about me? That you want to take Kiril’s place?” Practically shouting the last word, she swallowed hard and attempted to calm down.

His gaze was full of longing and understanding. “Yes, yes, and no. I would never try to take his place. I want my own place by your side where I can protect you and love you and be the man you deserve.”

She blinked in surprise. He always knew what to say, but she wouldn’t fall for it. She opened her mouth to order him to leave again, but he took one more step and dropped to his knees before her.

“Rezi. My love. The reason I left all those years ago was because I knew Kiril was the better man. The two of you were meant for each other. I

watched your parents, yours and his. Everyone knew they were preparing him to be by your side. I couldn't compete with that. I didn't want any contention between us so I left. I refused to stay and watch you being happy with Kiril."

Angry, Rezi gaped down at him. She couldn't believe him. All along, she had thought Gregor the better man. How could he think differently? "No. Tell me you did not use that as an excuse."

His eyes full of regret, he continued to meet her gaze. "I did. It was the honorable thing to do. You were already taking on more responsibilities, and you didn't need a fight on your hands. I stepped down."

Anger pulsed in her veins. Her heart thudded, the sound pounding in her ears. She raised her hand to slap him across the face. He caught her wrist in a vise-like grip. Her fury burst free. "How dare you? Who gave you the right to decide for me? I was going to pick you! I loved you. We were perfect together. I knew you would be the best man for me, and yet you took my choice away."

He released her hand and slumped forward. His expression tore her heart into tiny pieces. Dropping to her knees, she took his face in her hands and leaned forward until their foreheads met. "Gregor. Why? I've lived all these years wondering if you were safe and where you were. I've never stopped thinking about you."

He shuddered. "I've been a fool, haven't I?"

Rezi didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She went with the former and chuckled. "I have too. I should have made my intentions known earlier."

Pulling back slightly, he raised an eyebrow and looked her in the eye. "Maybe you were a bit power hungry with the decision you had to make? Dragging it out and pitting us against each other?"

Apologetic, she tried to explain. "Okay. Yes. It was an incredible headrush to have two men vying for my attention."

Gregor leaned in and pressed his mouth to hers. She hesitated for a split second before slanting her head and deepening the kiss. His lips weren't the same as before. He was a grown man of forty-three, not a youngster of eighteen. Experienced, he took control and pressed her back onto the sand.

Rezi wrapped her arms around his neck, delving her hands into his thick hair. Her lips parted. He plunged his tongue inside, tasting and teasing. She tormented him right back. Lust and passion exploded inside her. Her legs parted and his body settled between them.

This was what she had longed for, what she had waited for, what she had

dreamed.

Gregor back in her life, making love to her on their beach.

CHAPTER 12

The gods were smiling. Waking in her arms was a dream come true for Gregor. Rezi stared up into his eyes and smiled. She ran a finger along his cheek, her nail rasping against his rough, shadowy beard.

There was something Gregor needed to understand. He broke the silence. “I’ve thought about this moment for a long time. Tell me about Kiril. You and your sister have mentioned a few things which led me to believe you weren’t happy.”

Rezi turned her head away for a moment before bringing her now pensive gaze back to his. “We were happy. Not ecstatic, but happy enough. The first few years were great. He was the perfect beta to my alpha. Then things changed. I think he resented not actually being part of the troops. Do you remember that was his passion when he was younger? He gave the military up to stand at my side.”

To understand the other man’s actions, Gregor commented, “He wouldn’t be able to protect you while part of the troops.”

“True, and yet, he took every opportunity to join the others in military ops. That’s what happened when he was killed. We had a report of a disruption a couple of miles away while everyone was gathered at the festival. We thought it might be a few sharks which had escaped our capture for the races. It turned out to be a kraken we had awakened.”

“I heard Kiril didn’t know what hit him. That he never woke.” Helplessness engulfed him.

“He should have known better.” Angrily she gritted the words out. “Kiril wasn’t an idiot. He should have been more careful instead of taking too many chances.” Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Impulsively, he turned her in his arms so he was positioned above her and

wiped away the wetness from her face. With their past resolved, it was time to move ahead; move together into the future. He waited until she calmed. “Rezi. I want to be your protector. I want to be the man at your side to love you and care for you. I want to be your husband, your mate, your soul. Please say yes.”

Gregor’s heart skipped a couple of beats waiting for her answer. Her gaze searched his before a smile slowly crossed her face. “Yes, Gregor. I would love having you by my side.”

They sealed it with a kiss and more lovemaking.



LATER, they lay side by side on the beach, staring at the stars. The silence between them was comfortable while he allowed her the time she needed to recharge and gather her thoughts.

When she broke the peacefulness, he had to strain to hear her words. “I’ve always loved knowing Atlantis is one of a kind. No one bothers us. No one knows about us. No one suspects or even cares. We are our own entity and we’re thriving. For now.”

Cradling her hand in his, he turned his head to watch her. Her expression held a touch of sadness and wistfulness. “I’ve heard the rumors about the dome. Is that what’s bothering you, Rezi?”

Her gaze found his. She shrugged. “We’re dying. Or we will if we can’t find a solution soon.”

“You’re talking about the dome.”

She nodded. “It’s getting worse. I’ve had my soldiers scanning the exterior. Several spots appear to be thinner. It’s only a matter of time before we’ll have to evacuate.”

He knew it was a known situation when he’d left twenty-five years ago, but he’d never suspected it would get to this point. Everyone thought the dome would last forever. “Where will we go?”

Lost in thought, she didn’t answer for several moments, then she turned to face him. “I don’t know. We have maps from around the world. Maps our scientists have been pouring over. I sent teams out today to evaluate different locations. One by one we will determine which site is the best for us. Once we do that, we can move our people.”

He sat up. "It's that serious? Evacuating Atlantis?"

Rezi rose to her knees. She gazed at him, affection shining through her eyes. "As much as I love our home, we have to save who and what we can. There are thousands of years of history hidden there. Who knows? Maybe we'll find somewhere better and safer."

In denial, he shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Nothing else will be Atlantis." Staring out over the ocean, he racked his brain for a solution. There had to be some way to save their city. Atlantis was unique with the protection of a magical dome. *Magic*. That was the solution. A sudden idea popped into his head.

"Have you thought about Enchanted Rock?"

Puzzlement crossed Rezi's face. "Enchanted what?"

"Enchanted Rock. It's in Texas. In the United States. I traveled extensively before I settled in Greece."

"I know where Texas is, but I've never heard of Enchanted Rock."

A smile twitched his lips. "Maybe because they're like us. Hidden by a magical dome."

Rezi whirled toward him, landing on her knees. "Are you serious?"

A chuckle worked its way out of his throat at her excitement. "Yes. I visited it once, years ago. It's an entire city made up of fae, demons, paranormals, witches, mages, vampires, and who knows what else."

Her eyes grew wide. "Vampires and demons?"

"They aren't as hideous as human stories make them out to be. At least the ones I met."

She grabbed his arm. "You mentioned fae, witches, and mages. Do you think they can help us?"

"It's worth a try. Someone must be able to keep their dome stable."

Rezi threw her arms around him. "You are the smartest man I know. Let's go there. Immediately."

"Slow down. Maybe we should discuss the idea with Diona. She'll want to know."

Laughing with glee, she stood and whirled in circles. He hadn't seen her this happy since she was a child. Climbing to his feet, he pulled her into his arms and swung her around the beach in a wild dance.

EPILOGUE

“Are you sure you made the right decision?” With David’s arms around her waist and his lips near her ear, Diona had no trouble hearing his whisper. She knew what he was asking. Earlier in the day, Rezi and Gregor had married. An hour ago, they’d left for an extended honeymoon to the outside world.

Diona had made it clear they were not to worry about the dome. They had time, months if not years, before they would have to act. They were still waiting for their scouts to return with information from select locations. Rezi had protested vehemently, but Empress outvoted General.

“Yes. I’m sure.” She turned in his arms and wrapped hers around his neck. In their private quarters, he was her protection now. Not that she needed it while safe in his arms.

His lips drifted to her jaw, then lower to her neck and shoulder before he murmured against her skin. “You know we don’t have years. Maybe not even months.”

“Zephyr will go to Enchanted Rock.”

He lifted his head to stare into her eyes. “With Rezi gone, we need Zephyr here.”

She calmly returned his gaze. “No. There are others to fill in the gaps. Zee will be General one day and she needs a man by her side. She’ll need someone strong and calm like you.” She cupped her hands against his cheeks. “You and Gregor are men who can stand by a powerful woman and yet stand up for yourselves. Zee needs the same. She didn’t find one when she did her Outing. And she won’t find one here. Her next and maybe only chance is Enchanted Rock.”

“You don’t want another Kiril, do you?”

She shrugged. “He was a good man. He just wasn’t strong enough for the job. And you know our Zee. She’ll hold her own against any man or woman.”

His smile lifted her doubts. He always knew when she needed reassurance with her decisions. “I think it’s a brilliant idea. You are a brilliant strategist.”

“And a beautiful one.”

“Absolutely beautiful.” He dropped a kiss to her lips. “And cunning.” Another kiss. “And extraordinary.” Another kiss. With a shift of his legs and body, he began backing her toward their bedchamber. “And sexy. Very sexy.”

She giggled. How she loved this Landwalker who had captured her heart years ago. She prayed their daughter would find a man with similar qualities to stand by her side. With any luck, Enchanted Rock would save their city and her daughter.

A NOTE FROM SHARLA

Thank you for reading *A Mermaid's Choice*. Being part of the Enchanted Rock Immortals has been an amazing experience—intertwining stories between the different Clans brings interesting situations to say the least. Introducing mermaids into the mix was a blast! There was quite a bit on the internet about mermaids to help in my research which surprised me. Keep scrolling for a taste of my first release in the Enchanted Rock Series, [A Mermaid's Quest](#), with more releases scheduled for 2022! I can't wait to see what the Mer bring to Enchanted Rock. I hope you enjoy!

Check out my other series, including the free prequels. Stay in touch and get updates by visiting my website—[Sharla Wylde](#)

I'd love to hear from you.

Email: Sharla@sharlawylde.com

Now on to *A Mermaid's Quest*...

A Mermaid's Quest
An Enchanted Rock Immortals Novella
by Sharla Wylde

Hidden for millennia, Atlantis is on the brink of collapsing. In an effort to save her world, Zephyr Vasiliki, second-in-command of Atlantis' military, travels to Enchanted Rock to find someone who can repair the failing dome. Except her initial confrontation with the outside world is disastrous and has her fleeing into the arms of a small-town history teacher. With no escape in sight, she must rely on his assistance.

Edmund Abernathy is fed up with his life. Being a half-assed elemental, he believes he will never live up to the high standards set by Clan Magic. Prepared to leave Illusion, Texas and start over, he rethinks his strategy when he encounters a woman in need of protection. Surprising himself, he offers her a safe house and soon discovers she's a mermaid.

Between overzealous security, unstable magic, and a mysterious past, will they survive and discover the one person who can save Atlantis? Is love even an option with one born in the deep ocean and the other terrified of water?

Turn the page for the exciting first chapter to Sharla Wylde's *A Mermaid's Quest*!

A MERMAID'S QUEST

CHAPTER 1

“**Y**ou lied.” Normally, no one spoke so directly to the Empress of Atlantis, but Zephyr Vasiliki was not afraid to confront her mother. She’d been doing it since she could talk. Summoned to her mother’s office, Zee made a proactive move to control the conversation.

“You’ll have to be more precise.” Diona Vasiliki continued reading a document on her desk, not bothering to look up.

Used to her mother’s dismissive tone, Zee ignored the comment. “You told Rezi we have time to fix the dome, and then you encouraged her to leave.”

Three weeks ago, during the annual Karkharias Festival, the Empress had informed General Rezi Vasiliki and her second-in-command, Zephyr, of a grave danger to Atlantis. She confirmed what they had suspected for several years—the dome protecting their small underwater city was failing.

Yesterday, her aunt married her lifelong sweetheart. Shortly after, the newlyweds slipped out of the portal to a private location for their honeymoon. Gregor had promised to show Rezi the wondrous secrets of the Landwalkers. Zee thought his gesture was sweet and wistfully imagined her mate doing the same. Once she found him.

“If you recall,” Diona glanced up, “I said we had *time*. Time could mean weeks or months or even years.”

Zee rolled her eyes. “A technicality.”

“Let’s not argue over the definition of a single word. I’m glad you’re here.” Her mother stood and motioned to a set of chairs in front of her desk. “Sit. We need to talk.”

As much as she loved her mother, the Empress could be a pain in the ass. Effectively separating her two personas, Diona was currently acting as the

ruler of Atlantis.

Slipping into the seat opposite the Empress, Zephyr perched on the edge of the cushion.

“I need you to go to Enchanted Rock. I believe Gregor gave you all the information required.”

Zee shook her head. She didn’t want to leave and had no desire to travel to an unknown city on land. She began rattling off excuses. “I can’t. It’s shark mating season. You know how much damage they can do to the dome. Not to mention the whales. And the squids? Don’t get me started on them. Send Karo.”

She would not let them down. She trained daily with her aunt and would one day replace her. General Rezi had mentored her niece since the day she was born. And yet Zee wanted to postpone this mission until her aunt returned.

“All good reasons to act now and find a solution to the dome. I can’t send Karo. You are temporarily the head of the military, which means you are currently in charge of security and protecting Atlantis. You must go.”

She blinked and stared at her mother. Her voice dropped to a husky whisper. “You’re afraid it won’t hold.”

Usually not one to avoid confrontation, Empress Diona’s gaze darted away before coming to rest on her daughter. Zee could see the nervousness in her mother’s eyes and heard it in her words. “We’ve always known it wouldn’t hold. It was only a matter of when.” The Empress stood, walked around her chair, then paused with one hand resting on the back of her throne. Zee was familiar with her mother’s posture—the tilt of her head, one eyebrow raised, the stony façade of her expression. The signs of determination.

“But you didn’t think Rezi should go to Enchanted Rock?” Zee would have given anything at that moment for her aunt to be here and take control. The General would know exactly what to do.

A half-smile flitted across her mother’s face. “My sister is busy with her new husband.”

Something wasn’t right. Was her mother even telling *her* all the facts? “She wouldn’t have left if she knew the situation was critical.”

Her mother turned away and gracefully drifted across her chambers. “If you must know, I hid the truth from her.”

Horror filled Zee. She hurried to follow. If Rezi had known the true

criticality of situation, she would never have left. How could Zee trust her mother after this? “But why? Rezi is more suited to fix this.”

With a royal glare, the Empress turned on Zee. “Do not question my motives, little girl. One day, you will lead our military.” She waved a hand in a random direction. “I’m doing what I think is best. Your aunt has been a mess for years, even more so since Kiril died. Now that she’s found love again, I have no plans to rip her away.”

Zee’s stomach lurched. “You think this mission will be dangerous?”

Her mother gave her a reassuring smile. “No. At least I hope not. Enchanted Rock houses paranormal beings like us. It’s been thirty years since I’ve been on land. I’m sure it’s changed, but if you avoid humans, you should be fine.”

Their half Mer and half human heritage had become a long-standing joke between her parents, Zee, and her sister. Her human father started the teasing when the girls were little. Zee rolled her eyes and muttered her usual response. “You know I have human DNA.”

Her mother flashed a quick smile and provided her normal retort. “No one’s perfect.” Becoming serious, Diona continued, “All joking aside, we don’t know how long the dome will last. Remember, we’ve sent groups out to scout for alternative sites to rebuild Atlantis, but I’d like to have additional options. Saving Atlantis is a priority. This isn’t something we can avoid. If the paranormal community at Enchanted Rock can help us, we need to know sooner rather than later.”

There had never been a dire situation such as this before. They usually dealt with migrating sharks or whales or an occasional human in deep sea diving gear. She was out of her element, but her people were counting on her. With a slight half bow, Zee murmured, “I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Zee.” Her mother’s use of her name stopped her retreat.

The Empress made her way toward her, only stopping when they were inches apart. Diona spoke softly, “You must be careful when you visit Enchanted Rock. I know they are unique, like us, but we don’t know who we can trust. No one knows Atlantis exists and if they suspect, they don’t know where. Promise me you will be vigilant and keep our secret unless the reveal becomes absolutely necessary.”

“I promise to keep the knowledge and location of Atlantis a secret and will do everything I can to find someone who is powerful enough to re-establish the dome.”

Her mother nodded briskly, then jerked her chin toward the other side of the room. “See your father before you leave. He has additional information you need to know. And Zee?”

Zee stopped her backward step and paused.

“Try to be approachable. Meet new people. I would like to make an alliance with the beings of Enchanted Rock. You are our ambassador.”

With a quick half bow and two steps back, Zee orchestrated a precise about-face maneuver and strode out of the palace. Once outside, she stopped and stared up into the inky black water surrounding their little world, amazed at her ancestors’ resourcefulness. Living too far below the ocean’s surface for sunlight, they manufactured their own light from the dome’s magic and bioluminescence collected from coral and deep-sea creatures. Except the lighting dimmed as the dome’s power waned. She winced, thinking of the sunlight she would have to adjust to once she was on land.



ZEE’S FATHER waited for her outside the palace entrance. Suspicious, she wondered if her parents had planned this meeting. Her father, David, had been a Landwalker who fell in love with Diona when she’d been on her Outing—a short time when a Mer would leave Atlantis and walk on land. He had left his home on land and followed his true love under the dome of Atlantis. Anyone looking at her father knew he wasn’t a true Mer, although after all these years no one thought about it. His blond, rugged features and tall, bulky body stood out from the dark visage and slim physiques of the native Mers. Zee loved her father’s silly wit and found herself rattling off his senseless jokes and quotes. He referred to his humor as dad jokes.

“I see Mother asked you to wait for me.”

He shifted his gaze when she spoke and watched her stride down the steps toward him. A look of pride showed on his face accompanied by a brilliant smile. She’d never doubted his love and affection—neither for her nor her sister.

“She mentioned something about a trip to Texas. Do you even know where it’s located?” He fell into step beside her as she continued down the stairs and through the courtyard.

“I have a general idea and searched for weather information. It’s hot and

dry. The area near Enchanted Rock has an average annual rainfall of thirty-one inches. They have an average of two-hundred-twenty-four sunny days per year with an average temperature of seventy-seven degrees Fahrenheit. There are large animals called cows with long horns coming out of their heads.” She threw her arms out to approximate the size. “Texans like to eat things called barbeque, tacos, stuffed jalapeños, beefsteaks, and pizza.” She glanced at him and winked. “I threw in the pizza. I’m hoping I’ll get a chance to eat a pizza. Maybe a beef steak. Or both. The last time I had either was when I did my Outing years ago.”

Her father shook his head and laughed. “Oddly weird statistics. Don’t get anchovies on your pizza. We get enough of those here.”

“Hmmm. Good point.” She chuckled at their trivial conversation.

“Listen. Everything you’ve listed is basic information from our Great Library. Anyone can look that up. You need more details on Americans and Texans, but we don’t have time.”

“We learn the basics in class on politics and world changes when we’re in school and continue to get periodic updates from when our people visit the surface. What more do we need?”

He halted, causing her to stop and turn. “Zee. You are so literal with your life. So pragmatic. So black and white. You need to loosen up. Be more spontaneous and have more fun.” He waved away her protests. “I know this is a critical campaign, but lighten up a bit and enjoy yourself. I don’t think your mother specifically picked you for your military prowess.”

Odd. Why did she pick me?

Her father continued. “Don’t get me wrong. You are the most capable for this task but be open-minded to the possibility...of finding your mate.”

Zee protested, but her father held up his hand. “You’re not getting younger. You’ll need a mate when you become General and take over the military. It’s the Atlantean way. No man or woman has caught your eye here in our city. The only option is on land.”

She scowled. “This is Mother’s brilliant idea? Send me to Enchanted Rock on a mission but secretly hope I find a mate?”

“Don’t be angry. She’s thinking of you.”

Emotions whirled inside Zee. Anger at her mother. The Empress’s insistence that she go instead of her aunt now made sense. Excitement overtook the anger. Could she possibly find someone? Though she hadn’t gone out of her way to search for a mate to spend her life with, she wasn’t

opposed to the idea. The plan had merit. She wished her mother had been more honest with her.

Zee crossed her arms, attempting to take a stance against being railroaded. “She couldn’t tell me herself?”

He placed his hands on her shoulders. “She’s being the Empress, not your mother. There is a great need to fix the dome. That’s your number one priority. Finding a mate would be the perfect solution to your love life—or lack thereof.”

Zee nodded. “Alright. I understand.”

At his raised eyebrow, she sputtered, “Really, I do.”

Her father laughed, then followed her as she headed toward her quarters to gather her belongings.

“How will I know? How did you know?”

From her side view, she could see a slight smile flit across her father’s face. “You’ll know. With us, it was our first kiss. Too bad we spent two weeks dancing around the issue before we did.” He chuckled as he remembered. “I was terrified she would slap me if I took the first step, so I tried to ease into it. Your mother finally kissed me. I discovered the best action is to just jump into it.”

“I’ll remember that.”

They paused at the entrance to her house. The Atlanteans built additional structures within the city and reconstructed the old ones in the manner of apartments and condos to maximize their space. Not everyone was given a private home. Her father turned and met her gaze. “I’ll send over a bag of pearls. You’ll need those for negotiations. Also, your mother is demanding you return in forty-eight hours. Two days.”

Zee objected. “That’s not enough—” She halted at the stern look he gave her. “I understand, but you know it’s not enough time.”

“This is only a quick foray to Enchanted Rock. You can always go back later. Make sure you meet their leaders to make the process go smoother.”

An old saying her father used to tell her drifted through her mind and she giggled. “I’ll miss you. Take care of Mother.”

She leaned forward and planted a quick kiss on her father’s cheek. Zee watched her father walk away before going inside.

As she threw together a backpack of clothing and essential items for two days, she thought about leaving her home and visiting a strange place called Enchanted Rock in the middle of Texas. What the hell was a mermaid

supposed to do in Texas?

GET Sharla Wylde's *A Mermaid's Quest* now, available exclusively for Kindle and Kindle Unlimited!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award winning author **Sharla Wylde** has been making up stories in her head forever. Penning short stories was a way to relieve boredom and entertain close friends. After sneaking a romance novel at age fourteen, she fell in love and never looked back.

Born in Wisconsin into a large family, she was raised in small towns in the mid-west. Sharla now lives in Texas with her family and three dogs who all support of her passion. Writing, reading, watching movies, gardening, and hanging out with the puppies are high priorities. She enjoys traveling and tries to visit a new destination every year, but a reading marathon about sexy hunks is the ideal downtime.

Sharla writes contemporary, western, romantic suspense, paranormal romance, urban fantasy, and reverse harem—some a little bit wild and others a whole lot wild. Visit her webpage for series details and sign up for her [newsletter](#) to keep informed of news and giveaways.

Connect with Sharla at sharlawylde.com or any of her social media platforms via the icons below:



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