



MEGAN  
HART

THE  
CLEAR COLD LIGHT  
OF MORNING

## THE CLEAR COLD LIGHT OF MORNING

...I rinsed his hair until 'twas clean of soap. Then I pushed him back to relax against the tub while I rinsed the cloth and got more fresh water from the sink.

When I turned back to face him, the smile faded from my lips. Something was different. His eyelids fluttered while his hands had fallen, limp, into the water. His mouth was parted.

"I can hear the water singing," he whispered.

I grabbed his shoulders so violently his arms banged the side of the tub. Water splashed out, soaking me. I shook him.

"Mason, nay!"

His eyes opened, but they were again fuzzy with faraway sights. "I can smell your laughter."

"I'm not laughing!"

He blinked, hard, and shook himself. He frowned. "Perion, 'tis starting again."

"Nay. I won't let it."

"You can't stop it."

"I can. And I will."

I would not let him give in to the thrall. I would not! I bent to press my mouth to his and was overjoyed when he returned the kiss.

Our mouths parted and our tongues danced. I wanted him as much as I ever had.

"I will not let it have you." I bent to kiss him again, and pushed him back in the water. "But you have to help me fight it."

## PRAISE FOR THE CLEAR COLD LIGHT OF MORNING

“With Perion and Mason’s heartbreaking and soul-searing battle, Megan Hart shows us the world she introduced in *An Exaltation of Larks* in a whole new light—*The Cold Clear Light of Morning*.”

—Natalie J. Damschroder  
Author of *Elf Lord*

“...A quick pleasurable read. A very sexual, and highly stimulating story, this is one you want to read if your lover is near—otherwise it is cold shower time! Ms. Hart is a number-one storyteller, and manages to snag the reader’s attention from the beginning. It is always great to read another one of her books, and I am constantly on the watch to see what she will come up with next!”

—Teresa Henson  
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“This is a highly erotic story of love, and what a woman will go through in the name of love. The passion is strong between the main characters with sparks flying all over the place. The setting is realistic and I really love the bathtub. This is definitely one of those stories that will leave one with a heartfelt sigh at the end. This is a wonderfully erotic tale of love and I highly recommend it.”

—Chere Gruver

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# THE CLEAR COLD LIGHT OF MORNING

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BY

MEGAN HART

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THE CLEAR COLD LIGHT OF MORNING  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*For all the readers  
who wanted more of Perion  
and Mason, this one is for you.*

*For my children,  
who make me crazy but  
keep me sane.*

*And of course, for DPF,  
because he's always there.*

# THE CLEAR COLD LIGHT OF MORNING

I woke with a start because my teeth had begun to chatter. I put out my hand to touch the reassuring warmth of my husband's back, but the bed next to me was as cold as the air. I was alone. I scrubbed at my face to clear my eyes then pulled the fallen blankets back over me.

"Mason?" He did not answer me, though I now saw the shape of him outlined in the light coming from the window. I sat up in our bed. "I'll call someone to come and stoke the fire."

Then he turned, his full mouth drawn into a frown. His cheeks were pale and rough with the start of a beard. His chocolate colored eyes bore faint lines of pain around them. It fairly broke my heart to see him that way.

He looked to the fire. "Once I could've muttered a word to bring you warmth."

"Ah." I knew the reason for his melancholy. "But it's just as nice to have the maid do it, Mason, while you stretch out beside me here in

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bed.”

I patted the spot next to me on the feather mattress. He shook his head and turned to stare out the window again. I left the bed and went to him, then slipped my arms around his waist. I pressed my cheek to the flesh of his bare back and took in the scent of him.

“No wonder you cared little for the fire’s strength.” My lips brushed his skin as I spoke. My own skin beneath my sleeping gown had humped into goose flesh. “You’re burning up.”

He made a small but fiercely angry sound. “‘Tis calling me again.”

*The magic.* I pressed a kiss to his warm, smooth skin and held him, knowing there was nothing I could say to make him feel better. Once he had been a legend, the greatest magiccreator in the land. Mason de Cimmerian, the Dark Sorcerer. My love had given him the kind of power written of in old tales, but it had corrupted him, taken his mind and soul, and made him into only half a man. He’d renounced his high magic to become my husband. The choice had nearly killed him.

“‘Tis like a knife inside me.”

I almost didn’t hear his whisper, but at the words, my arms tightened around him. “You are stronger than that, Mason.”

He straightened in my grasp, not quite fighting to get away, but not softening to my embrace, either. “Damn it, Perion. Let me go. Let me...”

His voice trailed away, and with some alarm, I felt his shoulders shake as though he fought back tears.

“I love you, Mason,” was all I said.

“I need more.”

“My love is all I have to give you,” I replied without taking offense. I knew his struggle. I had seen him lying vacant-eyed and drooling, caught in the rapture of the thrall. I knew how hard he’d fought to choose me instead. “You have my love. You have my soul. ’Twill have to be enough, love.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

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“But you have it anyway.” I hugged him harder, wanting to take away his pain and knowing I was unable. “You’ve always had it. And you always shall.”

Mason needed something this cold Firstmonth morning. He thought it was abandoning himself to the lure of the high magic, but I knew differently. He needed to abandon himself yes; to relinquish his control, certainly; but not to the high magic that left him sick and vacant-minded. He needed to abandon himself to me.

I let my fingers brush against the hard ridge of his stomach, then over to the bones of his hips. He was still too thin. His belly jumped beneath my fingertips when I caressed him there again, and I was rewarded by the rise of his penis. Its head nudged my palms, but I didn’t grasp it. Not right away.

Instead, I slid both hands up to cover the twin circles of his nipples. In the cold air of our chamber, I found them pebbled and taut beneath my fingertips. The few crisp hairs around them tickled my fingers as I tweaked the sensitive flesh. Mason put his hands on the windowsill and lowered his head.

I shifted a little to the side to look at his face, and with a smooth movement of my thigh I forced his legs further apart, until he bent at the waist. I could see his fingers still gripping the stone blocks of the window’s deep sill. He pressed his forehead to the glass. His eyes were closed, his face strained. He slid his tongue out to glide along his lips, and the sight of it made the spot between my legs throb.

I paused in my exploration of his body to tug off the full linen gown I’d worn to sleep. The fabric puddled, ignored, on the floor around my feet. I pressed the fullness of my breasts to his back; the rounded curve of my belly molded against the firm globes of his buttocks. He still didn’t move. We did not speak. It was not often Mason allowed me to control him in any aspect, and I was not going to spoil it with speech.

I ran my hands over his smooth skin, allowing it to warm me. His shoulders were broad and strong, his arms bunched with muscle as he

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bent them to grip the windowsill. Over and over, I caressed his back, his shoulders, down his arms, sometimes slipping around to tweak his nipples or slide along his belly. I pushed my thigh further between his legs to let the weight of his testicles rest on my skin, but I didn't touch his erection with my hands.

In the past, Mason had driven me to fury like I'd never known, to fear, to ecstasy and to joy. All of me was wrapped up with him, soul to soul. I loved him. And now, knowing he battled within himself to fight the call of the high magic so he could stay with me, I loved him even more. Many times he had worshipped my body to completion. Now 'twas my turn to offer him the same solace. I could never take away the need he'd have to give himself to the thrall, but I could help him subdue it.

"Stay still," I murmured to him, though he hadn't moved.

I knelt on the softness of my gown and was grateful for the cushion of it on my knees. I cupped Mason's ankles loosely and felt the strength of the muscles and tendons. Dark, curling hair covered his calves and thighs. I bent and nuzzled my face against it, just below his knee.

He startled. "Perion!"

"Hush." I steadied him with my touch on his ankles again.

His breath came a little faster. I smiled as I bent to kiss the back of his calf, then to gently nip the flesh and lick it. He shuddered. I slid my hands up the back of his thighs and found the firmness of his buttocks. I continued to kiss and suck softly on the backs of his calves while my hands made slow, leisurely circles on his buttocks. I slid my face to the backs of his thighs, kissing and licking each one in turn, while I kept up my sensual massage of Mason's backside.

He muttered a low invective that made me laugh. "If my touch angers you, husband, I'll cease."

He made a low noise of protest. "Do so and you *will* face my anger, Little Bird."

The endearment made me smile again as I stood. I pressed myself

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against his back again, my breasts and belly on his flesh, but the juncture of my thighs sadly untouched. I slipped a hand down to press my fingers against the swelling nub of my arousal, and a low noise of my own burst from me.

He made as if to move, but I quickly put a hand on his shoulder to keep him facing away. With one hand still centered between my legs, I let my other hand slide around to grasp his erection.

He sighed when I touched him there. I stroked him lightly, remembering the first time we made love and how tender he'd been, how concerned for my pleasure. We had joined a thousand times since then, sometimes leisurely and sometimes with the fire of our passion making us frantic. Mason never failed to take the time to please me, and I wanted this morning to do the same for him.

I rolled my palm over the head of his cock, then down to its root. I pushed my thigh between his legs again to caress his balls. Up again, I stroked his length, pausing always to caress the head of his penis before stroking downward. He pulsed in my hand, and I felt the answering beat of arousal between my legs.

I kissed his back, his shoulders, his arms, wherever I could find a place to touch him with my mouth. With one hand on his cock, I let the other hand roam his legs, his buttocks, any place my lips could not reach. I put my hand between his legs to stroke a finger along his sac and felt it tighten at my touch. I pressed a finger on the smooth line of skin beneath his balls, and felt the beat of his heart.

I tilted my head to nip along the sensitive flesh of his side, and earned a small cry for my effort. Mason's cock had grown thicker in my palm. A small, slick drop of fluid leaked from its tip, and I coated my fingers with it to lubricate his shaft. My own center was slick as well, and I paused in stroking his balls to again touch myself there.

I could feel how my touch was affecting him in the way his legs trembled and his breath came faster. His arousal heightened my own, and I was no longer so interested in a leisurely pace. I straightened and

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pulled on Mason's shoulder until he turned to me. His face had flushed with passion.

Now I could use my mouth to taunt his nipples, and I did so immediately. His flesh was salty and hot beneath my lips. He smelled of All Soul's Bucket, the rarest of flowers, and I drank in the smell of him while I kissed and licked his nipples.

With the hand still resting on his shoulder, I pushed him until he sat on the windowsill. Mason's long legs easily reached the floor. He put a hand on each side of the window and spread his legs at my silent urging. I stood between them so his erection could nudge at my belly and the auburn nest of hair beneath it. His flesh parted mine, aided by the slickness our passion was creating. The head of his cock stroked my swollen nub and made me gasp with pleasure.

Mason put his hand to the back of my head and pulled me to him. He kissed me. I opened gladly beneath him, and his tongue swept the inside of my mouth. His hands tangled in my hair and released it from its binding braid. The thick length of it fell around us, shielding us like a curtain of silk. It fell over my shoulders and clung to my breasts, damp from being so close to Mason's heat. It curled down my back to tickle my thighs and over my front to tease his erection.

Impatiently, I pulled the mass away from my face until it hung, with some decorum, down my back and was no longer in the way. "Maybe I should cut it short again."

He tugged at the offending tangles. "Like when I met you? Nay, I think not. I like it this way."

"If it pleases you," I murmured demurely, and earned another kiss for my answer.

Mason's hands left my hair to slide forward and cup my breasts. They had ached for his touch, and I gave a sigh of pleasure when he found my nipples. He ran his thumbs across the hard peaks. My body tingled. I took a step back.

"Wait," I said.

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He gave me an odd look, but then I saw no more of his expression because I went to my knees before him. Without preamble, both to please him and because I could wait no longer, I took the length of him into my mouth. The musky taste and scent of him shot a thrill through me, and my hand once more found my center while I sucked him.

I slid my mouth to the base of his erection, then up, pausing to suckle a moment longer at his tip. I cupped his testicles and stroked the soft skin with my thumb while I used my mouth on his length.

He let his head drop back while he supported himself with his hands on the edge of the sill. His legs spread farther and I nestled myself between them. The chill of the stone wall beneath the window was welcome on my knees and thighs, for I was nearly faint from being so enclosed in the fire of Mason's heat. One of his hands found the top of my head, and I felt him guiding my pace to match his need.

The hand between my legs quickened along with the motion of my head. I was very close to orgasm, and I sensed Mason was the same. He rocked his hips and guided his penis in and out of my mouth, giving my jaw some relief from the tension of fellatio. I reached again to stroke his balls, and to find the sweet spot and provide a gentle pressure there that would give him an extra measure of arousal.

Mason didn't know I had procured and read a copy of *The Eastern Pleasures*, a book complete with illustrations and instructions on all manner of sexual arts. I had been an eager student of the text, and today I would test myself on what I had learned so far.

The skin of his sac tightened more beneath my fingers, as the head of his cock released another spurt of fluid. I slid my mouth from his length and replaced it with my hand, which I kept still. I clasped his penis just below its head while I pushed more firmly against the spot under his balls.

Mason's hips bucked and he gave a husky cry. His cock throbbed beneath my fingers, as did the spot I pressed, but no ejaculate came out. His penis pounded, almost vibrated, in my hand. His thighs shuddered.

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His hands gripped the windowsill and he pushed himself through the circle my clasped fingers made. After a moment, he settled. His cock still thrummed, fully erect and with no sign of wilting, in my hand. He'd climaxed without ejaculation. I gave him a self-satisfied smile.

His breath came in short gasps. When I looked at him, he smiled and shook his head. "Little Bird, you astound me."

I pressed a kiss to his penis that had his hips twitching forward again. "There's more, Mason."

"By the Astria, I hope so."

I stood and reached for his hand, then led him to the bed. Every step made my thighs rub at my swollen clitoris. The cold air caressed me and cooled me, and added an extra touch of arousal.

I started to push him down onto the mountain of coverlets and mattresses piled on our bed, but Mason tugged my hand instead until I lay on my back in front of him. Watching his eyes roam my body made my nipples grow harder and my clitoris ache for more than his gaze on it. He did not disappoint me.

Mason parted my legs with his hands then settled himself between them. He reached a finger to part my curls and tap lightly on my rigid nub. I rolled my hips at his touch. Mason slid his finger inside me, then another, while he stroked me with his thumb. My vagina clenched in the first spasms of orgasm. At the touch of his tongue, I could not hold back the moan.

He flicked me lightly with his tongue, then pressed his lips firmly to my clitoris and suckled with a slow, rhythmic pressure that made bright bolts of color shoot across my vision. His fingers moved inside me, making love to me while he kissed and licked my tender jewel.

I had to force myself to breathe. My entire world narrowed to that one, small part of me. I was dimly aware that my toes had curled. Everything felt as though it were drawing inward, downward, to where Mason's tongue and fingers flickered and fluttered and danced.

I needed him inside me. Needed him to stretch and fill me. As

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though he could read my mind, Mason left his spot and slid upward along my body. His mouth met mine and his body covered me, conquered me. He slid into me without hesitation or barrier, and I cried out his name again at the sensation.

He buried his face in my neck and held me while he thrust. We rocked together, bodies aligned in perfection. My orgasm rushed at me, furious, definite, unavoidable. I rose toward it, flying, falling, and being caught in the glory of my husband's love.

"Perion." Mason's voice was rough and cracked.

He lifted himself onto his arms to look at me. His dark eyes glimmered with tears and something else: the shimmering, shifting colors of the thrall. He blinked, but they did not disappear, not even when a single fat tear leaked from each of his eyes and traced their way down his beard-rough cheeks.

His smooth thrusts grew ragged. His jaw clenched, but I could not tell if it was from his ecstasy or from the pull of the high magic. He dipped his head, hiding his eyes from me, but I reached for his face and made him look at me.

"Stay with me."

"I don't know if I can."

"Look into my eyes," I urged.

He gave a twisting thrust that brought his pelvis in contact with my sensitive bud, and I had to bite my lip at the exquisite sensation of it.

"It's so close to me," Mason muttered. His eyelids fluttered, then opened, and his gaze fixed on mine again. "It wants me to take it."

"I want you to take me!" I cried. I rolled my hips to meet his thrusts. "Be with me! You can fight this, Mason!"

He shook his head. The heat radiated from him in waves so strong I fancied I could see the shimmering lines of it like standing in front of an oven. Sweat dripped from his forehead onto my mouth, and I licked away the salt tang of it.

"I don't know..."

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“You have to know.” I brought his mouth to mine to keep him from speaking more.

My heart pounded so fiercely I thought it might rip from my chest. I had known of his struggle. Many times when he did not know I watched, I had seen him force away the thrall that threatened to overtake him. Now I clung to him with a desperation borne of love and a fierceness borne of lust.

My kisses bruised his mouth. I tasted blood like copper on my tongue, but whether ’twas his or mine I could not say. Mason clutched me, his hands like talons on the soft flesh of my shoulders, but I did not complain. He was still with me.

He murmured my name over and over against my kiss-swollen lips. He pressed his mouth to my forehead, my eyelids, my nose, my jaw, and the rims of my ears. His penis throbbed within me, and my passage convulsed around him in another sharp, short orgasm. Still, he thrust, and still his eyes gleamed with the sight of something I was forever blocked from seeing.

I was losing him to a rival worse than any woman could have been. The thrall tugged at his soul, and I felt it, tithed as I was to him. I could never experience the magic itself—never control it—for that talent was not mine. But I could feel its pull as it sought to take him from me. I could feel the way it tore at him, nudged at him, taunted and called to him.

“If you let it take you, it will take me, too,” I told him.

“Nay!” His yell rang throughout the room like the clash of an earthen jug shattered on the floor. He closed his eyes, his jaw tensed, and the muscles in his arms twitched with the effort of holding himself steady above me.

“Give yourself to me, and I will keep you safe.” I had no idea if that were even possible, but if anyone could fight the high magic, ’twould be me. “I love you too much to let you go. I will not let it take you! I will not!”

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I had left him once, when I thought he would choose the power of the thrall over my love. I would not do that again. Mason was my husband, my heart, my very life, and he needed me. I would fight this with him if it killed us both.

He groaned, then whispered my name in a ragged breath. His cock thrummed inside me, and in answer, I spasmed in another brief climax. The pleasure of it made me cry aloud, yet the sensations building in my clitoris and vagina did not diminish. He was filling me, and I was taking him.

The hair on his head began to rise, and I felt mine trying to do the same. The air between us crackled with energy. As he thrust, his chest came down upon my breasts, and the sparks stung us and urged us to greater pleasure at the same time. I had never experienced anything like it.

His thrusts had become irregular, faster, more urgent. I put my hands to the curve of his buttocks and hooked my heels over his thighs to press him further against me. With every thrust, his pelvis ground against my center. I cried his name at the pleasure of it, and he answered me.

“Stay with me,” I whispered, and he opened his eyes.

“I am with you,” Mason told me. The light had gone. The air between us ceased to spark.

At the sight of him looking at me from clear eyes, a final explosion of ecstasy burst through me. My vagina clenched and my clitoris pounded as the bolts of pleasure filled me. I arched against him, and he gathered me in his arms. He thrust again, one last time, and his cry echoed my own. He held me tightly and pushed himself so far inside he stabbed the entrance to my womb.

Ripples of delight ran through my body as he moved his hips. Mason pressed his forehead to mine. I smiled up at him and kissed his mouth. Then he buried his face in my neck again, his arms around me, and rolled to the side until he cradled me next to him.

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I snuggled into his embrace, aware of the warmth of his seed trickling from between my legs. Our bodies were sticky with sweat and love fluids, but at the moment I was too sated to rouse myself from the bed and clean up. I breathed his scent, now mingled with my own, and sent a prayer to the Astria for helping us beat his addiction one more time.

“Thank you.”

“You mustn’t thank me,” I began, but he shushed me.

“You’ve always been there for me when I needed you. Even when you left me, ’twas to help me.”

I ran my hand over his firmly muscled chest. “I love you. I could do naught else.”

He pressed a kiss to my hair. “I don’t know if I will ever be able to stop wanting it, Perion.”

I bit my lip before replying. “Then any time you feel yourself wishing to give in to it, find me and we will make love again.”

He chuckled, and I felt the brush of his breath on my face. “We would never get out of bed.”

“Then we shall not get out of bed.” I sat to look at him. “We didn’t take a honeymoon. Mayhaps now is the time.”

He looked at me with the up-tipped brow I had come to know so well. “Oh? And think you your subjects will take kindly to their queen spending all her time lying abed with her king while their disputes go unsettled?”

“They’ll not care if their taxes go unpaid.” I smiled. “My advisors can see to the judging for one week. And my citizens will only thank you for keeping me abed if the result is an heir to the throne.”

Now he sat as well, and his expression darkened. “A babe? You wish to create a child with me?”

I sighed in exasperation. “My love, ’tis usually what happens when two people wed.”

He scooted back against the myriad of pillows and drew his knees

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to his chest, then crossed his arms over them. "I'm not certain I wish to become a father."

"Why not?"

We'd never discussed the possibility of children. In sooth, I'd wondered if I were able to conceive. My own mother had had difficulty in becoming pregnant and had died in birthing my only sibling, who also had not survived the labor. Mason and I had been lovers for more than a year—husband and wife for nearly six months—and my monthly flow still came and went with no sign of my ever becoming with child. But until now, I had not thought Mason to be opposed to the idea of parenthood.

He gave me a narrow-eyed glance. "Think you I deserve to create life?"

"I do. I thought you worthy to become my king and my soulmate, Mason. Why, by the stars, would you think I would not wish to carry your child?"

"What if I could not love a child?" he asked in a low voice.

"'Tis impossible not to love a child."

He shook his head. "Aye, Perion. 'Tis quite possible to not love a child."

My heart ached once more for the unloved and mistreated child he had been. Years of evil had made him wary of joy. I touched his cheek.

"I'll love our child. And you will, too. I promise you."

I lifted one of his arms so I could slide next to him. Now we were no longer making love, the chilly air was making me shiver. I pulled one of the coverlets up over our legs and tucked it around us.

"I thought when I renounced the high magic it would leave me forever. I didn't know it would still haunt me like this."

"Time will heal you." *Perhaps*, I thought, but did not say.

His eyes were bleak when he looked down at me. "I pray you're right."

"I'll have to be, won't I?" I meant it to tease, but could draw no

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smile from him. I hated seeing him so full of grief. “Come, sweetling. Let me draw you a bath.”

I could have had a servant provide such services, but it pleased me to do them myself. I wanted no other person to enter our chamber today, nobody else to speak to us. Today was for me and my love alone.

I left the bed and put on my gown then paused at the door to peer outside to the hall where a maid stood ever at the ready. “Bring us our breakfast, please, Carina, but leave it in the hall and don’t disturb us. Bring us our luncheon at the noon hour the same way, and I daresay dinner as well.”

“M’lady, will you not be coming out at all?” The maid dipped a curtsey in front of me.

“Not today, and not for a week. Send me parchment and ink with the breakfast and I will pen an advisement to my councilors.”

Carina gave me a conspiratorial grin. “Taking your honeymoon at last?”

I nodded. “‘Tis time, is it not?”

She giggled and tried to peer past me into the chamber, but I blocked her view. I didn’t want her to see Mason. Rumors abounded about the state of my husband’s mind, and his reputation had preceded him here. My country had accepted him as my husband and their king, but I knew all too well how quickly fingers would be willing to point.

I closed the heavy door and went to the fireplace. In minutes, the flames were bathing the room in welcome warmth. I smiled at my talent. Two years ago I had left my throne on a quest to find true love. I had learned much on the road, including how to build a handsome fire. And I had found Mason.

My husband watched me without speaking. The sight of his rumpled hair and bare chest made my heart thud a little harder even now. He had always affected me thusly right from our first meeting. I had to smile at myself, mooning over him like a love struck schoolgirl

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and yet, I would not have changed my reaction for any reward. I blew him a kiss that made him raise his eyebrow in his old, sardonic fashion, but he smiled as if in spite of himself.

“Wait here,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

He stretched his long, lean frame out on the bed. “I’ll be here.”

I went into my bathing chamber. In lieu of the magic I’d banned from the castle, I’d had the room outfitted with the latest ingenuity in plumbing. Copper pipes ran from the wall to the porcelain tub squatting on four golden legs. Water from the pipes came from a rooftop basin where it was heated by the sun, and by a coal stove if necessary. The room itself was warmed by a small, iron woodstove. It was the most luxurious room in the entire castle. I loved it.

I ran the water at a temperature hot enough to be decadent in this cold Firstmonth weather. I piled thick, scented towels on the bench beside the tub, and poured a few drops of oil into the water. I put a match to the wood in the stove and flames crackled inside. I took a soft, woven cloth from the cupboard along with a bristled brush, and put them with the towels. I lit a few candles in their sconces that cast the room in flickering, golden light. Then I went back into the bedchamber.

“It’s ready.”

Mason swung his legs over the side of the bed. “I can bathe myself. Just bring me the ewer and the basin.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” I scolded. “This is our honeymoon. You’re going to be pampered.”

He gave me a skeptical look.

“You can’t tell me you protest,” I said. “Sweet stars, Mason. You’re one of the few men I’ve ever met who revels in luxury as much as a woman does.”

That earned me a scowl, but he could hardly disagree. “You make me sound like some sort of libertine.”

Now I raised my own brow back at him. I did not need to remind him that before he’d met me, he’d spent most of his time being

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served, pampered and catered to by a bevy of young women willing to risk his bad temper for the chance to gain his love. "This is an opportunity you should not pass up, Mason. 'Tis not often I offer to serve you."

"How well I know that."

He allowed me to take him into the bath, where he paused at the sight. "Perion, you treat me too well."

"Shh." I pushed him forward. "Get in the tub."

With his back to me, I saw the furrows where my nails had left the marks of our lovemaking. The sight made my stomach flutter in memory of our passion. Mason sat in the heated water then sank down until it covered him to his chin. He hissed a sigh of satisfaction.

"Lovely, isn't it?" I had spent many a luxurious hour in this room.

"Why did you not order this bath built big enough for two?" Mason stirred the water with his hands.

"Because when I am in the tub, I prefer to be alone." I grinned. "Or to have someone bathing me...like I'm going to do for you. Sit back."

He did. I stripped off my gown and knelt on the low, padded stool next to the tub. I found the soft cloth and rubbed a cake of soap into it, then dipped it in the water to create a luxurious foam. I began with his chest and soaped him all over. I lifted one arm and soaped that, too, then reached for the other.

Mason closed his eyes with a groan of satisfaction and allowed me to clean him. He lifted his legs out of the water and I ran the soapy cloth along them. Water slopped over the side of the tub onto the floor, but I did not care.

"Lean front." I used the bristled brush on his back until he squirmed.

"Are you trying to flay me alive?"

"If I was trying, 'twould have been done." But I allowed him to sit back. When I had finished with his extremities, I dipped a pitcher of clean water from the sink.

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“I’m going to wash your hair.”

He was beyond complaining now. I carefully wet the dark thickness of his hair, then rubbed a palmful of scented, gentle soap into it. I scrubbed his scalp with firm fingers. It was like silk— thick and long and lovely.

“Your hair is so beautiful.”

He grunted, half-asleep. “Men are not beautiful.”

“Handsome then.” I ran some strands of it over my fingers. “So thick and so fine. I love to touch it.”

He gave another grunt, but this one sounded more pleased. I rinsed his hair until ’twas clean of soap. Then I pushed him back to relax against the tub while I rinsed the cloth and got more fresh water from the sink.

When I turned back to face him, the smile faded from my lips. Something was different. His eyelids fluttered while his hands had fallen, limp, into the water. His mouth was parted.

“I can hear the water singing,” he whispered.

I grabbed his shoulders so violently his arms banged the side of the tub. Water splashed out, soaking me. I shook him.

“Mason, nay!”

His eyes opened, but they were again fuzzy with faraway sights. “I can smell your laughter.”

“I’m not laughing!”

He blinked, hard, and shook himself. He frowned. “Perion, ’tis starting again.”

“Nay. I won’t let it.”

“You can’t stop it.”

“I can. And I will.”

I would not let him give in to the thrall. I would not! I bent to press my mouth to his and was overjoyed when he returned the kiss.

Our mouths parted and our tongues danced. His hand came up to cover my breast and caress my nipple with his fingers. I reached into

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the water and found the rising length of his penis.

So soon after our lovemaking, neither of us should have been ready for more. Yet, as Mason's touch moved from my breasts to my belly, I wanted him as much as I ever had. His hand dipped lower to stroke my center and I gasped.

"I will not let it have you." I bent to kiss him again, and pushed him back in the water. "But you have to help me fight it."

In another magicreator, the thrall would have been something to honor and revere. Mason, however, had not been taught how to use the strengths with which he'd been born. His teachers, the Sisters of Marr, had been ancient and bored with their immortality. They had abandoned their duty to teach the young sorcerer how to use and control the high magic and taunted him into killing them.

He had grown to manhood with the force of his powers controlling him, and when my love for him fulfilled the Sisters' prophecy and brought him the thrall, he did not know how to use it without losing himself to it. He'd spent his entire life yearning for the power he knew could be his—and now it seemed he would spend the rest of his life denying it.

I put my hand on his erection. "This is real. This is us. This is what is worth living for, Mason, not the thrall."

I put his hand to my breast, forced him to cup it. "This is love. This is me, your wife."

He nodded. His gaze cleared a little, and a shadow of anger crossed the features I'd come to know as well as mine own. "I do love you, Little Bird."

"Then you'll stay with me." I didn't ask it as a question, but made a statement. He nodded. "We'll get you through this."

I grasped the soft cloth and dipped it into the water, then wrapped it around his hardened length. The soft folds cradled him and softened my grip. The suds made his flesh slick in the water and allowed me to stroke him fully. He let out a soft groan and his head lolled against the

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tub's side, but this time the noise was of sexual gratification and not the sound of him losing himself to the thrall. I stroked him with the cloth, every so often rubbing lower over his sac.

"I love your body," I told him. The words rose to my lips unbidden, wanton, and I didn't care. This was my husband, my love, and everything else be damned. He was mine. "I love the way you rise beneath my touch."

He let out another low groan. The sound of his arousal triggered my own. I shifted on the padded bench then leaned forward to press my lips to his chest. The water had heated his skin again, and I ran my tongue along his flesh to cool it. I paused at his nipple and teased it with my teeth and tongue until he began to move his hips against my hand. I let the cloth fall away into the water and took him in my bare hand causing him to mutter a low curse.

I kissed and suckled his other nipple as I continued to stroke him. The water sloshed. Mason gripped the sides of the tub.

"I love the way you taste." My voice sounded unfamiliar to me, low and husky with desire. "I love the way you smell. I love the way you feel inside me."

I'd never said such things aloud, and the sense of power the words gave me had my center burning with need. Mason muttered my name like a prayer. I met his mouth with mine.

"You make my body sing," I whispered against him.

"I love you," he whispered back. "By the Astria, I do."

I lifted my body into the tub and sat astride him. His length slid inside my passage with no hesitation, and I settled myself against him. My knees pressed the porcelain sides, but there was plenty of room for us both. The water licked and caressed my sensitive flesh like another pair of hands or another tongue. I leaned into Mason's embrace. His mouth found my breasts and he suckled, first one and then the other, until I was fairly mindless with delight.

I slid myself up and down on his rod. The water made me nearly

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weightless, despite so much of it having slopped out onto the floor. I glided as though I were flying. Our mouths sealed in a constant kiss, Mason and I rocked together effortlessly. His cock filled me again and again.

He put one hand beneath the curve of my buttocks to hold me and help me ride him, while the other hand's thumb slipped between us to press in perfect counterpoint against my rigid bud. The world around me went red, then black outlined with gold, until all I could see was my husband's face. All I heard was the sound my name on his lips. All I felt were his hands on me, and his penis filling me. Everything had become him, but 'twas not enough. I needed to be sure that everything for him had become me.

I fought to control the waves of desire washing over me. I could not afford to lose myself in orgasm at this moment. I took my mouth from his, forced my eyes to open and my gaze to meet Mason's. I searched his eyes for a sign the thrall was moving within him, but all I saw was my face reflected in the chocolate brown depths. His mouth had thinned with concentration. Sweat beaded his brow even as water from the bath dripped from his cheeks and chin.

"Come with me," I whispered.

His eyes widened at the boldness of my talk. He gave a single, harder thrust and pressed his thumb to me. I writhed beneath his touch, the pleasure so intense it was nearly painful.

Mason put his arm fully beneath my bottom and left my bud to press his other hand on the tub's edge. So swiftly, and with such strength it made my head spin, he lifted me and stood. I thought for one awful moment he would slip and fall, and I clung to him with a cry that had him chuckle.

Then we were on the stone floor, our bodies cushioned by the thickness of the towels. The movement separated us and pulled his penis from inside me. I made a protest, but he kissed me so thoroughly I could not speak.

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When he drew away, Mason looked seriously into my eyes. “You believed in me when nobody else did. You loved me when nobody else could. And even now, you fight for me when others would allow me to give myself to thrall and turn myself into the drooling, gibbering idiot it makes me become. Wanting it is like a fire inside me, always burning, but I would die rather than leave you for it. I would die rather than lose you again.”

“I won’t let you leave me.” I pulled him down to me again. He made a movement to slip inside me, but I thought of *The Eastern Pleasures* and stopped him. “Wait.”

He gave me a curious look and I returned it with a sly grin. “Do it this way.”

I got on my hands and knees in front of him and shook my bottom while I looked back over my shoulder. The look on his face was priceless and sent shivers of lust racing through me again. Mason didn’t hesitate. His lovemaking experience might have far outshone mine, but I considered that to my benefit.

Another man might have faltered when faced with an adventuresome wife, for too many men of my acquaintance believed being demure to be of the utmost value in a wife. I was glad to know my husband was not one of them.

He put one hand on each of my hips and buried himself to the root. I gasped at the sudden sensation. He smoothed his strokes, and I parted my legs to give him greater access. I went down to my elbows, my cheek pressed on the soft towels. My passage opened further to him, deeper, and he took me that way until I began to shudder again on the verge of climax.

He slipped a hand around in front of me to tweak my bud and I was undone. I clutched the towels beneath my fingers. Once again, I was flying. My body shook from the force of my orgasm.

Mason cupped his hand to my twitching center and ceased his thrusts until the spasms ended. Breathless, I waited for him to move.

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His penis beat inside me for a few moments and he gently pulled out of me.

I looked at him. "Mason?"

He put a finger to his lips, then turned me to face him. With infinite care, he put his hand to the back of my head and lowered me to our bed of towels again.

"I want to see your face," is all he said as he entered me again.

I still tingled with the aftershocks of my climax, and his first thrust sent another slow wave of delight through me. I opened myself to him, then gathered him into my arms and kissed him as we joined.

He drew away so I could see the strain on his face. I sensed the thrall between us again, though 'twas weaker. He was fighting it and winning.

"Give yourself to me."

He nodded, body tense with the proximity of his completion. He thrust hard enough to make me cry out. A glimmering orb formed above us. *The high magic*. It pulsed in shades of red and violet in time to the rhythm of our lovemaking. Mason could not see it, but he must have known it was there.

"I will not let it take me," Mason said through gritted teeth, and though the orb flashed and grew, his eyes stayed clear.

He shuddered against me and breathed my name. I wrapped my arms around his back and held him tight.

"Leave him," I breathed so softly Mason did not hear. "Do anything you like, but leave my love alone! He is not for you!"

'Twas foolish to address the magic as though it lived. It was not an evil force set out to harm my husband. The evil had been done to him by those who had refused to teach him. The thrall could not be blamed because Mason could not withstand the force of its terrible beauty, any more than one could blame the innocent witch weed for causing hallucinations when improperly consumed.

I had no talent for the creation or control of magic, yet at my words,

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the orb exploded into a thousand shards, each as lovely and terrible as the whole. I cried out at the sight of it and at the pleasure bursting through my body. The pieces fell down around and upon us like rain. I flinched, expecting pain, but felt nothing as the shards sank into our flesh. In the next moment, the warm, slow gush of Mason's seed spurted inside me. Something twisted in my womb.

I gasped; this time not in pleasure, but not quite in pain. My arms clutched him tighter in shock at the sensation inside. Another twist made me cry out, louder this time.

"Perion?" Mason pulled away to look at me. "What's wrong, sweetling?"

"I don't know." I meant to say more, to reassure him, but another twist made me bite my lip, this time in real pain.

Mason gathered me in his arms and pulled me onto his lap. He cradled me there, my head on his shoulder while another gripping twist tore through me. I clutched at him, afraid, and took comfort from his strength.

"It feels as though there is a knife, a dull knife, scraping at my innards." I managed to depict the sensation, though my words were a poor description.

"Should I call a healer?"

The pain had passed, leaving behind no remnant. I shook my head. "'Tis gone."

Mason put his hand on my belly. "Where did it hurt you? Here?"

I moved his hand a little lower. "Here. Inside. Almost like the start of my flow, but stronger. But 'tis gone now."

He tilted his head to look at me. A slow, strange grin lit his face. "Perion... 'tis gone."

"Aye, the pain—"

He shook his head quickly, and squeezed me. "Nay, sweetling. The thrall. 'Tis gone. I no longer feel it."

He kissed me. His laughter lifted my heart. He rocked me in his

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arms and kissed me over and over. “‘Tis gone!”

I put a hand low on my belly over my womb. Something had happened with the thrall in that last moment. I had seen the high magic disappear...but where had it gone? Something was different inside me, but I had no time to contemplate what it might be for Mason had lifted me to my feet and was leading me in a merry dance.

Our feet sloshed in the water, and I hesitated lest we slip on the slick stones. His joy was infectious, though, and I could not resist. Soon I was laughing and dancing with him into the bedroom to fall in a giggling heap on the tangled covers of our bed.

“I’m starving.” Naked, Mason strode to the door of our chamber and flung it open. “Thank you, Carina.”

Startled at the sight of him, Carina stammered a greeting and gave a curtsy while hiding her face in her apron. Mason picked up the tray in the hall and shut the door behind him with a kick as he brought the food to me.

“You scandalized her,” I reprimanded but without true anger.

Mason gave a glance back at the door. He’d never concerned himself with nakedness, as I’d learned long ago when I met him at his home, Cimmerian. It was a lack of self-consciousness rather than lack of shame or modesty, but I still had to shake my head over it.

“Think you I wish my maids to see the treasure my husband carries between his legs?” I asked. “Would you approve should I present myself to the footman with naught on but what I wore when I came into the world?”

“I would kill any man who saw you as I do now,” Mason growled as he set down the tray and got into bed beside me.

“Yet you flaunt yourself in front of poor Carina...” But I had no more to say on the matter because he silenced me by tucking a bite of biscuit into my mouth.

He fell to the food with a gusto I had not witnessed since I had found him my garden after leaving him at Cimmerian. He’d been half

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dead then, and it had taken him some time to recover his strength. I was glad to see him with such an appetite.

Still, despite his renewed energy and the lethargy sexual completion had brought me, a sense of unease still lingered. Mason paused in his chewing. "Why so sad?"

"I'm not sad." I yawned. The food looked tempting, but I had woken early and had spent a vigorous morning in and out of bed. I took a sliced berry topped with sugar and let it dissolve on my tongue, but sleep called me more than food. "Just tired."

"'Tis decadent to lie abed this late in the day." Mason grinned. "Is that what lovers do on their honeymoon?"

"I know naught of lovers the world over," I said with another yawn. "But I think I shall be happy to go back to sleep."

"Then sleep." Mason pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "Sleep and dream, sweet Perion."

Already, my eyes were closing. The bed was so soft, the covers so warm. I did not wish for dreams of the past, but they found me anyway.

I walked a corridor, my foot in agony and dripping blood. Somewhere, there were a man and a woman who would hurt me if they had the chance, and somewhere else was Mason. The dream shifted and I saw my love kneeling on a stone floor in another chamber far away from the one we now shared. His gaze was blank and I beseeched him to wake, but he could or would not. Again, the dream changed, and I was once more in my garden with the blue roses dying all around me, and Mason collapsed in the gravel at my feet.

"Nay!"

My cry woke me from sleep, but it must not have been so loud because Mason slept on beside me. His skin was hot and he'd thrown off the covers. The fire had burned low again. Night had fallen outside.

Chills wracked me as though I had a fever, and faint nausea churned my stomach. I curled closer to Mason to take his warmth for mine own. His arm came around me and pulled me close even as he slept, and I

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spooned against him until at last, again, I slept, too.

As true honeymooners, we stayed in our chamber for a full seven day's passing. We ate and drank when and what we pleased. We bathed each other in the big porcelain tub, which proved to have plenty of room in it for two. And we made love in every way a man and a woman can give each other pleasure. It was idyllic and yet, through it all, the uneasiness never left me.

Something had happened within me when we'd made love the first time in the bathroom, and I was afraid it had something to do with the thrall. I had seen it sink into my flesh. Would it take me next despite my lack of talent for it? It had truly left Mason, for he said it no longer even called to him.

Had it come to me instead? I waited for the thrall to fill me, for sounds to become scent and sight to become noise. I waited to lose myself in the magic as Mason had. But I did not.

If I found it difficult to raise a smile, Mason seemed not to have the same problem. His laughter rang through our chamber and his mouth was constantly curved upward. I had rarely seen him so happy for such a long period of time, and I was sorry I could not join him in it.

He was not totally oblivious to my state of mind. On our last night before we would return to the routine of our lives, he pulled me to him as we sat on cushions near the fire. He didn't speak, but I felt the force of his love in the way he cradled me against him. I rested my cheek on his chest.

"Tell me what is bothering you," he said at last. "Please, Perion. Tell me what has been haunting you."

There was no lying to him. He could read me as easily as scholar reads a book. I snuggled closer into his embrace. "I'm afraid."

"Of the thrall."

"Aye. That it has not left you. That my love is not enough to keep it from you."

"You were the one who told me your love would have to be

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enough.” Mason stroked my hair as it tumbled over my shoulders.

The firelight painted us in gold and red. Mason kissed my temple. His arms tightened around me.

“I’ve been dreaming,” I told him. “Of Cimmerian and what happened there.”

I stretched out my foot to look at the pale scar twisting across the sole. A knight named Barrett had made me cut myself there during events that now seemed like so long ago. Mason had used his magic to heal the wound, but the scar remained.

“And you’re afraid I can’t forget the high magic. That I will allow it to take me again.”

I put his hand to my belly. “Something happened the night you said it disappeared. Something inside of me.”

He turned me in his arms so he could see my face. “Does it still hurt you?”

“Nay. But I feel...different.”

“Tomorrow, first thing, you will see the healer.” Mason wrapped me in his warmth. “No arguments.”

“Oh, tomorrow.” I sighed. “Back to face the world again.”

“We have one more night,” he reminded. Desire thickened his voice.

“I’d think you’d tire of this old body,” I teased. “Husbands are not supposed to be so enamored of their wives.”

“Only a stupid husband would not be enamored of a wife like you.” Mason’s hands smoothed up my sides to cup my breasts through the sheer fabric of my sleeping gown.

“And you are anything but stupid.”

My nipples tightened beneath his touch. I let my head drop back against his shoulder, and he kissed the side of my neck. So many times we had sated each other, and yet his touch could still rouse me as though we’d been without each other for weeks.

Mason pulled the gown up over my thighs. Firelight flickered on

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my pale skin, turning it to gold. He smoothed his hands across my belly, then down. My legs spread at his touch. Already the silken pink nub of my center had risen above the pubic curls. I watched, fascinated, as he stroked me with one finger.

The small bud twitched beneath his touch. He stroked again and a low, throaty noise escaped me. He cupped my breast through my gown with one hand and rolled the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. The other forefinger continued to explore my feminine folds, pausing every now and then to slide back across my thrumming clitoris. I grew slick at his touch, and he drew my fluids up over my bud to tease it to further arousal.

Against my back, I felt the heat of his erection. He pulled my gown off over my head then settled me back against him. His legs stretched out on either side of mine. His pubic brush tickled my buttocks and made me squirm.

“Stay still,” he ordered, but I could not comply.

His fingers traced identical, circular patterns on my nipple and my clitoris until I was shuddering with need. Then he switched hands to pay attention to my other breast, while he dipped inside me to tease my opening. He could not slide his finger inside me more than a fraction; enough to taunt, but not enough to fill me.

I lifted my hips to allow him greater access. He obliged by sliding his finger further inside me until I mewled from the sensation. Mason turned me and pushed me down to the cushions.

I thought he’d bent to kiss my mouth, but he surprised me by taking my foot into his hands. He looked at it carefully, then kissed the scar he had healed. It tingled beneath his lips and sent a shiver of sensation all the way to my core.

“Would that you had never been injured so,” he murmured.

“But I was.”

He nodded and kissed my foot again. “And my magic allowed me to heal you. ’Twas not all terrible.”

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“Nay.”

He kissed my ankle, then my calf. He trailed his tongue along my skin to the tender flesh behind my knee. “But ’twas not as wonderful as this.”

I had no answer, for now his tongue had traced its pattern on my inner thigh. His breath puffed against me and I waited, breathless, for his tongue to touch me where I needed it most. Then it was there, a quick, light jab followed by a fluttering that had me gripping the cushions beneath me.

He licked me slowly with gentle circles. One finger slid inside to stroke me. He found the soft, spongy spot just behind my pubic bone and, as he licked, he pressed there gently. My hips moved upward, bringing my jewel closer to his lips and tongue.

Bright sparks flashed in front of my eyes. Mason left my center and slid up my body, then pushed his penis inside me. He waited for a moment while he filled me, then began the rhythm he knew pleased me most. In moments I was quaking with orgasm. I bit his shoulder, then laved the small wound with my tongue when he cried out.

His cock throbbed inside me as he climaxed. He sighed heavily. He shifted his weight onto his arms so as not to crush me, and we both relaxed, spent, on top of the cushions.

“I won’t let it come between us again,” he whispered as the firelight cast its dancing golden shadows across our skin. “I promise you, Perion. On my vow to you beneath the wedding canopy.”

“It might still—”

“It might,” he said. “But I will not let it in. There is too much good here, with you, for me to seek anything else.”

I still felt something had changed within me, but I cared not to ruin Mason’s conviction. I kept quiet and satisfied him with a kiss instead. We slept the night there in front of the fire. I did not dream.

I woke to a pearly glow coming in through the window. The fire had died again, and when I pulled myself from my husband’s loving

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embrace, the chill made me shiver. I got up stiffly from the floor and stretched to ease the kinks in my muscles. Mason slept on as I went to the window and looked out at the world below. Today we would leave the sanctity of our bedchamber, rejoin the world, and take up the reins of our duty again.

And of the thrall? What of the high magic that had entered both of us but taken neither? 'Twas evident in Mason's untroubled sleep, the brightness of his smile and the clarity of his gaze he was no longer fighting the urge to give himself to the power. I had not seen him so content and peaceful in all the time I'd known him.

*So what had happened in that moment?*

I pressed my hands again to the softness of my lower belly. It no longer pained me. Instead, I felt a warmth like a glow inside. I thought of the orb and the way it had glowed.

*Was that a spark between my fingers? A hint of blue light?*

It vanished before I could be certain, but it left behind an idea so simple it made me laugh aloud at the relief of it. I counted rapidly on my fingers, then again, the days since I'd last had my flow, and on what day into my cycle we had made love by the bathtub. Then I knew what had changed within me. I was not destined to become a prisoner of the thrall. Instead, I'd been granted a different sort of magic.

I was with child.

I went to my husband and knelt beside him, and I urged him awake with kisses until he opened his eyes. I told him what I had discovered, and together we laughed and cried with joy in the clear, cold light of morning.

## MEGAN HART

Megan Hart began her writing career in grammar school when she plagiarized a short story by Ray Bradbury. She soon realized that making up her own stories was better than copying other people's, and she's been writing ever since.

Megan's award-winning short fiction has appeared in such diverse publications as *Hustler*, *On Our Backs* and *The Reaper*. Her novels include every genre of romance, from historical to steamy futuristic SF. In addition to her short erotic fiction for the Amber Kisses imprint, look for her other Amber Quill novels: *Riverboat Bride*, *Lonesome Bride*, *Convicted!* and *Love Match*.

Megan's current projects include a fantasy series, a futuristic trilogy and a dramatic suspense novel. Her dream is to have a movie made of every one of her novels, starring herself as the heroine and Keanu Reeves as the hero. Megan lives in the deep, dark woods of Pennsylvania with her husband and two monsters...er...children.

Learn more about Megan by visiting her website:  
<http://www.meganhart.com>

\* \* \*

***Don't miss Friendly Fire, by Megan Hart, available Winter, 2004,  
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*tropical island for a department-regulated vacation, more heats up than just the sand and sun. Will they let their past prejudices keep them from giving in to their mutual attraction, or will Zane and Kendall both succumb to a little Friendly Fire?*

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