



TRIAL BY FIRE

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ALSO BY MEGAN HART

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BY

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TRIAL BY FIRE
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*To everyone who asked
for more of Noa and Riordan,
this is for you!*

*For my friend Christine,
who gave me the great name for my
evil sorceress, Solveig.*

*To all the people who've written
to tell me how much they enjoy my work—
you make it all worthwhile.*

*And of course, to DPF, who
always gets a mention because without him,
I wouldn't be doing this.*

TRIAL BY FIRE

Noa woke and stretched without opening her eyes. Her entire body still sang with contentment, and she smiled as she turned in the bed to reach for Riordan. Her hands touched the smoothness of empty sheets and her eyes flew open. The smile turned to a frown of confusion.

She was in her own bed. Alone.

She sat up and looked around. She didn't recall coming back here, which meant he'd magicked her while she slept. Noa looked down at her bare flesh, still marked in places by the lovemaking they'd shared the night before. She had gone to Riordan and demanded he take her maidenhead in return for a small portion of the power she'd gain with its loss. He had obliged her well and thoroughly, albeit reluctantly at first. *And now...now what had he done?*

Noa left her bed. She needed no looking glass to know she had changed. The lengths of her hair crackled with sparks of blue and gold as she paced the narrow strip of stone floor between her bed and the wall. She lifted her hands and with a thought formed an orb of magic

TRIAL BY FIRE

that pulsed on her fingertips. Then she let it fall away.

She'd been a good student at Somnus Keep. She'd studied hard and done well in all her classes. She'd graduated with honors—no small feat since she hadn't had the advantage of the full magic strength so many of her classmates had already gained. When her flow finally came, she'd chosen Riordan de Cimmerian as her *ahavatara*, her first lover. With the breach of her virginity, she had reached her full potential and, because of her earlier training, she already knew how to wield it.

"Show me," she commanded as another orb flourished on her fingertips.

The ball of light glimmered and grew to reveal the face of the man she loved. She recognized the background. He was in his chamber. His brows were drawn in an expression she well recognized. He scowled.

So soon after their night of love he had returned to his former ways? And he had transported her from him to wake alone? This was intolerable.

The Noa of last night had needed to find the strength to confront a man she loved. The Noa of this morning was already strong. With a word and a gesture, she clothed herself. With another, she flung open the door to her spinster's room. The hall outside was deserted. The summer term had just begun and all students not enrolled had already gone home.

"Good morn, Noa." The young man who greeted her stepped out of her way as she passed.

"Caylen." She nodded, but didn't pause.

Caylen kept step with her. "You did it, didn't you? You chose your *ahavatara*?"

She swiveled her head to glance at him. "Aye, Cay. Last night."

He gave her a grin that stopped her furious pace. "I can tell. You look...lovely."

His eyes had gone starry as he stared at her. She gave him a smile

TRIAL BY FIRE

and touched his shoulder “Cay, ’tis me, Noa. Stop looking at me like that.”

He blinked and grinned. “It’s the thrall. I can see it all around you like a rainbow. Tell me what it’s like?”

Noa thought. “I don’t know if I can, Cay. ’Tis like nothing I’ve ever known.”

“Can you truly hear the birds on the other side of the Keep? Can you see my thoughts, hear my dreams, and smell the colors of my clothes?”

“I smell breakfast,” Noa replied. “And I hear your stomach rumbling. Go eat. I’ve got something I need to do.”

“Who was it?”

At first she couldn’t answer, but Cay had been a friend for a long time. “You know who I asked.”

His eyes widened a bit. “You asked him?”

“Who else?”

“And he said yes.” Caylen shook his head and let out a slow whistle. “I’m happy for you, Noa.”

“Don’t be.” She frowned. “I woke up this morn alone.”

Caylen winced. “You knew he might not feel for you what you felt for him.”

“That’s the problem,” Noa said. “He says he did.”

His eyes widened again. “So then why?”

“I’m going to ask him that very question.”

Caylen stepped back and gave her a lingering stare. “You have changed. I can see it in you. ’Tis more than the thrall. This is more.”

She laughed, though she didn’t feel much humor this morning. “Go on. I’ll see you later.”

He left her, and she turned back to her mission. Anger, tempered by anxiety, churned her gut. Why had Riordan sent her away? The night before he had told her he loved her, as she did him. *What could have changed?*

TRIAL BY FIRE

She'd hesitated before opening the door to his chambers last night, but didn't pause this time. The door refused to open at her touch and, without thinking twice, she raised her hands and blew it nearly off the hinges. She strode through it and into the now-familiar chambers beyond.

If she'd startled him, he gave no sign. He didn't even turn from the row of bubbling beakers in front of him. Noa stopped and waited for him to speak.

"Next time, try not to break my door."

The calmness of his response, spoken in the familiar, sarcastic tone, deflated her a little. Set her back. Made her doubt.

"I woke up alone, Riordan."

Did she imagine his shoulders tensing, just a little? "I know."

"Why?"

His glance over his shoulder made a shiver run down her spine. "Because I desired it should be so."

"And what of my desires?" She took two steps toward him. Her entire body hummed with tension. Strands of her hair began to lift around her, but she made no effort to smooth them.

He turned back to his beakers. "You got what you wanted from me, Mistress Kahane. Take it and be glad of it, and leave me alone."

His words infuriated her. "I thought I had gained your heart, which was what I truly wanted."

"You gained the thrall. As for the other..."

"Yes? The other? 'I have loved you from afar for so long.'" She threw his words back to him. "Did you lie to me last night?"

"Mayhap I merely told you what you wished to hear."

She gasped silently, as though he'd slapped her. "Look me in the face and tell me you lied to me, Riordan. Meet my eyes and tell me last night was fulfillment of your duty and naught more. Convince me, and I'll leave you alone and not bother you again."

He sighed, and the sound encouraged her for it meant he was unable

TRIAL BY FIRE

to immediately spout anger at her. He turned, his shoulders slightly bent, then straightening as he faced her. His eyes met hers without blinking.

"I did not lie to you, Noa. But I spoke wrongly."

She lifted her chin and faced him squarely. "You don't love me?"

The mouth that had given such pleasure thinned. Again he wore the long, high-necked robe of his office as Instructor Primus. Crimson peeked at the hem and just above the collar. A length of black cord tied his dark hair back from his face. Her heart broke from looking at him.

"Riordan?"

He gave an infinitesimal shudder that nonetheless gave her hope. "'Tis impossible, Noa. It can't work."

"Why not?"

He held out his hands, palms up. "You have your entire life ahead of you. You have the chance to be one of the greatest magicreators this land has ever seen. I can sense it in you. You need to reach that potential."

"And loving you can play no part in that? If I have that power, 'tis because part of my soul is tithed to yours. Riordan, no matter where I go in this world, part of you will always be within me. You can't send me away as though I'm of no consequence to you. You have some of me within you, too."

"I have some of lots of people inside me," came his cruel reply. "I have been the *ahavatara* for many young magicreators."

"I am not they," she said quietly. "You love me."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, girl. Go away and leave me alone."

"Why do you seek to push me away?" she cried and advanced on him. "Why fight me like this? What are you afraid of?"

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TRIAL BY FIRE

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“Any woman who gets on her knees before a man to try and woo him to her wishes is an idiot.”

She shoved him harder and the table crashed against the wall. “I’m not wooing you.”

She pushed the cassock the rest of the way up his thighs. He wasn’t bare beneath the cloth as he’d been last night. His linen drawers bulged with his erection, and she nuzzled him through the thin material. Her mouth pressed his cock through the linen and left a spot of wetness.

Without finesse, she reached up and yanked the loose drawers down to the floor. She tucked the cassock around his hips, pinned by his buttocks to the table. Noa put her hands on Riordan’s thighs and, without preamble, took the length of him completely in her mouth.

His groan rasped on her ears. She slid her tongue along his cock, down to the base, then up to swirl around the head. Her hands reached up to cup his testicles, and she stroked her thumb along the smooth seam of skin between his balls and his anus. She drew him into her mouth again, then out. The taste and scent of him filled her. Her clit swelled beneath her gown, and she rubbed her thighs together to stimulate herself as she sucked him.

With a subtle shift of concentration, she allowed the thrall to overtake her. All at once, she could hear the blood surging in his veins, smell his heart beating, and hear his arousal growing with every minute. The magic grew and crackled around them. Her hair stood out from her head in floating, shimmering waves, alive with the colors of their passion.

He made as though to move away from her, and she pinned him

TRIAL BY FIRE

with a gesture of her hand. That he could have easily broken her hold meant nothing, for she knew he would not. He leaned back against the table. His thighs had begun to tremble with an erotic tension that tasted like lemons and berries, sharp and sweet at the same time.

Her nipples ached for his touch, and her center pulsed in desire for his caress, but this act was not about mutuality. 'Twas about love and truth. She drew him in again, loosening the muscles of her throat to take him in as deeply as she could.

His hands tangled in her hair. He groaned her name, and she saw his voice as bright bands of throbbing color—blue, green and fiery gold.

He was going to climax. She eased off for a moment, left his cock for the softness of his testicles and licked him there while his hips surged and thrust on empty air.

The slickness of her arousal coated her erect clit. Noa rocked her hips, seeking release, but unable to find it. She needed more, and in the moment she thought it, the thrall gave it to her.

She gasped as a thick, solid phallus entered her slick tunnel. She shuddered as a tongue began to dance upon her clitoris. Was this her magic or Riordan's? It didn't matter. She took him into her mouth again and made love to him with her lips, teeth and tongue until he began to thrust against her and shout her name in hoarse gasps.

Her cunt clenched on the phantom phallus penetrating her. Her clit spasmed. She burst into orgasm as Riordan's cock throbbed in her mouth.

His hands pulled her hair hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. He pulled her to his mouth and kissed her so fiercely it left her breathless. With a smooth, powerful motion, he lifted her and plunged his cock all the way to the entrance to her womb. Her legs went around his waist, his hands beneath her buttocks.

Another burst of orgasm wracked her body. Her teeth sank into his neck just above the crimson-edged collar. She tasted blood and smoothed the wound with her tongue to heal it. She arched in climax as

TRIAL BY FIRE

he lifted her up and down, then shuddered into his own final ecstasy.

For a moment afterward, he held her. At last, Noa unwrapped her legs and disengaged herself, less awkwardly than she might have imagined. Riordan's cassock fell down to his ankles again. Noa stepped back, her own gown falling to the floor.

"What of my desires?" she asked again.

His chest still heaved from the exertion, and a faint, brick-red blush painted his cheeks. He ran a tongue across his lips, then a hand through his hair. His fingers made a fist when he dropped his hand to his side.

"I plead your mercy." He turned. "But this...this means nothing."

"It means everything." Noa forced herself to remain calm, even as she felt like screaming. "Last night, you told me you loved me. I believed you. What has changed since then?"

"Nothing." His sigh lifted his shoulders, but she still could not see his face. "Nothing but the morning."

"And what has morning to do with it?" she cried, but he gave no answer.

She gathered her pride about her like a tattered cloak and left his chambers. Her eyes stung with furious tears. A wind gathered in her wake as she swept through the halls of Somnus Keep. She sought privacy and solace, and though all who knew her would surely have said Noa Kahane was as mild and even-tempered as any woman they knew, not one person dared stand in her way today.

She climbed the stairs to the Keep's tall main tower. She refused to weep. The wind followed after her, sobbing and crying because she would not.

* * *

"Sex is nothing like they teach you in sex arts class," Bragnon Hucka said smugly as he leaned back and crossed his arms. "Believe me, it's one thing to read about it in a book, and another to actually have a woman's warm and willing tits in your hands."

TRIAL BY FIRE

Caylen rolled his eyes, making certain Bragnon didn't see him. Though only older than Cay by two years, Bragnon had been chosen by his *ahavataret* when he was only ten-and-six. Six years ago. He hadn't ceased wooing and bragging since.

"I'm more interested in the thrall," Caylen spoke up finally, unable to listen to Bragnon's descriptions any longer.

Bragnon paused and looked at Cay, and so did the rest of them sitting around the table. "You would be."

Cay bit his tongue before he could say something he'd regret. Of the five lads at the table, he was the only one who remained a virgin. He ducked his head and concentrated on not clenching his fists.

"Hairy Mary and her five daughters is no substitute for a real woman." Bragnon's crude joke made the others erupt into laughter. "Just like the low magic isn't substitute for the thrall."

"I know that." Caylen got up from the table. "I'll see you all later."

He tried to ignore the laughter following him, but it rang in his ears until he left the room. He paused in the hall to calm himself. There was no sense in fighting with Bragnon and his toadies. It wasn't their fault Caylen hadn't yet been chosen by his *ahavataret*.

He watched a group of giggling sorceresses pass by. The scent of them filled his nostrils and made his cock a hard, throbbing spike between his legs. They were all at least two years younger than he, but the way they swung their hips and made casual orbs of magic as they gestured proved they'd all gained the high magic already.

It's easier for girls, he thought a little angrily. They got to choose their first lover. Their only requirement was that they'd reached their first flow. Allowing them to choose meant they were never forced by someone stronger than they. Though Caylen had never known of a young woman to be raped at Somnus Keep, he knew it happened in other places. Men who didn't respect a woman's right to say no might be punished in other places, but in Somnus Keep, they were killed.

Men had it harder. They had to wait until an eligible female chose

TRIAL BY FIRE

them for their first sexual intercourse. There were plenty of older, experienced sorceresses who enjoyed being *ahavateram*. A young man could count himself lucky if he caught the attention of one of them. Bragnon, with his handsome face, tall build and swaggering manner, had attracted the attention of several who had actually competed for the chance to become his first lover. Some of them still warmed Bragnon's bed, a fact he never ceased to brag about.

Caylen suspected 'twas the real reason Bragnon hadn't left Somnus Keep to seek further employment, though his studies had ended two years before. Out in the real world, he'd be another magiccreator in service to a monarch or working for his supper. Here in Somnus Keep, Bragnon was practically a king himself.

Caylen was no king. He knew he wasn't hideously ugly or stupid. He simply...was. Thick brown hair, pale blue eyes, average height, average strength, and nothing special to set him off from the others. He didn't have the gift of speech Bragnon had, or the skill of gaming or sports. Girls liked him well enough when it came time to study for exams in classes like Introductory Animorphus or Runes. For tests in the Sexual Arts classes, Caylen had needed to use one of the Keep doxies.

One of them had kindly offered to be his *ahavataret*, but Caylen declined as politely as he'd been able. The woman was kind enough, but to be tithed to her for the rest of his life...even now the thought made him shiver. The person who gave you access to the high magic needed to not only have adequate control of the thrall herself, she needed to be someone you wouldn't mind being a part of.

Someone like Gabriana. Even now, the thought of her made his groin tighten. She'd been the assistant teacher in his Scrying class last semester. She'd helped him pass the class he otherwise would have failed. She smelled like flowers all the time. They'd spoken often of what controlling the thrall would be like when it came to be his time.

He'd taught her to play Quoites. She'd introduced him to the

TRIAL BY FIRE

pleasures of honey on apples. When he had finally passed Scrying, he'd made thin excuses to be around her, and she'd allowed him to. Sometimes, he saw her watching him with an expression he couldn't identify on her lovely face, and he wondered if she remained his friend because she pitied him. He didn't want that to be true. He'd waited for her to offer to be his *ahavataret*, but she never had.

Caylen had left the Keep and reached the lawn outside while he thought. The sun overhead beat on his head with a fierceness that seemed too strong for Fivemonth. He shielded his eyes against the glare and caught sight of a familiar form in the distance. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of her long, golden hair, unbound and gleaming in the bright sunshine.

Gabriana.

She disappeared beneath one of the drooping loveapple trees. Caylen paused for only a moment before deciding to follow her. A shiver tickled his spine as he ducked beneath the trees' hanging branches and entered the shadows. It was a lot cooler there than it had been outside, and the glare had been cut considerably. He blinked to let his eyes adjust, and then he saw her.

"Gabriana?"

She turned, her eyes glittering with tears and her pretty mouth turned down in a frown so fierce it hurt Caylen's own face just to see it. "Cay."

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, then shook her head, then shrugged. "No."

He moved closer and sat the stump at her side. "Want to talk about it?"

"I don't think so."

He nodded and said naught more. The faint whistle of a bird caught his attention and he tilted his head to listen better. The forest seemed hushed unless you really, really listened. Someday, when he had the thrall to command, he would be able to see the bird songs, hear the

TRIAL BY FIRE

trees growing, smell the sun shafting through the leaves. For now, he had to content himself with what his own ears and eyes could provide.

Gabriana sat beside him and gave a sigh so deep her shoulders lifted. “I don’t want to leave Somnus Keep, Cay.”

“Why would you have to?” The thought alarmed him.

She bent her head to stare at her hands folded in her lap. “How long can I expect to continue as an assistant instructor? I have the thrall, I’m qualified to teach, but how long, really, can I stay where I am?”

“Won’t they let you teach a class on your own? You’re a good teacher, Gabri. You’re very patient, even with the younger students. Won’t they let you teach them?”

“They have enough teachers, or so Hedavarius told me when I asked. There are too many magiccreators who want to stay at Somnus Keep instead of heading out into the world. There aren’t enough jobs for all of us. I have until the end of the summer term, and then I must leave.”

“They can do that?”

“Of course they can.” She made a face. “While fools like Bragnon Hucka stay on, leeching off the Keep, magiccreators like me have to leave! It’s not fair.”

“I’d like to leave. I look forward to the day when I can make my own way in the world.” Cay’s words startled him, for he’d never thought of that before.

Gabriana looked at him carefully. “Do you?”

He nodded. “Neither of my parents have any magic. They’re merchants. They work hard for what they have. I’d like to help them out a bit.”

“That’s nice.”

What she meant as a compliment sounded sour to his ears. “I’m tired of being nice while men like Bragnon get everything they want.”

“Men like Bragnon have little going for them other than a handsome face and an attitude. You have more than that, Caylen.”

TRIAL BY FIRE

Gabriana touched his sleeve.

He fancied he could feel the warmth of her fingers through the lightweight fabric.

His laugh sounded bitter and he knew it. "Sure I do. I have one more term to finish for my advanced studies."

"And then you'll go out into the world and help people." She smiled.

He looked at her. *Could she not know?* "Gabri, there's no point in my leaving Somnus Keep until I can summon the thrall."

Her lips parted. In that moment, he wanted to kiss her so badly he could nearly taste her lips.

"Cay?"

It was bad enough to face Bragnon's mockery. It was a thousand times worse to have to share his shame with Gabriela. Caylen got up from the stump and turned his back.

"I told you, I don't have the same appeal as Bragnon."

"I think you do. You're bright, you're kind, and you're compassionate. You use your strengths wisely and never to the detriment of others. You have every quality a woman would like to tithe. I'm surprised no sorceress has asked to become your *ahavataret*."

He thought of Bragnon. "I'm not handsome enough, I guess."

She put her hand to his cheek. "You're no pretty swain like Bragnon, 'tis true. But your face is fair pleasing, Cay. To me, it is."

He turned to face her. "Gabriana, you were my teacher first, and we've been friends for quite a while. You know the rules. Women choose their first lovers. Men don't."

"I'm sorry, Caylen. I didn't realize. You've always impressed me with your skill...I just assumed..." Her voice trailed away and she stood. She came closer to him.

His heart thudded so hard in his chest he thought he could hear it, even without benefit of the thrall. Gabri put her hand on the spot. His nipple tightened beneath her touch and breath hissed from his lips.

TRIAL BY FIRE

“Caylen, I would be honored if you would allow me to be your *ahavataret*.”

‘Twas everything he’d ever dreamed. And yet he couldn’t, in good conscious, take it. “I’m honored you’d choose me. But I don’t want you to do this because you pity me.”

“I don’t pity you,” she whispered. “Cay, you’re my friend. How can you think I pity you? If ’tis enough for you that you accept my gift, I’d be happy to give it.”

His cock swelled from the sound of her voice, the scent of her skin, the whispered touch of her lips upon his.

“Cay, ’tis all right. Really.” She tilted her head. “Unless you don’t want me.”

“By the Knight!” he cried. “Gabri, I want you!”

She kissed him, and ’twas better than anything he’d ever imagined. Her tongue nudged his closed lips, and he opened to her. Her hands clutched his shoulders and drew him closer to her.

Caylen knew what to do to bring a woman pleasure, but pictures in a textbook couldn’t compare to the real thing. He tried to still the trembling of his fingers as he slid his hand up to cup the fullness of her breast. Her nipple peaked through the material, and he ran a thumb across the tight bud.

He couldn’t really believe this was happening. He half-feared he’d wake in his bed, rigid with arousal and aching from being unable to release. His cock thrummed with heat and pushed at the front of his trousers.

Her fingers found the bulge and stroked him through the cloth. She unfastened the ties at his waist and slipped her hand inside to cup his testicles and stroke his shaft. She closed her hand around the head of his cock and squeezed lightly. Caylen surged against her hand and let out a low, strangled moan.

Before he knew how she’d done it, Gabri had gone to her knees in front of him and loosed him completely from the trousers. Her hot, wet

TRIAL BY FIRE

mouth enveloped him, took him deep, to the root. He pushed into her mouth in an instinctive rhythm she matched with her tongue, teeth and hands. He felt as a familiar pressure built in his balls, but this time as it rose, he could feel the wall that normally prevented him from climaxing disappear.

“How does the magic know?” he managed to gasp.

She paused long enough to ask, “What?”

“How does it know the difference between my own hand and your mouth?”

“I don’t know.” She licked him slowly, in small circles, while his hips rocked. “ ’Tis the thrall.”

He began to sense something different in the magic he’d carried with him for as long as he could remember. He could use it well, but now it swelled and surged within him along with his growing need for release. He could begin to smell the passion between them, hear the beat of Gabri’s blood in her veins. He looked up and heard the sunlight cascading through the trees.

“ ’Tis wondrous!”

She chuckled. The sound vibrated his shaft and made his balls tighten with desire. He lifted his hips to the sensation, and Gabri took him deep within.

The barrier had begun to crack, but it didn’t break. Gabri left him and lifted her gown off over her head, then laid it on the ground. She lay down on it and parted her knees, and Caylen responded eagerly to her silent invitation.

He knelt between her legs and parted the soft, golden curls with one finger to see the upright nub of her clitoris. He slipped his finger between her folds to find her slickness, then brought it up to circle gently on her button. Her legs fell open wider. The small nub pulsed beneath his touch.

Caylen bent and used his tongue to echo the movements of his finger. She sighed and lifted her pelvis toward him. He took her clitoris

TRIAL BY FIRE

between his lips and suckled gently. He gave up trying to remember what the classes had taught him and relied on instinct and Gabri's response to tell him he was doing well.

Her slick channel begged for him to insert his finger, and he did while he continued to lick her. His penis throbbed as he slid in and out of her warmth. He ached to be deep inside her.

Her bud twitched beneath his tongue and she gave a small cry, then tugged so sharply on his hair he thought he might have hurt her. Instead, she pulled him up until his mouth could take hers again.

Gabri urged him to remove his shirt, which he tossed aside. Her hands smoothed his back and sides, the curve of his pectoral muscles. She tweaked both his nipples and his cock spasmed. A drop of liquid oozed out, and his vision swam at the extreme sensation.

He didn't need to ask her if she was ready. He moved over her, and she helped him position his penis at her entrance, then eased him inside her passage. He held himself back from thrusting too deeply, afraid of hurting her, but Gabri lifted her hips to draw him in further.

Caylen paused before beginning to move. His body shuddered as he blinked at the colors and patterns moving in the air around him. Sounds had become scent, scent became noise, sight became scent. The thrall overtook him like a lightning bolt and shook his body with a pleasure-pain so fierce he ground his teeth together to keep from screaming.

Gabri waited patiently for him to gather control of himself. "You're feeling it, aren't you?"

"The thrall." Caylen bent his head to the curve of her shoulder. "Yes."

She smoothed his hair. He began to move against her. In moments, his buttocks tensed with each thrust. His balls became heavy with seed, burning with desire to get out. His shaft was lost in Gabri's slick heat, with every thrust coming that much closer to the final climax.

"Let go," she whispered in his ear. Her hands found his rear and cupped him, pulled him closer, urged him to push into her harder.

TRIAL BY FIRE

With a shout, he did. His cock tensed, long and hard, and he shuddered like a man caught in the chills of fever. He spurted, each gush another burst of ecstasy.

When he finally caught his breath, he opened his eyes to look down into her lovely face. "I'm sorry."

She raised her eyebrows. "Why, by the Lady? Why would you be sorry?"

"Because I didn't make it good for you."

She shifted him so he moved off her, then sat up and took his hand. "Caylen, you were wonderful."

"But you didn't climax. I could tell." With the thrall humming in his veins, he knew many things he wouldn't have guessed before.

"And you worry about men like Bragnon being better than you." Gabri gave a rueful shake of her head. "Men like Bragnon wouldn't even bother to ask their partner if she climaxed."

"But you didn't."

"Cay, this wasn't for me."

The thrall had backed off a bit, but still sparked on his fingertips when he reached down to touch her belly. "Let me make it better."

"You know you don't have to. 'Tis not a requirement. You have the thrall—"

He stopped her with a quick kiss. "But I want to."

She searched his eyes with hers. A faint expression he wasn't sure he could or wanted to identify crossed her face. She bit her lip, then nodded. "All right."

Without his own lust urging him to frenzy, Cay found it far easier to concentrate on giving Gabri the same pleasure she'd given him. He stretched out beside her to kiss her while his hand slipped down to the tangle of curls between her legs. He easily found her still-erect bud, and began to circle it gently with the tip of his forefinger. In moments, her hips lifted under his touch. Her clitoris grew larger, hotter, harder. He felt the beat of heart in the small nerve center.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Her body shuddered. Her back arched. He slipped a finger inside her and felt the wondrous contractions bearing down on him. She cried out against his mouth and grabbed his hair.

She relaxed and sighed. He withdrew and simply cupped her heat with his palm. Gabriela gave him a sleepy smile.

“Thank you.”

“I should thank you.” Cay nuzzled her cheek with his lips. “You’ve given me something much greater.”

“Use it well,” Gabri said. “But I don’t need to tell you that, Caylen. I know you will.”

* * *

“Instructor!”

Riordan, his hands overflowing with texts and parchments, paused in the doorway to his office. A dark-haired girl with brilliant blue eyes hurried toward him. He caught the scent of heartflower, an aphrodisiac, in her hair.

“I’m very busy. What can I do for you?”

She actually fluttered her eyelashes at him. “I was wondering if I could talk to you...in private.”

Riordan waited a moment before answering. The thrall curled around his ankles and twisted up his body to tickle the back of his neck. This girl was up to something.

“I’m afraid I don’t have time right now.” He shifted the papers in his hand to get a better grip and moved off down the hall.

His brow furrowed. He was done with classes for the day, and he wanted to get back to the privacy of his chambers. He needed some time to think about Noa...

“Instructor, wait!”

Incredulous, for most students at the Keep regarded Riordan with awe, and sometimes fear, he turned again to face her. “If you’d like to speak to me about class work, you can schedule an appointment with

TRIAL BY FIRE

my secretary.”

She reached for his elbow to stay him. “I’m not in any of your classes. I want to talk with you about something else.”

He raised an eyebrow at her and frowned. “Mistress?”

“De Yourk. Solveig de Yourk.”

“Mistress de Yourk. You do realize who I am?”

She simpered. “Of course I do. Everyone knows who you are.”

“Then you must realize I am extremely busy. And extremely bad-tempered. Good day.” Again, he moved away from her, but the chit had the gall to catch the sleeve of his cassock.

“I said I wanted to speak to you in private.” Her voice had grown hard beneath its veneer of flirtation. “Unless you’d like the entire Keep to know about our conversation.”

“I don’t respond to blackmail, Mistress de Yourk.”

She let go of his sleeve and gave him another flirtatious smile. “Please?”

He ground his teeth, but gestured toward the door to his office. “Come inside.”

She closed the door behind her and passed her hands over the lock in a simple charm to keep it closed. The thrall tickled him again and he raised his hand to undo the charm.

“There’s no need for that.”

She shrugged. “ ’Tis your office.”

He sat in his chair behind the desk and gestured for her to sit in the chair in front. “State your business quickly. I grow impatient.”

The flirting and the simpering fell away. Her pretty face became shrewd. “I want you to be my *ahavatara*. A man of great power such as yourself is the perfect choice. Any who tithe themselves to you can count on achieving great things.”

“Or terrible things.” Riordan watched the girl as she leaned back in her chair. *There’s something feral about her. Feline.* Her eyes gleamed with an intelligence he would have admired, had the expression in them

TRIAL BY FIRE

not been so predatory.

"You are a very bold young woman to approach the Instructor Primus."

Solveig ran a hand over her breasts and belly as she spoke. "I want you. I want the power you can provide me. I demand the very best when it comes to my clothing, my accommodations, my steeds. Why should I not demand the best when it comes to my *ahavatara*?"

"I'm not a stud service, Mistress de Yourk. And you demand nothing from me."

"Why deny me?" She purred and twisted in her seat. Her gown rode up to expose an expanse of creamy thigh. "I'm young, I'm beautiful. I excelled in my Sexual Arts classes and I can assure you I'll give you pleasure."

"I can see all that. And still, 'tis my right to deny you."

Her eyes flashed. "My father pays your salary, Instructor."

"Your father is Hedavarius de Livanone?"

"So my mother tells me." She smirked. "He's never denied it. He brought me here. He pays for my schooling and anything else I desire."

"Unfortunately, mistress, he can not pay for me. I long ago stopped serving as *ahavatara* to students. I found it unseemly."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "You did it for that common-born wench with the mismatched eyes. Noa."

"How do you know this?"

"My lord," Solveig said sarcastically. "The entire Keep knows it. We all know she's finally reached her command of the thrall. That's hard to miss since she's so old. We all knew who she yearned for. 'Twas apparent every time she looked at you. Frankly, I'm surprised you accepted her request when you're so reluctant to fulfill mine, but Shalhevet's Mercy is a powerful tool—"

"Close your mouth, girl." Riordan sat up straight in his chair. "Don't sully Noa's name with your lewdness. 'Tis none of your concern, or anyone else's, why I agreed to become Noa's *ahavatara*."

TRIAL BY FIRE

For the first time since stopping him in the hallway, Solveig seemed taken aback and a little nervous. “What other reason could it be? You can’t possibly...love her?”

He did love Noa, no matter how he might try to deny it. To hear this spoiled bitch in front of him—a wench who’d never had to work for anything in her life—speak of his beloved in so mocking a fashion made his stomach churn. It made him ashamed of the way he’d spoken to Noa earlier.

“You do love her. By the Lady.” Solveig sounded stunned. She sat back in her chair, all attempts at seduction disappeared. “You actually love her!”

She began to laugh, a mocking, cruel sound that had Riordan across the desk with the neck of her gown in his fists before she could speak. “Ware who you mock, lady. Your father might be the head of this university, but you are still a student here.”

“Get your hands off me!”

He let go and brushed his hands to rid them of the filthy feeling touching her had given him. “Get out of my office.”

Solveig sneered. “I’m going to give you one last chance. I don’t like the idea of sharing my *ahavatara* with someone like that common-born slut, but you are the best. And I take nothing but the best.”

“You’ll take nothing.” Riordan watched her pretty face darken as he rejected her again.

Incredibly, the chit ran her tongue over her lips and lifted her gown to reveal her bare thighs. The dark curls between her legs showed she was bare everywhere else, as well. She parted her legs and used her hand to show him the pinkness of her intimate region. He was unmoved.

She slid a finger inside herself and gave a soft moan. “I’m tight and hot, and I’m wet for you, Riordan. You can’t tell me you don’t long to fuck me.”

“I wouldn’t fuck you with an enemy’s prick,” Riordan replied

TRIAL BY FIRE

calmly. “Now get out.”

Her legs clamped together so quickly the hem of her gown bunched between them. “How dare you! I’ll have my father—”

“Yes, tell your father your story. How you approached me with lewdness and arrogance instead of the proper behavior of a maiden. Tell him how you threatened me. See what he says.”

Hedavarius might have spoiled his bastard daughter, but the old man wouldn’t approve of her behaving like a common whore. Solveig hissed and stood. Her blue eyes burned with fury. “You’ll be sorry!”

“I have only one action for which I am sorry.” Riordan thought of how he’d turned Noa away this morn. “And it has nothing to do with you.”

At last, she left with a swirl of her gown and slamming of the door. Riordan rubbed his temples. He’d handled that badly. The past two days had turned him upside down, a feeling he wasn’t used to and definitely did not like.

He needed to find Noa.

* * *

Noa had always enjoyed the view from the tower. From its small, arched window, she could see for many miles, over the top of the forest, even to the base of the mountains beyond. She’d grown up in farm country, the child of a shepherd and shepherdess. The land of her childhood had been gently rolling hills of grass. Seeing the majestic woods and mountains surrounding Somnus Keep always took her breath away.

Her throat hurt from the effort of holding back her grief, but she still refused to let the tears fall. She should have known Riordan’s love would be nothing but the dream she’d thought she might keep upon waking. If only she could still be asleep.

She rested her elbows on the windowsill. This high up, the breeze whipped strongly around the stone tower. It tugged the edges of her

TRIAL BY FIRE

hair and lifted it toward the air outside. She closed her eyes to feel it touch her cheeks as softly as lover's caress.

She sensed him before she heard him whisper her name. She kept her face toward the window, but a smile parted her lips. At last, the tears fell.

"Noa, I plead your mercy." Riordan put his arms around her, tentatively, as though he were afraid she would reject him. She'd never expected him to fear.

She leaned into his embrace. "Riordan, I love you. I don't care about the magic. I care about you."

"I know. I'm an old fool."

"You're not old," she said as she realized she wasn't even certain if 'twas the truth. The thrall gave those who could summon it extra life, if they used it wisely. "Are you?"

He chuckled, his breath hot on her ear and cheek. "I'm old enough. I've lived so long alone, I don't think I know how to live differently."

"I have every confidence you can learn."

His hands tightened on her waist. He nuzzled her neck. Her nipples tightened at his touch, and her heart lifted. She didn't even care about the tears slipping down her cheeks. She turned and kissed him. Their tongues darted and danced. His hands moved down to cup her buttocks through her gown.

"Noa, can you ever forgive my foolishness?"

She looked at him seriously. "Do you plan on doing this every morning?"

"No."

She linked her hands around the back of his neck. "Then you don't even need to ask."

He moved one hand to support her upper back and lifted her into his arms. He kissed her long and thoroughly, then brought her close to his chest and held her there. "Hold on."

The room whirled around her and she closed her eyes against the

TRIAL BY FIRE

sudden dizziness. When she opened them, she lay on Riordan's bed with him stretched out beside her. A chill went down her spine at the feeling of the thrall surrounding them, then quickly passed.

"We could've walked, Riordan."

"Ah, but then I'd have wasted precious minutes when I could have been making love to you." His hand slid from her belly to cup her breast, and pleasure tingled through her entire body.

"I like you this way much better," she said.

"Way?"

"Teasing and smiling. You are so much handsomer when you smile than when you scowl." She touched his cheek and ran her fingertips over the curve of his lips. "I think your smile is all the more precious because 'tis so rare."

"I've not had much to smile about. Until you."

His answer surprised her. "I would think you have much to be happy about. You have wealth, power, and security. You hold a position of prestige in the most respected university of magic anywhere in the world."

"And all of it empty...until now. Without love and someone to share it with, none of the rest of that matters." He touched the tip of her nose.

She had to ask the question. "Then why turn me away this morn? Why push me away from you?"

He sighed so heavily his breath gusted her hair. Riordan turned and lay on his back, arm flung behind his head. "Noa, I learned long ago I don't care for rejection. 'Tis always been my choice to keep those who could hurt me at a distance."

"I don't intend to hurt you." She turned on her side and put her head on his shoulder. She ran an idle hand over his chest, down to his belly. The material of his cassock was smooth and heavy, yet she could feel the heat of his body beneath it.

"I know you don't intend to. But you could do it."

TRIAL BY FIRE

It moved her to hear his honesty. Noa shifted onto her elbow so she could stare into his face. "I can't predict the future, for 'tis not my talent. But I can promise you I will never choose to bring you harm."

He didn't answer with words, but with a kiss that reached into her very soul. The thrall sparkled between them. They'd become joined in spirit when he took her maidenhead, and now that connection burst open in her mind and heart like sunrise after the longest night. Noa opened herself to it and to him. He filled her.

His tongue stroked hers. His hand came up to cradle the back of her head and he rolled her onto her back. His weight pinned her, but didn't crush her. He nudged open her legs with his own and settled between them, the bulge of his erection a delightful pressure on her center.

"Too many clothes," he murmured and made a pass down her body. Her gown disappeared.

Noa laughed and did the same to him. Naked, his flesh was hot as fire on hers. His cock brushed her belly, then settled lower against her hardening clit and her soft folds. He didn't enter her, though she ached for him. Instead, Riordan rubbed his erection against her and coated himself with her slickness.

He kissed her shoulders and neck, then moved downward to slide his tongue along the first swell of her breasts. A moment later, his lips found her nipple, still erect with arousal, and he suckled it. Sensation burst through her and she arched her back to push herself against him.

His mouth left her and the air caressed the heat he'd left behind. She shivered. He kissed her belly, ran his tongue along the circular tattoo there, then went lower to press his lips to the soft curls between her legs. He parted her thighs and licked her from the base of her tunnel to the upright nub of her clitoris with one smooth motion that made her purr.

Noa sighed as Riordan centered his attention on her bead. He didn't bother teasing her. He set immediately to a pattern of smooth circles that covered her completely. The thrall filled her, covered her, wound

TRIAL BY FIRE

around her and Riordan and drew them together tighter than any rope.

Riordan slid his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her closer to his mouth. His tongue delved deeply into her folds and stroked inside her. His breath warmed her. He slid up again to lick at her button, around, up and down, then back again to her center.

The first spasms of climax shook her, and he withdrew to blow brief, pointed breaths on her pulsing clit. The teasing caress drove her closer to the edge, but not quite over.

She needed him inside her, and as she thought it, he gave her what she needed. First one finger, then another, and he stretched her passage slightly as he continued to puff repeatedly on her trembling clitoris. Her bud swelled, grew impossibly hard, while her passage clenched on his twisting fingers.

Suddenly, she was cresting, she was flying, she was coming. The orgasm surged within her and filled her entire body with its force. Colors burst in front of her eyes and they sounded like the ocean singing.

Tension coiled within her and made her body stiff beneath the rhythmic breaths and around his sliding fingers. Another burst of pleasure wracked her and she cried out. She hadn't thought she'd fallen until she rose again to ride another surge of climax.

At last her clit ceased its beating. Her heart slowed. The haze of Riordan's aura mingled with her own and cast a peach-colored light around them. She smoothed her hands on his shoulders and touched the top of his head resting on her belly.

"Don't ask me to move," she said. "For I don't think I can."

"I don't want you to move. I want to lay like this with you for a while."

Silence followed, broken only by the soft sound of their breathing. Noa closed her eyes and drifted for a short time in the first daze of sleep. Her limbs grew languid, and her breaths regular and slow. Dreams tickled her mind and she embraced them with a smile.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Riordan left her belly and came up to lay beside her. He tucked his head into the crook of her neck and shoulder. At the feeling of his erect cock against her thigh, Noa's eyes drifted open. She rolled to face him, to touch him. She held him in her fist and pumped him lightly up and down until his breath came faster.

With her own urge satisfied, it became easier to focus on the changes in Riordan as she stroked him. His cock filled her hand. She slid her fingers down to the base of it, and stroked the soft flesh covering his testicles. All at once the urge to taste him as he had tasted her made all vestiges of sleep vanish.

Noa moved down Riordan's body so swiftly she heard him make a startled noise. He gave another when she took him deep into her mouth and used her tongue to tease the ridge around the head of his penis. Still cupping his testicles with one hand, she used the other to stroke him as she sucked.

Within minutes his thighs began to tremble. His sac moved beneath her fingers as the jewels within swelled in response to her attention. She relaxed her throat to take him deeper, faster, harder.

With a groan, he lifted his hips to press himself further into her, and she took him. His hands tangled in her hair and pulled her away from him. With one smooth move, Riordan rolled her beneath him and entered her so quickly she gasped.

He thrust and filled her, and his pelvis ground on her clitoris. She rose again toward orgasm, faster this time even than before. The first shudders hit her just as she felt Riordan's cock begin to throb inside her. It sent her over the edge. They climaxed together in a tangle and tumble of limbs and sweat and flying hair.

When she could finally catch her breath, Noa began to laugh. "My lord, I fear you'll be the death of me with such passion."

"Never say that," came Riordan's reply. He kissed her, then wrapped her in his arms and held her tightly. "Not even in jest."

Kept safe by his warmth, Noa snuggled closer to him. "Tomorrow,

TRIAL BY FIRE

will I wake alone?"

She felt the shake of his head. "Nay, love. I promise."

* * *

Had he ever seen a day so bright, or smelled a wind so sweet? Caylen didn't think so. Whistling, he moved down the hall toward the common dining room where he planned to eat a quick breakfast and head out to the grounds to enjoy the fine Fivemonth sunshine. Today, not even the sight of Bragnon Hucka flirting with Solveig de Yourk, one of the prettiest girls in Somnus Keep, could blacken Cay's mood. Not even when he passed them and the pair turned their heads to whisper and giggle behind his back.

"Good morrow," was all he said and grinned.

Breakfast this morn was oatcakes with butter and syrup, and Cay helped himself to a large plate. He was ravenous. He walked toward one of the long trestle tables and concentrated on eating. While the food was delicious, he was anxious to get outside.

"You missed a spot."

A warm, feminine voice made him look up in surprise. "Good morning, Gabriela."

She reached out a finger to swipe a drop of syrup at the corner of his mouth, then tucked it into her own. "There. All better."

His heart thumped at her touch. He nodded toward the sideboard where the breakfast was being replenished by the students serving as staff. Gabri smiled and shook her head.

"'Tis sweeter when it comes from your lips, I'd wager." She leaned toward him and flicked the corner of his mouth, still sticky, with her tongue. "See?"

He was fully erect and straining the front of his breeches within seconds. "Gabri—"

"Shh." She shook her head. "Cay, forgive me. I overstep myself."

"No. It's all right." Cautiously, he looked around to see if anyone

TRIAL BY FIRE

else had noticed her display. “I don’t mind.”

She linked her fingers through his and squeezed. “Caylen, what are your plans for today?”

“I was going to go outside for a while and practice summoning the thrall.”

“Would you mind if I join you?”

“No!” He softened his voice. “Of course not. But...why?”

“Do you have to ask?” She bit at her lower lip and suddenly seemed shy. “I like you. I like being with you.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “You’ve given me enough already. I don’t expect—”

“That’s why I like you.” Gabri gave a short shake of her head toward Bragnon now sauntering down the aisle toward them. “Men like him do expect.”

“Had enough to eat, Cay?” Bragnon patted his stomach. “Stuffed yourself full to satisfy another sort of hunger?”

Bragnon’s cruel laughter, which yesterday would have had Caylen leaving the table to avoid him, now only made Cay smile. Obviously, Bragnon didn’t know things had changed. Caylen shrugged in response.

“I’m hungrier than normal, sure. I guess it’s all the energy I’ve been expending.”

Bragnon looked taken aback. His companion, Solveig, was shrewder than the handsome man. She gave Caylen a closer look, then looked at Gabriela.

“She’s fucked him,” she announced triumphantly. “Look at them. Can’t you see it, Brag? He’s got the high magic now.”

Bragnon’s brow furrowed. It would be too much for him to congratulate Caylen, not when it meant the he was losing his favorite whipping boy. Bragnon shrugged.

“It’s about time,” was all he said.

Solveig cast them a glance over her shoulder as she followed

TRIAL BY FIRE

Bragnon. Gabri watched the pair go, then murmured, “Bragnon had better watch out. Solveig de Yourk is the most spoiled get I’ve ever known. If he steps on her toes one too many times, he’ll find his soft bed and three squares a day not so easy to come by here at the Keep.”

Cay took her hand. “Let’s not talk about them, all right?”

Her fingers tightened on his. “All right.”

Together, they left the dining hall and headed for the bright sunshine outdoors. Gabri watched Cay as he held the door open for. Though he was a few years younger than she, Gabri had been watching him for quite a while. First as a student in the class she’d helped teach, and then as a friend. Now, she watched him as a lover.

Gabri had never served as *ahavataret* for anyone before. The act required an amount of boldness she didn’t often find within herself. She had offered herself one other time only—to a young man who had politely turned her down and waited for a wealthier and more accomplished sorceress to offer.

Gabri had tried not to be offended; young women got to choose their first lovers and young men had to wait to be chosen, but nobody was ever required to accept an offer. Being someone’s bridge to the thrall was an important responsibility. It was more than initiating a young person into his or her sexuality, since most of them had experienced some form of sexual expression, just not intercourse. Being a magiccreator’s first lover meant taking a piece of them into yourself forever, and they a part of you. A tiny part, to be sure, but one that could mean nothing...or everything.

Still, being turned away the first time she’d offered meant Gabri hadn’t offered again. Until Caylen. She’d had other lovers, of course. Few magiccreators remained celibate once they’d come of age. There was no point in it. Magiccreators didn’t need to fear disease or unwanted pregnancy as unmagicked folk did. Sex was one of the Divine Creator’s greatest gifts and meant to be shared. Of the other men she’d taken to her bed, however, none had pleased her as much as Caylen had.

TRIAL BY FIRE

“What are you thinking about with such a smile?” he asked her as they walked along the curving path toward the shimmering lake.

“You.” She gave him an honest answer because he deserved one, and was rewarded with his own smile.

“You have a pretty smile, Gabri.”

“Thank you.” She had to stop if from spreading wider and breaking into laughter at the happiness she felt with him. After a moment, she didn’t try to stop it any longer, and her joy bubbled out over her lips. “Come on, Cay. Let’s run.”

“Why?” He looked over his shoulder, as though expecting to see a foe approaching.

She took his hand and lifted her skirts with the other. “Because it feels good.”

So they ran, down to the water’s edge, where they collapsed on the soft grass in fits of laughter that looked like music and smelled like sunshine. She tucked the thrall back inside her, where it rightly belonged, and watched Cay try to do the same.

“It will come to you in time,” she told him as his eyes cleared. “It doesn’t always overtake you.”

“I know.” He grinned and stretched out with his hands behind his head. “But for now, I don’t mind. I’ve waited a long time for the high magic to come when I call it. I don’t mind if it comes when I don’t.”

She nodded. The low magic could be powerful, too. ’Twas the magic most magicreators used for daily tasks. The high magic, though...was everything. All the time. A strange and overwhelming force with the fury and beauty of fire, wind, and water, thought and emotion and sensation all wrapped up in one package.

Gabriana shaded her eyes and looked out over the water to the small island in the center of the lake. “Have you ever gone out there?”

“To the fairies’ grotto? No.” He gave a mocking shudder. “I’d like to keep my eyes and my tongue, thanks.”

“You wouldn’t be much fun without your eyes or your tongue.” She

TRIAL BY FIRE

leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. “But I fear to disappoint you. There are no fairies in the fairies’ grotto. They all died or moved away. There’re only ruins there.”

“How do you know that?” he asked suspiciously. “Hedavarius forbids students to go there.”

“Cay, I’m not a student any more. I’ve been a teacher.” She pointed. “Actually, Hedavarius would be hard pressed to call you student any longer, either, since you’ve gained the thrall. It’s actually quite something to see. If you’d care to join me.”

He sat up and looked across the water, then back at her. His blue eyes had gone dark with passion, and the sight made her stomach twist in anticipation.

“I’d like that.”

She held out her hand to help him up. When he stood, the movement pulled her close to him. Their bodies touched. Her nipples hardened against his chest. His hand pressed on her back for a moment before he stepped away. Gabri knew she didn’t imagine the flush rising on his dusky cheeks—and knew the color wasn’t from the heat of the sun overhead. The day had become ripe with promise.

“How will we get there? Is there a boat?”

“Do you need a boat?”

Cay looked at the water, then down at his feet. “I don’t know. Do I?”

She shook her head. “Not when you have the thrall to command. Do you want to try it?”

“Of course!”

She laughed at his exuberant answer and held out her hand. “This way.”

She put her foot to the first gently lapping waves. They wet the toe of her slipper. Gabri closed her eyes for a moment and concentrated. The thrall, eager as a puppy, slipped beneath her feet and surrounded her. ’Twas as easy and as comfortable as slipping into a soft pair of

TRIAL BY FIRE

shoes. She sighed and looked down. The water still moved in its gentle pattern, but now her foot stayed atop it, not in it.

“You try.”

Cay stood beside her and put his foot out. “I don’t know the words for water walking.”

“Look inside yourself, Cay. Do you need them?”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, she saw the thrall swirling in the depths of his pupils. “No.”

“No. And this won’t be water walking. Not quite. Water walking keeps you on top of the water, but you still get wet, and you can still be vulnerable to whatever is in the water. ’Tis one reason why Hedavarius has made the island forbidden. Water walking might get you there...if you can get past the merfolk.”

“And using the thrall protects us?”

Gabri nodded and let the high magic cover her like a cloak. “If you let it.”

Cay took another step forward. His feet moved on the water without getting wet. He walked a few steps to where the water would have reached his shins, and looked back at her. “Are you coming?”

She had paused to watch him use his newfound power, but now she joined him. “You’re doing well.”

“I had a good teacher.”

She blushed. They walked farther onto the lake’s surface. Out here on the water, the breeze was stiffer. It rippled the water hard enough to thoroughly rock a small craft, if they’d been in one. As it was, the water occasionally splashed up onto their legs, but again did not wet them. The high magic protected them.

“Look here,” she said, when they’d reached close to the lake’s center. The deepest part. Here the water was as clear and still as glass, though they couldn’t see even close to the bottom, only darkness. “Have you ever seen one?”

“Not this close.” Caylen peered down past his feet to the mermaid

TRIAL BY FIRE

swimming beneath them. “Not alive.”

Gabri shook her head. “Hedavarius outlawed hunting them for sport, but they’ve never forgiven us. Beware, Cay, and keep the thrall about you. That bitch would harm you if she could.”

“She looks like she’d like to eat me,” Cay replied as the mermaid stretched her mouth into a wide, sharp-toothed grin.

“Mayhap that, too.” Gabri shivered at the sight of the bare-breasted humanoid figure whose body ended in the thick, muscular tale of a fish. “Nasty creatures.”

“Let’s go.”

The mermaid followed them, swimming on her back below the lake’s surface. Her scaled tale moved the water with such force it lifted Gabri and Caylen as they walked. After a moment, she was joined by a merman. His powerful arms embraced the female, twisted her, turned her. The female bucked and fought, her face pulled into a grimace and her sharp teeth flashing.

The merman’s penis rose from its concealed slit, and Gabri blushed to see it. The organ was long and ridged. It looked more like a weapon than an instrument of love. The merman gripped it with one hand and used the other hand to wrench his ladylove into position.

“Apparently merfolk do not make love face to face.” Caylen sounded embarrassed, and when she turned to look, his eyes were wide. “If you can call that making love.”

The water churned into foam around their feet as the merman thrust into the mermaid. The female flung out her arms, face down, and writhed as he impaled her. The merman humped against her rapidly, without grace. They turned in the water, so she was above him and he beneath. His tail beat the water as he pumped her.

It didn’t look like an act of love, but the mermaid’s nipples had become red and hard. Her face contorted in a scream they couldn’t hear above the water’s surface. Her tail bent forward to create better access to her lover behind her. His hands came around to caress her buoyant

TRIAL BY FIRE

breasts and tweak the red, protruding nipples. They turned in the water, over and over as they fucked.

Gabri's own nipples tightened at the sight, which should not have aroused her but did. The raw, animal passion of it made her heart beat faster and her pulse pound in the spot between her legs. Those creatures were not completely animals, but they mated like beasts. It should have disgusted her...and yet, as she watched the mermaid's eyes glaze with unmistakable delight and saw the fishwoman's body tense and jerk in climax, her own body filled with a tension she couldn't ignore.

Again, the pair below them turned and Gabri saw the merman's face clench as he, too, climaxed. In another moment, they'd parted and swum away, leaving only a pattern of bubbles to show they'd been there at all.

She looked up with heat all over her cheeks and met Cay's gaze. He ran his tongue along his bottom lip, slowly, in a way she knew was unrehearsed. The sight shot a bolt of pure pleasure straight to her already swelling clitoris. He was incredibly attractive, mostly because he simply didn't realize it. She wanted to kiss him very much.

It seemed to take forever to get to the island, but once they were there, Gabriela bent and slipped off her shoes to wiggle her toes in the sun-warmed sand. The beach was tiny, miniscule really, and just inches away was the small stand of trees that sheltered the fairies' grotto.

She tilted her head up toward the sunshine, her eyes closed to see the bright pattern of red and gold against the back of her eyelids. She sensed Caylen beside her. The soft brush of his hand on hers, the puff of his breath on her cheek made her smile. If she were blind, she'd know 'twas him, and not only because she held a part of him inside her.

"Is it back there?" His voice broke her out of her silent thoughts.

Gabriana opened her eyes and looked into the trees. "Yes. Would you like to see it?"

He nodded and reached for her hand. "Show me."

She led him under the hanging tree limbs and through the

TRIAL BY FIRE

undergrowth to the barely visible trail. Here, the sun was barely able to force its rays to the ground. The shade felt welcome after the brightness of the sun. She carried her shoes in the hand not holding Caylen's and the ground was soft beneath her toes. In minutes, for the island was very small, they reached the grotto. Here the ferns and flowers grew more abundantly, once tended by the fairies who'd made this place their home.

Cay looked around. "Very pretty."

She could tell he wasn't much impressed. "This is just the outside of their homestead, Caylen. You have to go through that wall there to get to the ruins of their colony."

"A stone wall." He grinned. "With no door."

The wall had begun to crumble over time with nobody to care for it. Vines and weeds overgrew it. Gabri passed a hand over the stones and the thrall glimmered at the ends of her fingertips. The stones sparkled in response.

"Fairies don't have magic. They *are* magic. This wall is magic, too. 'Tis not real. Put your hand through it and you'll see."

Looking doubtful, Caylen did so, then pulled back his hand when it slid through the wall with no resistance. "What happened to the fairies who used to live here?"

"Disease, I think. A plague killed them off quite some time ago. The rest moved away. I imagine 'tis better than having them here, kidnapping students for their dinner."

"Shall we go through?"

They stepped through together and came out inside the decrepit fairy colony. The buildings had long ago disappeared since they'd been made from organic materials. All that remained were the small stone columns that marked their wells and waste systems. The rest of the colony had been overgrown with flowers and plants that made what had been outside seem sterile in comparison. Sunshine glimmered with colored sparks that echoed the colors in the flowers. The ferns had

TRIAL BY FIRE

multiplied like lacy banners and covered the entire earthen floor.

Gabri turned to point out the remains of one of the fairy circles where the creatures had their dances, but as she faced Caylen, the words died in her throat. The look of passion in his eyes had grown darker and more urgent, and she was speechless in response to the sight of it.

Without a word, but with infinite tenderness, Caylen laid her down on a bed of cool, soft ferns and kissed her. She opened beneath him, eager for his touch. He cupped her breast and her nipple nudged his thumb.

Caylen slid his mouth along her cheek to nuzzle at her ear, then went down the curve of her jaw to kiss the column of her throat. His fingers went to the line of buttons on the front of her gown, and he followed each one as he undid them. She was bare beneath the gown but for a thin pair of underdrawers. His mouth found her bare breasts, and he suckled gently on first one nipple, then the other. Sparks of pleasure tingled in her from his touch.

Gabri touched his hair as he used his hands to bring her breasts together and kiss them both. He palmed her nipples, then moved lower, down her belly. His mouth nipped at the curve of her hip and she wriggled at the tickling.

He looked up, as though to be certain she wasn't protesting, then bent back to her skin again. Gabri no longer felt like Cay's teacher, but instead had become his student. Though sexually she'd had more experience, none of her lovers had taken the time to so thoroughly explore her body and find the places that gave her the most pleasure.

The flowers around them perfumed the air with enough scent to make her feel nearly drunk from it. The thrall ebbed and flowed between them. She took what he gave, and he did the same with her. Caylen unlaced the front of her drawers, but did not pull them down.

Instead, he cupped her through the thin material, then drew his finger down across the small bump of her clitoris as it became more

TRIAL BY FIRE

prominent in her arousal. He circled it gently. The pull and tug of the cloth against her flesh added to the sensation and had her biting her lip in seconds. He stroked downward and outlined her opening. Up again, over her nub, then down, until she would have cried with need had he not suddenly put his mouth to her and given her what she wanted.

His breath was hot through the cloth. He plucked at her button with his lips. He wet the material and used his hands to press it, transparent now, over her clitoris. He licked her firmly, stroke after stroke. Gabri began to shudder and he had, as yet, not even put his flesh to hers.

At last, Cay tugged on the waistband of her drawers and pulled them over hips, then off her legs. He paused at her feet to kiss her ankles, then up her calves. He kissed the tender spot behind her knees, which made her roll her hips helplessly. Up her thighs he pressed a line of kisses. When he reached her center at last, he used only the tip of his tongue to touch her nub.

“Caylen!”

The cry erupted from her mouth as her body tensed at his touch. She was close, so close. He slipped a finger inside her as his tongue stroked her from top to bottom, pausing at the top to swirl around the place she needed it most. Gabri spread her legs to let him in and lifted her buttocks to press herself against him. She gave herself to him completely.

She didn't know how Caylen had undressed himself while making love to her with his mouth, but when she looked down at him, he was as naked as she. The sight of him between her thighs, the sight of his tongue dancing on her aroused clit, nearly sent her over the edge. She gasped, she breathed, she sighed.

She put a hand into his hair and pulled, desperate to feel him inside her. He left her trembling center and moved up her body. He captured her mouth without hesitation. He was fierce in his passion, something she'd never have suspected of him, and that fierceness made her recall the merfolk's coupling. It made her gasp aloud as he entered her

TRIAL BY FIRE

smoothly, without fumbling.

His body fit with hers like they'd been made for each other. His cock filled her completely. The hardness of his pelvic bone rubbed her exactly where she needed it most. Cay began to thrust, slowly at first, then faster, and with every movement, her clitoris throbbed anew.

Gabri clutched at his back and hooked her heels around his calves. Their eyes met and locked. In Cay's gaze, she saw a depth of emotion that touched her, moved her, sent her flying toward climax more swiftly even than their physical joining. She saw something she hadn't dared hope to see. Love.

His thrusts grew more ragged, along with his breathing. He slid a hand between them to press his thumb against her bud. The extra sensation was enough to send her over the edge. Her clitoris swelled and throbbed, then released. She brought his head down to kiss her again as she trembled beneath him.

His cock pounded inside her. He gave a low cry, first wordless, and then her name. Over and over as his orgasm rushed through him, he cried her name.

He gathered her into his arms, and they rocked together. Their hearts beat in time, fast and then slower. Finally, he grew soft inside her and rolled onto his side with her still held close to him.

"Gabriana."

She snuggled close to him, glad for his warmth against the cool ferns under them. "Yes, Caylen."

"I would like to say something to you, but I'm afraid you'll take it the wrong way."

That didn't sound good. Gabri sat up. "Yes?"

Cay sat up, too, and took her hand. "Gabri, we've known each other for a few years now. I want you to know I've always admired you."

This was getting worse and worse. Gabri looked down at their hands, the fingers linked, and thought of the passion they'd just shared. Perhaps she had been wrong about what she saw in his eyes. "Thank

TRIAL BY FIRE

you.”

“I know you can’t possibly feel the same about me—”

“Caylen, stop.” She took her hand from his and curled her knees to her chest. “You have no idea how I feel about you.”

He looked surprised. “I don’t?”

She sighed. “Oh, Caylen. Do you still think I’m doing this just as a favor?”

He looked. The high magic moved between them subtly and without force. He rubbed his face and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Gabriana got to her feet and lifted her chin to keep herself from crying. She gathered her clothes about her. “I don’t want to hear any more!”

“Gabriana—”

“Oh, stop!” she cried as she pulled her gown closed and did up the buttons with a swipe of her hand. “Is that what you think of me? That I just...just give myself away like that? To anyone? For pity?”

“No, no...”

“Then why do you think I asked you to come here with me today?” Gabri put her hands on her hips. “Why do you think I made love to you? For a favor?”

“I don’t think that.” Caylen held out his hands, but Gabri pushed them away.

“Then what?”

“I was hoping. I mean...” He gave a frustrated swipe through his hair, mussing it, before he looked at her. “I’ve liked you for a long time.”

“Well, I should hope so.” She gave a pointed glance down to the crushed foliage where they’d just made love.

“But I never thought you would ever like me in the same way.”

She softened toward him...a little. “Why not? Wait. Don’t bother to make a list.”

He smiled and bit his lip. “Gabriana, I admire you greatly and

TRIAL BY FIRE

would be honored if you would allow me to court you. Properly, I mean. Exclusively, I mean.”

Her heart leapt. “You know I have to leave the Keep at the end of this term, Cay.”

“I was hoping we might leave together.”

She smoothed the front of her gown. “I would like that. I would like to be with you.”

With no more hesitation, Caylen swept her into his arms and kissed her breathless.

“We should be getting back to the Keep.” He kissed her again.

They stayed in a silent embrace for a few moments. Gabriana held him tightly, then let him go. “We should. Come on then. Back over the water.”

When they came out of the grotto, she saw footsteps on the sand that hadn’t been there before. Gabri looked around, curious. *Who else could have decided to come to the deserted island today?*

A few bent twigs and crushed ferns indicated someone had been there, and not long ago. Her cheeks heated as she thought of someone witnessing their lovemaking. Whoever it was had had quite a show.

Across the water, close to shore, she glimpsed a small craft. It was heading not toward the bank where she and Caylen had entered the lake, but instead moved steadily toward the high stone wall that kept the water from entering the subbasements of the Keep. Someone planned to enter the Keep unseen.

She shaded her eyes. “Who is that?”

Caylen put up a hand to keep the sun from blurring his vision. She sensed the shift of the thrall within him as he concentrated. “Bragnon. And that girl he was with this morn in the dining hall.”

“Solweig de Yourk.” Gabri looked, but too late. The boat had already entered the boathouse. “I wonder what they were doing out here?”

“Same thing as us, do you think?” he asked, and she had to look at

TRIAL BY FIRE

him hard to see if he were teasing her.

He was. Gabri raised a brow at him. “They were much swifter about it than we, I’d say.”

“Or maybe they changed their minds. She’s still a maiden, isn’t she? Maybe she decided against Bragnon as her *ahavatara* after all.” Cay shrugged. “I couldn’t care less actually.”

“Me either,” Gabri said, though she watched after them for a few more moments, even as she could see nothing. Then she shrugged, too, and followed Cay back across the water to shore.

* * *

Noa hummed to herself as she hung her robe on the hook. She was looking forward to a long soak in the hot bath. Though the days had begun to warm in a prelude to summer, there was nothing like a nice soak in a heated pool, especially inside the cool stone walls of Somnus Keep.

Riordan had a private bathing chamber, but the tub there was purely utilitarian. She’d decided to visit the communal bath chamber instead, where she could not only soak, but also be massaged and pampered if she chose. She’d rarely used the facility in her time at the Keep, as she’d always had something better to spend her money on than extra privileges. Tonight, however, she’d decided to treat herself.

The pool itself was large enough to hold at least twenty young women. The stone steps did not reach to the pool’s bottom, which was deep enough to make the water over Noa’s head. A stone bench lined the pool’s inner rim, and a flat, heated pallet rose from the pool’s center for those who wished to lie above the water. Various lower flat stones were positioned just below the water’s surface to accommodate those bathers who wished to recline while still being covered by the hot water, and Noa chose one of those. She grabbed a molded pillow of water resistant rushes and stretched out, her head above water and her body nicely ensconced in the soothing warmth.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Her body ached, even between her legs, but she didn't mind the pain. In fact, it made her smile. She was sore because of the amount of lovemaking she and Riordan had been doing over the past few days. Every morn and every eve, and sometimes during the day if he caught her with a free moment.

He smiled more, and laughed more. He held her hand in the halls and kissed her shamelessly outside his office even when there were students in the halls. Somnus Keep was abuzz with the changes in the Instructor Primus, and Noa blushed at the rumors and stories abounding, but she didn't really mind.

He loved her, and she loved him, and it didn't really matter what anyone else thought. She knew most people were surprised he'd not only agreed to become her *ahavatara*, but her permanent lover as well. She knew there were those at the Keep who didn't believe their love would last long enough to reach the marriage canopy. Noa didn't care. Riordan had asked her to become his bride at the end of the summer term, and she had agreed. Whatever else anyone thought about it didn't matter, so long as she had him by her side.

Now she closed her eyes and drifted into waking dreams of Riordan and the plans they were making. The water covered her, stroked her, soothed and caressed her. She drifted, lazily, content to feel the firm stone beneath her back and the steaming water over the rest of her.

She heard the splashing of another bather, but ignored it. She'd chosen one of the pallets on the far end of the pool for privacy. The splashing grew closer.

"Hello, Noa."

Noa, surprised, opened her eyes. The girl who floated in the water next to her was a few years younger. Her face looked somewhat familiar, but Noa couldn't think of her name for a moment. "Solveig?"

A look of irritation flickered in the other girl's eyes, as though she was annoyed with Noa for not recognizing her right away. "Yes. You remember me. You helped with Instructor Chondley's class last year. I

TRIAL BY FIRE

was his top student.”

The Advanced Sexual Arts class. “Oh, yes. Solveig. How nice to see you again.”

Noa recalled Solveig had been a vain and spoiled student. Not a girl she would have chosen for a friend. She gave the girl a strained smile and closed her eyes again. Solveig didn’t swim away.

“I was wondering if I could ask your advice.” The girl sounded concerned, and Noa looked at her. Solveig made a pretty pout. Her dark hair fanned out around her shoulders in the water. She put her hands, one holding a washcloth, on Noa’s pallet to keep herself afloat. “I admire you so much, you being so much older and everything.”

Noa looked at Solveig. To hear the younger girl admired her made her pause before answering. Solveig was pretty and rich from what Noa remembered. She’d never paid Noa a second of attention before now.

“What sort of advice?” Noa asked carefully.

Solveig lifted herself onto Noa’s pallet so quickly Noa had to sit up lest the other girl land on top of her. Solveig’s naked skin brushed Noa’s as she maneuvered. The contact was surprising and uncomfortable, but Solveig appeared not to notice.

“It’s about a man.” Unselfconsciously, Solveig pushed her hair from her face so it fell in dark sheets over her shoulders to reveal her breasts.

Though nudity in the bathing chamber was no new sight, Noa wished suddenly for a robe to wear. She usually wasn’t shy or modest about her body, but the girl’s closeness was making her so. She moved away as much as she could without being obvious.

“An older man?” Noa asked, making an assumption.

Solveig nodded, her eyes wide in a stare that seemed somehow contrived. “Yes.”

“What happened?”

“He...he touched me.”

Solveig’s eyes filled with sudden tears and her shoulders began to

TRIAL BY FIRE

hitch. Noa felt guilt for her initial distrust, for the girl's grief certainly seemed real enough. Awkwardly, she put her arm around the girl's shoulders. Solveig reacted immediately, bursting into further sobs and throwing her arms around Noa.

"Shh, hush." Noa tried to soothe the sobbing girl. "Tell me what happened."

Solveig sat back and swiped at her tears with the cloth. "He...he called me into his office. He asked to speak to me about something private. I thought he meant a grade or something. I went in and he locked the door. Then he told me to sit down. In a minute, he'd torn my gown open! And he put his hands on me, here! And here!"

As she cried out, Solveig clutched at Noa's breast with the hand holding the cloth, then thrust it between Noa's legs. "And he grabbed me!"

She'd retreated before Noa could protest or even try to move the girl's grip. Her skin tingled from Solveig's rough touch. Gooseflesh humped on her arms and legs, both from Solveig's words and from her grasp.

"And then he pushed me down and...he took me!"

"He raped you?" Noa's gasp echoed in the stone chamber. Rape was a crime of the common world, not of Somnus Keep. Men did not force women, especially not virgin magiccreators whose power was tied to their maidenhead.

Solveig burst into fresh sobs. "Yes! He raped me! He said he'd grown a taste for cherries! I didn't know what he meant at first..."

But Noa understood the crude term. Cherry-picker was used to describe a man who actively pursued being asked to serve as a young woman's first lover. "Solveig, who did this awful thing to you?"

"You see, that's why I had to come to you for your advice." Solveig sniffled and turned her red-eyed gaze on Noa. "It was Riordan de Cimmerian."

* * *

TRIAL BY FIRE

Riordan had never seen so many people in Judgment Hall. From his seat on the floor facing the multiple tiers of benches, he stared into the faces of what surely must be the entire population of Somnus Keep and some neighboring towns besides. He kept his face neutral, though he knew he was in some very serious trouble.

Hedavarius was head of the school itself, but he was not in charge of passing judgment. He had called a tribunal of Inquisitors. It had been difficult finding enough men and women who were Riordan's peers in the world of magic. Many of them lived far away from Somnus Keep. Some had refused to take part. Some who had had previous conflicts with Riordan had been ineligible. Finally, Hedavarius had gathered six men and three women to serve on the judgment board.

Riordan's eyes searched the crowd and saw many faces twisted into smug grins. He'd made enemies over the years. He'd been harsh to students and faculty, aloof, arrogant. And yes, he had been cruel. If he fell, there would be many who would applaud.

But not Noa. Please, by the Knight, he prayed. *Not Noa.* He searched the crowd for her, but did not see her. He hadn't seen her since the night she had come to his room to warn him of Solveig's story. He had tried to tell her then he'd never touched the girl, but the guards had come to take him away before he could tell her anything.

He had the power to destroy this place, but pride would have prevented him from doing it even if the Binding had not. It had taken the combined strength of nine other magiccreators to Bind him, however, and he did take pride in that.

"Riordan de Cimmerian, Instructor Primus of Magical Theory and Practice, you are called to the table to answer for the crime of rape."

Riordan got up and walked toward the table behind which his prosecutors sat. He had worked with all but one, a woman who stared at him with implacable eyes. She was playing the role of First Inquisitor. He nodded to each in turn, but none of them returned the gesture.

"How do you plead?" said the First Inquisitor.

TRIAL BY FIRE

“I did not commit the crime.”

“Bring forth the accuser.”

Riordan sat in the high backed chair next to the table. Solveig de Yourk, wearing a far more demure dress than she'd worn to his office, her hair pulled back in a tight braid, face clean of any cosmetic, entered the room. She walked slowly and her eyes darted toward him, then away, as though she were afraid even to look at him. The act made him want to curl his lip, but mindful of the eyes upon him, he resisted.

“Have a seat, Mistress de Yourk.”

She did and clasped her hands in her lap.

“Please tell the tribunal and these witnesses what transpired.”

She went through her story. How he had called her into the office. How he had told her sit down. How finally, he had breached her maidenhead by force.

He'd heard her tale three times already, for she'd had to tell it thrice, convincingly and without discrepancy, in order to bring him to trial. Now, as she told her story a fourth time, even Riordan had to admit she sounded believable.

They went through her list of witnesses, the main one being the braggart Bragnon Hucka, who swore he'd seen Solveig enter Riordan's office and leave it weeping and disheveled a few minutes later. She had the bruises she claimed were from Riordan's touch. More damning, she could summon the thrall, which proved she had lost her maidenhead. At last came the final piece of evidence against him.

“This is the cloth you used to cleanse yourself?” The First Inquisitor indicated a white square of fabric, no different than any other of the Somnus Keep toweling.

“Yes.” Solveig wiped at her face and put on what Riordan supposed was meant to be a brave smile. She was a good actress.

“Put it in the truthfire.”

One of the men, Edward de Fenize, did so. The flames flared blue, then black before finally settling back to red and orange again. Solveig

TRIAL BY FIRE

sat back in her chair and gave the audience a triumphant look.

“The truthfire says the mingled substances on this cloth do indeed belong to the two individuals in question.” The First Inquisitor folded her arms across her chest. She looked at her fellow Inquisitors. Then she looked at Riordan. “Riordan de Cimmerian, the evidence which has been presented against you is very serious indeed. You now have the chance to defend yourself and convince this tribunal of your innocence. If you cannot, you will be put to the final trial by fire.”

Riordan stood and faced the crowd once more. He searched it for any sign of Noa, and though he refused to show it, his heart fell when he did not see her. He called on anger to chase away the pain inside. She had said she loved him...but she wasn't here to support him.

“I don't need to speak in my defense.” The watching crowd murmured and Riordan met them all with a stony face to match his hardened heart. “Let the truthfire be my proof.”

* * *

“Where would you like to go?” Gabriana formed an orb that first took the shape of a ship, and then a bird. “Across the Sea of Days? To the Western Lands? Where, Cay?”

“I think I'd like to go someplace green.” Caylen formed his own orb, which joined hers in flight across the room. “And flat. I confess I'm a bit tired of the mountains here.”

He rolled atop her and kissed her again. She felt the press of his hardening cock between her thighs, and a surge of arousal made the thrall rise, humming, in her veins.

“I think I'd like to see the ocean,” Gabri said. “Walk along real sand.”

“I think I don't really care where we go,” Caylen replied. “As long as I'm with you.”

“Those are the nicest words I've ever heard.” Gabriana kissed him.

Caylen pressed his erection between her thighs and a familiar heat

TRIAL BY FIRE

flared. She spread her legs to let him settle closer against her. He tucked his head into the curve of her shoulder and held her for a time without speaking or moving. The past few days had changed them both.

“I love you, Gabriela.”

“I love you, too, Cay.”

He tilted his head to look up at her. “You know I can’t offer you much.”

“I don’t need much.”

He snuggled closer for another minute. His lips traced her neck as he reached up to cup her breast. He rolled her nipple under this thumb and the small pink bud tightened.

“I love touching you,” he whispered.

He moved to the side and slid his hand lower to touch her center. She was already slick with desire for him. Caylen found her button and stroked it gently, then slid down and up to coat her with slickness. He kissed her mouth. His tongue swept inside her mouth, and she met it with her own while her hips lifted under his patient attention.

He was going to make her climax too soon. Gabri wanted this to last. She shifted herself away from him and pushed him until he rolled onto his back. Then she straddled his hips, his cock nestled between her thighs and nudging upward toward her belly. She gripped with her inner thigh muscles as she rocked back and forth. He hadn’t entered her, but the position pressed his cock along her folds and her clit. It would take only a small shift to allow him to slide deep within her, but Gabri kept herself in place.

Cay put his hands on her hips to help her move. Soon his entire penis glistened with her juices. The shaft grew ever harder between her thighs as she rocked along its length. Gabri reached down between her legs and grasped his cock. She closed her fingers around the rim of the head and echoed the movement of her pelvis by twisting her palm on his sensitive flesh.

Cay moaned and throbbed in her hand. Gabriela’s head fell back as

TRIAL BY FIRE

pleasure overtook her. Her hair fell over her bare skin and across Cay's thighs. As the thrall filled her, her hair began to crackle and spark. The ends lifted. It surrounded and curtained them, and the colors of their mingled passion shone in every strand.

She felt the pulse of his balls between her legs and of his cock against her center. Her clit twitched in response. She was ready for him, more than ready, hot and wet for him.

"Yes," Caylen groaned as Gabriela lifted her hips to allow his penis to enter her slick passage. "By the Knight, Gabri, that's good."

He filled her so deeply he tapped the entrance to her womb. For a moment, Gabri didn't move. She held him inside her while she clenched and unclenched her inner muscles to bring him pleasure.

It worked. Cay's cock expanded inside her, and she felt the first ripples of his impending climax. Gabri wasn't ready to stop making love to him yet. Instead of lifting her hips to stroke herself on and off him, she continued to stay in one place and use her muscles to drive him closer to the edge.

'Twas working for her, too. Without so much movement to distract her, she found each sensation heightened. Each clench of her muscles tightened on Caylen, even while tugging on her hard button. She began to rock her hips, still not enough to finish him, but enough to draw out the pleasure even more.

Gabriana met Caylen's eyes, and they both smiled. The mingled threads of the high magic danced around them. Blue, red, green, gold. Every sense became stronger. She could hear his heart beat.

Caylen took one hand from her hip and brought it around to press his thumb against her clitoris. One touch, then one more, and she splintered and broke. She shattered and came back together. Her body shuddered with an ecstasy that did not fade but instead grew again, immediately, as he continued to circle her clit.

She could no longer keep herself from moving. Gabri lifted herself on Cay's cock, up and down, as she rolled her pelvis toward the

TRIAL BY FIRE

delirious bliss of his thumb on her nub. She came again and bent forward to capture his mouth with hers while she continued to pump him.

A third time, her body shuddered and jerked. Gabri cried out. Caylen gripped both her hips and began to thrust inside her hard enough to crush her lips against him. Her hands found the pillow beneath his head and she gripped it. Her breasts pressed against his chest as he thrust harder and faster.

He slammed into her, his hands in a bruising grip on her hips, but the pain only made her pleasure flare higher. Caylen's cock leapt inside her as he buried himself as deeply as he could. Covered with the thrall, she heard the sound of his seed pulsing from him as she heard the blood flowing throughout her clit in its final surges of orgasm.

They rested there for a moment before she slid to his side to cuddle against him. The warmth of his seed coated her, and Gabri took a cloth from the bedside table to press between her legs.

"How do people without the thrall make love, do you think?" Cay asked her. "It can't possibly be as nice."

She laughed and kissed his shoulder. "Well, there are more people in the world who don't have magic than do, so I'd say their lovemaking must be at least adequate enough for them to keep doing it."

"Now that I have it, I can't imagine how I ever was before." Cay's heartbeat had begun to slow beneath her cheek. "The low magic seems like parlor tricks now."

Gabri yawned and pulled a sheet over their sweat-cooled bodies. "The low magic is just as useful as the high. More useful, sometimes, because it accomplishes the more menial tasks. You don't use the high magic to light a fire or to boil water. You don't use the thrall to appear or disappear. Most anything truly useful is done with the low magic."

"I know that. But the thrall...it fills me. It makes me see and hear and smell, taste, feel..."

"I know." Gabri rubbed his chest in slow circles and enjoyed the

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feeling of his smooth skin under her fingertips. "It's everything. But it can take everything, too. If you let it overcome you."

"I'd never do that," Cay scoffed. He kissed the top of her head. "You'd have to be pretty weak to allow that to happen."

Gabriana sat up to look into his face. "No. Just greedy. Or angry. If the thrall is a gift, it can also be a curse, Cay. Didn't you pay attention in History of the High Magic and Its Uses class?"

Cay looked embarrassed. "With Instructor Morgatine? Sorry. She put me to sleep nearly every time."

Gabri had to laugh at his honest answer. "If you'd stayed awake, you'd have learned some very important things."

"Maybe you can teach them to me." He kissed her.

Gone was the shy and awkward young man I knew so well, Gabri thought fondly as Cay fondled her breast and nuzzled her cheek. Cay was confident. Eager. And a surprisingly accomplished lover.

"I studied in class, but 'tis you who've inspired me," he whispered, and took her aback.

"What?"

"You were thinking I'm changed," he said.

"Yes, but...the thrall?"

He nodded, then lifted his hand to show her the small orb he'd formed. He closed his fingers on it and it broke apart. The strands flowed over his arm and up his shoulder.

"Can you read thoughts, Gabri?"

She shook her head. "No, Cay. That's a very rare talent."

"It's faded now anyway." He showed her his palm and the vanishing sparks of magic. "But for a moment, I heard everything you thought."

"Do you think it's the tithe? That 'tis just me? Or can you do this with anyone?"

He lay back on his pillow, his blue eyes narrowed in concentration. "I don't know."

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“Cay, if you can, you’re destined for more than just casual accomplishments.” Gabri felt a shudder trail her spine like a set of phantom fingers. “You’ll have a great responsibility. You could be a Truthseer.”

He gathered her close to him, and when he spoke, his voice was muffled. “I don’t know if I want to be a Truthseer.”

“Love,” Gabri said. “You might not have a choice.”

* * *

Noa hadn’t meant to avoid the judging. She had not seen Riordan since the guards had dragged him out of his chambers when she’d come to warn him of Solveig’s accusations. She hadn’t been allowed to follow.

Overnight, while Riordan languished in a cell, Noa had been struck with a fever that left her unable to get out of bed. Her stomach and bowels had rebelled against the mildest of broth, even water, and she’d spent most of her time on the privy chamber floor. With nearly the entire Keep in a frenzy over the scandal surrounding Riordan and Solveig, nobody had bothered to pay attention to Noa. The mysterious illness had laid her low.

Without Solveig’s accusation ringing in her head, Noa would have assumed spoiled food had caused her sickness. Instead, every time her stomach heaved and her head spun, she saw the other’s girl’s face and felt her hands on her breasts and between her legs. *This smacks of magic, bad magic.*

She’d wasted an entire day wracked with chills and losing anything she ate or drank. She gathered her strength as night fell and forced herself to stand, to seek out the warmth of the bathing chamber, and to cleanse herself of the sickness that had overtaken her.

Sheer force of will kept the bowl of soup in her belly. Willpower helped her wrap herself in layers of winter robes that would normally have been too heavy for the Fivemonth weather. Her strength and the

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strength of her love for Riordan kept her on her feet when her vision doubled and tripled.

Noa made it through the night and greeted the morning from her window. She did not feel better; if anything, she felt worse. Her skin was red and blotchy, and heat rose all around her like flames even while she shivered and shuddered. She had to swallow convulsively, over and over, to quell the nausea. But she stood. She walked.

She'd never heard the Keep so silent, without the conversation and laughter of students in the halls. Even the cleaning staff had disappeared. Noa put a hand to the cool stone wall. Her head spun and she blinked away the dizziness. She needed to get to the Judging Hall.

Each step seemed to take the strength of three, but she made them. Head down, she concentrated. She summoned the thrall and felt it dance around her, but not even the high magic could keep the illness from her. It did, however, help her move her feet when she began to believe she couldn't take another step.

She had paused to catch her breath when her soul twisted. Noa doubled over, gasping. Blackness edged with crimson blinded her. She reached for the wall and her fingernails broke as she gripped the stone. The pain was intense, but far away as she fought to retain consciousness.

The tithe. When Riordan became her *ahavatara*, the act had tithed their souls to each other. What happened to him would affect any for whom he'd served as *ahavatara*...but not like this. Not this agony that ripped at her guts like a hand full of broken glass. This was not only because he had been her first lover. 'Twas because he was her first love. Her only love.

Noa cried out as the pain grew. If she was feeling this agony, what must Riordan be feeling? She forced herself to take another step. She stumbled and went to her knees as the blackness made her blind.

A gust of a breeze on her cheek made her think she'd fallen in front of a door that opened. Noa opened her eyes. The blackness became

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gray.

“Noa? By the Knight, what happened to you?”

Hands lifted her. A hand cradled her head while another held her beneath the arms.

“Caylen?”

“ ’Tis me. And Gabriela. What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

Slowly the gray left her vision, too, until she could see the man and woman who held her. “ ’Tis Riordan, Cay. They’ve taken him.”

“What? Where?” Gabriela took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped Noa’s face. “Noa, you’re burning with fever. What’s going on?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Noa licked her cracked lips with a tongue as dry as sand. “Solveig de Yourk has accused Riordan of rape.”

Gabriana gasped. “No!”

Noa began to fall and Caylen picked her up. Her head fell against his chest. She wanted to say more, to tell them Solveig must be lying, but no words would come.

“He can’t have done it.” Caylen shifted Noa in his arms. “Not the Instructor Primus. He’s mean, but he’s not stupid.”

“...not mean...” Noa breathed. “I love him...”

“Save your strength.” Gabriela pushed Noa’s hair from her face. “We know. We know this can’t be true.”

“This can’t be right.” Caylen carried Noa down the hall toward the Judging Hall. “Gabri, let’s get Noa to the Judging Hall.”

They got her there far more quickly than she’d have been able to by herself. By the time they entered the crowded room, some of her strength had returned. Caylen set her down, though he and Gabri kept hold of her elbows.

“Are we too late?” Noa asked from the doorway.

A woman she didn’t recognize was speaking. “Riordan de Cimmerian, you have heard the accusation against you. You have seen the same evidence presented to this tribunal, and you have declined to offer your defense. This is your last chance to speak on your behalf. Do

TRIAL BY FIRE

you have any proof of your innocence in this matter?"

Riordan's voice rang out clear and strong through the room. "There is nothing I can say to convince anyone in this room. There are many here who would be happy to judge me guilty no matter what proof I offer to the contrary. I will take my chances with the truthfire."

The woman, who must be the First Inquisitor, nodded. "Let it be so."

In front of Riordan, a column of blue flame shot up from the floor. It cast no heat, but its brilliance was so great all who looked at it had to shield their eyes.

"No!" Noa cried more loudly than she'd thought possible.

She felt the weight of many eyes upon her, but none heavier than Riordan's as he turned his head toward her and stepped into the column of flame.

Instant agony seared her. He went to his knees inside the column. His face twisted in a scream she could not hear. But she felt it. It ripped and tore at her, and she voiced it for him.

The flames did not change color. Riordan bent and put his head in his hands, and she could no longer see his face. More pain surged within her. Noa would have fallen if not for the hands of her friends.

"How long?" She heard Cay murmur. "How long do they wait to see if he speaks the truth? How long can he last in there?"

"You see?" Solveig cried triumphantly to the room. "It's staying blue! He's lying!"

"No," Noa whispered. "I can't believe it of him."

Beside her, Caylen touched his forehead as though to brush away a pain there. "No. I can't either."

He looked into the crowd. "Gabri, do you see Bragnon?"

Gabriana turned her head to look at the crowd. "No. Wait. Yes. Up there in the corner. He's doing something."

"He's working the thrall," Cay said.

Noa fought another wave of weakness. She lifted her head and

TRIAL BY FIRE

sought the sight of the man Caylen had named. “Why? What’s he doing?”

“Look.” Cay used his head to point toward Solveig, who was smiling, her eyes locked on Bragnon’s. “I didn’t think he’d have it in him.”

“He doesn’t,” Gabri said. “ ’Tis her. She’s got the thrall now. That much is true. ’Tis strong in her. But I don’t think she got it from Riordan.”

“That day at the lake!” Cay’s grip on Noa’s arm would have been painful, except for the pain already flooding her. “Solveig and Bragnon on the boat. He was her *ahavatara*. And they’re lying about it to send Riordan down.”

“But why isn’t the truthfire changing color?” Noa felt stronger.

Caylen said, “Because maybe there’s enough truth in Solveig’s story to allow her to use the thrall, with Bragnon, to trick the fire.”

Noa had never heard of anyone being able to trick the truthfire. “What is her story?”

The young woman sitting in the seat closest to the trio spoke up. “She says she went to his office, at his request, and that he forced himself on her there. She said she had cloth she used to clean herself after, and it proved to have both of their essences on it. And she’s got the thrall.” The young woman sounded convinced Solveig was telling the truth. “She couldn’t get that without an *ahavatara*.”

“But she could get it from anyone,” said Gabri.

“The bathing pool.” Noa stood suddenly so straight her friends no longer needed to support her. “She came to me in the bathing pool and tried to convince me of her story. She had a cloth, and she touched me with it. I thought she was just being dramatic, but she could have used that cloth to prove her story. Only she didn’t get the essence from him. She got it from me.”

“And she made you sick, so you couldn’t come here and help defend him.” Gabri’s voice was grim. “By the Astria, she’s a witch.”

TRIAL BY FIRE

The blue column wavered. Riordan had stopped moving. Noa's soul twisted again.

" 'Tis killing him," she said.

She didn't have to think twice about what to do. She would not stand by and allow Riordan to perish alone. She gathered every bit of strength she had left and ran into the truthfire.

* * *

The room erupted into a cacophony of shouts. Caylen watched Noa dive into the column of blue. She cradled Riordan in her arms. He couldn't hear what she said to him, though he saw her mouth moving. Tears glittered on her cheeks.

"Why can't they see what she's doing?" Cay said.

"Nobody's ever tricked the truthfire." Gabri reached for his hand and their fingers linked. "She must be very, very strong."

"Get her out of there!" Someone cried as Noa went to her knees with Riordan.

The First Inquisitor held up her hand. "She's chosen her path. If he dies, so will she."

Caylen watched Solveig watching Noa and Riordan. The younger woman's eyes had lit up with a joy so nasty it hurt him to see it. The thrall pulsed around her in waves, but even though Caylen knew she had somehow linked with Bragnon to fool the fire, he couldn't tell how. Nobody else would know either.

The high magic tickled the back of his neck, though he hadn't summoned it. "Maybe I can see."

"Caylen?"

He stepped toward Solveig and the table of Inquisitors. "Maybe I can see the truth she's blocking."

Gabri's fingers slipped from his. Caylen lifted his hands. The thrall crackled and snapped from hand to hand. An orb formed in each palm. Both splintered and merged, then formed again as he walked. He'd

TRIAL BY FIRE

never done this before, not on purpose, and he wasn't sure how to urge the thrall toward his goal.

"Stand back!" cried one of the Inquisitors as Cay approached Solveig's chair.

Caylen heard the questions.

"What's he doing?"

"Who is that?"

"Caylen de Marque!"

Caylen waited until Solveig turned to look at him. The smile on her pretty face became a frown. Caylen held out his hands.

"Go sit back down, chum." She glanced back toward the truthfire, but not for long before her eyes turned back to Cay as though she couldn't help herself.

She was strong. She was hiding how much of the thrall she commanded, and he understood why. Just the ability to hide her strength indicated exactly how much power she could wield. Solveig gripped the arms of her chair and fixed him with a steady glare.

Go sit down.

The words echoed inside his head, and Cay actually turned to do as she said before he broke the command. He turned back. Surprise flickered in her eyes before 'twas quickly replaced by cunning.

"State your name and your business," said the First Inquisitor.

"I am Caylen de Marque. And I can prove this woman is lying."

The room rippled with outrage and shock. Caylen didn't buckle beneath the wave of disbelief around him. Behind him, he felt Gabriela's presence. She didn't have to touch him to give him the benefit of her strength.

"How do you propose to do this?" said an Inquisitor. "The accuser has provided sufficient evidence to convince this tribunal she speaks true, and the truthfire concurs."

"She's lying." Caylen watched Solveig's face crinkle with a fury she fought to conceal. His gaze flicked to the crowd. Bragnon had

TRIAL BY FIRE

vanished.

“The truthfire doesn’t lie.” The First Inquisitor looked at Caylen calmly. “How can you prove otherwise?”

“He can’t!” Solveig’s voice was harsh. She looked toward Hedavarius. “I’m not lying! I’m not! That man forced me!”

She burst into loud, braying sobs that moved Hedavarius to take her into his arms. “Hasn’t she been through enough?”

Inside the truthfire, Noa and Riordan clutched each other. Cay couldn’t tell if they were still conscious. The blue didn’t waver.

He held up his hands again, and with a subtle shift in his mind, he opened himself to the thrall. It flooded him with more force than he’d ever felt. It rocked him, but Gabri’s hand upon his back helped him stand straight.

Light exploded around him, then drew together and formed a large orb over his outstretched hands. The orb beat in time to his heart. Caylen was vaguely aware his cock had hardened into an erection so stiff ’twas nearly painful. He ignored it and focused on Solveig.

Get out!

Gabri’s thoughts had come to him unbidden on the island. He had to work to get to Solveig’s.

You’re a liar, Solveig.

Get out of my head! Get out, you common-born mongrel!

Everything else faded away as he faced her. He was aware of Gabri behind him and the Inquisitors watching, of the crowd in the room babbling, but none of that mattered. He faced the sorceress without flinching.

I know what you did.

You don’t know anything!

I just don’t know why.

An image came to him of Solveig sitting in an office. Riordan’s office. The Instructor Primus was shaking his head while Solveig gave him a simpering smile. Solveig spoke and Riordan reached for her.

TRIAL BY FIRE

That much of her story was true.

You offered yourself to him, and he refused.

He took that common born slut to his bed. He should have begged to have me!

But he didn't and you took Bragnon instead.

Solveig sneered around Hedavarius' arms.

I have more power in my little finger than that bitch will ever have! And even though I took that imbecile Bragnon for my ahavatara, it gave me what I needed!

The thrall.

And now Riordan and his haggard slut are both going to die, and I'll be the most powerful magicreator this realm has ever seen! Now get out of my head!

Caylen staggered from the sudden force of Solveig's will. Her expression didn't change, even as she hammered him. Gabri's touch fueled him further and Caylen spoke the truth.

The orb above his hands formed the pictures he'd taken from Solveig's head. Hedavarius stepped away from her as Solveig straightened. Her hands clenched into fists. She lifted them and formed an orb of her own.

Caylen had trained to control the thrall when it should come to him, but like lovemaking, a text could only hint at what the experience was actually like. Solveig already had more control of the high magic than Caylen did. He couldn't hope to match her. He could only hope to do his best.

"What is this?" the First Inquisitor asked. She stood, followed by the others. "Caylen de Marque, are you a Truthseer?"

"He is, Inquisitor." Gabri answered for him, since he could not.

Get out of my head!

Pain exploded in Cay's skull. Blood began to flow from his nose. It smelled like the sound of drums and tasted like midnight. He went to his knees, but kept his hands upraised. His orb didn't flicker.

TRIAL BY FIRE

More truth poured out of him. The vision swirled above them. Solveig, riding Bragnon. The two of them, head to head, making plans. Finally, Solveig with Noa in the bathing pool, and the cloth she'd used to condemn Riordan.

"Solveig de Yourk," said the First Inquisitor. "You have been proven a liar."

"No!" Hedavarius cried.

Solveig said nothing. She raised her fists to the sky and the room rocked. The Inquisitor's table fell over. Hedavarius was flung back. Some of the benches holding the spectators cracked and spilled them to the floor.

As screams and cries filled the air, the room rocked again. Harder this time. Hard enough to crack the stone floor of the Judging Hall.

Solveig spat on the floor next to Caylen. She clasped her hands together and looked up to the ceiling.

Then she disappeared.

* * *

"You don't have to leave, you know." The woman who'd served as First Inquisitor said to Riordan. Her name, Noa had learned, was Felicita de Quaya. "You've been cleared of all charges. And you, Caylen de Marque. Somnus Keep could use a talented Truthseer."

"So could many other places," Caylen replied. He and Gabriela had packed their things and planned to leave the Keep at the same time as Noa and Riordan, though their destination was different.

Riordan didn't answer at first. His time in the truthfire had weakened him. At last he said, "I served Somnus Keep for a long time. But I can't stay in a place which would allow such a travesty to take place."

Felicita nodded. "We understand. You won't be easy to replace. But we understand."

Hedavarius had not come to see any of them off. Noa didn't care.

TRIAL BY FIRE

As far as she was concerned, the sooner they left Somnus Keep, the better.

“The Keep won’t be the same after this,” Riordan said to Felicita. “Its reputation is as cracked as the floor in the Judging Hall.”

Felicita nodded again. “We understand that, too. And we’ve taken pains to assure something like this never happens again.”

“Too bad you hadn’t taken the time to assure it couldn’t happen at all.” Riordan turned and reached for Noa’s hand. “Come, love. Let’s quit this place.”

* * *

And quit they did. Riordan took her to his ancestral home, in the land of Grimearth, to the house of Cimmerian. The manse was more a castle than a house, but Noa didn’t mind. Not as long as she could share it with Riordan.

The days grew long with summer and they spent them together. They had a simple ceremony beneath the wedding canopy with only Caylen and Gabriana to attend them. They lived, and they loved, and they tried to put the past behind them.

Word spread quickly to the surrounding realm that Riordan was once again in attendance at Cimmerian. Every Granting Day, people came from miles around to have the two magicreators listen to their wishes for healthy babes, fertile fields and successful journeys. In exchange for a coin or two, the wishes were usually granted.

“I’m glad this day has ended,” Noa said after one full day of listening to petitioners. “My ears are fair weary from hearing all those pleas.”

“But you do it so well,” Riordan told her. He kissed her as she bent to slip off her shoes. He helped her pull her gown off over her head, then led her to their large, soft bed. “The people love you.”

“The ladies love you,” she replied wryly as he stretched out beside her. “Why do I only get the old crones, the fat merchants, the lovesick,

TRIAL BY FIRE

young boys? While you get the simpering, eye-fluttering maidens and busty housewives?"

"Do I? I've barely noticed."

She laughed and held him close to her while he nuzzled her nipples. "You know you do."

"I only have eyes for you, dear Noa."

She sighed as his tongue traced a pattern on her skin. "Riordan, have you ever been tempted to grant the request of someone who wishes for evil?"

He paused. "Yes. Of course I have."

She thought of Solveig whose power had been mighty despite her youth. "What stopped you from giving in?"

"The more evil you grant, the more you receive."

She didn't ask him about the girl who had accused him falsely. Instead, Noa pulled his head back to her breast. She was determined to put the witch from her mind. Wherever she was in this world, she was far from them.

Riordan made his way down to the soft curls between her legs, and Noa arched to meet his kiss there. He brought her to the edge of climax with his hands and his tongue, then moved up her body and filled her with his cock until she cried his name as she burst with pleasure.

He loved her hard, and he loved her sweetly, and when it was over, they slept in each other's arms without bad dreams to disturb them.

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.

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* * *

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