



*He loves her, or he loves her not. There's only one way to find out— take a chance.*

For most people, Arithmancy is no more than a jumble of numbers. For Somnus Keep instructor Elspeth Valerin, those numbers are her refuge, her passion. Her magic—her only magic since a painful incident from her past cripples her ability to unlock the inner power of the thrall.

Today her calculations indicate change is in the air. That's not what she smells when she enters The Slaughtered Lamb, though. She smells ale. Smoke. And when she catches a glimpse of the owner of the Lamb, memories.

Tonight there's a new face among the regulars in Connell Byrne's pub. The woman he once loved with all his heart—before she left it in pieces. And one thing hasn't changed: she is still clearly—inexplicably—afraid of him.

Elspeth's heart is racing. That she and Conn are here at this moment means her numbers were right. Beyond this moment, though, is a fate she cannot comprehend. The one equation she's never been able to calculate. The one outcome she cannot control—love.

*This title has been previously published under the title Everything Counts.*

Warning: Star-crossed lovers who need a little push to fully understand the phrase, “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” Explicit sex with enough steam to prove the Chaos Theory.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

Titled  
Copyright © 2011 by Megan Hart  
ISBN: 978-1-60928-355-1  
Edited by Lindsey Faber  
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: February 2011  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# Tithed

*Megan Hart*

# Dedication

For anyone who's looked up at the stars and wondered how many there were.

Change was coming. Elspeth Valerin knew it. She'd seen it this morning in her daily calculations. The date, her name and birthday, the color of the sky and what she'd eaten for breakfast—all had been given a numerical value and figured in an equation along with a dozen other factors.

*Everything counts*, she thought as she followed Gabriela through the carved wooden door to The Slaughtered Lamb. For most people, Arithmancy was no more than a jumble of numbers. For Elspeth, it was her life.

"I'm so pleased you decided to come out with us tonight, Elspeth," Gabriela said over her shoulder. "We've been asking you for ages. I thought you'd never say yes."

"The stars must finally have aligned," teased Dayla Mornit. Dayla taught Runes at Somnus Keep.

"No," interjected Callis Dardin. She taught Astronomy. "The numbers finally added up. Am I right, Elspeth?"

Elspeth smiled a bit as she followed her colleagues to a table toward the back of the pub. "Something like that."

The scent of sawdust, alcohol and food greeted her, and she paused to look around. Seventeen tables, each with three or four chairs. Six windows. A long, polished wood bar stretched along the left side of the room. Twenty-two stools lined up along it. Toward the back, a swinging door leading to the kitchen, and a hallway. A dartboard with eight darts stuck into the cork. Six musicians in the corner struck up a tune to cheers from the substantial crowd.

She was counting again and took a deep breath to force herself to focus on the quality of the pub rather than the quantity of the items within it.

"I admire anyone who can make sense of Arithmancy, much less teach it," said Dayla. "I can't add the contents of my pocket, much less turn everything I do into an equation."

Elspeth gave a tentative smile. "It's useful to know how to do it. But it's just as useful to know someone who can make the calculations for you."

Dayla stared at her for a moment. "Is it possible our quiet Elspeth has just put me in my place?"

"Oh, no, I—"

"Hush," said Gabriela. "She's teasing you."

Callis laughed, looking at the serving lass headed their way. "Ignore her, Elspeth. She's a sour old biddy because nobody likes Runes either. And good eve to you, Gretel Deloras!"

Elspeth couldn't help staring at Gretel, whose smile was almost blinding in its brightness. Her lush curves threatened to burst the seams of her simple peasant shirt, worn so low off her shoulders the dusky hint of aureoles peeked out from the lace around the edge. A man's hands would easily span her waist, while her hips swelled out below with the promise of sensual delights any man would be unable to resist.

"Who's your friend?" Gretel's voice oozed such blatant sensuality it turned the heads of the men at the next table. She leaned forward to smile directly at Elspeth. "Hello, honey. I'm Gretel."

"Elspeth," she stammered, overwhelmed by Gretel's presence.

Gretel laughed, tossing back her mane of blond curls so they fell down her back. "Welcome to The Slaughtered Lamb, sweet thing. What can I get you? We have everything you could want and probably some things you don't."

Elspeth hated the heatroses that bloomed in her cheeks and hoped the pub's dim lighting hid them. At the school she managed to maintain the near-constant cool and collected demeanor necessary to keep her students in line. Here she was out of her element, unused to the attention and uncertain how to react.

Gretel took their orders and glanced again at Elspeth, her bright blue gaze lingering. "Sure I can't bring you something strong, sweetheart? You're a mite pale. Maybe an ale would do your blood some good."

"All right," she answered, surprising herself. "Ale would be lovely, thank you."

Gretel raised one perfect golden eyebrow, as though Elspeth's politely phrased response had surprised her, but she smiled. "Grand, lass. I'll bring your drinks right over, ladies."

"Sweet Astria, if I looked like her, I'd never get out of bed." Callis shifted in her chair, watching Gretel sashay away.

"You wouldn't?" Elspeth turned to look at the Callis. "Why not? She's beautiful."

Callis looked perplexed for a moment before laughing. "Oh, Elspeth, you're such a dear."

Damn. She'd said the wrong thing. Again. 'Twas a talent, she supposed, to consistently come out with the wrong words.

Gabriana came to her rescue again. "Callis didn't mean she'd stay abed out of grief, Elspeth. She meant that if she looked like Gretel, she'd have so many lovers, she'd never get out of bed."

Again, Elspeth blushed. "Ah. Of course."

In a world where lovemaking was as practiced a pastime as playing a sport or taking up a hobby, the subject of sex was not one that ought to have brought such heat to her cheeks. Yet of course it did, because though lovemaking was considered not only an enjoyable part of life but a necessary one, Elspeth did not partake.

Her colleagues wouldn't have known that, of course. It wasn't good manners to ask, and she doubted they'd assume she was celibate. She was a magiccreator after all. An instructor at Somnus Keep. Arithmancy, the study of numerical values used to make predictions, meant she rarely had to harness the

power of the thrall. Nobody had to know her control of it was flawed, that though she could sometimes form an orb of power, she could never sustain it or make it do anything more than look pretty sitting on her palm. She was a magiccreator who could not control the high magic and therefore could not use it. She was a failure, and worse than that.

Elspeth Valerin was a fraud.

“Here we go, ladies.” Gretel returned bearing a tray of glasses she set down in front of all of them with the unerring memory of a good server. “Ale for you, my lovely.”

“Thank you.”

Gretel smiled and put her hand on her ample hip. “Anything else I can get for you, loves?”

“This will do for now.” Dayla sipped from her glass, the foam from the ale coating her upper lip.

Gretel moved away, and Elspeth watched her work the tables. She flirted with the men, and if her obvious pleasure at their attention was false, she did a fine job of making it believable. Envy, fierce and shocking, made Elspeth gulp her ale. A woman with control like that over her body could do anything.

“Two sevendays of freedom!” Gabriela crowed. “What will you do with it?”

“Sleep in!” Callis wriggled with a gleeful sound.

“Stay up late,” Dayla countered.

“What about you, Elspeth? Have you any grand plans for the holiday?”

Elspeth intended to do the same thing on her holiday she did all the rest of the time—study, read, knit. Perhaps continue to work toward advanced certification in her field.

She opened her mouth to answer, but before she could, Callis pointed discreetly and gave a whispered giggle. “There he is!”

“Who?” Elspeth asked, even as she followed Callis’s pointing finger with her gaze.

“The owner. Conn.” Dayla giggled too. “I forgot you’ve never come with us before. Isn’t he beautiful?”

*Conn.* The name was not uncommon. Hundreds of mothers must have named their sons the same. The man who owned this pub, the beautiful man who had all the ladies giggling and pointing, did not have to be the same Connell from her past.

But he was.

“Your admiration club is here,” said Gretel as Connell came from the storeroom, hefting a fresh keg to tap.

He settled the keg behind the bar and gave her a grin. “Yeah? Which ones?”

“You’re too convinced of your own charm.” Gretel rolled her eyes, but nodded toward the back of the room. “The ones from up the hill, from the Keep.”

Connell chuckled, bending to drive the spigot into the new keg and sliding an empty glass with practiced ease beneath to catch the spurt of ale. No sense in wasting it, so he swallowed the mouthful and set the empty glass in the bin to be taken back for washing. “The ones who’re so free with their coin? Sure and they’re always welcome.”

Gretel poured some shots and set them on her tray. “They brought a new little mouse along with them tonight.”

“Yeah?” He stood, wiping his brow on his sleeve, scarcely interested in whatever giggly miss they’d dragged along with them beyond what coin she might spend.

“Pretty thing with a mouth like sugar.”

He laughed. “Yeah?”

Gretel nodded. “Shy, though. I thought she was going to burst into flame when I asked her name.”

He rolled his head on his shoulders, cracking his neck and shaking out the tension. “Not everyone can flirt with you, love.”

Gretel smiled. “That’s what you think, Conn-me-love.”

He laughed again as she swished her hips and headed back to serving. Gretel liked to give him a bit of a wink and a nudge, but she saved her real charms for men who didn’t pay her wages. He looked out over the room, eyes taking in everything. Connell Byrne prided himself on running the finest pub in town. The Slaughtered Lamb was a clean joint, with the best food and beverage he could provide, the fastest service, the liveliest entertainment. He didn’t allow dirty dealings in the Lamb either, and if that meant cracking a few skulls to keep out the riff raff...well, he wasn’t above it. Bar fights were part of the business, but as he examined the crowd, he saw no sign of belligerence waiting to erupt into violence.

The trill of feminine laughter from the back of the room caught his ear, and grinning, he turned to look. Gretel was right in saying he knew too well his own charm. The ladies came in to eat, drink and be merry, and if a little harmless flirting made them merry, Connell wasn’t above that either.

He recognized the group just as Gretel had said he would. They were all magiccreators from up the hill. Instructors at the Keep, which meant they always had plenty of coin to spread around. That suited him fine. Magiccreators didn’t cause trouble either, because even a group of unattended women wouldn’t be bothered by the most boisterous of his customers. No man would mess with a magiccreator who could take off his nuts with little more than a flick of her fingers.

Connell walked around the edge of the bar and headed toward their table, intending to give them a smile and a laugh, and a round of free drinks in appreciation of their business. Maybe let them think they might have the chance to take him to bed. It never hurt to lead them on. Made them spendy, it did, even if it never led to anything but stories they took back with them.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said, hands on his hips, looking round at each of them. “A pleasure to see—”

The words caught in his throat at the sight of her. The same dark hair, worn tied up instead of loose, but still as smooth as silk. Time had sharpened her features and turned her from a girl into a woman, but the better-defined cheekbones and jaw only made her that much more beautiful. The lush lips he'd once kissed with such passion parted as he spoke, and the remembered taste of her set his mind reeling.

"Hello, Conn." This came from the red-haired woman to his left. She eyed him without a speck of coyness. "Nice to see you again."

"And you," he answered, eyes locked on Ella's familiar blue-gray gaze. The eyes he'd never thought to see again.

The other women didn't seem to notice his lack of attention, for they giggled and flirted while his mouth made replies his mind did not bother to track.

She was terrified. He could see it in the way her eyes grew dark and her fingers tightened on her glass. Her entire body vibrated like she meant to run away, but was unable to move.

He scared her, 'twas no great feat to see it, and even after all this time, the fact she would fear him tightened his jaw with anger. He'd never done aught to harm her. All he'd ever done was love her. And even now, ten years after he'd told her he would never love another woman the way he loved her, she wanted to run away from him again.

"...on the house," he heard himself say, and waved away the ladies' half-hearted protests. "I insist. On me."

"Ooh," purred the woman with black hair. "Really? Drinks on you? That would be interesting."

Where he'd have given her a grin and a wink before, now Connell only managed a faint smile. "Be careful, madam or I'll think you fancy me."

This made the women at the table erupt into giddy laughter. All but one. He stared hard into her eyes for one more moment before turning away.

Three ales. She'd kept careful count, as she did of everything, even now when the alcohol fuzzed her brain and made her unsteady.

The others had become raucous as the night wore on, setting up challenges with the table of men beside them. Drinking games. Wagers. Callis had settled herself upon the lap of a brawny man with a ginger-colored beard and a booming laugh. Dayla and Gabriana had agreed to a game of darts with two men, though their opponents had declared the match unfair because the women could use magic to their advantage.

*Everything in pairs*, Elspeth thought as she stared at the bottom of another empty glass. *Two by two. Neat and tidy. No room for three.* She was drunk, which surprised her into laughter. She put her hand over her mouth to stifle it, though nobody would have noticed with all the noise.

“What’s with your friend?” she heard the brawny man ask Callis. “She don’t like comp’ny?”

Callis murmured something Elspeth couldn’t hear and she stared at the table. Men had been speaking to her all night, but she’d put them all off. The only man for whom she had eyes had not looked at her again, a fact for which she was intensely grateful as his studied lack of attention allowed her to watch him, unnoticed.

Connell. Ten years had been kind to him. They’d broadened his shoulders, lengthened his hair and touched the corners of his eyes with lines that showed he, at least, had spent his time smiling. He wasn’t a lad any longer, but a man. Then again she supposed she could no longer consider herself a girl.

She was no fool. She was an Arithmanticist. Elspeth knew better than anyone how small choices influence greater ones, and how one seemingly unimportant decision can affect an entire outcome. Everything counts.

If she was here and Connell too, it meant that somehow along the way both of them had done something, made some choice, taken some branching path that led them both to this spot. It would not have happened otherwise. She would have refused the invitation to join her colleagues, or they’d have taken her to another pub. Or going further back, he’d not have opened his place in this town where she’d chosen to live.

She was here, and he was here, and there was a purpose to it. A fate she could not comprehend. An equation she did not know how to calculate.

All at once the drinks, the smoke and the laughter made her blink against an onslaught of dizziness. She stood, touching one hand to the table to steady herself.

“I’m going to get some fresh air,” she told Callis.

“Are you well?” Callis looked concerned, as though she meant to get up from her companion’s lap.

“I’m fine,” Elspeth answered quickly, adding a smile to be more convincing. “Just need a bit of a breeze. That’s all.”

Callis nodded, but sank back onto her seat. “If you’re sure…”

“Yes. I’m sure.” Elspeth smiled again and moved around the table, avoiding the leer and lewd greeting of one of the men sitting there.

Darkness shrouded the hallway leading to the washrooms, but Elspeth had never feared darkness. She went past two doors marked with symbols—one for male and one for female. Again, a pair. The door at the hall’s end bore no marking, but she knew it led outside, and so she pushed through it and ventured into the chill winter air.

The fenced courtyard behind the Lamb contained no pretty garden or bubbling fountain, only a path of fitted slates leading to a leaning, decrepit shed and scrubby grass interspersed with patches of bare earth. Large refuse bins lined one side. Some benches lined another, and ’twas there she sought to rest her legs and catch the breath which had left her with such sudden ferocity inside.

Above her, the stars gleamed pure white against a black, clear sky. The moon hung like a coin amongst them. She smelled snow despite the lack of clouds. She tipped her head to stare up, and her eyes followed the lines and curves of the constellations as she began to count the points of light.

She'd never counted them all. She never could. It brought her peace, though, to try. Stars were just about the only limitless thing in the world, the only things she could not reach the end of, and the numbers rose higher and higher in her mind, wiping out everything else for the moment.

When she lifted her palm, fingers slightly curled, not even the numbers in her head could push aside the sight of the glimmering silver orb that formed there. She could count forever and still remain unable to wipe from her mind how the orb shimmered and shattered before she could push it into anything else. She closed her fingers tight on the remaining shards of what should've been great power and were instead nothing but broken pieces of what she could never have.

*A star has fallen to earth.*

Not a star, and not a piece of her broken orb either. An ember. A cheroot, the tip flaring as its owner drew in the smoke, then arcing through the air as he tossed it to the ground and left it without bothering to crush it with his boot. A smaller piece of blackness separated from the larger shadows, and she stood, stepping back against the fence.

"How many are there?"

She'd known it was him the moment she stood. "You know I can't know that."

"Not even you? Not the Countess?"

"Don't call me that." The retort came out sharper than she'd intended. The fence pressed against her back. A splinter gouged her arm. She'd come out without a cloak.

Connell stepped closer. "You used to like it when I called you that."

"That was a long time ago." Elspeth couldn't back away any further, so she straightened her spine. *And you used to say it with love in your voice.*

Connell's eyes flashed in the starlight, and a moment later, his teeth as he grinned. "Aye, and so it was. A long time ago and a place far away. But you haven't changed, have you? You're still counting."

He'd moved so close to her she could smell him, and it made her weak. He'd used to smell of the sea. Salt. Sun. Sand. The tang of sweat.

Now he smelled of ale and smoke, but underlying it still a hint of sun and wind and sand. He was different and yet the same; the remembered taste of him flooded her mouth and made her heart thump in her chest.

"I'm still counting." Her voice scratched and cracked, embarrassed her.

His hand came out to twirl a strand of hair that had fallen over her shoulder. A handspan separated them, no more. He tucked the hair behind her ear. His fingers cupped her cheek, then trailed along her jaw, down the line of her neck and came to rest upon her shoulder.

She shivered, not from cold but heat, which had sprung up along the path of his fingers. Shadows veiled his face again, but she heard his breath, felt it on her face, and she could almost taste his lips on hers.

Connell didn't kiss her. "I didn't believe my eyes when I saw you sitting in my pub. After all this time and there you were, looking like an angel. I thought for sure I was dreaming."

She wanted to tell him she was sorry. She hadn't meant to run away. She hadn't meant to hurt him. She hadn't meant any of it, that long ago night when she'd told him she could never love him... But unlike numbers, words never came to her rescue when she needed them.

Closer still he moved, his body against hers, pinning her against the fence, and Elspeth shuddered with a sudden force of desire so strong it forced a low cry from her throat. Ten years, and he still affected her this way. The only man who ever could.

She was already opening her mouth to his kiss when he pulled away, leaving her cold instead of hot. Connell backed away with a muttered curse. She blinked, trying to see his expression, but could make out nothing more than the flash of his eyes again in starlight.

"Why?" he asked her, one word that meant so much and had so many answers.

She didn't know which to give him. "Connell..."

He backed away from her reaching hand, putting both his own up as though to make sure there was no way they could possibly touch her.

"Why, Ella?" The agony in his voice broke her heart all over again. "Why now, after all this time, when I finally thought—"

But he'd say no more, just backed away another step. This time, she was the one pursuing, moving across the slate path toward him. "Connell, wait."

"You're still afraid of me!" he cried. "I saw it inside, and I felt you shaking just now! You're afraid of me, even now, when I'd never do aught to hurt you!"

"I know that. I know it. Connell, love, please..."

He'd backed into a patch of moonlight, and to her horror, she saw tears glimmering in his eyes. She'd made him cry before, and it seemed unfair now that she'd made him weep again when tears would never come for her no matter how much she might wish for the relief they brought.

He ran a hand through his hair, messing it, and let his hand rest on the back of his neck, his eyes turned away from her. "Why?"

"Because I was a fool," she answered. "I didn't deserve you."

She reached for him again, a hesitant hand that did not quite touch him. "I was a fool who did not know the gift she held, Connell. And I plead your mercy."

He shook his head. "You left without a word. I never knew where you'd gone, or if you were all right. I never knew if you were alive or dead, sick or well. I never knew if you were happy."

"I'm sorry." It was all she had to say, and it was not enough.

“All I ever did was love you,” he said in a low voice. “And you treated me like I wasn’t even worth it.”

Then she was in his arms and his mouth was on hers, bruising. She didn’t resist, didn’t protest, just let him walk her backward and put her up against the fence, his hands on her waist and his mouth crushing, crushing.

She opened beneath him and his tongue swept inside. She tasted ale and smoke. She tasted Connell, a flavor she’d never forgotten, and it made her gasp as she put her arms around his neck and clung to him.

He pushed hard against her, the way he used to when they were in her garden and desperate to steal one more kiss before she had to go inside. He bunched the fabric of her skirt in his hands and slid beneath it to the bare skin of her thighs atop her stockings. His hands cupped her rear and he lifted her, holding her so tight she had no fear of falling. The heat and hardness of him pressed against her, and she gasped and tightened her thighs around his hips.

She tasted blood from the force of his kiss, from a spot where her teeth had caught the inside of her lip. The metallic, salty taste of it made her think of the way they’d been, and how she’d once taken him in her mouth while the ocean crashed so close to them the spray had wet their clothes.

Desire, unaccustomed and overwhelming, flooded her, but she didn’t fight it. Her arms tightened on his neck and she kissed him as fiercely as he did her, their mouths meeting again and again, reminding her of the way eagles mated in the sky, soaring and plummeting as they screeched their pleasure.

He held her against the splintered wood with one hand while the other slid between them to fumble with the laces at his waistband. His hand rubbed her through the thin material of her undergarment, and she shuddered with want.

He’d be inside her in another moment, and oh, by the Astria, she wanted him there. Inside her. Filling her. Making this feeling grow until she exploded the way she used to when they were young, before it had all gone so wrong.

He shifted her weight and she tensed, waiting for him to enter her. Then, in the next moment, she stood on her own, her skirt falling down around her ankles and the fence the only thing holding her up. She blinked, bereft and abandoned, her body not yet adjusted to the loss of his hands on her. She licked her lips and tasted more blood, and she lifted a shaking hand to wipe them clean.

“You might not have changed,” he said in a shaking voice. “But I have. I’ll not be used like that again, no matter what treasure you hold between your legs.”

His words hurt, that he thought she’d ever used him. He twisted away from her when she tried to touch his cheek, and she let her hand fall. He ran his hand again through his hair, then crossed his arms over his chest. The white moonlight made stark lines on his face, cast his eyes into shadow and highlighted his scowl.

"All these years," he told her. "You've no right to come here, to my place, looking as though naught's changed. No right."

His words were unfair, but she accepted them with a nod. "I'll go then, shall I?"

"Aye, go." He bit out the words like they tasted bad. "Get out of my place, and don't come back here."

She didn't move. They stared at each other until at last she nodded again. "I plead your mercy, Connell. I never meant to hurt you."

"No." His reply was colder than the winter air. "And I can see by your tears how grieved you are."

His short, sharp burst of laughter pierced her heart.

"Ah, but then, you've never wept, have you? Why should I expect you'd bother to cry for me?"

"If I could have, believe me, I would."

He didn't answer. She backed away from him, turned and left the courtyard, wishing desperately she could have given him tears but as always, finding none to give.

She came to him in dreams, as she always did. The girl he'd loved so much it had been like dying when she left him. Tonight she was the woman she'd become, the one he did not know.

The taste of her had changed, as had the curve of her hips, the fullness of her breasts, the timbre of her voice. He took her in his arms and she yielded, offering her mouth to his kiss and her body to his hands.

He took her without a word, as once they'd not needed to speak. She opened beneath him. His tongue stroked hers. His hands roamed her body. She linked her arms behind his neck, and he lifted her, laying her down upon a bed of flowers that filled the air with their scent as the weight of their bodies crushed the petals.

His mouth traced the line of her chin and the slope of her throat. Her pulse beat under his lips and he licked the spot. Ella arched beneath him, murmuring the name only she had ever called him. To everyone else he was Conn. To her, he'd always been Connell, and she always made it sound noble.

"The name of a prince."

Her smile made his heart thump inside his chest and he kissed her again, covering her with his body, the body of the man he was now and not the lad he'd been.

"I'm no prince."

"You have ever been my prince." Her eyes shone. "Ever and always."

And the thing of it was, with her he had always felt a prince, rather than the beggar he really was. A nobleman, not the son of a butler and a cook. Ella made him feel as though he could be and do anything, that he needn't contort himself into the place his parents had expected him to take.

"Everything I've become is because of you," he told her.

Her hands linked around the back of his neck, pulling him down to her mouth again, and he kissed her like it was the last thing he'd ever do on this earth.

His hand slid up to cup her breast through the thin flaxene of her gown, and he passed a thumb over her nipple. In another moment, he slid down to take it in his mouth through the cloth, and in the next, the dream shifted and they were both naked on the bed of flowers which he knew from real life to be somewhat scratchy but here, in the dream realm, were as soft as feather bed.

She tasted of sunshine, his Ella did. His mouth moved along her body, along the soft curve of her belly, the slope of her hip, the warm skin of her thighs. He found her center. The sound of her low cry when he kissed her there made his cock twitch in response. He licked her, and she arched upward. Her fingers tightened in his hair. He found the small button of her pleasure and stroked it with his tongue until she gasped his name over and over again.

He had always loved making her shudder beneath him. He loved the taste of her desire, and the way her smooth folds swelled as she grew hot with passion. He loved the way her clit grew stiff between his lips, and the way it throbbed when she came.

"I love you," he said into her ear as once again he stretched his body along hers. "I'll never love any woman the way I love you."

And because this was a dream, thank the Astria, she did not turn him away but looked into his eyes and put her arms around him, and she took him inside her body.

"I love you too, Connell," his dream-Ella told him as urged him to move with an upward shift of her hips. She said the words she'd said to him once before, long ago and far away, before it had all disintegrated around them. "Make love to me."

Long ago and far away, he had not been able to do as she'd asked. He'd made love to dozens of women since that night. Fair-haired and dark, with eyes of blue and green and brown and gray, with bodies of every shape and voices in every tone. Every one of them became Ella at the moment of his climax.

But now, in this moment, as he moved within her, it really was Ella and he didn't have to pretend. He kissed her, the taste of her spurring him on. Her nails raked down his back and he moaned, though the pain only enhanced his pleasure. He moved faster.

"I love you," she said, her blue-gray eyes never leaving his. "I always have. And I always will."

Ecstasy boiled inside him, making him shake, and he wanted to bury his face in her hair, but couldn't pull himself from the sight of her eyes. He moved inside her heat, watching desire make her tilt her head on its pillow of lilies. Her gaze never left his, and he drowned in those eyes, the color of the sea on a cloudy day, her eyes that never wept, and he saw himself reflected there as he climaxed.

And woke, sweating, the sheets a tangled mess around his ankles and his cock throbbing with a need for release so great it made his stomach hurt. Connell sat up and scrubbed his face with his palms, breathing

hard. A dream was all it had been, but he mourned the loss of it anyway, because dreams were all he had of her.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and went into his washroom, seeking the solace of a cold shower, the only relief he'd have that night. As he closed his eyes against the needling spray, he saw her face, and he whispered her name, letting his mouth fill with water that couldn't wash away the memory of her flavor.

"Mistress Valerin, sit." Riordan de Cimmerian, Instructor Primus of Magical Theory and Practice, indicated the chair in front of his desk.

Elsbeth sat. She slid a sheaf of parchment across his desk. "I've completed the requirements for the Consummo degree, sir. I would request you review the work and approve it before I send it to the Arithmancy Accreditation Committee."

He nodded and pushed the papers to one side. "Quite a lot of work for you to be doing during the winter break. You're entitled to some time away from your job, Mistress Valerin."

She gave a small smile. "As are you, sir, and yet here I find you at your desk."

The Instructor Primus had a reputation for being a man quick to anger and swift to disdain, and though Elspeth had seen him behave that way with many others, with her he seemed more often to maintain an air of quiet bemusement or consideration. What, exactly, he was considering about her she never dared ponder. She didn't wish to know. It was enough for her that he had hired her knowing her control of the thrall was flawed, and that he never asked her of her past. He'd earned her loyalty for that alone, and Elspeth's loyalty, once earned, was fierce and unrelenting.

"Mistress Valerin," de Cimmerian now said, "I must speak with you on a matter of some import."

"Sir?" Her stomach twisted. His dark eyes traveled over her face, and he had that look again. As though she were a puzzle he meant to decipher.

"You have been a teacher here for seven years."

"Yes, sir."

"And in all that time, it has never come to my attention that you've taken a lover."

For a moment she didn't know quite what to say. Her mouth parted in surprise before she closed it. Those words were the last she'd ever have expected from him. Of course the Instructor Primus would certainly be aware of any and all who formed bonds in the Keep...and of those who did not. It was his place to know such things. Still, his statement shocked her not because she was startled that he knew, but because she had never expected him to be concerned.

"Sir, I fail to see—"

His raised hand stopped her. “When I hired you, I understood your control of the thrall was...limited. But as your position didn’t require its use, I felt your inability to harness it properly was less of a deficiency than your extreme skills in your chosen field were an asset.”

She drew in a breath, ready to explain though she had no idea of what she could possibly say to make any of this better. Again, the Instructor Primus raised a hand. He needed no orb of power, no use of the thrall to silence her. The power in his gaze was enough.

“Mistress Valerin, I assumed your control of the thrall would grow in time and with practice. That you would acclimate yourself here at Somnus Keep, become a true member of our staff. You’ve held yourself back from us.” He paused. “Yet in all this time, I have watched you teach your craft to class after class. You are one of my finest instructors. You have an easy way about you that makes Arithmancy appeal to even those who find numbers appallingly difficult. You care for your students. I know you have open office hours longer than any of your colleagues, and I know as well the number of students you counsel.”

“They come to me because I listen to them,” she said.

“Because once you needed someone to listen to you and had nobody.”

His assessment of her made her body stiffen so suddenly she pushed the chair back from the desk. “Sir—”

Again, he raised his hand and she fell silent. “I’ve watched you teach, Mistress Valerin, and I’ve seen you are capable of passion. So tell me, please, why you can express it with equations and calculations, but not with a lover?”

She wanted to run, but could not. His dark eyes pinned her in place. She shook her head slightly and had to wet her lips, but still could not speak.

“Who hurt you so badly you can’t open yourself?”

She had seen him be cold to others and had seen his sneer. This was worse, this penetrating insistence upon truth. Nobody else seemed to notice or care about what was inside her, but this man did. She couldn’t hide from him. He was the most powerful magiccreator in the Keep, the strongest she’d ever known. Perhaps the strongest anyone had ever known.

“I have never asked you why your control of the thrall is incomplete,” he told her, his voice gentler than she’d have expected from him. “But I don’t have to ask to know. I’ve seen it before. Rarely, thank the Astria, for it rarely happens. But I do know.”

Her throat closed. Another woman would have cried, but again the release of tears was denied her. She ducked her head, eyes fixed upon her hands fisted in her lap. “I have worked hard, sir, to gain better control of it. I am much improved.”

“You shouldn’t have had to work so hard.”

The anger in his voice made her look up, but he was not angry with her. He was angry *for* her, and Elspeth understood something about him few probably did, for he hid his heart beneath an exterior of

disdain as she did behind a mask of dispassion. Riordan de Cimmerian cared deeply about his students and his staff.

He cared about *her*.

“Who was he?” he asked. “The one who took from you instead of giving. Tell me, and I’ll see he’s punished for it, no matter where he is.”

“He is dead. Beyond punishment. He slit his wrists and bled to death in our mother’s rose garden. I was ten-and-eight.” The implications of what she’d revealed hung between them. She met his gaze and didn’t look away.

“Then you’ve never had an *ahavatara*,” he said quietly. “No first true lover whose duty it is to open your body to love and your soul to the glory of the thrall. You were forced.”

She nodded. She had never spoken to anyone of the things Des had done to her. Never admitted her shame. Not since the day in her mother’s garden when she’d lied and told Connell she didn’t and would never love him.

“Elspeth, you are not to blame.”

She nodded again. “I know.”

“But you don’t believe.”

She gave a small shake of her head, a shrug. “It was a long time ago.”

The Instructor Primus stared at her for a long, silent moment. He sighed, and again she caught a glimpse of the man he hid from everyone else. “’Tis not my place to tell you that you must take a lover who will open you to the thrall in the proper way, how it is meant to be done. I do well understand your reluctance to do so. But you do understand that the damage he did you need not be permanent, do you not? You need not forever mishandle your magic because of one man’s disservice? There are ways to remove his tithe upon you and replace it with one more proper.”

“I didn’t know. I thought—” She’d thought she was destined to be this way forever. Ruined.

“Come here.” He stood, and she obeyed, her heart hammering.

He waited until she stood in front of him. He was a tall man, and he put a finger beneath her chin to lift it. He bent to kiss her, his lips pausing before they touched hers. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“I do, sir.”

“And yet you are shaking, and not from desire.”

She looked into his eyes. “I plead your mercy.”

He ran a hand along her neck, down her shoulder, brushing the hair off it. Then he stepped back. “You need plead nothing from me, Elspeth. I would not force attentions upon you. Tithed to me you would achieve great power, but it must be your choice. Without true desire, no matter how brief, binding us, what I can give you would be worthless. I understand why you shield yourself.”

Looking into his eyes, she thought he did. Riordan de Cimmerian had his own demons, his own reasons for keeping his heart as closed as hers. That he had been willing to help her meant all the more.

She thought of Connell. The courtyard. His bruising kiss and the inside of her lip still wounded from it.

She looked at de Cimmerian. "I made a mistake ten years ago, and threw away the love of a man who would have given me everything."

"A magiccreator?"

She shook her head. "He was the son of my parents' butler and cook. We had known each other since infancy. We played together as children. And when we got older..." She smiled a little. "We were foolish. We thought nobody would know."

"But you could not take him as your *ahavatara* because he did not have magic."

Again, she nodded. "Yes."

"Did he know what happened to you?"

She hesitated, remembering. "Yes. He knew. He blamed himself for not protecting me. But when he tried to love me, I couldn't let him. I ran away."

"And now?"

"Now," she said slowly, "I have found him again."

"Then might I suggest, Mistress Valerin, you don't let your opportunity slide away again?"

Once again he was the Instructor Primus, distant, though now his consideration of her had disappeared. *Because he knew*, she thought. She was no longer a mystery to him. He understood her now, and he did not despise her for her past.

She'd experienced moments of revelation in her work when the columns of figures had formed a picture so clear and precise it was impossible to ignore. Now, even without the equations, she understood something so clear and shining she felt the worst sort of fool for being blind to it before.

Riordan de Cimmerian, a man neither kind nor generous by any description, knew her truth, and he did not hate her for it. He did not turn from her in disgust, and he did not even love her.

If a man who did not love her did not turn from her in disgust, neither would a man who did.

"I understand, sir. And, sir, if I might be so bold..." She paused. "You might take your own advice."

His eyes narrowed, and again she caught the glimpse of the man who so many feared. "You *are* bold."

She nodded. "I plead your mercy."

He stared at her a moment longer, the weight of his gaze unreadable. "You're dismissed, Mistress Valerin."

"Thank you, sir."

He nodded, not looking at her any more. Elspeth left his office with much to think about.

Arithmancy was a far more precise practice than Divination. Divination used signs and portents to predict the future, while Arithmancy used numbers and calculations to determine how choices would affect outcomes. The difference of something as simple as one number could result in an end completely different than if one used another number or calculation to figure it.

She spent several hours at her desk, running numbers. She factored every possible equation, ran every scenario she could think of, added and subtracted every element. It was, perhaps, the mathematical equivalent of “he loves me, he loves me not”, but it was what she knew best how to do. In the end, it came down to two results, the difference of one small equation, one factor, a single number that when used or eliminated in the overall formula created two results. One, positive. The other, negative.

When it came down to the line, there was nothing she could do to determine which of the sums was going to be accurate. No choice she could make to sway the results. Two outcomes seemed equally likely.

She couldn’t put a numerical value on love; couldn’t use addition and subtraction on the human heart. It didn’t work. She could fact and figure her way into an assumption of the future, and use the numbers to lead her choices toward positive or negative, but in the end, it all came down to something she could not control.

Either Connell loved her, or he did not. And no matter how many times she looked at the numbers, she wasn’t able to decide which of the two most likely results were going to happen.

“Connell.”

His eyes opened wide to darkness and he sat up. The curtains blew in the open window. The chill, salt-scented breeze made him shiver.

“Ella?”

A portion of the darkness peeled away from the doorframe. In the next moment she slid under the covers and into his arms. His nose filled with her scent, while the dark silk of her hair tickled his bare chest. She wore a thin flaxene gown, and his hands told him she was bare beneath it. The points of her nipples rose hard against the cloth, and at the feeling of them, he was hard too.

“Make love to me, Connell.”

Oh, how badly he wanted to. Her mouth was already on his, her tongue darting between his lips with the delicate aggressiveness that never failed to stiffen his cock and make his heart pound. His hands tangled in her the glory of her hair, and she moaned when he tugged it. She moaned louder when his teeth found the soft flesh of her throat.

He had no fear they’d be overheard. His secluded rooms over the garden shed meant only someone standing down there in the night, listening on purpose, could possibly hear her. Yet something made him

hush her. He put her from him a little more roughly than he'd intended, and the whimper as his fingers gripped her arms made his heart lurch with grief.

"Ella," he said. "I want to make love to you. But we can't."

She sat up. Moonlight filtered through the window and flashed in her eyes. She was crying. "We have to."

Connell shook his head, pushing her hair away from her beautiful face. He was dreaming this as he'd dreamed so many other times. He already knew her reasons for seeking the safety of his bed when they both had always known he could not be her first lover. Her *ahavatara*.

Connell didn't have magic. Giving him her virginity meant she'd tithe herself to him forever, her use of the thrall would be compromised and she would never reach her full potential as a magiccreator. They'd always known it. They'd always known their desire needed limits. One day she would no longer be his Ella but belong to someone else.

"I don't care," she whispered. "I love you, Connell. You. And I want to be with you. I don't care if I never harness the thrall, I don't care—"

She did care. He knew that. She had to. She had no choice. Elspeth had magic, and it couldn't be denied. He had nothing but a strong back and hands that could build. Nothing but sweat and effort. She had the chance to have it all, but not if she wasted it on him.

"Ella, I can't let you."

"Please, Connell!" Tears choked her voice, and she shook in his arms. "Please, before it's too late! Once it's done, he'll be able to do naught about it."

"Who, Ella? Who?"

Silver tears slipped down her cheeks like trails of star fire. "He said he'd make sure Mother and Father put you out...and your parents too. And that he'd kill you himself, if he knew you'd laid a hand on me again. He said I'm bringing shame to our family, that I'd better not disgrace him by tithing myself to someone with no magic!"

"Your brother doesn't scare me," Connell said angrily, but the sight of her face made him fall silent.

For the first time, he saw why his Ella had gone so pale and thin the past few months. Why she'd stopped smiling. His fingers tightened further, and her small cry made him relax. His heart lodged in his throat. "I'll tear him apart."

"I'll give it all up. I don't care." She sounded hoarse, her voice like glass, brittle. Ready to shatter. "Make love to me, Connell, and all I'll lose is the thrall. I can live with the rest of my life doing only low magic. I can. But I can't live the rest of my life tithed to him. I can't! Not that way!"

He hushed her, gathering her into his arms, burying his face in her hair. He didn't want to ask her what Des had done or what he was trying to do. He didn't want to believe it. His stomach twisted, but the words she'd said no longer mattered. She was with him now. His Ella, the only woman he would ever love.

And then, another figure appeared in the doorway. The shouting began. Desmond Valerin, his parents' pride and joy, and supposed defender of his sister's virtue. He'd cried of scandal and threatened to kill Connell, and because Desmond was a magicreator and Connell not, the fight had been brief and unfair. By the time the binding spell wore off and Connell could leave his room, much had happened. The rose garden had been painted with Des's blood.

And Ella had been lost.

"Connell."

His eyes opened wide to darkness, and he sat up. He was no longer dreaming. A shadow in his doorway had him on his feet in moments, fists raised.

She murmured a word and the fire flared. She pushed her hair off her shoulders and looked at him, her eyes glimmering in the light. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't." He ran a hand through his hair, then looked down, self-conscious at his bare chest and the loosely tied sleeping trousers he wore. "What are you doing here?"

Ella—Elspeth, he corrected himself, looked hesitant. "I came to plead your mercy. For everything. All of it. I have no excuses. I was cruel then. You deserved better."

This wasn't what he'd expected, and though her words softened him inside, he did his best not to show it. "You have my mercy. Now you can go."

She did something he had not expected. She crossed the room and went to her knees in front of him, head bowed. "Connell, please, please forgive me."

And he could no longer hold onto his anger. It had burned through him like a hot coal in a napkin, leaving behind a hole, but no more heat. He got down in front of her, unable to bear seeing her abase herself like that. "I forgive you, Ella. I told you that."

She looked up at him. "Do you still hate me?"

"I could never hate you."

Her smile was small. "You told me you hated me."

"You told me you'd never love me."

"I didn't want to hurt you." She looked at him. "Des was dead by his own hand. My mother—"

"I remember."

Her mother had given her favored child a funeral full of pomp and circumstance, of glitter and glory. Amarata Valerin had slapped her daughter's face in front of the mourners, called her a whore and blamed her for Desmond's death.

"When you found me in the garden afterward and took my hand, all I could do was think how my mother was right." She took a deep breath and reached for his hand. She linked their fingers together. "How it was my fault Des had died. And how I couldn't let her know how much I loved you, Connell, or else she'd send you away or find a way to hurt you out of spite for me. So I told you I didn't love you, and I

pushed you away because I didn't know what else to do, and I went away because I couldn't bear to live with how much I'd hurt you."

He pulled her into his arms. "You weren't crying. I thought you meant it. I shouldn't have believed it, Ella. I should've known different."

Against his cheek, she shook her head. "You couldn't have."

He held her tight against him, stroking her hair and losing himself in her scent the way he'd done so many years ago, when they were no longer children and not quite adults. Tears wet his face, and he wasn't sure if they belonged to her or to him, only that she was laughing and crying at the same time, and then she was kissing him.

"Make love to me," his Ella said to him once again, after all this time. "Please, Connell."

And this time there was no hesitation, no reason to say no. This time, he took her in his arms and carried her to his bed where they fell, both of them laughing until the laughter became sighs.

He laid her down and covered her with his body. His hands came up to cup the sides of her face and brush the hair away. He looked into her eyes. Then he kissed her with such gentleness it made her want to weep again.

She gave him the tears she'd been unable to shed for years, and he kissed them away. He kissed her eyes, her cheek, the line of her jaw. Connell nuzzled her ear, then the curve of her shoulder, and she tipped her head back to give him access to her throat, and he kissed her there too.

His mouth, wet heat with a hint of teeth, made her gasp. He took her skin in his teeth and she arched into his bite. His hands moved down along her sides, then up to cup her breasts through her gown. She moaned his name.

"Ella," he whispered, "I never stopped loving you. Not ever."

"I never stopped loving you either."

He paused in kissing her to prop himself on his elbows and look into her eyes. "I should've protected you."

"Shhh." She shook her head. "That's all gone. He's gone. It's in the past. Let's make the present, here. Now."

She reached up to pull him down to her. Their mouths met, opened, tongues darting, and it was as though no time had ever passed between them. He set her on fire as he always had. As no other man ever had. She took his hand and brought it again to her breast.

He shivered and bent back to her neck, kissing and nibbling. She arched into his touch, encouraging him with small moans. He knew already how to touch her, how to urge her passion from her, only now

each touch, each lick, each stroke and nibble, was magnified because it had been so long for her without pleasure, without passion, so long without the ability to feel.

He moved down, undoing the small pearl buttons that lined her dress from throat to hem. Connell laid open the throat of her gown, baring her skin to his kiss. He found the curve of her collarbone and nipped it, earning a gasp, then smoothed his tongue along the place his teeth had already found. He kissed further down, his hands undoing the buttons without hesitation.

He undid the buttons to her waist. Under her gown she wore a thin flaxene shift tied at the throat with ribbons. Connell unlaced her slowly while he kissed her mouth. The heat of his hands on her bare skin made her gasp.

“Your skin is like silk,” he whispered.

His fingers circled her nipples, already hard, and he rolled them in the way he used to. The way that made tingling sparks of pleasure flood her veins, move along her body with each beat of her heart. Something had happened to her that made her gasp at the realization.

“I’ve stopped,” she said.

He looked at her. “Stopped what, love?”

“Counting,” she said, and kissed him again.

He left her mouth and moved downward again, lips sliding over her skin until he replaced his fingers with his tongue upon her nipples. He suckled first one, then the other, and she shivered under his touch. His hands slid down along the curve of her hips. His mouth kissed her ribs, then the hollow of her naval and the slight curve of her belly. He licked and kissed and nuzzled her skin.

He paused to take her hand and pull her up so she could slip her arms out of her clothes. Sitting, she bared herself to him, nervous for the first time. She was no longer the girl he’d loved. Time had been kind to her, but her body had changed. She pushed the material down over her hips and watched him watch her, his dark eyes gone darker with passion.

“By the Astria, you are beautiful.”

Other men had told her so. Ones she’d ignored or avoided. Being told of her beauty had always made her stomach twist, made her turn away. Made her go cold inside.

Not with Connell. His words made her smile. Heat bloomed inside her, sending a flush along her chest and up her throat to paint her cheeks. She wriggled the rest of the way out of her gown and lay back against the headboard, holding out her arms to him.

He stretched out along her once more. They kissed. Long ago they’d spent hours kissing, tongues stroking, lips nibbling. Hands touching first over clothes and then, when it became too much to bear, fingers sliding beneath to pet and rub. And finally, clothes removed, mouths and hands arousing each other, doing everything but the one thing they couldn’t do because it would change their lives forever.

His erection rubbed against her through his sleeping trousers, and Elspeth reached down to stroke him. Connell, face buried in her neck, shuddered when she touched him. His teeth closed on her skin, giving her the pleasure-pain she'd always loved.

She let her hand move up and down, then reached for the ties at his waistband. "I would see you."

He nodded and helped her undress him as he'd helped her. In moments he was bare, and she put her hand upon his shoulder to push him back against the pillows. She wanted to see all of him. She wanted to drink the sight of him like she'd drink fine wine, wanted to consume him with her eyes.

His body had changed too. He'd always been strongly built, with muscled arms, broad shoulders, lean hips and strong legs. As a lad of ten-and-eight, dark curling hair had thatched the base of his penis and run in a line up his belly. Now, as a man of eight-and-twenty, the line had thickened. More curling hair scattered over his smooth skin and surrounded the dark circles of his nipples.

She bent to lick one, then the other. He tasted spicy. She sucked his skin gently, hair tickling her cheek, then let her mouth linger on his skin. Warm. Smooth. The same, but different. His body had grown more defined with age. A rippled scar curved along one shoulder.

She moved to kiss his mouth again, her hands running down his arms to circle his wrists, and she pulled away to turn over his hands. The palms were rough. Scars dotted his skin there too. Marks of hard work. She traced them with her fingertips first, then her kisses, and held them up.

"Each of these must tell a story."

He nodded, drawing her closer to kiss her. "For another time."

She laughed as he put his arms around her to hold her close. Their bodies, length to length, skin warm, fit together like puzzle pieces. She took his kiss and gave it back.

"Another time, oh and aye," she agreed.

Her hand found his cock again, and she stroked him gently, fingers barely grasping him. She let her palm roll over the head, then twist around and down the shaft. Up again, the rhythm familiar even after so long.

He sighed into her mouth. She took his breath. He entered her lungs. Became part of her. His hand found the back of her head and held her mouth against him as his hips lifted into her touch.

She broke the kiss to catch her breath. She shifted her legs, and the sensation made her shiver. Heat filled the pit of her belly and lower. She felt swollen, slick with arousal, empty and yearning to be filled.

The first time she'd taken him in her mouth, he'd cried out her name so loud it had startled a colony of gulls. She'd been clumsy then, her love for him making up for her lack of skill, and it had taken only moments for him to spill inside her mouth. Time had granted both of them greater control. The memory of it, the musky, ocean taste of him, made her clit pulse.

Elspeth slid down his body, her mouth leaving a trail of slickness along his skin. She let her breath caress his length, her lips hovering but not touching him. She heard him take in a breath, but did not hear him let it out, and she smiled. She licked the head of his cock. Connell moaned.

She could not torture him longer, or herself. She wanted to taste him. Elspeth took him into her mouth, the entire length as far as she could. The brush of his pubic hair tickled her lips. He cried her name, and though there were no gulls to scatter above them, the sound of it well-pleased her.

She slid her mouth upward, following behind it with her hand so he was not left bereft. She suckled the head of his cock in time to her hand's stroking. Then down again, slowly, deliberately, until again her mouth brushed his dark hair and her hand slipped down to cup the weight of his balls.

She had always loved doing this for him, giving him pure pleasure. Letting him fill her mouth gave her almost as much pleasure as him filling her, because she loved him.

"Ella." His voice hoarse, Connell moved his hips in time to the pace she'd set. His fingers tangled in her hair, not forcing her to stay there, but moving with her as she moved.

He grew harder under her tongue. His breathing got faster. Between his legs his heartbeat quickened when she pressed the seam of his skin below his testicles. He moaned louder when she ran her finger along that soft skin and pressed in time to her sucking.

A drop of salty fluid coated her tongue and she swallowed it. The taste made her clit swell further, begging for attention. She slid a hand between her legs to stroke herself. Her fingers had made no more than one full circle when she felt his hand upon hers.

In the next moment, Connell shifted to the side, pushing at her hip in the same motion. He rolled her so skillfully she did not lose him from her mouth. He settled himself full on his back, hands on her hips and her heat poised over his mouth.

She paused in her sucking when she felt his breath upon her. Then the next minute her own cry burst from her throat at the sensation of his tongue licking her. Heat on heat, wet on wet, he circled her clit then kissed her. Soft, firm kisses. The tip of his tongue stroked her clit.

She lost her concentration at first from the sheer ecstasy of it. It had been so long. So long even since she'd made love to herself. She couldn't breathe or move, could only let the glory of Connell's mouth upon her wash over her.

His hands stroked her hips, urging her to rock them in time to his kisses. This made it easier. She took him in her mouth again and let him move her body. Back and forth. He licked her while she sucked him.

She couldn't think. Could do nothing but ride the waves of pleasure. Her rhythm stuttered. She lost her place. Her hips moved against him until at last his hands held her still and he licked and licked and her entire body shook with climax. Her fingers clutched the bed clothes. She put her forehead to his thigh, her hair falling down over them, tangling round his cock, slick from her mouth.

His tongue fluttered on her. She broke. She shook. She came so hard she couldn't even think.

He rolled them again. She became aware of the softness of his bed beneath her back and the weight of his head upon her belly. He was stroking a hand along her hip and side, over and over. She blinked and looked down to see him looking up.

Grinning.

“Come here,” she said, and he did at once.

She tasted her joy on his lips, and it made her shiver again. She held him close to her. He settled between her legs, his belly against her still-pulsing center. He pushed her hair off her face. He kissed her mouth, her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead, then rested his forehead against hers and looked into her eyes.

“I love you, Ella.”

“I love you, too, Connell.”

He smiled and kissed her once more, like he couldn’t get enough of her, and she understood because she felt the same. She thought he would enter her, but he did not. Connell seemed content to lie upon her, kissing her, and Elspeth was content to let him.

She did not think her body could respond again to him. Her climax had left her shaken. But as Connell kissed her, soft, hard, gentle and fierce, once again heat pooled between her legs. Her body became pinpoints of sensation. Her lips. Her nipples crushed against his chest. Her clit rubbed the firmness of his stomach.

Connell shifted, still kissing her, never stopping. The tip of his cock nudged her. She sighed and tilted her hips to aid his entrance. He did not push inside her.

Instead, he kissed her more. His hips made slow, gentle thrusts. His pelvic bone rubbed her clitoris with maddening continuity. His hand slipped round beneath her neck to hold her head as he kissed and kissed and kissed her.

Tongues stroked. Lips nibbled. Mouths opened, breath passing from one to the other. She no longer knew where she ended and he began. She no longer cared. She didn’t know the moment he began to fill her, only that he slid the tip of his cock along her folds. She arched to take him further. He withdrew.

Their bodies had joined, melded by sweat and the slickness of her arousal. Nothing scraped, nothing pinched, nothing caught or tugged. Everything had become smoothness, like silk, like oil. Liquid and languid and flowing.

He slid inside her without pause. His cock nudged the entrance to her womb. His belly teased her clit. He began to move.

She heard herself murmuring his name, words of love, and heard him answer, but they came with no conscious effort on her part. They slipped from her lips as easily as breath. She could not think of words, could think of nothing but him moving inside her and his mouth on hers. Nothing else mattered.

“Ella—”

His surprised tone made her open her eyes. The air glimmered around them. The thrall filled her, making sight replace sound, sound become taste, taste transform itself to sight. Connell tasted like singing and smelled like sunshine. She had covered them both with the high magic without knowing it.

He moved faster with long, smooth strokes. The thrall glimmered and shimmered around them both. Her hands ran down his back to cup his rounded buttocks as he pushed upward on his hands to keep his weight from crushing her. Elspeth angled her hips and hooked her ankles around the back of his calves, urging him forward.

“Look at what you’ve done.” Connell shivered. Sweat dripped from him. She slid her hands up his chest to tweak his nipples. “Look at you, Ella. Look what you can do.”

The thrall danced within her and around her. Connell did not have magic. She wanted to share it with him.

“Kiss me,” she said.

He did. It should not have happened. It wasn’t supposed to happen. Everyone said it could not happen.

Yet when he kissed her, it did. He opened to her out of love, and she gave him what she was feeling, seeing, tasting, smelling. He had no magic, but she gave him some of hers.

His eyes opened, glazed with passion, and she lost herself in his love. They moved together. He bent to kiss her again. He tasted like love. Together, they made love while the thrall covered them and urged them on, taking them higher.

*I love you.*

He answered her thought with his voice. “I love you too. My Ella.”

His pace became ragged. His breath shortened, and hers did too. Starlight filled her, tension coiling, every part of her focused between her legs where the pressure built and built until it let go and she surged with climax again.

Connell thrust inside her once, twice, the last time falling forward to bury his face in her neck. He cried her name and gathered her into his arms.

His cock pulsed inside her. The thrall let her feel his seed filling her. Connell’s climax sounded like moonlight and tasted like thunder, and it left her gasping and quaking with a third and final orgasm of her own.

The thrall had never filled her the way it just had. Connell rolled off to lie beside her, his head next to hers, his lips pressed against her shoulder. Elspeth lifted her hand and formed an orb. It was perfect, without flaw, a deep and gleaming gold tinged with blue the color of summer sky.

She closed her fingers and it absorbed into her skin. She made another, as perfect as the first. This one she released. It hovered above them, waiting for her to command.

It was almost too much. She closed her fingers again and withdrew the orb. Her body hummed. Every sensation remained colored by a new awareness. By the thrall. By the magic Connell's love had let her access at last.

Elsbeth began to weep.

"Ella, love, what's wrong?"

How could she explain how it felt to hold the thrall in her hands rather than have it slip away from her grasp? To know she could do anything now, make anything happen, create and destroy. How could she tell him, who had no magic, how the years of working so hard to harness what she'd been born to do had left her convinced she would never be able to do it?

How could she explain to one who did not have magic how empty she had been, and how full she was now?

"Ella?"

She looked down at him and brought him to her again for a kiss. "Thank you, Connell. Oh, thank you."

His brow furrowed at her tears, but he held her in his arms and kissed them away. "Shh, love. Please don't cry."

How could she explain that she wept from joy, not grief? That she had found her way at last along the path she'd thought never to walk. How could she tell him she had believed she would always be alone.

She could not. Numbers, not words, were her strength. She could not find the means to tell Connell everything in her heart.

She could only tell him what she'd already said. "I love you."

And it was enough, because he demanded no more from her. Her words were not inadequate to him. They were enough. At last, for her, everything was enough.

## About the Author

When she was in the third grade, Megan Hart fell in love for the first time. Not with a boy (that would wait until fourth grade), but with a story. “The Homecoming” by Ray Bradbury leaped out at her from the pages of a library book, and she tumbled head over heels. In the dark ages, before the days of photocopiers, the only way for her to keep a copy of this story was to copy it out by hand so she could read it over and over again. Something funny happened, though, as she carefully printed it on lined notebook paper.

She made “improvements.”

At age 12, reading Stephen King’s *The Stand* for the first time one memorable summer, it occurred to her that people really did write books for a living. That’s when she decided to become an author. Megan began writing short fantasy, horror and science fiction before graduating to novel-length romances. In 1998 as a stay-home mom, Megan took up writing in earnest, attending her first writing conference and getting her first request for a full manuscript. In 2002 she saw her first book in print, and she hasn’t stopped since.

Published in almost every genre of romance fiction, Megan also writes fantasy, science fiction, women’s fiction, horrifyingly awful screenplays, and continues to occasionally dabble in horror.

Megan’s goal is to continue writing the kind of books she’d like to read. She spends too much time playing The Sims. 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 with her husband and two monsters...er...children.

Learn more about Megan at her website, [www.meganhart.com](http://www.meganhart.com) and her blog at [www.readinbed.net](http://www.readinbed.net). Follow her on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/Megan\\_Hart](https://twitter.com/Megan_Hart) and at Facebook: [www.facebook.com/megan.hart](https://www.facebook.com/megan.hart).

Look for these titles by Megan Hart

*Now Available:*

Passion Model  
Amidst a Crowd of Stars

*Coming Soon:*

Seeing Stars

*A love as a rare—and precious—as a desert rain.*

## Amidst a Crowd of Stars

© 2010 Megan Hart

Marrin Levy needs a man. Not to have children. Her husband gave her three before he died—along with a failing homestead and crushing debt. What she needs is a strong back to help her wrest a living from the harsh, desert plant of Lujawed.

She's sent away for a field-husband to take over the hard labor, nothing more. She never expected the devastatingly handsome, forever-young Seveeran, Keane Delacore, would fit so easily into her family's life.

Keane's heart is as strong as his back, bringing Marrin more than just help in the fields. He offers her love she never thought she'd feel again...if she has the courage to reach out and take it.

*Warning: Contains three-alarm love scenes and a three-hankie love story. Read it and weep—in a good way!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Amidst a Crowd of Stars:*

The colony was still small enough to support group celebrations like this one. The tables had been set with flowers and pretty cloths. A band hired to provide music. Food, laid out in a bounty that proved to any who doubted how prosperous they'd all become.

Marrin watched Sarai chattering with her friends. Her other daughters, Aliya and Hadassah, had also abandoned the dull company of their parents to seek their companions. Marrin had a plate of salad and a glass of iced water, but wasn't doing much beyond looking around in amazed pride.

"You're Sarai's mother, aren't you?"

Marrin turned at the question to see a woman of about her own age she faintly recognized. "Yes. I'm Marrin Levy."

"Arlene Simpson. I'm Jack's mom."

Marrin didn't know Jack, but she smiled and nodded anyway. Keane came up beside her and put his arm around her shoulders, squeezing gently before stepping away to take the plate from her hands and begin finishing the salad.

"Hi," he greeted Arlene.

The other woman's eyes widened slightly. "Hello. I'm Jack's mom." Her smile thinned as she looked at Marrin.

Keane smiled and shrugged, more honest in his reply than Marrin had been. "Sorry, I don't know Jack."

“Jack Simpson?” Arlene’s tone clearly said Keane ought to know him. “He might be a year or two behind you.”

Keane paused with the fork halfway to his mouth, an eyebrow raised. “Sorry?”

Marrin tensed, her gut twisting. It wasn’t the first time their apparent age difference had been brought up in casual conversation, but it had been quite a while. Anyone who knew them knew Keane wasn’t as young as his Seveeran genetics made him appear.

“My son,” Arlene said patiently, as though Keane were an idiot. “He graduated today with your girlfriend.”

“My girlfriend?” Keane’s face showed an amusement Marrin envied, but didn’t feel. He looked around the room, clearly biting back a laugh.

“Well, yes...you’re Sarai’s boyfriend, aren’t you? I just guessed you—”

“You guessed because I was here with Marrin and behaving in such a familiar manner that I must somehow be related to her, and you assumed for some reason I was here because of her daughter, who graduated today with your son.” His smile remained pleasant, his voice light, but he’d set down his plate and put an arm around Marrin’s shoulders.

Arlene looked confused, from Keane to Marrin and back again. “Well, yes.”

“Marrin is my wife,” said Keane without changing his tone.

If the woman’s face could have blushed any more crimson, Marrin didn’t see how. Arlene Simpson stammered and stuttered and backed away like Keane had somehow insulted her when really, she was the one who’d put her foot in her mouth.

It made Marrin feel no better to watch the other woman’s distress. Much of the time she could forget her husband was of a different race that didn’t age the same way Earthers did. She aged every day. Keane did not.

*Sworn virgin, instrument of the god's vengeance—helpless in her target's arms.*

## Blood of the Volcano

© 2011 Imogen Howson

Maya, leader of the temple maenads, has learned nothing but contempt for the weakness of her human body. She lives for the ritual that transforms her into maenad form, ready to administer the vengeance of the volcano god.

Killing a fugitive shifter is not just her duty, but her delight—until, against all odds, he captures *her*, trapping her in her worst nightmare. Her vulnerable, easily controlled human form.

Marked for destruction by his forbidden gifts, empath and shifter Philos fled the city years ago to become a warrior for persecuted people like him. Now he has the enemy at his mercy—a maenad desperate to regain her power. But when they touch, he finds his empathic power not so much a gift as a terrible danger. To his people, and his heart.

Gradually, Maya realizes Philos is not a monster deserving of death. Yet even as she hesitantly offers to help in the war against the priests, she can risk no more than the bare beginnings of friendship with the man she was supposed to kill. Anything more, and she will forever lose access to the power she cannot bear to live without...

*Warning: Contains violence, deadly spider-venom, sex that gets interrupted at the last minute, sex that doesn't get interrupted at the last minute, and plenty of not-your-usual shape-shifters.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Blood of the Volcano:*

Maya watched him drink, cup water in his hands and splash it over his face, run wet fingers through the long strands of black hair. *Longer than mine...but then he was not born to be a fighter.*

The shame ate at her, that he, a runaway, a condemned criminal, had kept her prisoner this long. It had been only luck and a spider bite that had reversed their positions, nothing to do with her god-given powers or her years of experience running with the maenad pack.

She watched him, an ordinary man, maybe five years older than she. Prettier than most, with the sweep of glossy hair and the dark eyes she remembered staring, terrified, into hers, but nothing that should have made him able to beat her, nothing that should have allowed him to keep her prisoner for a whole night and day.

*Except he's not ordinary.* The thought held her still with sudden surprise. *I'd forgotten that—forgotten why we were chasing him in the first place. There's something wrong with him, some unholy power, demon- not god-begotten.*

She didn't need to know. It was nothing to her. In a short while she'd pack up supplies and leave, and if she ever saw him again it would be because he'd been stupid enough to try returning, and she—or

another of her pack—would tear him to pieces. There was no reason to want to understand more about him, how he'd been able to overpower her.

There was even less reason to want to make him look at her, now that she was no longer helpless, pathetic and bound. No reason to want to make him remember her as in control, sitting here with the knife ready to her hand, on the spot where she'd successfully saved his life.

*And it's stupid. I've already saved him when I should have let him die, am already letting him go when I should march him in chains back to my people. I do not need to talk to him, let him pretend to be a person.*

She said it anyway, as she'd known she was going to, and her warring thoughts came through into her voice, making the words shiver and run together so she sounded uncertain and almost afraid. "What is your power?"

He turned. She was looking straight at him, so his eyes met hers. Her question must have taken him off guard, because for a moment his eyes held no wariness, nor fear, only an amusement that warmed his face. It reminded her suddenly of the laughter she'd heard in his voice yesterday, when they were fighting and she'd thought he meant to rape her, then he'd said something silly, too outlandish to take seriously, and she'd known that whatever else he might do, she would never need to fear that from him.

"Did you not wonder before?" he said.

She shrugged, not liking the feeling that his eyes could see *into* her. "No. I was *busy* being marched across the desert."

He smiled, just a little bit, one side of his mouth curling upwards. "I mean before, in the ravine. Did you not wonder why you could not find me when you first came there?"

She blinked. She hadn't wondered. She'd forgotten those strange minutes in the ravine, when she—in the full flood of the madness, all her senses enhanced—had neither been able to see nor hear nor smell him.

He came over towards her, moving slowly, awkwardly—*he* would not be setting out today—then put his hand out, resting it on the rock face near where she sat. "Here. This is how. This is my gift."

She frowned at him. There was nothing, he was doing nothing. Whatever he was, it was not a shifter...

"No." He smiled again, a little bit more. "Don't look at my face. Look at my hand."

She did so. The wide span of his fingers was pressed against the rock, leaving a wet handprint, black on grey. An edge of morning sunlight caught the fine hairs on the back of his hand, making them shine faint gold against the brown of his skin. Calluses showed on the inside of his thumb and forefinger. It might not be a fighter's hand, but it was not a nobleman's hand either—it knew hard work.

She was still looking at it, wondering what she was supposed to be seeing, when it disappeared.

She blinked, instinctively shook her head, thinking her eyes must have blurred, but his hand—no,

his whole arm—did not reappear. And now the rest of his body, his face, his tunic seemed to dissolve, like a mirage dissolves when you get close to it.

Then all at once her perception shifted. He wasn't disappearing, he was *changing*. His skin and hair were taking on the colour and texture of the cliff face, matching each ridge and crack and tiny variation so exactly that if she hadn't known he was there she'd have sworn she was looking at nothing but rock. The change—and that was stranger than all the rest—even crept out into his clothes, so there was nothing to show that a man stood there, silently, secretly watching.

Only his eyes. They alone did not change, so she had the skin-crawling sensation that something—a demon, something not just half-human but not human at all—peered out of the cliff at her.

She opened her mouth. "That—that's your gift?"

He nodded—she could see where the bit of the seeming-cliff that was really his head moved.

"And is it just rock? Or can it be..." she made a vague gesture, unable to drag her gaze away, "...other things? *Anything?*"

"Anything, more or less. Nothing moving—not water or sliding sand. I can't match it quick enough for it to work. But anything that stays still long enough...yes."

He shut his eyes for a moment, and it was as if he'd vanished entirely. Almost doubting her own senses, she caught herself from reaching out to touch where he'd been. Then he swam back into visibility, his body seeming to coalesce from the air in front of her, changing to his normal self.

His eyes opened. "It's not the only part of it. You maenads—you'd have found me if that were my only gift—"

"Not your only gift? You have...more than one?" She'd never heard of anyone having more than one gift...and black envy caught at her throat. *If I had more than one, I would not feel so bereft. And why him? Why does he deserve—*

She got hold of herself. His gifts were unholy, unsanctioned—not something to be envied, no matter how many of them he had.

She looked back at his face. "You must have sinned appallingly." The envy, not quite suppressed, coloured her voice with a harsh tone that sounded like contempt.

"What?"

"To have two gifts. It was your sin that brought that on you—"

"It was not."

She stared at him, incredulous that he'd deny it. "You know it was. That's why we were sent after you—you've been using unholy gifts, trying to conceal them—"

He cut across her. "I know very well what brought you after me. I know my gifts are what the priests call unholy. I'm saying it was not sin that gave them to me."

At that, she laughed, scornful, a lifetime of teaching making her sure of her ground. "You're saying

you never sinned?”

“I’m saying I got my gift when I was two years old.” His voice was like stone. “You tell me, what sin could I have committed by then?”

For a moment she could think of nothing to say. *It can’t be. The unholy gifts—they’re born from sin. It’s why they come at adolescence, when people move away from the innocence of childhood. Only the holy gifts can come earlier, given by the god, blessings rather than curses...*

“You’re lying.” She moved away from him, standing with a jerk.

“I am not.”

“You are. You’re lying. That can’t be true. Those gifts come from sin, they can’t come from anything else, they *can’t*.”

He said nothing, his silence as much of an argument as words would have been. They were done, she and he, they’d not see each other again, why would he bother lying?

She crossed her arms across herself, tight, like a barrier, hating how slight her muscles felt, how her fingers closed on little more than skin and bone. *I shouldn’t even trouble to talk to him. I shouldn’t want to understand. I shouldn’t care at all.*

“How, then?” she said. “How did it happen?”

*An angry fairy queen trapped his body. A woman's love could imprison his heart.*

## Awaken

© 2010 Anya Richards

### *An Enchanted Story*

Prince Ryllio once lived so charmed a life, even he began to believe nothing bad could touch him. Then a moment's indiscretion brought Queen Mab's wrath raining down, encasing him in stone.

Hundreds of years later, he is losing hope that anyone will find him, much less counter the spell. Until a beautiful young woman wanders into his hidden glade to privately discover the pleasures of her own body. Her sensual innocence reignites his acute longing for freedom.

Lured into the old forest by an irresistible impulse, Myrina finds intimate communion with Ryllio's imprisoned spirit. His whispered guidance weaves an erotic spell, rousing her to undreamed heights of ecstasy.

The intertwining of their minds comes at a devastating price. As each encounter intensifies, Myrina falls in love with a man she can never touch. And Ryllio realizes he must give up the last vestiges of his humanity—or condemn her to life devoid of a flesh-and-blood lover...

*Warning: Bawdy faeries cause mayhem and wicked self-love abounds, as a voyeuristic prince and a shy but willing commoner both get a fine erotic comeuppance (put the emphasis in 'comeuppance' where you will)*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Awaken:*

*"I can't help thinking your friend was only partly right."*

*"In what way?" Myrina asked in surprise.*

*"There are some things you can learn on your own, but others only a lover can teach."*

*"What kinds of things?"*

*Ryllio's voice grew low, caressing. "The touch of your own hands is unlike the touch of another. What you do to yourself cannot feel the same or give the same sensations as when a lover gives you pleasure."*

*Myrina shivered, her skin prickling to life, body growing warm and liquid inside. Words failed her, for she remembered the imagined ecstasy of his mouth on her quim, wondered if it could have been even better in reality.*

*"And," he continued in the same low, seductive tone, "each lover is different, is inspired to do different things, or the same loving actions in different ways. It is only in the moment you can know whether these new sensations are pleasurable or not. But Elawen also was right. There can be no harm in learning your body's desires for yourself."*

Flushed with arousal, yet also embarrassed, Myrina thought it best to leave, but could not bring herself to go. It was not just the desire holding her in place, but a bone-deep reluctance to abandon Ryllo now that she knew of his lonely existence. There could be no harm in staying for a while, in being with him during this moonlit night, in asking him some of the questions burning in her mind.

It took some courage, however, to finally reply, and her voice faltered from her throat. “Are lovers so different, one from the other, then?”

*“Yes, and you will be different with each one too. What one man will do to you without hesitation, another would never consider doing. And what you enjoy with one man, you will find repulsive if another tried.”*

Considering his words, Myrina realised he must have had many lovers before his punishment began, and a spark of something akin to jealousy came to life deep in her belly. It made her voice stronger, with a bit of a snap, when she spoke. “What kinds of things would a lover such as yourself never do? Surely there cannot be many?”

But when he replied, his words doused the flame of her anger, even as they ignited a flash-fire of passion.

*“For you, with you, I would do everything, give you every liberty over my body, take whichever you would give in return. There is nothing I wouldn’t try in my quest to give you pleasure, to satisfy you, to make your desire burn so hot it incinerates us both with the ecstasy of our joining.”*

There was no need to ask what he meant, for in her mind she saw them together, in flickers of images conjured by his imagination. He was bent to her breasts, lips curved to receive her straining nipple—kissing her back, hands stroking her belly—kneeling between her legs, his hair dark against her thighs—curled around her from behind, the head of his cock poised for entry into her hungry body. She was tied, naked, to a bed—then he was likewise held immobilized for her pleasure. He was behind, in front, between—in her quim, her mouth, her hand, her arse. She was over, under, beside him, her hair unbound, trailing over his skin. Gentle here, masterful there—in control and ceding control—kissing, stroking, licking, sucking places Myrina never thought another would touch.

She pressed trembling palms to her cheeks, trying to rise, wanting to flee, but finding her legs too weak. The images were so real they left her gasping, burning—titillated and confused.

*“I’ve shocked and frightened you.”* His voice was rueful, but filled with such harsh longing the desire rampaging through her body climbed even higher. *“I’m sorry. You are more innocent than I realised. Please—”* he added, as Myrina once more tried to rise, *“—don’t go.”*

She subsided, quivering, drawing her cloak closer around her as though it could protect her from the unfamiliar swirl of emotion between them. His words and images were like an iron chain, binding and drawing her further into an unknown world she desperately longed to explore.

But there was also a sense of shame for being so ignorant. Jecil had been her only lover, coaxing until curiosity and the knowledge he would soon be leaving convinced her to accept his attentions. She had been tired of hearing Elawen's stories and not having any of her own to share. Tired too of not knowing what it felt like to be held, caressed, loved. Now she realised she was still almost as naive as before Jecil breached her maidenhead.

"You think me silly—like the old biddy Elawen accuses me of being."

"No, Myrina." Sincerity gave his words a gentle edge. "*Your inexperience is not something to be scorned.*"

"How can you say that when I could hardly understand what you showed me?" Tears prickled behind her eyes, and she hugged her knees beneath her cloak. "When I can hardly understand what I am feeling?"

"*What do you feel?*"

How could she describe the heated sensitivity of her body, the need washing through her in rough, tempestuous waves? How to explain to Ryllio just the sound of his voice, the vision of his fantasies, had ignited a passionate conflagration within? In its light all other sensation dimmed, cast into insignificance.

Gently, as mist creeps over the warmth of a slow flowing river, he cast a picture into her mind. Holding her cheeks, he tipped her face up so the deep green eyes with their slumberous lids and amorous gleam looked deep into hers.

"*So lovely,*" he murmured, fingers tracing the lines of her brows, the curve of her lips. "*So beautiful.*"

The feathery sensations came from her own hands, but still Myrina allowed the love-dream to pull her deep, gladly sinking into the drowning pleasure, leaving reality behind. Ryllio's voice, tender and enthralling, guided her to discard constraint along with her cloak, inhibition with her shift.

Loosening her hair to toss the heavy mass behind her shoulders, Myrina combed fingers through it as she raised her face to the star-flung sky. The movement lifted her breasts—an offering made to love's primacy—and the puckered tips, kissed by moonlight and the warm night air, ached. At Ryllio's sighing moan, the last of vestiges of reserve fell away, and she felt reborn—a woman desired and desiring, confident of her allure.

Taking her time, Myrina stroked neck and breasts, belly and thighs—making contact with fluttering touches and sure, strong caresses. Ryllio's whispers entreated her to search out and delight in the softness and sensitivity of her skin, the supple firmness of the muscles beneath.

She felt like a wild thing, unfettered by rules and expectations, open only to the satisfaction of the moment. In the cradle of the night, Ryllio's voice enfolded her, sheltering and freeing all at once.



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