

TWILIGHT

Anya Bast

Chapter One

It was always impressive to see, thought Dai as he and Nico mounted the top of a hill and the fourth triad tower came into view below them.

The tower rose high above the weed- and briar-choked hedges that wreathed its base. The weeds were impossible to keep at bay these days, despite the fact that darkness had grown so much that it seemed like constant twilight, and even though it was high summer, it felt like late autumn. Even now, in the gloom of the Encroaching Darkness, that tower seemed to cast a shadow.

He snapped his horse's reins and dug his heels into the beast's sides. Beside him, Nico did the same. They headed their mounts down the slope and through the gateway that led into the tower courtyard.

A black-hooded monk took their mounts and another ushered Dai and Nico into the tower. A small fire burned in the hearth, barely managing to touch the chill in the cavernous room. The floor was of solid stone, but no rushes had been laid down. The High Mages of the Vedicinn and their monks rarely succumbed to the temptation of such luxuries. A single table stood in the austere chamber, covered with texts and loose papers. Dai knew well the Vedicinn still sought ways to stave off the Encroaching Darkness, even though they all knew well it was Dai, Nico and the third member of their Sacred Triad—wherever she was—who would mean the difference between triumph and defeat.

Dai and Nico were two-thirds of a sacred triad—one of seven. The other six triads had been formed years ago and they were all waiting for the seventh to be realized. In the eyes of their elders they were failing. For years they'd searched for the woman who would complete their circle of magick. Her inclusion would form the last part of the conduit that would allow the power of all the triads to flow out and purify the binding fabric of their reality, fine-tuning it to a higher level. The formation of their triad would push back the Encroaching Darkness.

A shrunken form rose from the chair beside the table. A gnarled hand extended. The other liver-spotted hand clutched a wooden staff. "Come," said the fourth mage.

Dai and Nico walked forward and went down on their knees, touching their fingertips to their foreheads in the formal gesture of respect.

"Rise."

They rose and felt the full weight of the Fourth's gaze on them. He narrowed rheumy eyes at them. "Time is growing short," said the fourth in a voice that sounded as though it'd been broken over old stones. Timeless. Weary.

He needed to say no more.

Nico cleared his throat. His long black hair was loose and a hank of it had fallen across a dark eye. Nico was beautiful, dark and intense. It was said he could seduce anyone—man or woman. Dai knew it to be true. “We have a trace on her magick. She may be in the northern part of Carraton, and we are traveling there directly after this meeting, High Mage.”

The fourth’s eyes narrowed further. “I thought you told me her magick had been completely transferred to you.”

“Not the entirety of it. She still has a thin thread left.”

They did not know much about the one they sought, save that she was female. All the triads were of both sexes—two females and a male, or two males and a female. They also knew that years ago, some event had made their third member relinquish most of her magick. They speculated that she’d been greatly, perhaps irreparably, psychically damaged due to that unknown trauma in her past. Whatever happened had forced the magick out of her body and, as the other two sides of the triad, Dai and Nico had been forced to absorb it.

“Why have you not sensed this *thread* before now?” the fourth asked suspiciously.

His temper piqued, Dai stepped forward. It was as if the fourth thought they’d deliberately been thwarting the formation of their own triad. Even when the extra magick they carried was a heavy burden all of the time—and a nearly uncontrollable force some of the time. “We *have* sensed it over the years, High Mage, but it always moved so erratically that by the time we reached the area of its emanation, it had shifted. Now it has settled and stayed constant. We believe she has finally set up a home. I would respectfully ask your leave to be on our way immediately.”

The fourth stared at Dai and he returned his gaze confidently. Dai’s name was an apt one since he was like the day—friendly and full of light—but also had a temper that could grow hot as the sun.

The fourth tested that temper now.

Tense moments passed. Finally, the fourth banged his staff on the floor. “I summoned you here to impress the fact upon you that the fate of our world lies in your hands. The Vedicinn grows desperate. They search for ways to engage the magick of the triads without yours, and that will be risky. Go,” the fourth barked. His face grew haggard-looking and he seemed suddenly even older than his already ancient age. “You had better find her this time.”

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Twyla dug into the hard packed earth in effort to free a hanclep root. Her nail broke to the quick and, cursing, she snatched her hand to her mouth and fell back into a sitting position. Her wooden, hand shovel had split yesterday and she sorely missed it.

It was market day in Dandre Village tomorrow. She knew she’d have to brave a trip in to buy a new one. The last time she’d gone, she’d been hassled by a local farmer. Out

here in the country, women traveling alone were always suspect. The farmer, Marsten had been his name, had followed her around. Perhaps he'd thought she was a pleasure woman for hire, Twyla didn't know. All she knew was that he'd received a sharp elbow in the ribs for his trouble.

She cast around until she found a suitable branch and used it to dig. Finally the root came up. "Dinner!" she declared triumphantly to the forest at large. The root was an ugly bulbous purple mass at the moment, but cleaned up and boiled with the rest of her potatoes and an onion it would be quite delicious.

Cradling the root in her shirttails, she stood and made her way through the murky forest that she called home. She'd found a ramshackle house back in the depths of the woods. It had likely been abandoned for years and had needed many repairs. She'd set about fixing it up, and the project was nearly complete now. Smoke curled enticingly from the chimney in the distance and the thatched roof came into view. She still had things to do but it was becoming very cozy already.

Home.

She hadn't had one of those in a very long time. She'd never had a permanent one. She and her mother had always been forced to move to different villages when she'd been growing up. Never staying in one place long enough for them to settle and make friends or have any kind of stable life.

And then one day... Twyla gave her head a sharp shake. No, that didn't bear any thought at all. Better to let the past be the past.

She passed the woodpile and the hatchet she'd embedded in one of the stumps. She'd begun to line the walkway up to the door with some large, flat stones she'd found. It looked pretty that way, she thought. Yes, she planned to stay here for a while, forever if she could hold the place. She was so tired of moving.

Twyla pushed the door open and entered the snug house. It smelled of the drying herbs she'd hung from the rafters. She'd warmed some water over the fire so she could bathe. After she placed the root on the trestle table, she poured the warmed water into her hip tub. She loosed her hair from the knot on the top of her head and shook the length out. It was long, to her waist, and blood-red. She had no time or need for vanity in her life and, practically speaking, she should have hacked it off long ago. She fingered a tendril and eyed the knife on the table. *Really*, she should. It was constantly in her way and was so difficult to keep untangled. She closed her eyes as a memory overwhelmed her.

"Your hair is like rubies, darling," her mother said as she ran a brush gently through it.

Twyla inhaled. Her mother always smelled of vanilla.

"You have such pretty hair. Promise me you'll never cut it."

She opened her eyes, let go of her hair and stripped off her filthy clothing.

The water was comforting and pleasant when she lowered herself down into it and picked up the chunk of soap. She might not want to acknowledge the event that had decorated her body with a crisscrossing of thin, white scars, but she couldn't ignore

them either. They traced over her breasts, her stomach, thighs and buttocks and served as an ever-constant reminder of the night she'd lost both her mother and her innocence forever. The wounds, caused by a mercilessly lashing whip, had long since healed. Of course, the far more severe wounds within her mind and her heart had never healed, and she doubted they ever would.

She finished bathing, towed herself dry and slipped into her warm, woolen sleeping gown and slippers. After she'd prepared her stew and set it to cook over the fire, she curled up in a chair to watch the fire lick red and amber over the bottom of her cooking caldron. She considered buying a book at the market tomorrow. It was an expensive luxury, but she hadn't had a new book in a very long time. Exhaustion and relaxation gradually stole over her body and soon she found it difficult to keep her eyes open.

When she awoke, early morning light filtered in through the windows and the fire had burned itself to ash. She stood and checked the caldron and found it cold, as was her cottage. Her breath showed in the crisp air. Twyla cursed under her breath as her stomach rumbled. She'd have to remake the fire for heat and for food.

She moved to pick up her kindling basket from beside the door when she saw a flash of movement outside her window. Murmuring voices met her ears. Two males. Dropping the basket, she picked up her sword that lay against the wall instead. Moving stealthily, she inched toward the door and opened it a crack.

At first, she saw nothing, then she glimpsed two men roaming around outside. One was blond and fair; the other had dark hair and eyes. They were both tall, and well built. She bit her bottom lip, assessing them. They'd be far superior to her in swordplay unless she could dodge and strike, not allowing either of them to corner her and lay their weight against her.

No...with two of them that was probably not an option.

Quickly, she turned and pulled on a pair of trows, a shirt and a pair of boots. No way would she allow herself to be cornered by two unknown males in a thin sleeping gown. Her heart pounded and nausea threatened to overwhelm her. She sat on her bed and drew deep, ragged breaths. In her mind she chanted. *Not again! Not again!* Over and over.

She wouldn't be able to stand a repeat. She simply wouldn't be able to live through it. Also, she didn't want to leave this place. She didn't want to be chased away from yet another place she desired to make a home.

Twyla opened her eyes. She had to defend herself, or die trying.

A knock on the front door scared her almost out of her skin. She ran for the window at the back of the cottage, threw it open and pulled herself and her sword out of it. Then she walked around the side of building, her sword drawn and concealed behind her back, should she need to use it.

"Who goes there?" she asked when she turned the corner.

The two men turned toward her and she nearly dropped her sword. They seemed so familiar to her. Had she met them before? And what was that fizzy sensation vibrating through her? It calmed her somehow. It felt indescribably *right*.

The blond one smiled and took a step toward her. She took a step back. He frowned and held out his hand, as though entreating a wild animal. "We won't hurt you."

Aye, she'd heard that before.

"State your business," she said.

"*You* are our business, lady. We've been searching a long time to find you."

"What trickery do you use? As far as I know, I've never met either of you before. What cause do you have here? Why have you come?"

The dark one stepped forward. "I am Nico and this is Dai. We've come to talk with you. Will you at least tell us your name?"

"I think you've no need of that information. Leave now, before I am forced to *make* you do so." She pulled the sword from behind her back. They exchanged a look, yet remained nonplussed.

Did they not think she was serious?

"Please, lady, it is urgent we talk with you," said the one who'd called himself Nico.

In response, she assumed a battle stance, her sword at the ready.

"Lady –"

She charged, flying at them both. In her mind, she reviewed her battle strategy. Strike one and then the other fast and hard, maybe she could maim them. It would make them easier to fight.

But, suddenly, she found herself at a dead standstill. Both men had their hands out, palms forward. She was paralyzed in lunging battle stance—her arms raised, intent clear on her face.

Panic, intense and complete, consumed her.

Loss of control to males.

Just like before...

Her heartbeat sped up wildly. Her breath came in short, hard gulps. Then everything went black.

Chapter Two

Nico carried the young woman into her cottage and laid her on the narrow bed that lined one wall. He turned toward Dai, breathing hard and sweating, but it wasn't from lifting the woman's slight weight. It was from the hard, deep thrum of magick reverberating through him from being so near to their third, from touching her. Dai's eyes were wide and shining. Nico knew he felt it too. That extra magick within them wanted to go back to its rightful owner. Keeping it contained was a real effort.

Dai shook his head. "We have to keep it." His gaze dropped to the woman. She whimpered in her sleep as dreams set in. "At least for now."

"I know," answered Nico. He glanced at the woman. "She should sleep for a long time." Her hair flowed past her narrow shoulders like a dark red river. Her skin was so thin and pale, he could see her veins beneath it in places. Nico knew that fragility of hers was a deception. She'd almost pushed right through the magickal net they'd thrown up in front of her.

Her baggy, masculine clothing hid her body, but a man could clearly see she was sweetly shaped beneath them. Nico knew, and his cock definitely knew. He, like Dai, he was sure, had hungered for the woman the instant he scented her on the wind, the moment he'd seen her. It wasn't because she was beautiful, it was because she was their third and this triumvirate was predestined and long overdue.

Tingling sexual need tightened his body in a vise. He looked up at Dai, who held his gaze steadily. They were in accord.

"Outside?" asked Dai tersely.

Nico nodded once and they left the cottage. Once outside, he stalked to Dai, running his gaze over the other man's body as he went.

They were both well built from lives of strenuous activity, though Dai had perhaps just a little bit more bulk. Dai had been compared to a wolf by women, and Nico a large cat. The two of them together never failed to attract a woman to join them for bed play, when that was what he and Dai desired.

With his gaze, Nico traced the lines of Dai's chest and upper arms that could be seen through his shirt, and then dropped to the cock that strained against Dai's treads. Dai was every bit as aroused by the magick of encountering their third as he was. The power of their added magicks rose in them both, forcing upward and threatening to explode. It felt like a bag filling with water, the pressure forcing the seams. They needed an outlet, relief, a pinprick in the taut fabric to let just a trickle through.

Nico circled Dai with his eyes heavy-lidded, taking in the gorgeous male body that would soon be beneath him. He wanted to take Dai, and take him forcefully.

Right now.

He stood behind Dai, but didn't touch him. Instead, he allowed his body heat to radiate out into the other man's back. When Dai's breath caught, when Nico imagined his heart rate had sped up, he leaned forward and brushed his lips across Dai's nape.

"Do you want me?" Nico murmured.

"You could make water catch fire, Nico."

Nico nipped at Dai's nape, and then gently bit, tasting the salt on his warm skin. The action was a blatant show of dominant assertion. Neither one of them was naturally inclined toward submissiveness, but they took turns in deferring to the other sexually. This time Nico wanted Dai to defer and was making that clear. Telepathically he said, *you didn't answer my question.*

"Of course I do."

Nico released his hold on Dai's neck and Dai tried to turn toward him. With a low snarling noise in his throat, Nico clasped his hands to his waist and held him in place. Then he worked Dai's shirt up and over his head and ran his hands slowly down him, feeling the bunch of his muscles, the gentle rise and fall of his chest, his warm, warm skin.

Nico closed his eyes, savoring the feel of him under his hands. He dipped down and brushed across Dai's straining cock through his treads and Dai answered with a deep shudder. Nico's mouth curled up at the edges. His partner was excited by his touch.

Nico undid the treads and let them fall. Dai's cock was long and thick and heavily veined. Perfect in every way. He ran his fingers teasingly over the broad tip and then down to stroke the organ that felt so much like velvet-covered steel. Dai's body tensed and he let out a long, low groan.

With urgent lust, Nico pressed Dai to the ground beneath him, undoing his own treads as he went. He needed to be within Dai's heat. Nico needed to join himself with the man he loved, needed to feel their connection both physically and magickally. Last but not least, they needed to assuage this growing buildup of power. Nico ran his hand down the cleft of Dai's ass and then pressed a finger into his anus, eliciting groans from them both. He added another and thrust, gently widening him and relaxing his muscles.

When Dai was ready, Nico slipped the head of his cock within him, then fed the length to him inch by inch.

"Sweet—" Dai started to swear and then broke off. He shifted his weight and grasped his hard cock in his hand, stroking himself. His other hand curled into the grass beneath them. "Sweet Gods," he breathed finally.

Nico began to move, possessing the other man's body in the most satisfying of ways. The magick skittered over his skin, then, as the tension his body grew, it began to stroke him like a hand encased with silk.

Nico reached around and took Dai's cock in hand, stroking it as he thrust behind him. Dai's body tensed in the way that Nico knew meant he was ready to climax. When Dai let out a long, low groan of satisfaction and his cock jerked in Nico's hand, Nico exploded. At the same time, the magick burst from them both, covering them over in ecstasy before dissipating into the air around them.

Relief. In so many more ways than one.

Dai allowed himself to collapse to the ground, and Nico came with him. They lay tangled together and breathing heavily for a long time. The ground and air were cold, the skies dark, but neither of them seemed able to move to go into the cottage where it was warmer. The exhaustion came partly from making love and partly from the release of the excess buildup of magick. But mostly it came from the relief of their success. For years they'd sought her, and they'd finally, *finally* found her.

The finding of their third had brought with it a powerful emotional euphoria. Joining physically was a pleasurable way of expressing it.

Neither of them had started out predisposed to men, but when the magick had built and built, sex with each other had happened in order to relieve the pressure. They'd already been good friends, but it was then they'd become good lovers. Eventually, they'd come to truly love each other in a romantic sense. Now Nico couldn't imagine life without Dai. They were two parts of a whole. Well, he amended, maybe two parts of a triad was more like it. They had one more lover to add.

At some point, they slept, but awoke to the sound of screaming. Dai and Nico jumped up and raced into the cottage.

The woman writhed on the bed, her spine snapping back in gesture of agony. Her face contorted and she cried out in her spell-drenched sleep.

Dai and Nico hurried to her bedside. "She dreams," murmured Nico.

Dai shook his head. "Those are not dreams. She suffers with memories."

She clenched the blankets in white fists and shook, screaming and crying. Finally she went limp, perspiration coating her face.

Nico began to breathe easier. Perhaps the worst was over.

That's when the words began.

Nico fell to his knees beside the bed and Dai followed. Now *they* fisted the sheets in their hands. Now they cried. Every word she uttered painted a far too clear picture of the event that had driven her magick from her and into them.

The horror was beyond all imagination.

Nico and Dai sought and found each other, as though touching would help them endure the onslaught of her words and the images they produced in their minds. She talked of the night those that pursued her and her mother had finally caught up to them. She screamed when she relived the brutal rape and murder of her mother. It had occurred right before her eyes. The woman sobbed and became unintelligible after recounting this, but Dai and Nico understood the terror that had followed, and what

had happened to her. The men had done everything to her that they'd done to her mother, and more. Everything but kill her.

Finally, the woman lay still, sheened with perspiration and breathing hard. Her blood-red hair lay across her cheek in sharp contrast to the paleness of her skin. Nico reached out to brush her hair away, but Dai grabbed his wrist.

"Let her awaken on her own. Our touch, while she relives these events as she dreams, may very well make everything worse for her."

Nico nodded and began to lower his hand. Dai caught it and pulled Nico to him. For long moments, they stood by the woman's bedside, clinging to each other as her memories seared themselves into their minds. Nico squeezed his eyes shut, taking comfort in the rise and fall of Dai's chest against his own and the scent of his hair that lay against his nostrils. A mixture of fury and deep sorrow infused him. Fury at the men who had done this to her, and sorrow that he and Dai hadn't been there to protect her.

Dai pulled away, stood, and started pacing the small room. Nico watched him silently, his own emotions tightly leashed, knowing this was the fine edge of Dai's sometimes explosive temper. The last thing Dai needed now was more fuel for his emotions.

Finally Dai stopped in the center of the room and stared at Nico with a gaze made of daggers. "They destroyed her," he said in a much too soft voice. When he spoke that carefully, that softly, trouble lay ahead. A quiet Dai was a dangerous Dai.

Nico drew a breath. "We will aid her in rebuilding."

A burst of power exploded from Dai, making the glass in the cottage windows rattle and a fire begin with a poof of smoke in the hearth. "They broke her," Dai repeated in a dark voice. "Our third. How can you be so calm?"

Nico spread his hands. "There is nothing to do now but try to heal her, Dai. The past cannot be changed, but we can help her create a tomorrow full of support and love."

Dai made fists. "We need to find them. We need to—"

"All but two are dead."

Nico whipped his head in the direction of the quiet, feminine voice. The woman sat up and pushed herself into the corner of the wall, drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them in a protective gesture.

"They made the mistake of not restraining me that night." She shrugged. "I guess they thought I was too injured to move, but I wasn't. I-I...well, let's just say I took vengeance for my mother and myself."

"How long have you been awake?" Nico asked softly.

She tipped her chin. "Long enough to know I spill my secrets when I sleep. Long enough to wonder why you think I'd want your support and especially your *love*." She sneered the last word.

Dai moved toward her and, with wide eyes, she pressed herself against the wall . He stopped in the middle of the room. "We won't hurt you. That's the very last thing we would ever want for you. That's why I'm angry. The thought of you being"--he paused for a moment, obviously not wanting to say the word--"*abused* that way is near unbearable.

"I can take care of myself. I don't need anyone else," she snapped.

"Haven't you been lonely?" asked Dai.

"Of course I've been lonely, but lonely and safe is better than happy and endangered."

"What if you could be happy *and* safe?" asked Nico softly.

Her lower lip trembled just a bit and her eyes showed a fleeting deep vulnerability, before her features hardened. "I don't know who you are or why you've come, but I want you to leave."

Nico stood. "We're both Mages of the Triads." He waited a beat. "*You* are a mage, also. *You* are our third. That's why we've come."

"What?" Her eyes widened and she went very still.

"I'm not lying to you," said Nico. "We've been looking a very long time for you."

Her face paled. Finally, when she spoke, it was more of a shriek. "Get out! Get out now!"

Nico and Dai went for the door. Pushing her wouldn't aid them or her. She would come to them eventually. It was destined to be so. "At least tell us your name," said Dai before exiting.

Nico turned to watch her. She stood in the middle of the room, shaking nearly imperceptibly. They'd touched something within her. Something fresh and tender, and it had hurt. That was obvious. She needed time to come to terms with it.

Too bad they didn't *have* any time.

"M-my name is Twyla," she whispered, looking away from them.

Chapter Three

Twyla shut the door behind the two males and latched it. Then she leaned her head against the heavy wood and closed her eyes. Emotion jumbled around inside of her until she didn't know how she felt anymore.

There was something about them. Something that had rekindled the magick she'd had as a child, the magick that had made her and her mother outcasts in every village in which they'd tried to settle. It had flicked over her skin like a caress when she'd first seen them, then again when she'd awoken to hear them raging on about That Night. The blond one had been furious. She'd never had anyone become so upset in her defense.

She squeezed her eyes shut even tighter. They were mages. They said she was one, too, a Mage of the Triads. They were the holy people of Carraton, counterpart to the blessed ones, the Vedicinn. They lived cloistered in the Triad Towers far to the north, using their magicks for those who had need of them. Unlike witches, the mages were highly revered in their culture.

Could it possibly be?

She opened her eyes and turned away from the door. The fire still raged in the hearth where the blond one, Dai, had set it aflame with his magick. She sank into a flanking chair and studied the tendrils of flame that licked the bottom of her cooking cauldron as they warmed her stew. At least some good had come out that encounter.

It was true that when her mother had been alive, Twyla had been full of magick. She'd had healing ability and had been able to move things with her mind. It had been what kept them outcasts. It had been why they'd been forced to move from one place to another. Twyla had always known she was different, but she never thought she was a Mage of the Triads. She and her mother had simply assumed she'd had rogue magick in their bloodline. That she'd been a witch, not a mage. A mongrel, not a purebred.

Worse, she'd been untrained. So Twyla hadn't even been able to hide her abilities. They'd just appear, sometimes at the most importune of times.

The night her mother had died, she'd rejected all the magick within her. She'd pushed all of it away from her with a supreme use of her will, blaming her magick for what had occurred. The men had tortured her and her mother because they feared her and her abilities, after all. If she hadn't been such a misfit, so strange, the men would've left them alone on That Night. Her mother would still be alive. A tear slipped down Twyla's cheek. It was her fault her mother had been murdered.

There was a deep part of her that missed her magick, that was true enough. She had to remind herself that magick only brought pain.

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Seven days later an unnatural chill set in. Twyla stuck her head out of her cottage door and examined the darkened skies. It had been so cold and dark lately. She shivered and wrapped her cloak tighter around her throat. It had started about a year ago, but it seemed to be getting just a little darker and colder with every passing day now.

She ducked her head back in to grab her wood basket and then left the cottage. Nico and Dai had been nowhere to be seen since that first day, but yesterday, she'd started to feel their presence in the forests. It wasn't ominous or fear inspiring. On the contrary, it was a good feeling. As much as she wanted to deny it, it was a comforting sensation to know these two men were close.

That went against everything she'd become since her mother's death. It was jarring to not feel revulsion when she thought of these two men, to not want to run away as fast as possible. On the contrary, she felt drawn to them in ways she couldn't fully articulate.

It was like she had some kind of internal homing sense riveted on them. Twyla knew where they'd set up camp, more or less, because she could feel them.

She went in the opposite direction.

Her boots crunched over fallen leaves and broke twigs as she walked. Occasionally, a bird would call to another in the canopy of trees. She picked up a branch and stood, staring skyward. Not as many birds sang these days. Not as many as there should be for this time of year.

"They're upset about the strange weather."

She nearly dropped the branch at the sound of Nico's voice. Her hand clenched around it instead. She should've known they'd make themselves seen soon enough. Dropping her gaze, she narrowed her eyes at the male who leaned against a nearby tree. He wore an outfit as dark as his hair and eyes, along with a pair of sturdy boots. The fabric of his shirt stretched over a well-muscled chest and arms. She would be no match for him in a fight, that was certain. "You startled me," she said accusingly.

He inclined his head. "Forgive me." He motioned at her wood basket. "Can I help you?"

"I can gather my own wood. Save what you find for your own fire. It will be very cold once the sun goes down."

"Dai and I have much wood." He smiled. "No shelter to speak of, but a lot of wood. I have two strong arms, Twyla, I'm willing and able to help."

She stared suspiciously at him for a long moment. "All right," she said finally. "I won't turn down aid."

Nico fell into step beside her, gathering branches with one hand and bracing them to his chest in other arm. "Have you had a little time to think on what we've told you?" he asked.

She fumbled the branch she was trying to pick up. In exasperation, she blew a tendril of hair away from her face and stood. "I don't know what I think about what you told me. Magick" – she swallowed hard and glanced away – "I don't really want a part of magick. It destroys."

His brow furrowed. "Destroys?" Then a look of understanding overtook his face. He shook his head. "Magick didn't cause what happened to you, Twyla," he said softly. "Ignorance, fear and hatred caused it."

Something flip-flopped in her stomach every time he said her name. She shook her head. "As much as I'd like to believe that... Anyway, I don't have magick anymore."

Nico turned toward her. "You do," he said empathically. "We've been keeping it for you in trust. You pushed it away that night and Dai and I absorbed it."

Confusion clouded her for a moment as her mind stuttered over the possibility. A hope she hadn't even known she'd had warred with doubt and fear. She shook her head. "What kind of game are you playing with me?"

"No games, Twyla. I can show you."

She just stared at him. Could it possible that she could have her magick back? Tears filled her eyes. A part of her missed it deeply. No matter what manner of torture it had put her mother and herself through when she'd been a child, her magick was an intimate part of her. She couldn't deny that.

"Come. Let's go back to the cottage. I will let you peek at the power I'm keeping for you."

She nodded, only half-aware that she did it.

They reached her cottage and stacked the wood beside the hearth. When Twyla stood from piling on the last branch, Nico was staring at her intently. She took a step to the side and then back. "Will you have to touch me to do this?"

"Sometimes touching can be very nice. It can be loving and comforting. It doesn't have to be like what you've experienced."

Fear and panic rushed through her. She eyed her cutting knife that lay on a table nearby. "How *much* will you have to touch me to do this?"

"Just a little. Come here."

She stood there, frozen in place.

"Twyla, I would never hurt you. Not only that, I would kill anyone who tried." He beckoned with a hand. "I won't do anything to make you uneasy. In fact, pick up your knife there and hold it. That way, if I do something you don't like, you have a weapon."

Twyla flinched, surprised he'd suggest such a thing. She took the knife from the table and walked to him slowly.

"Hold out your hand," he commanded gently.

Carefully, she extended her hand. He reached out and took it. She jerked a little, but didn't pull away.

"Please. Try to trust me just a little," said Nico.

She drew a deep breath. "I will."

He pulled her forward until they stood just a heartbeat away from each other. Twyla could feel the heat his body generated. It emanated from him and warmed her through, chasing the chill away. The scent of him filled her – leather and some kind of spiced soap. When he pulled her the rest of the way toward him, she came without even realizing it. Suddenly, she found herself pressed up against his chest. She gasped and tried to step back, but he wound a hand to the small of her back and pressed lightly. She stopped. Awkwardly, both arms dangled at her sides, one hand weakly gripping the knife.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

His deep voice rumbled through him and into her. Her mind felt clouded by his heat, his scent and the press of his body against hers. She never would've thought she'd enjoy the closeness of a man. Never dreamed she'd... *Never...*

"Twyla?" he asked.

"I-I'm fine."

"Sure?"

She nodded.

Slowly, obviously trying not to spook her, he reached up and cupped her cheek. His hand warmed her skin, and she closed her eyes and placed her knife-free hand on his waist. He tilted her face up toward his and very gently brushed his lips across hers. She drew a sharp breath and opened her eyes.

"All right?" he asked. He sounded unsure. Like she'd bolt at any moment.

But she was just fine. Stunned, amazed...but *fine*.

"Do it again," she said with wide eyes.

He really kissed her this time. He lowered his head, pressed his lips to hers and kissed her. She closed her eyes and let herself relax, just a little, against him. The hand he kept at the small of her back felt so comforting.

That's when she felt it. Little skitters of energy over her skin. It felt so right...like it was a long-lost part of herself. Her eyes wide, she gasped, dropped the knife and backed away. "*Dear Kingdom,*" she swore. "You really do have my magick."

He nodded. "Yes."

She frowned. His eyes were hooded and his breath came fast. He looked almost as though he were in pain. "What's wrong with you?"

Nico found a chair and sat. "Do you have some water?"

She located a glass, filled it from her water jug and handed it to him. He gulped it down. Then he tipped his head back and let out a low, long groan. The sound was...interesting, almost arousing. "What's wrong?" she demanded to know.

He tipped his head forward and examined her. "Twyla, you don't know for how long and how hard we searched for you. We've been holding this extra magick and it's worn on us. To be so near you now and not to be able to...join with you. It's very taxing."

Every alarm bell within her went off. She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean...join?"

He paused, watching her carefully. "I mean exactly what I said. It is part of being Triad. It is the only way to fully transfer your magick back to you and it is the only way to fulfill the prophecy. It's done by physical contact. The three of us...together. Our magick combines and fine-tunes the vibrational waves of this reality. It will chase the Encroaching Darkness away."

Her mind stuttered for the second time that morning. She sat down a chair across from Nico and focused on the nonsexual part because it was easier. "What prophecy?"

He handed her the glass and she refilled it for him. When he was finished drinking down the water he took a breath. "I'm sure you've noticed that it's far colder and darker at this time of year than it should be, yes?"

"Of course," she snapped.

"This occurs every few thousand years. When the fabric of the Kingdom's reality begins to fray, the Mages of the Triads, under the direction of the all-wise Vedicinn, complete their circles of magick, forming a conduit that will allow the power of all the triads to flow out and purify the binding fabric of the reality, fine-tuning it to a higher level."

"The darkness will go away then?"

He nodded. "If we cannot achieve it, and achieve it soon, we will be locked in twilight forever."

She only nodded, stunned.

"You see now that finding you was very important to more people than just Dai and I." He paused and left his seat to kneel in front of her. He clasped her hand in his. "But, Twyla, you must understand that while finding you was very important in order to fulfill this prophecy, you are a part of us and our caring for you goes very deep. It goes far beyond the prophecy. You can feel that, can't you? You can feel that we're a part of you."

She pressed her lips together, fighting down sudden, uncharacteristic emotion. "Of course I can. You'd both be dead by now if I couldn't."

He smiled and stood. "All right, then. I will leave you to think more on what I've said." He turned before he went out the door. "You know where to find us, if you need us." Twyla watched him leave.

She sat in the chair for a long time, thinking. A part of her now mourned the empty cottage and absence of Nico. She wondered about Dai, the other one, and what he was like. Nico felt even, deep, and calm and Dai seemed far more volatile. Perhaps that's

why Nico had come today. Then her thoughts turned to the Mages of the Triads, the Encroaching Darkness, and the prophecy. She sat transfixed within her ponderings until the wind rattled the windows and she realized she was freezing.

She stood and wrapped herself in a blanket while she made a fire and set a kettle on for hot tea. The windows rattled again under the onslaught of the cold wind and she looked southward, toward where she knew Nico and Dai were camped. She bit her lip. They were probably very cold sleeping out there without any shelter. Twyla shook her head and turned away. That was not her problem. It had been *their* choice to camp near her cottage, out in the middle of the woods.

She went about the business of the evening. Gathering and preparing food, making up her bed and organizing her laundry and the other chores she would begin in the morning.

Finally, the cottage began to warm up nicely. The windows showed frost on the outside, but between her four walls, she was snug. She poured herself a cup of tea and fished out a bit of flatbread from her stores and sat down at her little table to gnaw at it. Did Dai and Nico have enough food and fresh water? Suddenly the flatbread tasted like horse manure in her mouth. They probably had little food and were freezing out there in the middle of the woods. She let the flatbread drop to the table. "I have got to be insane," she muttered as she stood.

Twyla found her cloak and lantern, left her cottage and traveled southward.

* * * * *

Dai awoke huddled against Nico on a pallet on the floor of Twyla's cottage. He felt warm and comfortable, far different than he'd felt last night before Twyla had invited them into shelter.

He shifted his head and watched her sleep. Her black eyelashes lay like a line of soot against her pale cheeks. Desire tightened low in his stomach. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anyone with the exception of Nico. Nico also wanted her, but they had to go slow. It would be so easy to scare her off. Although, yesterday had been a day of great strides. Not only had she allowed Nico to kiss her, she'd invited them into the sanctuary of her home and then fallen to sleep. It showed she trusted them.

Above him, on her bed, Twyla's eyes opened and stared right into his. Her pupils dilated and she blinked. In that one unguarded second, Dai saw all the terror in her life, all the sorrow and loneliness. The realization of all the hardship she'd gone through clamped down around his heart and squeezed. It made him want to wrap in his arms and never let her go, but she wouldn't allow that.

"Good morning," he said softly, so that he didn't wake up Nico.

She blinked, then sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Morning," she replied. Without another word, she flipped the blanket back, got up, grabbed a basket full of clothing and a

couple other things, slid her shoes on and stepped outside. She'd slept fully clothed the night before—a testament to the fact that she didn't *completely* trust them yet.

After several minutes, Dai slipped out from under his blanket and followed her. Once outside, she was nowhere to be seen, so he tuned into her psychically and found her right away. Taking a deep breath of the crisp morning air, he headed down to the stream that ran a half mile from Twyla's cottage.

He heard the burbling of the stream before he reached it. Twyla knelt at the edge, splashing water on her face. The basket of clothing rested on the stream bank beside her. Not wanting to startle her, he deliberately stepped on a branch.

She glanced at him, then continued what she was doing. "You didn't have to do that. I could feel you coming down the path anyway," she muttered.

"Are you all right this morning?" Dai asked. Her moods seemed so unknowable. He felt like he was constantly dancing on the edge of her temper.

"I-I'm fine" She shot him a glance. "I'm just fine."

He waited a heartbeat and then knelt beside her. "I think not. Tell me what is troubling you."

She turned to him. "*Why* could I feel you coming down that path? Why can I sense you in ways I've never been able to sense other people before?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

She sighed, stood, and walked to the tree line. He followed. Twyla whirled on him. "What do you two want from me?" Tears stood her eyes.

"You know the answer to that, too."

"You both want my body."

"Your body, yes. We're healthy males who have waited a long time for you. That goes without saying, but we want more than just your body."

"What, then? You want my emotion, my love, m-my *soul*?"

Dai smiled and shook his head. "Nico and I already have your soul, love. It's already intertwined with ours. We want the rest, though. Most of all, we want your love, freely given."

She stood there, looking up at him with large, tear-filled eyes. The way she looked now, she could almost fool him into thinking she was vulnerable. Maybe she was. He took a step toward her, wanting nothing more than to pull her into the circle of his arms and hold her.

"I don't have any love left to give," she whispered hoarsely and turned away from him.

He reached out and touched her shoulder. When she didn't jerk away, he pulled her to his chest and wrapped her in his arms. She let out a long, ragged sigh and relaxed against him. Closing his eyes, Dai inhaled the scent of her. His heart sang. To have her in his arms was better than all his imaginings. "You do," he murmured insistently into her hair. "Let Nico and I show you."

She turned in the circle of his embrace and tipped her face up toward his. Tears made tracks down her cheeks. "Kiss me," she whispered.

Dai kissed all her tears away, tasting the salt of them on his tongue. Then he tasted her lips. Instantly, a tendril of magick curled up his spine. He groaned and pulled her to him tightly. Her mouth was so soft and giving beneath his. Her body fit against his so perfectly. He wound one arm around her waist and put his other hand to the nape of her neck.

She made a sound of desire in her throat, and Dai slanted his mouth over hers like a starving man and feathered his tongue across her lips, asking her to open to him. Her lips parted and he swept his tongue in and touched hers. The force of his lust nearly overpowered him at the taste of her. He knew he had to handle her carefully, gently, but he had to touch her. He slipped his hand beneath her shirt at the small of her back and rubbed his thumb over her sweet, smooth skin.

Twyla moaned and pushed herself against him, tangling her tongue with his savagely. He took it as encouragement and let his hand roam her back. Trailing up her side, he reached her breast and smoothed his thumb teasingly along its underside.

She gasped and pushed him away. He'd gone too far. Twyla stood there, looking up at him apprehensively and breathing hard. She was aroused. Dai could feel just how excited that kiss had made her. His cock strained against his trews, rock-hard and all for her. His breath came fast and his heart pounded. Inwardly, he berated himself. He'd pushed her too hard, too fast. Nico never would've done that. He would've seduced her stealthily, with silky intensity, and not allowed himself to burn so hot for her.

"I-I'm sorry," he started.

She held up a hand. "No. Don't be. I just need-need a little time alone." She glanced at the stream and licked her lips. "I was going to bathe."

Dai's mouth went dry. Just thought of her wet and nude was enough to nearly make him come in his trews. He drew a breath. "I pushed you too hard. I *am* sorry. It's just that—"

"You and Nico have been waiting a long time. Nico explained it to me."

"Yes."

"Give me a few moments to myself?"

"Of course, Twyla." He turned, still berating himself, and headed back up the path.

"Dai?" she said hesitantly.

He turned toward her and saw the barest smile curve her mouth. It stopped his heart in his chest for a moment. "I liked your kiss."

Relief poured through him. He smiled. "I'll give you some time alone."

"Thank you."

* * * * *

Twyla watched Dai leave and then nearly collapsed. She caught herself on a nearby tree trunk before her knees gave out. The kiss had seemed to touch every single part of her body and ignite it. She'd never, *never* felt that way before. The kiss had been so powerful, she'd been barely aware of the magick skittering over her skin.

Her body had responded sexually.

She'd never believed that would ever be possible. Not after what had happened. She'd expected to go to her grave having never felt lust for a man.

Carefully, she picked her way over to the water's edge and peeled off her clothes. She picked up the wedge of herbal soap she'd placed on top of her laundry and waded into the biting chilly water. This time when her hand passed over her breasts, they felt swollen and sensitive. She'd never noticed how her nipples pebbled in the cool water of the stream. This time when she washed between her thighs, she thought of what it would be like if Dai or Nico—not just any man, but one of them—were to touch her there. What would it be like to feel their breath on her skin, their hair brushing over her? What would it be like to feel their mouths on her body in those most sensitive of places?

Twyla explored the patch of hair that topped her sex and dipped her finger down minutely to touch herself. She'd never really thought herself as a woman until this moment. Never paid much attention to the parts of her that were female. She found a spot from which much pleasure seemed to emanate and touched it. She'd heard it called a *clit*. A frisson of delight coursed through her. Tentatively, she rubbed it, then traced downward. Her fingers stroked between her outer labia to caress the folds within. She gasped at the moisture that wept from her slit and rubbed it over her sex in long strokes that dipped her fingers inside her hot body. She circled the mouth of her vagina, spreading her juice on her engorged flesh.

Twyla dropped her other hand down to part her swollen labia, pulling her lips back to expose her sensitive clit. She touched the nub once and shivered. Twice made her moan. Gently, she teased her clit back and forth and up and down, rubbing faster and faster. The pleasure grew and grew until it exploded. Twyla keened her experience to the woods.

Opening her eyes and drawing harsh breaths, she stood in the waist high water and stared at the sandy bank in wonderment. Did her body have the ability to give her pleasure as well as provide pain and humiliation? Could it be true?

Stunned by this possibility, she waded back to the shore, dried herself and dressed. The laundry could wait for now. She wanted—no, was driven—to be in Dai and Nico's company.

She raced back up the path, but stopped when she neared the cottage. Something within her told her not to rush inside. Slowing her pace, she approached one of the windows and peered within. On the floor, amidst the blankets the two males had shared the night before, Dai and Nico lay nude, tangled and sweaty. Her body provided an instant response to the scene in front of her. The sight of two well-muscled,

handsome men touching each other was enough to prime her body the same way Dai's kiss had primed her.

Dai kissed Nico savagely, then descended down his body and took Nico's thick, erect organ into his mouth. Twyla's breathing quickened as Nico's hands fisted in Dai's hair and he tipped his head back on a ragged moan, showing his Adam's apple. Even beyond the walls of the cottage, Twyla could feel the magickal pulse within as the encounter released a trickle of power.

Broad shoulders flexing as he worked, Dai pumped his mouth around Nico's erection, pushing him further toward climax. Toward that delicious sensation she'd had while she was bathing. The one she hadn't even known women *could* have. She watched Dai tease Nico with his tongue, then slip him back into his mouth.

Finally, Nico groaned and shuddered. Nico's hip jerked forward and he thrust his cock deep down Dai's throat as he came.

Then, in an act that seemed overtly dominant and aggressive, Dai flipped Nico to his stomach, parted the cheeks of his buttocks and thrust hard within. Twyla watched the two male, straining bodies work on the floor of her cottage. She watched the muscles of Dai's ass flex with every thrust into his lover's body. The sight made her even more aroused. Her nipples were hard and every breath she took brushed them against the fabric of her shirt. She was wet at the juncture of her thighs. When her breath came too fast, her heart pounded too hard, she turned away and slid down to sit on the ground.

She closed her eyes and felt sorrow. Not only was she aroused, she felt left out, she realized with a start. She could tell, by the kisses they bestowed, by the way they touched each other and talked softly to one another, that whatever Dai and Nico shared, it went beyond the physical. They cared for each other, loved each other.

For the first time since her mother had died, Twyla longed for love again. She suddenly ached for someone to share her life with. In that moment, all the years of solitude and fear pressed down upon her and she wished to be free of it.

Twyla stood and slipped back into the woods to do her laundry and give Dai and Nico some time alone.

She took her time with the clothing, despite the chill in the air, scrubbing and rinsing every article. Several times throughout the day, she felt she was being watched. It couldn't be Nico or Dai. She could sense them. She'd stop what she was doing and look around, but never saw anyone peering through the foliage at her. Shrugging it away as nerves, she went on about what she was doing.

By the time she'd finished whiling away her time, it was late afternoon. She constructed makeshift lines to dry her clothing, but feeling the chill in the air and seeing how dark the day had been, she decided they wouldn't dry there and packed them back into her basket. She'd have to dry them in the cabin, in the warmth. Picking up her basket, she headed back to her cottage.

As she neared, she saw that someone had lit a fire in the hearth. Smoke curled invitingly from the chimney. The windows showed a cheery glow within, and the smell of baked fish wafted to her on the air. Her stomach growled. She'd had nothing but a handful of berries all day long.

She pushed open the door and set the basket on the floor to the left of the door. Nico walked to her and took her hand in his. "You're freezing, Twlya. Come into the warmth and have something to eat."

"I'm fine," she grumbled. She started to pull her hand away, but he held on.

"Sit and eat," he commanded. "If you don't take care of yourself, we'll do it for you."

She mumbled something intelligible, silently pleased he cared. Dai pulled out a chair for her at the table and she sat down. Nico placed a plate in front of her, heaping with freshly caught fish and boiled potatoes. The men also served themselves and sat down with her.

They ate in silence, she not knowing what to say to them and they probably in the same situation. Finally, she laid her fork down and looked at them. "So, tell me about yourselves. If we're all so intimately entwined I think I should know you better."

Dai cleared his throat. "I'm from the Hartland Province and Nico is from Gattway. We met about ten years ago, when we were twenty. Soon after that, we realized we were part of a Sacred Triad and became involved with the Vedicinn."

She held up her hand. "No. I want to know about *you*. Not more about Sacred Triads, prophecies or the Vedicinn. What you like to *do*? What kind of families do you come from?"

Nico leaned forward and smiled. "Well, I was an only child, and Dai came from a huge family of twelve. I like fishing" – he motioned at the plate before them – "archery, and studying history. Dai enjoys anything to do with swords or a bow."

She smiled. "Tell me more."

They ended up in front of the fire, talking into the night over cups of spiced tea. Their memories danced before her eyes through verbal spells of comfort woven by their tongues. She enjoyed Dai's very first horseback ride and the tale of the first woman Nico wooed and won. She was there when Nico and Dai met for the first time and knew instantly the connection she also felt with them.

Finally, when the fire burned low and the spiced tea was all gone, she leaned back with a sigh. "But, you left something out."

"We did?" asked Nico.

She leveled her gaze at them both in turn. "You left out that you're lovers," she said softly, then looked down and away. That extra bit of connection made her feel sorrowful, perhaps because she was not a part of it.

Dai and Nico shared a look. "That's true, we did," Dai said slowly, "because we weren't sure you were ready for such information. "

“How long has it been so?” she asked.

“After we received your magick, the force of it was too strong. The only way to alleviate it was physical. At first it was only a way to relieve the pressure, but Nico and I fell in love and now it’s much more than just sex. It’s a way of expressing a deep emotional tie.”

Nico broke in. “It’s not uncommon for it to happen in a triad. In fact, I know of none in which love, both physical and emotional, is not shared by all parties.”

Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked fast to prevent them from rolling down her cheeks. “I think it’s beautiful and I would love to be a part of it, but I’m so damaged. I-I just don’t know if I can—” she started.

“You can,” said Dai in an insistent voice. “I feel it within you.”

Nico inched closer to her. “Now, *you* tell us about *yourself*, my love, and don’t leave anything out.”

She began by talking about her mother and their life. She talked about being pursued and hunted, but also about the good things. About her mother teaching her to survive on her own, how to heal using flowers, roots and herbs. When she reached That Night, she faltered but pushed on.

Soon she was telling them everything, and sobbing violently while she did it. It was the first time she’d ever voiced the events of That Night while conscious. She told them what happened before, during and after That Night in a tearful purge that hurt, but at the same time felt good. By the time she was finished, she was in Nico’s lap, limp as a rag.

Nico rocked her, running his fingers through her hair and occasionally kissing her temple as she cried out the grief and fear she’d been holding inside for so long. Finally, when she had expelled everything, her voice broke and went silent. She could hear nothing but the gentle crackle of the burning wood in the fireplace that Dai had been feeding, Nico’s breathing, and the rush of the wind outside. Nico laid a lingering, emotion-filled kiss to her cheek and she let out a shuddering sigh of relief.

The last thing she remembered was being gently lifted and tucked into bed.

* * * * *

Twyla bent to pick up a smooth rock at the bank of the stream and ran her thumb over it. It was shiny and black. Not a scratch marred its surface. She slipped it into her pocket and continued her walk.

Today was a beautiful day. It was still dark, still cold—much too dark and cold for the season—but it seemed not *as* dark and cold. Or maybe it was just because her heart felt a little lighter. It had been a week since she’d had her emotional purge. In that week, she hadn’t had even one nightmare. Twyla hoped she’d seen the back end of them, hoped she truly could leave the past behind...or at least learn to live with it better.

She, Nico and Dai had not talked of that night, though the memory of it hung in the air. They'd been even more solicitous to her than usual, *handling* her carefully. They were unsure of their ground now, it seemed. Afraid to touch her in any way that went beyond that which a brother might give a beloved sister. She found she missed the touches that went beyond that, missed their kisses.

She felt Nico before she saw him emerge from the woods ahead of her. He walked to the shore and sat down on the sandy beach. Her heart thumped hard in her chest and her breathing quickened. It happened every time she saw either of them.

Twyla hastened her pace and sat down beside him. She dug the rock out of her pocket. "I found this on the shoreline," she said as she pressed it into his palm.

He examined it. "It's nearly flawless. How uncommon." The lines around his eyes crinkled as he looked down at it and his black hair hung in his face.

Unable to resist, she reached up and brushed his hair away from his face in a tender gesture. When he turned his face toward her, she ran her thumb down his cheek. Dark, glimmering, naked *want* flashed in his eyes. She drew her hand back, her eyes widening. How hard was it for them to restrain themselves around her? What kind of sacrifice were they making while they waited for her?

"Nico," she breathed in a broken whisper.

He pulled away. "Forgive me. I'll go." He got up to leave.

She put a hand to his forearm. "Please, don't."

He stilled, and then sat back down.

"I had no idea," she said. "No idea how difficult it's been."

"It's-it's been hard for Dai and I, but we'll do anything for you, Twyla. Anything."

"Anything?" Her heart pounded as she curled her lips into a smile. "Then will you kiss me?"

He came toward her immediately, but then hesitated. "I don't know if I'll be able to stop—"

She rose up, closing the distance between them, and pressed her lips to his. He remained motionless for a heartbeat, and then he wrapped his arms around her and slanted his mouth across hers. His tongue swept into her mouth and stroked. A primal shiver that had nothing to do with magick shot up her spine.

With a low growl in his throat, he pressed her back into the sandy shore and feasted on her mouth. His tongue retreated and plunged into her mouth over and over in a semblance of lovemaking. Magick and desire enveloped her in a flash and her body took over for her mind. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back, her tongue thrusting in to mate with his.

He parted her thighs with his knee and settled himself between her legs. She gasped as she felt the press of his cock through his treads into the delicate flesh of her sex.

He pulled away. "Are you all right, Twyla?" His eyes were dark and hooded, full of unmistakable lust.

"I-I'm fine," she said in a surprised voice. She trusted Nico with everything she was, she realized. She knew both Dai and Nico would never harm her, never push her too far, never do anything she didn't completely desire.

He stroked her hair and kissed her. "I love you, Twyla, and I always have. You can trust me."

She nodded. "Yes. I do."

"Let me touch you." It was half order, half entreaty.

She nodded again. It would be touches of love, not violence, she reminded herself. He cupped her sex through her treads and she felt how damp he'd made her. With one finger, he rubbed her through the material. She gasped in pleasure.

His thumb brushed a small area of extreme sensitivity. "I could...kiss you here, love," he murmured.

She knew shock passed over her face. Twyla lifted up on her elbows and stared at him. "Would you want to do to that?"

He smiled slowly. "I want to taste you almost as much as I want to feel your heat close around my cock. You will enjoy it, I think." Instead of waiting for her reply, he slid her boots off one by one, then her treads.

Finally she was bare from the waist down both to the air and to Nico's heated gaze. He appeared consumed with the sight of her. His gaze traveled up from her feet to the patch of fiery red hair shielding her sex and back down again. Then he reached out and touched her skin, running his fingertips up and down her legs, first touching gently, then massaging. Twyla let out a pent-up breath and relaxed. Nico's strong fingers worked their way up from one foot, drawing little circles on her skin, up her calf, to the sensitive underside of her knee, to her inner thigh. He did the same on the other side. Only this time, instead of stopping at her inner thigh, he brushed her sex.

Twyla shivered in pleasure as his fingers threaded through her patch of red curls and then slipped down. He feathered over her sex, rubbing circles around the small bud that seemed to throb and grow larger at his touch. One look at his face told her he was holding back, and she was grateful for his restraint. This was the first time in her life someone had looked upon her in both love and lust. She liked the combination, but at the same time the experience was overwhelming.

All thought left her mind with a shudder when Nico lowered his mouth to her sex and drank from her center. He skated his palms over the flesh of her inner thighs and pressed her legs apart. His tongue flicked and tasted, flicked and tasted. She gasped as he licked her from her anus to her bud with one long swipe.

Twyla pressed her pelvis up toward him and dug her fingers into the shore on either side of her. Gently, he parted her folds and pressed his tongue within her and thrust. It felt hot and wet and oh, so good. "Nico," she moaned.

He made another low sound of pleasure in his throat and caressed her thighs reassuringly. He thrust again and again and pleasure built within Twyla. Then Nico moved up to her bud and laved and sucked at it relentlessly. One hand strayed to her sex and he, very slowly, slid his index finger inside her.

Twyla arched her back as pleasure exploded out from the core of her and enveloped her body. She squeezed her eyes shut and called out Nico's name as the spasms rocked her to her very center. Ah, it was very much better than when she'd brought herself to climax in the river. It was better to have Nico bring her.

A delicious, relaxing glow spread through her. Her entire body gave into it. She opened her eyes to find Nico staring down at her. She smiled, reached up, and touched his cheek. "You showed me my body can give me pleasure," she whispered with tears in her eyes.

"Ah, so much pleasure, love. So much. We've only just begun. That was merely a taste."

His eyes were bright, his breathing labored. Suddenly concerned, she pushed up into a sitting position. "What's wrong?"

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. "Nothing is wrong, love. I am happier right now than I've been in a very, very long time. I only wish Dai could've been here to share the first climax I gave you. Although maybe it's better he wasn't. Things could've gotten out of hand too quickly if he was here. Control is not his strong suit."

She glanced down and saw how his organ tented his pants. She noted how hard it was and how it pushed against his treads. Still, he held back, afraid he'd push her too far. Twyla reached down and brushed her fingertips over his erection through his treads. Nico shuddered and tried to pull her hand away.

"Please," she said. "Let me."

He hesitated and then withdrew his hand. Bowing his head in a gesture of surrender, he said, "Do your worst, lady."

Intrigued by the feel she'd had of him through the fabric, she decided to divest him of the barrier and explore. Once his boots and treads were gone, his cock sprang up wide and long and thickly veined from a mat of dark hair. Still, she wasn't satisfied. She pulled his shirt off and drank her fill of his body.

He was a glorious example of a male. She hadn't seen many in her life, but she knew Nico had to be on the extreme end of the gorgeous spectrum. Broad shoulders melded into strong arms and a muscled chest. His waist was narrow and his legs long and lightly dusted with black hair. His cock was beyond description. She never thought she'd think of a cock in those terms, as a beautiful thing. It enraptured her. How would it feel inside her? How would it feel thrust within her, as far as it could go?

Saving the best for last, Twyla set her hands to his chest. She touched his wide, flat nipples and ran her fingers through his smattering of chest hair. Nico groaned and she felt his heart speed up under her fingers. His skin felt warm under her hands and his chest was hard with muscle, yet soft, all at the same time. Taking her time, she explored

every part of his body – except his cock – in complete wonder. She scattered kisses on his lips and face. When he tried to touch her, she shushed him and told him to lay still.

“You’re killing me, love,” he groaned. “Slaying me with your hands as well as you could with any blade.”

She smiled and decided to take pity on him. Trailing her hand down his stomach, she curled her fingers around his erection and pumped.

Beneath her, Nico shuddered and his hips bucked. “Gods, yes,” he hissed through a clenched jaw.

Encouraged by his response, she pumped again. Nico’s body tensed. Again and again she moved her hand up and down until finally Nico groaned and pushed up. He pulled her against him and rolled her under him. She felt the press of his cock on her inner thigh, deliciously and alarmingly close to her sex and Nico let out a long groan. She felt his hot seed erupt out onto her skin as Nico pressed his mouth to her in a penetrating kiss.

Nico went still, his forehead pressed to hers. “Thank you,” he murmured.

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his temple. They stayed that way for a while, until Nico murmured something about how she must be cold, and rose. Using a little water from the stream, he cleaned his seed from her skin and helped her dress. Together, they started back toward the cottage. Nico put his arm around her shoulders and kept her warm the whole way.

When they reached the cottage, it was almost completely dark outside. Dai had started a fire, however, and the small building looked snug and inviting as they walked the pathway to the front door. Inside, Dai was sitting by the hearth with one of her precious books in his hands.

Would he know what she and Nico had done by the side of the stream?

Dai looked up and smiled at Twyla, then gave Nico a knowing look. So, he did know and had stayed away.

Twyla extricated herself from Nico’s arms, went to Dai and kissed him soundly on the lips in gratitude. They were easing her into this because they had her best interests at heart. Kissing Dai was her way of thanking him.

The book thumped to the floor and Dai enclosed her in his arms and pulled her down into his lap. She ended up sitting on Dai’s erection and could tell he was every bit as large as Nico. That knowledge was both arousing and slightly daunting. Finally the kiss ended.

“What was that for?” Dai asked in a thick voice. “Not that I care, really. I’m just glad you did it.”

“That was simply for being here and for being one part of the triad,” she answered, and then kissed him again.

Little by little, with love and understanding, perhaps she’d be ready to form the triad...and they could fulfill their duty.

"I am ready to begin this," she said, loud enough so Nico could also hear her. "But grant me control over the pace."

She watched Nico glance at Dai. They nodded. "Yes," replied Nico. He licked his lips. "Believe me, you *do* have all the control here."

Dai stood, lifting her in his arms. The sensation startled her for a moment, but then she relaxed against him. He walked her over to the bed and laid her down, then settled down beside and drew her into his arms. Nico slid in on the other side, bringing his arms around her waist and settling his cock between the cheeks of her buttocks. Enjoying the sensation of the strength of the two males surrounding her, their scent and the warmth of their bodies, she soon fell into the deepest and best sleep she'd ever had.

* * * * *

"Two crowns," countered Twyla over the bolt of soft blue fabric she wanted to possess.

The merchant's eyes narrowed. "Three."

She returned his gaze coolly. "Two crowns and two marks. That's all I'll give you for it."

They engaged in a staring contest for several moments. "Fine," the man grunted.

Twyla fished out the agreed-upon amount from her purse, handed the coins over and picked up the bolt. The man mumbled something about taking food from his kids' mouths as she walked away.

She smiled at the merchant's melodramatics and rubbed her finger across the soft material. It was an extravagance she couldn't really afford on the meager income she had from selling herbal remedies. But these days she'd begun to care more about her appearance and images of the pretty clothing had danced through her head as soon she she'd seen the material laying on the merchant's table. Carefully, she put the bolt of fabric into the large sack she carried.

She flicked a glance at the darkened sky, barely seeing the muted sun behind the thick cloud cover. It was almost noon, time for her meeting with a man who would buy some of her herbal oils. Dithering with the fabric merchant had eaten up precious time. Happily contemplating her purchase, she turned a corner in the crowded village...and came face-to-chest with a large, smelly man.

"Excuse me," she snapped as the man's large hands gripped her shoulders in an effort to steady her.

He released her when she was balanced. She backed away. Contact with any man but Nico or Dai was still abhorrent to her. When she lifted her gaze, she saw Marsten, the farmer who'd harassed her the last time she'd come to the village. Every muscle tensed in anticipation of a confrontation.

"Ah hello," said Marsten. "I was hoping I'd see you again."

"Listen—"

He held up one chubby hand. "Hold. I merely wanted to apologize for my behavior the last time we met and offer you a gift to make peace." He smiled, showing a broken tooth. "Please? I feel so badly about what happened."

Twyla stood, staring at him. She wasn't sure how she should react.

He fished something out his pocket and held it up to the light. A metal pendant in the shape of a crescent moon hung from his fingers. She squinted, examining it. It seemed familiar, though there was no reason for it to be so. "I bought it hoping I'd see you again."

She shook her head. "I don't want anything from you."

"Please," he said in an earnest voice. "I feel so badly about mistaking you for a whore the last time I saw you. If you don't take my offering I'll never forgive myself."

Twyla didn't care if the man ever forgave himself or not. Though she did care that it was growing late and she was going to be tardy for her meeting with the herbal oil buyer. She couldn't afford to miss it, especially after buying the bolt of fabric.

"Fine, you're forgiven," she mumbled as she snatched the cheap trinket and pushed past him. She could feel his gaze on her back as she allowed the market crowd to envelop her. Hastily, she stuffed the pendant into her pocket as the herbal oil man came into view.

The meeting with the herbal merchant went better than she expected and she was happy enough to actually be whistling by late afternoon. She crossed the village square, where the merchants were packing up their wares, and spotted Dai and Nico in front of the inn where she was supposed to meet them. She had rented her own room and Dai and Nico had gotten a room of their own. She would miss their presence as she slept, but it was one way she felt she could maintain control...and she desperately wanted to do that.

Her heart swelled with joy and love as she approached them. It was amazing how quickly they had worked their way into her soul.

Rather, they'd been there all along, she'd just had to realize it.

Dai reached out, took her bag, and then drew her into his arms. "We've missed you," he murmured as he brushed his lips across her forehead. "Did your meeting go well?"

She nodded. "Very well. What have you two been doing all day?" she asked.

"Wandering the town, mostly. Shopping a little," answered Nico. He smiled. "Arranging dinner."

"I'm starved," she answered.

They entered the darkened inn. It was crowded with many people in town for the market day. A cook fire scented the air with a combination of a roast and wood smoke. The sound of people laughing and talking assaulted her eardrums. In the background, a flutist provided music.

Nico pulled her from Dai's arms and pressed her against the wall behind her. She inhaled the scent of him as his lips came down teasingly light against her mouth. His chest pressed against her breasts. Her breath caught as a wave of lust rippled through her.

"Go upstairs to your room and don the things we've gifted you with," Nico murmured against her lips. "Then come back downstairs. We've arranged a private room to dine in this eve."

He backed away and she took a moment to catch her breath before she spoke. "But a private room? Gifts? That's all so ex—"

"Hush," commanded Dai. "Say no more. You are worth any amount to us and we would like to show you as much."

She stood looking at them, mute.

"Go," said Nico. "We'll take care of your things."

Stunned and pleased, she made her way through the throng and up the stairs. Once within her room, she found a beautiful silk green gown lying on her bed. It was a simple dress. They would've understood when buying it that flounces and lace would not be to her taste. It was elegant and well cut. Very expensive. Of that, she had no doubt. Alongside it lay underthings.

Very alluring underthings.

She fingered the delicate, practically see-through panties and the low-cut green corset with the silken, dark green ties. Lace-topped sheer stockings that would come up about mid thigh lay on the bed's red coverlet, along with a pair of gorgeous ladylike shoes with high heels.

Never in her life had she ever worn shoes like that! She'd fall flat on her face.

She picked a shoe up to examine it and remembered the bolt of blue fabric, the frivolous nicety she'd bought in order to be more attractive to Dai and Nico. Aye, she wanted them to think her beautiful. Therefore, she'd risk falling on her face.

She set the shoe down and turned to see that the bathtub had been filled. Delicate lavender petals floated on the top of the water. Thick towels and a creamy-looking bar of soap lay on a chair alongside the wide tub. Her gaze caught on objects laid out to the right, on the dressing table. She walked over and examined the articles. There were two gossamer, green clips for her hair, each in the shape of a dragonfly, a filigreed gold necklace also in the shape of a dragonfly and made of expensive jade, and a bottle of perfume.

Feeling pampered, she smiled as she divested herself of her clothing. It all felt very strange, but she would enjoy it all the same. She pinned her hair up, since the thick length would take all night to dry if it became wet, and sank into the warm, comforting water. She scrubbed her skin until she glowed, then toweled herself off and anointed her body with the spicy-scented perfume behind her knees, between her breasts, and behind her ears. She inhaled and sighed. They'd known exactly the kind of scent she'd like best.

The silken stockings felt heavenly as she slid them on. The panties and corset felt odd. She struggled drawing the ties of the corset up, and considered calling one of the inn's serving girls to help her. In the end, not accustomed to having help, she managed it herself, though it took a good while. Finally, she slipped into the shoes and teetered to the full-length mirror to have a look.

Dear Kingdom...she truly was a woman.

The shoes showed off her long, shapely, silk-stockings-clad legs. She actually did have shapely legs. She'd never know that before! The sheer panties allowed enticing glimpses of the red hair covering her mound, and completely revealed the cheeks of her buttocks when she twisted around to look at her back. The corset cinched her already small waist and forced her breasts up to overflowing at the very low-cut top, making the edges of her dusky nipples show.

Her entire body responded at the sight of herself in the mirror. Her nipples hardened and her sex grew damp. She looked womanly, alluring. She looked like a woman who wanted sex. This had likely been Nico and Dai's plan, to draw her into her own body's natural needs and desires.

She wanted Nico and Dai's hands on her. She wanted their mouths exploring. She wanted their cocks slipping inside her, giving her pleasure as she, in turn, gave them pleasure. Her breath came faster as the images filled her mind.

Experimentally, she reached up and ran a finger over the part of one partially revealed nipple and felt a frisson of lust go through her. She reached her other hand down and parted her legs, running the pad of one index finger over her swollen bud. It responded instantly to the stimulation, making her gasp. Twyla forced her hands away from her body. She would save her responses for Dai and Nico.

She turned from the mirror and donned the gown. The material slithered down over her body and came to rest flawlessly on her person. The size was perfect. Finally, she carefully put on the jewelry, brushed her hair out and pinned it up on each side with the dragonfly hair clips. Then, taking a deep breath, she left the room and went downstairs.

Twyla tried to ignore the attention she received from the men in the room. It both pleased her and made her uneasy. She asked a barmaid where to find the private room where Dai and Nico awaited her and then went there.

"Oh, sweet Gods," breathed Dai, as she closed the door behind her. "I knew you'd look beautiful in that gown, but I never thought – sweet Gods."

She felt herself flush and glanced away.

Both Dai and Nico stood. Nico walked toward her, his eyes bright as he took her in from head to toe. He took her hand and whispered in her ear, "You are beyond stunning."

"Thank you," she mumbled.

Dai came to her other side and gently pressed her between himself and Nico. He kissed her cheek and then her earlobe. "You're lovely, Twyla," he murmured. She could

feel the heat from both their bodies caress her skin and warm her. She shivered. It was a safe sensation to be enclosed by the bodies of these two men. It was not threatening. Indeed, it was nothing but comforting and arousing.

She turned and tipped her head up to Dai. He took the invitation and kissed her. Behind her, Nico shuddered in pleasure, put his hands on her waist and laid a kiss on the skin of her shoulder. Dai's tongue swept into her mouth and she savored the taste of him. He twined his arms around her waist, tangling with Nico's.

Finally, Nico pulled away. He sat and then patted his lap, "Please sit. Consider me your chair for the evening."

She glanced at an empty chair, knowing she had the choice, but decided to take him up on his offer. His arms enveloped her as she sat down and she felt the rise in his treads where he'd grown hard for her. Her body answered swiftly and she felt her panties grow wet.

The table held all kinds of culinary delights, thick slabs of bread and creamy butter, roasted pork and a tossed salad and fruits and vegetables of all varieties. Dai pulled a bench near them and straddled it. Then he reached across the table and piled a plate with various samples of the dishes and set it in front of her.

She speared a bit of pork with her fork and closed her eyes as the sweet, perfectly prepared meat filled her mouth. It'd been so long since she'd had a hearty meal like this. Mostly she only ate what she could grow or glean from the forest. It wasn't exactly a balanced diet.

After chewing and swallowing, she opened her eyes and realized with a blush that both Nico and Dai had been watching her intensely. She speared a bit more and brought it to Dai's mouth. He took it, all the while keeping his gaze locked with hers.

That gave Nico the idea of feeding her. He fed her a couple more pieces of meat, and two green colvege spears. Finally, he picked up a thick, plump strawberry and set it to her lips. For a moment, she wondered how they'd been able to grow it. Her strawberries had been scrawny and late this season. But once the sweet taste of the berry filled her mouth, she stopped wondering. In fact, she stopped thinking altogether.

Both men's gazes were riveted on her lips as she took bites of the fruit, on her face as she tipped her head back and groaned her approval at the flavor.

Nico's hands rubbed her thighs and her breath caught. She chewed the strawberry slowly and swallowed, wanting him to go farther than that, but unsure of how to communicate the desire. As if reading her mind, his hand slipped down her leg to the edge of her gown and traveled beneath it.

Nico leaned forward and kissed her ear lobe. "All right?" he murmured.

She closed her eyes momentarily and nodded.

"Mmmm...good," he purred.

He trailed his hand up her leg, bringing her gown with it. When he reached her upper thigh, his hands veered toward her sex and he brushed his finger lightly over her bud. She shuddered at the blatant tease.

“Do you know how much I want you out of this gown, my love?” he whispered into her ear. He kissed her earlobe and then bit it gently. She let out a soft moan. “I want you out of it so I can see your luscious body in those underthings we bought. Did you know Dai and I had to...ease...ourselves this afternoon just thinking about how you’d look in them?”

Dai trailed his fingers up her calf and fingered the edge of the top of her stocking. Her sex swelled and she grew wetter. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples hardened. They rubbed against the top of the corset with every breath she took. “T-take the gown off,” she answered in a breathless whisper.

“Our pleasure.”

Together, Dai and Nico drew the dress gently over her head and off. Then Dai sat back on his bench and looked strained, like he almost had to sit on his hands to keep from touching her further. Had they agreed to let Nico take the lead? It was likely so. Twyla could well imagine that they may have thought Dai too intense for her at this moment...and they may have been right.

Or not. Her body’s demands seemed to be growing with every breath she took. It was an odd sensation to have her body rule her mind, negate any and all fear she held within. And, yet, it was not only lust that she felt. Something within her desired her to join body and soul with these men, to give them everything of herself that she possibly could.

She heard two male groans fill the air. They were both staring intently at her. She was now dressed in nothing but the heels, stockings, see-through panties and revealing corset. The plump of her breasts swelled over the top of her corset and the air caressed her reddened, erect nipples.

Nico moved his chair back and shifted her so that she had her back to his chest. Dai positioned himself directly in front of her.

Dai leaned forward and positioned her left leg so that her inner knee was hooked over Nico’s knee and her calf trailed down Nico’s shin. Then Dai cupped the ankle of her other leg in one strong hand. He brought her still-shoed foot to rest on the bench that he straddled. Her toe just barely rubbed at his straining erection with every movement she made.

In this position, she was completely spread and open to him. It made her feel vulnerable, but deliciously so. His gaze focused on her swollen sex, which the panties she wore did not fully cover. Gently, he massaged the muscles of her calf, very slowly working his way higher. The sight of her leg, clad in the stocking, the sexy shoe, and Dai’s large hand moving up over her skin made her breath come faster. Dai paused and rotated his thumb in little circles on the sensitive flesh near the back of her knee. It sent little frissons of pleasure through her.

One of Nico's hands moved from her waist slowly up to cup her breast. He ran a finger over the pump of one, rubbing along the exposed part of her nipple. Another moan filled the air and she realized it was hers.

"Your breasts tempt me," Nico murmured near her ear. His chest braced and warmed her back. He rubbed over her nipple again, stiffening it impossibly harder. Dai circled his thumb around and around on the back of her knee—as if he massaged the sensitive bud between her thighs. Her clit pulsed at the dual sensations and she tipped her head back and panted, giving in to a near climax.

Nico pulled at the string of her corset and she felt it loosen. At the same time, Dai moved higher on her leg, to her mid thigh, and continued to draw those little circles on the sensitive flesh there. Her panties were sopping wet by now, her sex plumped and pulsing and ready for attention. She realized she'd spread her legs wider for Dai, with that very wish foremost in her mind. All she wanted was for him to touch her there where she was most needy. He continued those little, concentrated circles around and around, higher and higher. It was as though he touched her clit.

"We can smell your desire," crooned Nico in a strained voice. "We can see your chest rising and falling, hear the thump of your heart as you grow more aroused. Your lust is our aphrodisiac, my love. Let's drive it higher."

Her corset loosened further and then fell away, leaving her in only her shoes, stockings and panties. Her breasts felt full and her nipples stood erect, like two suckable small cherries. The motion of Dai's hand faltered at the sight, then steadied. He moved up higher and ran his finger along the top of her stocking, then went higher still, caressing the soft skin where her inner thigh met her pussy.

Nico brought his hands up her rib cage agonizingly slowly until he cupped both breasts in his hands. His thumbs flicked skillfully over her nipples, back and forth until her back arched and she let out a small moan. In the same instant, Dai pushed aside the wet slip of material shielding her pussy. With one finger, he trailed over her labia, then sank into the wet depths of her and thrust slowly in and out. With his thumb, he rubbed her clit. Dai groaned low at the feel of her.

Powerful pleasure washed over her. Her back bowed again and her hips bucked. Dai and Nico didn't let up on the erotic ministrations to her body. Dai continued the dual act of finger-fucking her and rubbing at her clit. Nico continued caressing her breasts, teasing the reddened, sensitive nipples. The sheer wonderfulness of having so many erogenous zones stimulated at the same time drove her to climax. Her body tensed as the waves of pleasure consumed her. She felt the muscles of her pussy convulse and contract around Dai's pistoning fingers. A rush of liquid lubricated her passage. When it had subsided, she was left shaking and yet even hungrier for them.

She struggled to stand. Shakily, she stood in the middle of the room watching them, seeing the hunger for her in their eyes. She watched how their cocks strained against the material of their treads. They held themselves back. They were afraid to spook her, but, oh, how clear it was that they wanted her. She realized something.

She held power here.

Dai and Nico were hers. She trusted them completely to never do anything she did not wish. They would not do anything unless they had her permission. She held their leashes in her hand. She could hold their leashes as tightly or as loosely as she wished. It was her call.

Perhaps she'd let up a little this evening. She craved a loving she had invited of her own free will and here were two beloved, trusted males willing and able to give her just what she wanted.

With more confidence than she had just a moment before, she walked to the center of the room and felt their hot gazes follow her. She turned and cleared some of the plates away so she could halfway sit on the table. The position provided them with a view of her wet pussy. She cupped her breast in one hand and rubbed the nipple with her other hand.

Their bodies tensed visibly and they sat forward, watching her movements. Her other hand trailed down to her pussy to rub at her clit. It was even now growing aroused again. Their eyes followed every flick of her finger against the bud. It grew large and sensitive once again.

She tipped her head back and sighed. She could make herself peak right now just by doing this. Instead, she caught their gaze both in turn. "What were your arrangements for the evening? One of you must've agreed to hold back."

Dai swallowed hard. "I did."

She nodded. It was as she'd presumed. Dai was too intense, too uncontrolled. They had not wished to scare her with his sexual aggressiveness. She shifted her gaze to the man beside him. "Nico," she said softly. "Come here."

Nico stood and walked toward her. His eyes were heavy lidded and dark. The pupils were dilated, revealing his arousal. He enveloped her in his arms and she felt the delicious press of his hard chest against her bare breasts. One of his hands rubbed at her lower back. His finger teased the band of her panties. With his other hand, he cupped the nape of her neck and tilted her head to the side. She felt his lips press against the sensitive flesh of her throat and his teeth nip territorially at the place where her shoulder met her neck.

"Grant me permission to take the lead," he whispered in his velvet voice.

She swallowed hard and nodded. Glancing down, she found her hands grasping fistfuls of his shirt, wanting it off.

He untangled her fingers and removed his shirt. "All right?" he asked.

"More than all right," she murmured as she proceeded to explore his chest, tracing every delectable bulge and biceps with questing fingers. He was magnificent.

Suddenly, he grasped her wrists, firmly yet gently, and placed them on either side of her on the table. "Please, you're driving me insane. I need to keep my control."

He dropped to his knees in front of her and drew a nipple into his mouth. Her back arched and she whimpered at the sensation of his warm tongue drawing circles around the erect tip and the gentle suction he exerted on it.

She noted that Dai had dropped his treads and now caressed his thick, hard cock in one hand as he watched them. Having Dai's gaze on them as they engaged in this erotic act only fanned the flames of her desire higher.

She'd wondered if the memories of the past would rise up to smother her once she began these acts with Nico and Dai. But *this* was so different from that. There really was no comparison. *This* was about love and caring. *This* was about shared, mutual pleasure. It had absolutely nothing to do with what happened to her so many years ago, though they were both carnal acts.

Nico's hand slipped down her back to her waist. He slipped his thumb under the thin silk waistband of her panties and pulled down. The small slip of material slithered easily down her legs and she stepped out of them.

He switched his oral attention to her other breast and moved his hand ever so slowly up her inner thigh to her sex. Gently, he traced circles around her swollen clit until she moaned and tossed her head. "Please, I need —"

She didn't even have to finish the sentence. Nico's hands grasped her waist and lifted her up to sit on the table. He pulled her so her buttocks were just at the very edge and her legs dangled over the side. She reached for the buckle of his treads but he was faster. He undid them, kicking off his boots at the same time, and slid them off.

She sucked in a breath of awe as she reached out to stroke the thick length of him. He tipped his head back and groaned, making his Adam's apple vibrate. She couldn't wait to feel what it would be like to have that massive cock within her.

Nico tipped his head forward and studied her with predatory calculation, as if deciding the best way to take her. Finally, he slid a hand to the small of her back and closed the distance between them. His mouth came down on hers as his finger slipped within her. She moaned and squirmed, but he held her fast. He thrust a few times, until he had her panting, and then added a second finger. Patiently he worked her with his hand, widening her entrance large enough to take the considerable girth of his cock.

Her hips bucked forward of their own accord and she grasped the edge of the table as he finger-fucked her. Finally, his hand left her and she felt the wide, silken head of his cock press against her. Little by little, he thrust within, backed out and thrust again. Bit by glorious bit, he fed her every inch of his rock-hard erection. She grabbed his upper arms as he embraced her and sank her teeth into his shoulder. It felt so exquisite to be filled, possessed by a man she loved and trusted. Her body felt completely his, utterly and totally a part of him.

"Ah yes," he hissed as he seated himself to the hilt within her.

He placed a hand beneath one of her silk-stockings-clad knees, the other he braced on the edge of the table and he began to thrust in and out of her. She felt every vein of him rubbing in lovely friction against the inner walls of her passage. Every groan of

pleasure he made excited her further. She looked down between them and saw the thick, ridged length of his cock plunging in and out of her body.

It pushed her over the edge.

Her climax hit her hard. The muscles of her sex pulsed and contracted around his length and she felt a flood of moisture release from between her thighs. Nico took her in a hard kiss, consuming all her cries and whimpers of passion. He didn't stop shafting her and once her climax had passed another began instantly to build.

Nico's body jerked and shuddered. He thrust into her as far as he could and came. He groaned loudly and she felt his seed bathe her within. She held him close, scattering kisses over his face and throat as he passed his moments of ecstasy. He shook when it was finished.

"I love you, Twyla," Nico murmured into her ear.

"As I love you," she whispered, answering from her heart.

With one last mind-numbing kiss, Nico slipped from her body, revealing Dai, still sitting on the bench, still caressing his painfully hard-looking cock. She wanted Dai within her, she realized suddenly. She wanted to connect with him as she'd connected with Nico. She loved them both. She wanted to take each of them into her.

"Dai," she said softly. "You need release. Come here."

He stood and kicked his treads off the rest of the way. "You must be absolutely certain, Twyla. I won't coax and seduce climaxes from you like Nico, I'll pull them from your body. I won't be able to hold myself back."

"Come," she said softly. "Come here."

He stalked to her and drew her hard into his arms. His mouth came down on her lips and his tongue slipped within. He tasted hot and slightly angry, instead of cool and mysterious like Nico.

"So sweet," he murmured. "So incredibly sweet." He fell to his knees, coaxed her thighs to part and licked up her pussy.

She jerked, surprised by the action. His tongue swirled around the opening to her passage and circled her clit. Her hands clenched around the edges of the table and she fought a scream of anxious, confused pleasure rising in her throat. All the while he dipped his tongue within her, sucked on her clit like it was a piece of candy. He was unrelenting, unstoppable. Dai drew her labia into his mouth he made noises like she was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

"Dai," she gasped urgently. It sounded like a plea for him to stop to her own ears. Was that what she wanted? He was like a whirlwind, enveloping her body. Sensations assaulted her mind and for a moment she fought them. Then something within her relaxed. She remembered that she trusted Dai not to hurt her and decided to give her body over to his care. He wanted her pleasure, nothing more, nothing less.

She gave in to it, gave in to the force of him. She cried out as pure pleasure suffused her body, this time without the confusion or the anxiousness. It danced her to the razor edge of another climax.

Finally, when she was panting and almost clawing the table, he stood and kissed her deep. He pulled away and set his forehead to hers. "Turn around, love. I will take you from behind."

Her breath caught at the note of control in his voice, the look of ownership in his eyes. She turned and grasped the edge of the table. She felt his strong hands on her hips as he pulled her toward him. With one foot, he coaxed her still-shoed feet further apart. Then he ran a hand up the back of one thigh and flicked his fingers minutely over her wet, sex-swollen pussy. He pressed his cock within her. He wasn't as gentle as Nico. It was a good thing she'd been prepared before she'd taken Dai. He thrust within her to the maximum, until she felt like she'd be spilt right up the center, and then started shafting her. He pushed himself within her as far she could take him.

Instantly, a climax ripped through her. With every thrust Dai made, he rubbed some spot of sensitivity, a bundle of nerves hidden deep within her. It was almost unbearably good. Since she was lubricated thoroughly now, Dai picked up the pace.

As he thrust, he gently circled the opening to her nether hole. It surprised her at first, but she realized quickly that it was a powerful erogenous zone. When Dai slipped a finger within, she came hard once more. Her loud cries and moans filled the small room.

He drew two more climaxes from her before he finally released his seed within her. She realized one of them may have impregnated her and the possibility bought a fast flush of joy.

She leaned down and rested her flushed cheek on the smooth wood of the table. "Tomorrow, I'll be ready. Tomorrow I'll take both of you," she murmured.

Chapter Four

Twyla fingered the pendant Marsten had gifted her with as she sat in front of the hearth in her cottage. The day had dawned in twilight as every day had for a long time. Though today the twilight would be lifted. This morning, Dai and Nico had traveled out to prepare the circle in which the final ritual of the final Sacred Triad would be performed. This afternoon, it would be finished.

Deep in thought and caught in a review of her life, Twyla turned the pendant over and over between her fingers. It was a silver crescent with a small red jewel at the top. The pendant seemed so familiar to her for some reason, but why?

She frowned as a flash of this pendant entered her mind's eye. A flash of the piece of jewelry on someone's throat. Her mother's laughter rang through her head, making her tighten her grip on the piece of metal until she drew blood from her palm with the sharp edge.

She closed her eyes as a flash of the pendant assaulted her again. This time the piece of jewelry was smeared with flour. The scent of bread baking and the feel of a warm fire filled her senses. The image widened and steadied into a full shot of her mother's face as she baked in the kitchen of their three-room cottage. She laughed and joked as she rolled out bread dough. The lantern light flickered on the pendant she wore around her throat.

"Oh sweet..." Twyla breathed and pain and memory assaulted her. She'd forgotten so much about her life before That Night in an effort to protect herself. How had Marsten obtained her mother's pendant?

She cried out and fell to her knees in front of the fireplace as more memories rose up. She'd pushed them far back into the recesses of her mind, but with the pendant in her hand, they rushed back.

Marsten's laughing face on that long ago night entered her mind. Gods, she'd driven their faces so far from her mind, she simply hadn't recognized him.

Marsten as he ripped the pendant from around her mother's throat as she screamed in agony.

Marsten dropping his treads and...

Blinded by tears and emotions, she crawled across the floor toward the door. She let the pendant drop from her fingers as she moved. She needed air. She needed space. She needed to be anywhere but where she was right now.

By the time she reached the door she felt like a wild animal. As the memories and feelings that she'd forgotten out a sense of self-preservation filled her mind, they stripped away her humanity. They reduced to her a savage thing, bent only on her own

survival, wanting nothing more than to escape, to run, to hide somewhere alone and lick her wounds. These memories she did not need. She did not want them. Maybe if she ran hard enough, she could outrun them.

Twyla pulled the door of the cottage open, feeling as though someone held her head under the rushing water of the river, and ran, trying not to drown.

Branches ripped at her clothing and at her face as she bolted blindly through the woods. A log tripped her and she went sprawling on her chest, knocking the air from her lungs. Pausing not more than a heartbeat, she jerked to her feet and ran on.

Dai and Nico followed her. She could feel them behind her. She wanted to stop for them, but she couldn't. She was unfit for them, an unfit partner for their triad. She was damaged, dirty. They needed someone cleaner, better than she.

"Twyla!" someone yelled behind her. She ran faster.

As she entered a clearing, something hard hit her from the side, bringing her down and sprawling her in the soft grass. Through her tears, she had glimpses of Dai's face. "No," she keened as she fought and kicked and bit. Still, Dai wouldn't let her go.

She felt wild. She clawed at the ground in a frenzy to get free of him, to bolt into the forest and never look back. The part of her that was still Twyla wanted to stay, but the twisted part...that part wanted to run and run and never return.

Finally...success. She bolted to her feet and toward the thick forest. Dai and Nico shouted and ran after her. They grabbed her at the same time and in a tumble of arms and legs, wrestled her to the ground. She ended up facedown in the grass, struggling, yet restrained by two powerful male bodies. It took the two of them to keep her from fleeing. It was as if this sudden fear she had made her stronger than normal, stronger than was natural. The part of her that was still Twyla was grateful for Dai and Nico. Happy they could control her. She wanted, *needed*, them to do so.

Dai ended up between her spread legs, pinning her down with his hips. The mound of his flaccid cock pressed against her buttocks through the fabric of her skirt. She felt exposed and vulnerable in this position. She felt how she'd felt on the night of her rape. It made her claw the ground and scream and cry.

Nico grabbed her arms and held them down. "Calm," he yelled. "Please, Twyla. It's us. It's us. We won't hurt you. Never hurt you. We're only trying to prevent you from hurting yourself. Hush now," he said over and over.

Inexplicable animalistic lust tore through her. Her pussy was sopping wet, so ready to be taken. It's all she wanted. All she could think about. Using the little space she had to move, she spread her legs as far as she could and positioned herself against Dai's cock and rubbed her hot sex against him. His body tensed and she felt his cock grow hard.

"Twyla," Dai said in a warning voice. "Don't do that."

She made a frustrated, animal-like sound and wiggled her hips, deliberately trying to push him over the edge. She just wanted him inside her. She wanted to be filled, taken, subdued and controlled. Sex was the only thing that could ground her now.

Dai snaked his hand around her hip and pulled her shirt up. He thrust his hand down the front of her skirt. His fingers found her wet sex through the material of her undergarment. He let out a sound that was like a growl of anticipation. "You're ready for a cock, love. Do you know that? Do you want me, Twyla? Is that you want?"

She nodded and dug her fingers into the earth at the feel of him touching her. Couldn't he see that's all she wanted?

He moved the scrap of material aside and slicked his fingers through the cream she'd made for him. She shuddered when he found her opening and pressed two of his thick fingers inside her. Her hips jerked involuntarily as he started thrusting in and out of her. *Oh yes. Sweet Kingdom, yes,* she chanted in her mind. She pushed up further, so she was fully on her knees and he let her. He pushed his knees forward, forcing her thighs apart as far as they would go. In this position, she was completely vulnerable to him. Completely at his mercy. It was like before, when she'd been taken against her will, but yet completely not. She *wanted* this.

She needed it.

She needed this memory of Dai and Nico to overlay and consume the bad memory from her past.

"Yes, I want you. Both of you," she rasped. "Let's do this now."

Dai thrust his fingers within her hard and fast and she arched her back at the sensation. She couldn't speak anymore. She could barely think.

"You're sure?" Nico said somewhere near her ear.

She nodded. "Please," she whimpered.

"Not here, love," said Nico. "If we're going to do this, it must be in the circle."

She shook her head. "No. Here. Here." But they were lifting her, carrying her. Dai held her in his arms and when she fought him, he gave her over to Nico, who slung her over his shoulder and let her beat his back with her fists. Her hair hung loose and long over her head, brushing the ground as they bore her to the circle.

It was a large clearing that thrummed with power. It should have calmed her, but did not. A blanket had been spread in the center. Nico put her to her feet on the blanket and crushed her to her chest. "Hush, Twyla," he crooned as she cried into his chest. "What's the matter the love? What's wrong?"

She pulled away from him without a word and began to undress him. "Please. I need to feel you, both of you. Please, I need your skin against mine. Please, please," she said over and over. "Now."

Nico gently withdrew her hands from him, swept her off her feet and laid her onto the blanket. "That you will get, love."

She turned over on her stomach, offering her ass up to the both of them. "Please," she cried out.

Nico pulled her skirt up to her waist and ripped her undergarments at the seams to get them off her. Soon, she was naked and exposed from the waist down. Her ass was in

the air, offered up like a juicy bit of fruit to their gazes and their touch. Someone groaned at the sight of her. She thought it was Dai.

Twyla closed her eyes, listening to the rustle of clothing being taken off.

Twyla didn't know how Dai had gotten his pants off, but soon she felt the press of the wide, thick head of his shaft pressing into her. Bit by bit, he worked his shaft into her. She was so wet, that despite his size, he slid in easily. He stayed embedded in her to the hilt and groaned low and long. Then he grabbed her hips and started to thrust. The pace started slow and she wanted him to go faster, harder. Digging her palms into the grass and grunting, she pushed back against him, making every thrust as deep as she could make it. Her vision swam as the pleasure of it filled her. This was the ultimate possession of Dai over her. She wanted to be possessed by him.

Taking the hint, he picked up the pace. He pulled back and slammed into her over and over. She clawed the ground, giving in to the ecstasy of it. Her orgasm hit her hard, rolling her eyes back into her head. "Ah yes, Dai, yes!" she screamed.

He pulled free of her body without coming, and pulled her up against him, letting his hand tangle through her hair and stroke down her tear-strained cheeks. "Is that better, love? Do you feel calmer now?"

She fisted his shirt in her hands and shook her head. "No. More. *More*. I need both of you. I want to feel both of you. Please."

He lowered her back to the blanket and came down on her right side.

Nico lowered himself to his knees on the other side of her and stroked his hands over her body, over her breasts and between her legs to graze her swollen, needy pussy. She shuddered. At the same time, Dai slipped a hand to the nape of her neck and rubbed with strong fingers. She sighed as the tension left her body in a whoosh.

Her hands sought and found Dai's cock, still wet from her own juices. His hips jerked as she ran her fingers over it, teasing him, trying to push him past the limits she knew he had. Nico was harder to push, but Dai...he was easy. On the other side, she found Nico's cock and let her fingers curl around the shaft. She pumped them at the same time, relishing the dual groans that filled the air and the lovely sensation of both their cocks in her hands at once.

Dai's mouth came down on hers and she closed her eyes, allowing him to part her lips and stroke his tongue into her mouth. He pulled her against him and her breasts brushed the rough hair of his chest. Her body felt heavy with desire. Nico spread her labial lips and Dai rubbed his finger through her folds. Her hips thrust up involuntarily.

"Ah," Dai murmured against her lips. "I love the way you feel, Twyla." He slipped a finger into her, then another and pumped her with them, while Nico stroked her clit.

"You're so wet and slick," Nico growled near her ear. "I want you so very much, love."

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. Her pussy gripped Dai's fingers. Nico pulled away for a moment and came back to find her nether hole. He'd coated his hand in some kind of lubricant. With a finger, he stroked around her anus and then slipped

inside. She let out a low moan and tossed her head from side-to-side as both orifices were pleased simultaneously. In and out, they thrust relentlessly, widening her pussy and her anus to take their cocks.

“I will take you here,” purred Nico as he thrust extra hard into her ass. She groaned.

“And I will take you here,” murmured Dai as he thrust in and out of her pussy. “At the same time. Are you ready for that?”

Those dark words poured over her, lighting a fire in her lower belly. Her climax built slow and intense. It wouldn't be long before she exploded. She nodded.

A second finger was added to her nether passage and the fingers pistoned in and out of her, driving her crazy. Her moans filled the clearing and her back arched, thrusting her breasts into the air, her nipples hard and demanding attention. Dai's head came down to her breast to capture and lave over a nipple. He licked it with the flat of his tongue and then nipped at her gently. The little bit of pain combined with the incredible amount of pleasure tilted her over the edge. She screamed as she came, her vaginal muscles clenching and releasing as she poured out her hot juice over Dai's hand.

“Mmmm...yes,” Nico murmured into her ear. “You are relaxed and wet and ready for us. First, I want a feel of your pussy around me.”

Twyla watched as Nico settled himself between her thighs and guided his cock within her. Her fingers grasped his forearms as he gave her all those luscious inches slowly, then pulled almost the full way out and slid in again. She arched her back and moaned as he took at a pace slow enough to blow her mind. Nico leaned down over her and kissed her cheeks and her mouth, telling her how beautiful she was, how much they both loved her.

Tears coursed down her cheeks and Dai leaned over her and tenderly kissed them away. Their love felt like a palpable thing, like a velvet blanket wrapping around her, warming her through. If love was an energy, Dai and Nico emanated it now in totality. The sensation made her heart swell with deep emotion, made her see the world so differently. No longer was it a place of anger and hatred. No longer was it a world where she was made to run and hide from those who wished her harm. Her reality was suddenly filled with the bright light of belonging and mutual caring.

She was loved.

That knowledge transformed everything.

Nico pulled out without coming and Dai took his place. He restrained himself, shafting her slow and easy, just as Nico had. After bringing her to orgasm once again, they switched off, Nico taking Dai's place and loving her gently and slowly once more. Twyla felt like she'd explode from the sensation of it and the love they seemed to fill her with.

Finally, Dai leaned backward to lay on the blanket and Nico helped to position her so that she straddled Dai, her swollen pussy just brushing the head of his cock. She

pushed her hips down, trying to slip him within her. Nico and Dai's hands went to her hips and together they guided her movements until his cock slid within.

And in, and in, and in... Soon she was seated on his pelvis, with the entire thick length of his cock thrust up within her as far as it would go.

"Yes," she breathed as his length and width filled her. She closed her eyes and pressed down, pushing him within to the hilt. It felt right to have him inside her. It would feel even better to have them both possessing her in tandem.

Dai groaned and closed his eyes. He brushed her hair back from her shoulders. "Ah Twyla. You feel so delicious around me. I'll never grow tired of your beautiful body."

Nico covered her back, scattering kisses on her shoulders and the nape of her neck. His warm flesh teased her sensitive body. He touched her buttocks with a lubricated hand. "Are you sure?" he murmured.

She dropped her head down to kiss Dai, which brought her ass up enough to give Nico access. "Fill me," she panted. "Fill me up with both of you. Fill me up with love. Fill me to cover over the memory of terror and replace it with one of pleasure and passion. *Fill me, Nico.*"

Nico pressed a finger into her anus, then two, widening her. She bit her lip at the feel of her muscles stretching to accommodate the invasion. At the same time, Dai lifted her up just a bit to give himself room to move. He thrust his cock in and out of her so slowly she thought she'd die.

"Does it hurt?" asked Nico.

She shook her head. There was a slight pain, but it was actually arousing. It made the pleasure so much more pronounced. Nico's cock pressed at her nether hole, circled it, and then entered. She gasped and almost pulled away. Both Dai and Nico held her hips in place.

"It is just the head that will hurt, love," Nico murmured. "Once we get past the crown, it will not pain you much. On the contrary, there will be only pleasure." He pushed the rest of the way in and, indeed, it was true it was not so painful when it was the shaft that breached and stretched the tight muscles of her anus.

She moaned as the men started to love her slowly...so very, very slowly, both attuned to the other's pace. Dai watched her face carefully, monitoring the play of emotion and pleasure.

Nico brushed his lips across the crown of her head and then dropped his mouth to her bare shoulder. "Are you all right, love?" he murmured.

Magick skittered across her skin, trying to find a way in. It brushed over her breasts and thighs, making her shiver. That, combined with the gentle, mind-blowing glide of the cocks of the two men she loved was enough to set her teeth into her bottom lip. She whimpered in pleasure and nodded.

Dai shifted his hips a little so the tip of his cock paid special attention to the spot within her that felt so very good when it was rubbed. "So sweet, so tight," groaned Dai. "You are perfection, Twyla."

She released her lip. "Do you feel that? The magick?"

Nico kissed the curve of her shoulder. "Yes, love. It's your magick trying to return to you. If you allow it in, we can complete this ritual. Your magick needs to be home before it can join with ours."

"Allow it, Twyla," murmured Dai.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on the magick smoothing its way over her skin. The image came unbidden. Perhaps it was instinct. Either way, she imagined a door in the center of her chest. She opened the door and pushed out all of the fear and terror and rage and let her magick flow into her. She gasped as it filled her up, setting around her heart and infusing her mind with powerful intelligence. It felt silky, warm and comforting. Twyla opened her eyes, knowing she'd finally regained the part of her that had been lost. The part that had been stolen from her so long ago on a dark night when hatred had reigned.

Dai and Nico both groaned loud and low. "Thank the Gods," Dai murmured.

"Good girl, love," said Nico as he dropped a kiss to her ear. "Now, are you ready?"

"For what?"

They didn't answer her. Instead, their pace quickened. Faster and harder they thrust. Twyla curled her fingers into the blanket on either side of Dai and hung on. They shafted her in tandem now, each perfectly attuned to the other's movements, driving her toward another climax that would shatter her world. Twyla felt a scream building in her throat.

Being so filled this way, having Dai pistoning in and out of her pussy, and Nico filling her anus, it was almost too much to take. Too much sensation for her body to handle at one time. It was heaven and it was hell all at once.

She dropped her head down on a moan. Her hair fell over Dai's shoulder. He put his mouth to her ear. "You're so hot, Twyla. You're so hot and sweet and tight. We're so close. We just need to hear you cry out your pleasure. Come for us, my love...my beauty. Scream out your climax."

Her climax ripped through her and she screamed. Waves of intense pleasure racked her body, making her knees go weak and blackening her vision. It stole all her thought, her muscle control and almost stole her consciousness.

Dai groaned as he released a hot jet of come into her. Nico did likewise, thrusting as far into her as he could and letting loose.

Twyla's head snapped back as a thread of her magick exploded upward from her chest, drawing another scream from her. Dai and Nico also cried out as their magick left them. She could feel it around them, curling through the air and snaking around each other as the tendrils melded. She couldn't see it, but she could sense it with everything

she was. The threads of magicks were like three great and powerful beasts scenting each other and deciding to mate.

Finally, the magick sped straight upward. Nico and Dai moved, toppling them all onto the blankets in a tangle. They watched as the magick seemed to explode in a brilliant flash of white in the sky above them. The grayness over their heads broke and light poured through it. The crack grew larger and larger until the entire sky was consumed with daylight.

“Sweet...” Twyla breathed. “Sweet Kingdom.”

“Finally our magick had joined with the magicks of the other triads,” said Nico. He breathed out slowly. “It’s done.”

Together, they stayed on the blanket for a long while, kissing and holding each other, murmuring words of love and commitment in the bright daylight of noon.

Epilogue

Twyla pulled her silk-lined cloak about her shoulders and allowed her footman to open the door of her black and gold carriage and help her out. She stepped on the cobblestone street of Middleton, a city near to the one she, Dai and Nico now lived. It had taken her three months to track Marsten down. He'd fled Dandre Village when he'd discovered she was part of a Sacred Triad.

But she would not be denied closure, and he would not escape retribution.

His rooms lay above a cookshop in one of the seedier parts of the city. The city's inhabitants eyed her black and gold carriage drawn by six perfectly black horses, curiously. Twyla felt at home in an environment like this, but she realized the poor, bedraggled residents of this neighborhood likely didn't get many visitors as well-heeled as herself.

Nico and Dai had fought to accompany her, but she'd been firm in her resolve to do this on her own. After all, it wasn't like she was powerless. Her magick had returned to her in full and then some.

With a look toward the blue sunlit sky, she entered the building and walked up the stairs to Marsten's room. Steeling herself to again lay her gaze on one of the men who'd killed her mother, she raised her hand and sent a blast of magick against the wooden door. It flew off the hinges, and a draft of fetid air from Marsten's flat hit her square in the face. She turned her face away and coughed.

Marsten sat at a long table eating a stew. He wore a grimy tunic and sat with one hand to his mouth, frozen with shock, his eyes wide. He started to stand. "Hey, you can't—"

She shot her hand in his direction, firing a quick blast of power that sat him back down in his chair. Marsten *oomfed* as his breath left him.

"Stay," she commanded.

Marsten squinted up at her. His angry gaze traced up from her silk slippers to the burgundy gown to the expensive jewels that glittered at her ears, throat and wrists. His gaze settled on her face. Fear shot through his mud-colored eyes. "T-the pendant, that was a just a little joke, milady. I never meant any harm."

"Silence!" Her magickally enhanced voice boomed throughout the room. Rage ripped through her and she fought to control it. Rage and magick did not mix. That was one of the many lessons she'd learned in her recent magickal studies.

Marsten mouth snapped shut with an audible click.

"I suppose you meant no harm the night you raped and killed my mother, also." She stepped toward him, looking him up and down. "I came here today in order to

prevent you from hurting any other women. I will also be searching out the other participant from that night who still lives. Now, listen carefully, because I don't want to waste any more time on you than I must."

Marsten looked at her with wide eyes. She could taste his fear on her tongue. Twyla didn't enjoy it, and she didn't want it. All she wanted was to get on with this business so she could go home to the ones who loved her.

She raised her hand and closed her eye, feeling the magick within her bubbling to the surface. It tickled her palm as it radiated out, seeking and finding its focus.

"You and your mother were not the first," Marsten yelled. "You were not the first women I forced that way. You won't be the last, either." He laughed. "Dirty whores! You *all* like it in the end, anyway. No matter what we do to you, you still—" He gasped and looked down at his crotch, where her magick was fulfilling its purpose. About now, he should've been feeling his cock shrivel.

Marsten shrieked. He stood up, causing the chair to fall backward, and retreated to the far corner of the room to cower. But he wouldn't be able to prevent her magick from completing its task.

The magickal stream ceased and retreated into her body. "I was the last. Marsten. Your days of seeking pleasure from the terror of women are over." She raised an eyebrow. "Indeed, you will not be able seek your pleasure in any fashion again, ever."

She turned and walked out the door, leaving to Marsten to yell and cry behind her as he realized she'd wasted his member.

Happy to have that unpleasant business completed, her heart light, knowing that other women were now protected from the fate she'd endured, she walked back down to her carriage that would take her back to the men who loved her.

About the Author

Anya Bast writes erotic fantasy and paranormal romance. Primarily, she writes happily-ever-afters with lots of steamy sex. After all, how can you have a happily-ever-after WITHOUT lots of sex?

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