

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Anya Bast

Whisper
OF THE
Blade

Two of Swords



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Whisper of the Blade

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WHISPER OF THE BLADE

Anya Bast

Author's Note

I used the Two of Swords from the standard Ryder-Waite tarot deck as a basis for this story. It depicts a woman sitting in a chair with a waxing moon in the sky, rocks and a body of water behind her. She is blindfolded and balances two crossed swords.

I wanted to write this note to explain how I interpreted this card. The crossed swords I take as conflict, which the woman must balance on her shoulders. She must do it blindfolded, perhaps carefully weighing the solution to the conflict with logic and intellect, rather than force, and with neutrality. The waxing moon in the sky symbolizes a new beginning arising out of the solution to the conflict. The water represents emotion, and the rocks signify hindrances to the flow of that emotion.

Chapter One

The blade could injure the wind itself.

Emmia stood in the middle of her grove, her blindfold in place. Around her, birds twittered on branches and leaves rustled in the trees. There was not one person for miles around her.

This was heaven. This was the place she most loved to be. She took a long, cleansing breath of air and slowly let it out, enjoying the emotional quiet around her.

Then she lunged and turned, driving the blade through the air at an imagined enemy, enjoying the heft and feel of the fine weapon in her hand. Each day she practiced for three hours in the woods and she often trained blindfolded. Taking away her vision helped sharpen her other senses and she needed every advantage in a fight.

Perspiration beading her brow and breathing heavily, Emmia turned, lunged, leapt and arched, feeling the delicious stretch and pull of her muscles. Just her and the blade. It was how she liked it best. No one around to batter and buffet her emotions. No one around to bombard her with their unwelcome feelings.

Her Talent was empathy. That meant she could feel the emotions of others. It was a rare Talent and she was particularly strong in her abilities. The downside was that it had been difficult to train. Emmia had tried numerous techniques since she'd been too small to filter the emotions she felt, but nothing had worked. Stemming her ability had been like trying to stop a river with a butterfly net. The only thing that worked for Emmia was long periods of solitude. That's the only thing that made the emotional bombardments she must endure bearable.

After the showdown with the Nameless in D'ar, Emmia had returned to her home in the Eastern Mountains, ravaged by the turmoil she'd been forced to absorb. All she

wanted for a while was the peace and solitude of her cottage, her woods, her training grove and her bathing pool.

Emmia hoped no one came to enlist her services for a while. She stopped, pulled her blindfold off and watched the dappled sunlight gleam along the blade and tang of the sword. Although her new sword was definitely a beauty, the finest famed blacksmith Ma'hor in Galenstown had ever made. Seemed a pity not to put it to immediate use.

The blade itself was curved a little and etched with a sun and moon, mated. The grip and pommel were wound with fine cured leather to provide an excellent handhold. The ricasso was not leather-bound and instead was bare unsharpened metal, roughed a bit to make the sword more wieldy in close combat. The blood grooves etched into the blade near the guard allowed air into the inflicted wound and made for an easier pull out.

It was, in a word, *perfect*.

Yes, she was a fine sword. The very best friend a justice mercenary like her could have. Sorrow squeezed her chest. Since she didn't seem to be able to have any human friends, perhaps it was the best friend an empath could have as well. She stood, breathing heavily in the oppressive heat of the day and considered that, the slight smile she wore fading.

Her joy at the blade now somewhat diminished at the thought, she sought her scabbard and walked through the trees toward her bathing pool. She would take a swim to cool off and to bathe and then seek her dinner.

This was her life, best to accept it.

* * * * *

Magnus guided his horse past the thick covering of bushes and trees of the old forest he traveled through. He'd left the main road through the Eastern Mountains some time ago to indulge himself in a solitary ride back to Ravensbridge. He knew the

way and, if he ever lost it, he had a compass and a map tucked into the saddlebag of the chestnut brown stallion he rode.

The journey would take longer cross-country, but he had no pressing need to be back at Ravensbridge. Indeed, he did not even have a desire. Rolf, his castellan, could take care of things until he returned. Everyone much preferred him gone these days, anyway. Many of them wanted him dead.

He wouldn't go easily, though. They'd have to lynch him. Magnus refused to be punished for a crime he never committed.

The evidence was damning. Magnus knew that to every man, woman and child at Ravensbridge it appeared he'd committed murder. It even looked that way to Quinn. Sorrow clenched in his chest and throat when he remembered the look of shock, then doubt in his best friend's eyes.

Even the person who knew him best in the world thought he'd done it.

Magnus knew that Quinn was even now on his way through these forests to seek the aid of a justice mercenary. That was the primary reason Magnus had gone cross-country. He wanted to get a glimpse of the woman who might stand in judgment of him, the woman likely to be his executioner...if she could manage to kill him, that was. Since he was innocent, he wouldn't go down without a fight.

A full four weeks had passed since the crime had been committed. Four weeks of hell in which he'd been accused, had protested his innocence and finally laid down the law because he'd felt he'd had no other choice. Unable to exist at Ravensbridge amid the whispers, suspicious glances, and outright fear of him, he'd left to travel to his sister's keep.

A messenger bird, keyed to his location by someone who had the Talent, had reached him yesterday, letting him know that Quinn could not take the uncertainty of Magnus' guilt any longer and had gone to employ a justice mercenary.

The woman was well known in the Eastern Mountains and he knew she dwelt in these leaf-laden hills. No one could pass through these woods without her knowing it.

As an empath, she could sense the whereabouts of anyone because of the emotions they emitted. She would never sense him, however, because he was also an empath. The rare talent canceled out in two people face-to-face. Well, theoretically, anyway. There were so few empaths in the world, it had rarely, if ever, been put to the test. Mostly likely, he would not be able to feel her emotion, nor her his.

The idea of meeting someone like her was an attractive one...even if she might want to kill him. He'd take the risk.

Further into the forest, he heard the splash of water and a woman's voice swearing low. Silently as he could, Magnus slipped from his mount, tied him to a tree and stepped carefully through the trees, trying not to break any branches. She wouldn't be on guard for sounds in the forest. He knew that for certain. No, she'd been open to sensing emotion, not listening for noise, just as he would be in her position.

From his place in the undergrowth, he caught a glimpse of her in a large, still pool of water. She stood with her back to him, lean, lithe body moving as she bathed herself. The sunlight sprinkled her skin through the canopy of trees overhead and caressed her short, curvaceous body. Long, dark hair hung damp down to the small of her back, twisted into a braid that lay like a heavy rope along her spine. A pity her buttocks were concealed under the water. He had the sense they were as luscious and sweetly curved as the rest of her.

She turned a little, revealing the tender swell of a breast topped with a pinkened nipple. Her profile revealed her to be a beauty, but her features were set with an intense expression, almost sorrowful.

But the most wonderful thing was that he didn't know how she felt. The absence of foreign emotion while he viewed another person felt like a balm to his often-battered soul.

Magnus stared. He'd never expected beauty, not from all the tales he'd been told about this woman. He'd expected her to be strong, mannish, but while it was clear she was muscled, her body well-toned from physical exertions, she appeared small, almost

delicate. She seemed barely able to hold a sword, yet she'd gone up against some of the worst scum Molari had to offer and had come away the victor.

Magnus took a step toward her before he remembered himself. To court a conversation with Emmia, the most deadly of justice mercenaries, was to court death.

And he was already doing that.

She stilled in the water, listening. His heart shot up into his throat. Had she heard him or sensed him in some way?

Magnus took a step back, careful not to break a branch under his boot. He would meet her soon enough and she would judge him. After the hell he'd been through in the last month, he welcomed her visit. Perhaps, by some wild twist of fate, she would discover his innocence. Or perhaps she would look at the evidence mounted against him and come to the conclusion so many others had, that he was guilty.

Either way, there would be closure. Magnus thirsted for that.

* * * * *

A blade appeared at his throat, making Quinn stop short. His horse reared in surprise behind him and came back down on his already lame foot. Poor beast.

"What do you want?" came a low, steady female voice to his right.

"For you to drop your weapon?" Quinn answered quickly.

Silence. Apparently levity was not called for in this situation, nor charm. Bad news for him.

"Are you Emmia, the justice mercenary?" He tried to turn toward the voice and got only the pressure of the blade against his throat. It pricked and he felt the warm, slow slide of blood down his flesh.

"I am."

"My name is Quinn. I come seeking you. I have business to discuss."

She held the weapon a moment longer and then dropped it. Quinn let out a breath of relief and turned toward her, only to catch his breath again. She stood before him dressed in faded brown hunting leathers and a white tunic. The pants hugged her shapely legs and hips closely, though the tunic concealed her upper body. She met his eyes with her dark brown gaze. They were pretty eyes, set in a pretty face.

So this was the famed Emmia. She was lovely. How unexpected.

"I'm not taking any jobs right now," she answered brusquely. She turned and walked into the brush. "Go home."

The lovely didn't come with good manners. Pity.

"No, I can't. Emmia, I very much need to employ you. I've come offering a large sum of money."

"I don't require money," came her voice, now going fainter as she retreated from him.

Anger rose up in him, swift and immediate. "I've traveled four days to reach you," he yelled. "My horse has gone lame. I need a meal, a bath and a good night's sleep. At least hear my case. I come to avenge a woman I cared for and perhaps save a friend."

"This is not my problem." Her voice sounded farther away.

"Please! I need your help! I'll beg, if you like!"

Silence.

"Have you no compassion at all?" he yelled.

More silence.

"Damn," he swore under his breath. He clenched his fist. He couldn't go back to Ravensbridge without her. They had to cure the poisoned environment they lived in. She was the only one who could make that happen.

The bushes to his left rustled and Emmia emerged. "I have so much compassion, sir," she said icily, "that I am numb with it." Her eyes were dark with anger, perhaps a

kind of deep grief. It was there, then gone. "Follow me. I will hear your case, but that doesn't mean I'll take it. Understand?"

He nodded.

She turned and continued down the horse path he'd been following. Eventually they came to a cottage, though *cottage* may not have been the right word. In the darkening twilight, he could see that it was made of expensive gray stone and stood two stories tall with a well-thatched roof and at least three chimneys. It was not large, but it was obviously well appointed and probably snug in the wintertime. A well stood outside and nearby a large stable had been constructed.

Regardless of her of remote location, she didn't deny herself luxuries. Quinn liked that. It made her seem more accessible.

In any other situation, he would have joked about the justice mercenary business being lucrative, but Emmia didn't seem like the joking type. In an odd way, she reminded him of Magnus. Perhaps it was because they were both empaths.

Carefully cultivated flowers grew in profusion everywhere. Quinn had a hard time picturing this woman tending them, but he knew she lived alone. In the small, well-kept courtyard, she turned to him. "You said your horse had gone lame? Put him in the stable and tend him if you like. Then come into the house. I'll have stew warmed and some fresh bread with butter, if you're hungry."

"Thank you."

Unsmiling, she turned and left him, disappearing through the front door of her strange home here in the middle of nowhere.

Quinn led his horse into the stable and found one other mount already there, a fine black stallion that whickered low when they entered. He examined the hoof that had taken a sharp rock the day before. The tender frog was still raw and red, but it was nothing that wouldn't heal. He brushed him down and got him some feed and water from the well, then settled him into one of the stalls for the night.

Following the scent of food, Quinn entered the cottage and found himself in the kitchen. To his left was a sitting room and directly in front of him was a staircase, leading up to the second floor. She had a fire going in the kitchen hearth to heat the stew, making the already warm room even warmer. Emmia sliced bread at a long table in the center of the room. Perspiration shone on her forehead and the fine skin of her throat and upper chest. A long strand of her dark brown hair had freed itself from the tight braid she wore down her back.

He set his saddlebags down and let his gaze linger on her a moment, admiring her beauty and wondering what her upper body looked like under that loose tunic. It seemed horrible to be thinking carnal thoughts about this woman a scant month after Caith's death, but Caith wouldn't have minded. He could hear Caith's lilting voice in his head even now, telling him to take pleasure where he could...she did. Theirs had never been an exclusive relationship.

In any case, he couldn't help being attracted to this woman. She was incredibly intriguing.

"I'm not going to sleep with you, if that's what you think," she said curtly, without even looking up.

Hell, he'd forgotten momentarily that she was an empath. "I never assumed that. It's just that you're beautiful and I'm a man who appreciates such a quality in a woman." He shrugged. "There's not much more to say."

She just grunted and glanced up at him. "Sit there." She jerked her head at a smooth wood table in the corner where a place was set with a plate of butter, silverware and a bowl of stew. His stomach rumbled. "I've got your bread for you and a glass of ale. Then you can tell me your sad story. I warn you, though, I've heard many of them and I'm not easily swayed."

He sat and she brought him the bread and ale, then sat down in a chair near him. Quinn dug into the food immediately. The stale flatbread and water he'd been eating

for the last two days hadn't done much to assuage his hunger. Emmia watched him with her dark, inscrutable eyes.

When he'd filled his stomach enough to speak, he launched into an explanation for the reason for his journey.

"I come from Ravensbridge, in the westernmost part of the mountains. I am advisor to a great lord, or he was a great lord, anyway, named Magnus. He was a friend, a good friend." He fell silent a moment, mastering his emotions before he continued. "We were both involved with the same woman, the niece of a lower baron. Please understand it wasn't any deep romantic love we held for her. It was just affairs for all of us, the lady included. Though Magnus and I did care for her deeply and were very fond of her."

"Let me guess, this woman does not now live?" she interrupted.

He drew a breath. "She was slain, yes, and I believe possibly by Magnus' hand. I don't want to think it, and it's hard for me to believe, but he was seen with her last. They went into the woods together and a scant time later she was found run through several times. The castellan conducted a search of the castle and found Magnus' blade covered in blood."

"Seems straightforward enough, but I can tell you're not truly sure Magnus killed her."

"He denies it, and I can think of no reason he would do such a thing. He is a man of violence, a strong man and a sometimes cold man, but I know him well enough to understand that he would never harm a woman or child, never. He especially had no reason to harm Caith. She pleased us both well and was a very good friend."

"But you don't know everything that went on in their relationship, I suppose."

"I likely did," he replied, but said no more. There were certain things he wouldn't reveal unless he absolutely had to.

Her eyes blazed for a moment with speculation and he wondered what she was thinking. She glanced down at the table. "So you want me to travel to Ravensbridge and determine his guilt."

“Or innocence.” He paused. Yes, he still hoped. “He is lord and master of the keep and the law of the land. No one but you could render justice against him.” He stared at his bowl and realized he’d lost his appetite.

“You are conflicted in your emotions regarding this man, but you are resigned.”

“I don’t like any of this, but I want to see justice done. No matter the outcome or the pain it might cause me, Caith deserves her murderer punished.”

“Tell me, is this man Magnus stupid? Careless?”

“Hardly. No, he is neither.”

She scratched her fingernail over the top of the table. “Confident in his divine right as lord of the keep, then?”

“No, he’s not that way, either. He’s a fair man, sometimes hard and exacting in his justice, but never acting presumptuously or entitled in his rule.”

Her shapely lips twisted into a half smile. “You talk so well of this man you’ve traveled here to have condemned.”

“I only want to see justice done.” A tumult of emotion roiled in his stomach. He pushed the bowl away and took a long drink of the ale. The liquid couldn’t wash away the now-familiar taste of bitter guilt pooling on the back of his tongue.

“If he’s not stupid or overly arrogant, then why, I wonder,” she said slowly, “would he leave his bloody sword lying around where the castellan could find it?”

Quinn sighed. “That has occurred to me too. Out of shock over his crime, perhaps? Maybe he wasn’t thinking clearly.”

She looked up at him, still scraping her nail over the tabletop. The hank of dark hair that fell over her cheek looked like silk. He fought the urge to find out if it felt that way against his fingers. “Could be,” she answered.

“Does that mean you’ll accept this job?”

A muscle worked in her jaw and she glanced away. “No, I’m sorry. I cannot.”

Quinn pushed a hand through his hair. “Why not?”

She stood and walked to the table. "I recently returned from fighting the Nameless. I'm sure that battle did not go unmarked in far away Ravensbridge?"

"It didn't go unmarked anywhere in Molari, Emmia."

She nodded and folded her arms over her chest. "I'm still recovering. Truthfully, I don't know how much good I would be to you."

Quinn turned in his chair, letting his gaze skate up her body. For a strong woman, she seemed fragile in a way. He nearly got up and went to her, drew her into his arms. Likely he'd incur serious injuries if he tried that. "I won't leave without you," he said simply.

Anger flickered in the depths of her eyes.

"I am not a man easily dissuaded." He paused. "When I see something I want." She was likely aware of the double entendre.

Anger turned to apprehension and...fear? She was easily read and he was not even an empath. "I should throw you and your lame horse out right now." Her voice shook slightly.

"I still won't leave this area. I'll camp nearby and bother you every day. You'll have to run a sword through me to rid yourself of my presence."

She raised an eyebrow. "Think I wouldn't?"

"I think you're not the type of person to kill someone who wasn't guilty of a heinous crime. That's what I think."

Emmia stood staring at him for a long moment, her gaze going icy. He'd seen that same look a hundred times in Magnus' eyes. It was the armor of an empath. They wore it thick in order to shield themselves from the torrents of emotions around them. He understood Emmia because he understood Magnus...or thought he had, anyway.

"You had better bank on that assumption," she answered in a low voice. "There is a bedroom at the top of the stairs on the left. You may stay there for the night, but you *will* leave in the morning." She turned on her heel and left the room.

Quinn rubbed his hand over his chin, feeling stubble. The woman had the ability to drop the temperature in a room to near freezing. She needed some warming up.

And he wasn't leaving in the morning.

He got up, took care of his dishes, gathered his saddlebags and then climbed the steep set of stairs to the second floor. The bedroom was of medium size and appointed sparsely with a large feather bed, a dresser and a wardrobe.

The door across the hallway was closed. Likely that was where Emmia slept.

He'd seen a washroom down the hall, so he took what he needed from his bags and then went down there to wash up. The water was drawn through pipes from a large water tank and heated by some method not readily apparent. Quinn didn't care much about puzzling it out. He could barely form a coherent thought when faced with the prospect of bathing in hot water after so many days of dunks in cold rivers.

He filled the bathtub and shed his traveling clothes. Then he slipped into the bathwater with a deep groan of appreciation. After a few minutes of just soaking, he lathered his hands and ran them over his chest and shoulders, massaging away the tension in his muscles. It felt good. The only thing that would've felt better was Emmia's hands on him. He thought about her stroking his skin, working his muscles, and it made him hard. Quinn wrapped a soap-slathered hand around his cock and pumped it until he groaned.

When he'd finished in the bath, he drained the water and stood at the sink with a towel wrapped around his waist to shave and trim his hair. Then he cleaned up after himself, balled his clothes up and opened the door to go back to his room.

Emmia stood in the hallway. She looked taken aback and Quinn didn't miss the slow head-to-toe perusal she gave him before she finally completely addressed him to his face. Her expression went from surprise to irritation. "Making yourself right at home, I see," she snapped.

He smiled. "I thought you'd appreciate a houseguest who didn't stink."

"I'd appreciate no houseguest at all," she grumbled, and disappeared back into her bedroom and slammed the door.

* * * * *

Emmia leaned against her bedroom door and closed her eyes for a moment. There was no reason for her to have such a reaction to a man's body. She'd seen enough of them in her days, even ones as fine as Quinn's. Still, having a man in her home, his scent, and the sounds of him...all of it was very intimate.

It had been far too long since she'd had sex and the times she'd had it had been too infrequent for a woman of her age. It was true she avoided it in general and had turned down many opportunities. Perhaps that had been a mistake. She was a healthy woman, after all, with needs like any other woman, empathic ability or not.

Now it appeared she was paying the price for her neglect of her sexual wellbeing.

She listened as Quinn walked into the other bedroom. He was definitely a strong, excellent specimen of manhood. She'd seen that when he'd been fully dressed, but clad in only a damp towel, it had been readily apparent. Broad shoulders led to capable looking arms and a hard, muscled chest. His hips were narrow and his thighs solid. He was a man who labored physically often, not some weak, well-fed eastern nobleman. He was a man who could make her feel like a woman and that was something, although she hated to admit it, that she craved from time to time. It was all made worse by the fact that she knew he was powerfully attracted to her. He wanted her. If she wanted him, he was hers for the taking.

The door across the hallway closed and her heart rate gradually returned to normal.

Chapter Two

Emmia woke the next morning at the moment dawn slivered the sky. Her eyes fluttered open and she frowned, hearing the sound of wood being chopped.

“What?” She bounded out of bed and went to her window. Below her, in the area where she normally kept her firewood stood Quinn in all his shirtless glory. Muscles rippled as he raised the axe over his head and brought it down on a fallen tree trunk. Something tightened in her stomach at the sight, and it wasn’t only because he formed such an enticing picture...it was anger.

He glanced up at the window, did a double take and smiled a little, wiping the sweat from his brow.

She disappeared and ran downstairs and out the door. “What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

He hefted the axe over his shoulder and looked up at the sky. His rib cage rose and fell with his breathing, labored from his exertion. Emmia tried not to become overly fascinated with his strong build, the way the muscles in his arms bunched and flexed as he moved, and how the faint light filtering through the trees made his skin gleam. “It’s getting colder,” he said. “Winter’s setting in. You don’t have nearly enough firewood stored.” His breath showed in the cool morning air. He pointed at her admittedly meager pile of wood. “I found some deadfall and I’m stocking it for you. Paying you back for the food, water, horse feed and the room for the night.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“I don’t leave debts unpaid, Emmia.” He paused, looking at her speculatively. “You don’t get much help, do you? You don’t know how to handle it when you do.”

“I don’t need you to try to understand me, Quinn.”

“Seems to me that you might need someone to take care of you a little, sometimes. Since you take care of so many others.”

“You don’t know what I want or what I need.” Her voice was shaking a little. She tried to read his emotions, but failed. That happened sometimes when her own emotions ran high. She wasn’t sure why she was so offended by Quinn taking the initiative in chopping wood for her, she just was.

He stared at her for a long moment. “I know exactly what a woman like you needs.”

Anger flared through her hard and fast. His meaning was not lost on her. “That’s a very high-handed comment to make.”

“Out here in the woods, on your own so often,” he continued. “I’ll bet that even when you’re working and you’re around people, you keep them at a distance. I bet men pursue you, but you put them off. You don’t want to be close to them because you can feel their emotions. You can tell when they’re just in it for the sex, or worse, when they’ve grown bored with you.”

“I’ve used men for just sex before too, Quinn.”

He nodded. “We all have needs. Empty, though, isn’t it? One night of sex appeases us for a short time, but we all need relationships, connections and intimacy.”

“You aren’t the one to talk. You admitted last night you used Caith for sex.”

He shook his head. “No, it wasn’t like that. Our relationship was seated in deep respect and caring, if not love. We weren’t using each other, we were enjoying each other.”

“A fine line.” She shook her head. “I’m not having this conversation with you. I want you to leave here now. I’m very well on my own.” She turned to walk away. “I don’t need anyone—”

She heard the axe *thunk* to the ground and felt Quinn’s strong hand on her upper arm. He spun her around to face him.

"You're lying to yourself," he growled. "I can see it in your eyes. You're lonely, Emmia." He rubbed a tendril of her hair between his fingers and then hooked it behind her ear.

His touch felt good to her, though she tried to deny it. She tried to deny his words too, but couldn't.

"So what if I am," she whispered. "That's the lot I drew in this lifetime."

He shook his head. "It doesn't have to be that way. I'm here. I'm intrigued by you, attracted to you."

"You're trying to seduce me, poor pathetic, lonely woman out in the woods, just so I'll agree to travel to Ravensbridge," she spat. "You think I don't know?"

"No! Emmia, this has nothing to do with that." He sighed heavily. "I'm genuinely attracted to you."

Emmia did feel that from him. Grudgingly, she admitted he wasn't lying.

"And I recognize things in you because Magnus is also an empath. I see things in you that I've seen in him." He shrugged. "That's all."

She stilled. "Magnus is an empath?"

"Yes. I know the Talent is rare."

"You didn't mention that before."

"I didn't know it was relevant."

She blinked. "I've never met another empath before," she replied quietly, almost to herself.

"Come to Ravensbridge and you will."

She shook herself out of the shock. "I wouldn't be able to feel his emotions. I'd be blinded in that way."

"I know. You'd have to use your other reasoning abilities to discover the truth." He paused. "Does this mean you're thinking of accepting the job?"

"I don't know." Although the fact that Magnus was an empath did change things. She pulled out of his grasp with an impatient jerk. "Give me time to think," she replied, glaring at him.

He raised his hands, palms out. "All right."

She raised her gaze to his. His dark eyes regarded her with a nice, even warmth. Quinn was attracted to her and he understood better than anyone she'd ever met, likely because of his relationship with Magnus. He confused her, set her on edge.

"Emmia," he said slowly. "Give me tonight with you. Just one night. I'll leave in the morning...with or without you."

She didn't answer. She only turned and walked away.

Give me tonight with you. Just one night.

Emmia closed her eyes for a moment. Was it horrible that she was tempted by the offer? One night of physical contact with another person, his hands on her body, his mouth on her skin, hard body moving over her, his cock filling her, moving inside her... It had been so long since she'd had that. Her body nearly ached at the thought of it being so close.

She honestly didn't know if she'd able to not take him up on the offer.

Trying to put it out of her mind, she went back into the house and dressed for the day. Avoiding Quinn seemed the best option, so she threw herself into her work, doing chores, training in the woods. Every time she sensed he was near, she moved away, doing her best to completely insulate herself from him for the day.

At twilight, when she finally returned to the cottage for the evening, he was gone. The house felt empty and when she checked the stable for his horse, she found it gone.

Suppressing a twinge of disappointment, she went into the house and took a bath. When she came back downstairs, dressed in a comfortable nightshirt that hit her about mid-thigh, he was back. She'd begun to sense him when she'd been about halfway down the stairs. He was feeling tired, sexually aroused and a little hopeful.

She breezed past him, walking toward the main part of the kitchen. "Thought you'd left," she mumbled. She couldn't suppress the tiniest bit of happiness that he hadn't.

"Not yet. Not until you either agree to the job, or you give me one night."

She stopped in front of the counter, resting heavily against it.

"Give me tonight with you and I'll leave in the morning, with or without you," he repeated.

She stepped to the side, ready to turn around, ready to flee, but he moved to block her, arms on either side of her on the countertop so that she was caged. The heat of his body radiated out and warmed her. Emmia closed her eyes for a moment. If she wanted to get away, she could, but she didn't move. She couldn't deny that the contact felt good, almost better than sex.

Just simple human contact.

Quinn lowered his head, placed his mouth at her ear. The motion pressed his body against hers, pushed her against the counter. "One night," he whispered. "From now until dawn."

She didn't say anything. Didn't utter the word yes or no. But she didn't protest when he dragged the hem of her nightshirt up to her waist either. The feel of his fingertips on her skin made her shiver. He delved his hand between her thighs, felt her bare neediness, where she was wet and warm and creaming at his touch.

Quinn made a contented sound in his throat even while Emmia gasped. He splayed his other hand against her abdomen and stroked her softly between her thighs until an animalistic moan issued from her lips. He pressed his index finger to her clit and rubbed. Emmia felt it grow under his touch, swelling and becoming sensitive.

Through the haze of pleasure that had descended on her, she heard the sound of Quinn's belt buckle being undone. He eased her thighs wider apart and set the smooth, broad head of his cock to her slick opening. Quinn flexed his thighs, pushing up and into her. A ragged groan escaped her throat at the feel of him sliding up to fit within

her. She curled her fingers around the edge of the counter and held on against his slow, steady thrusts.

It had been so long.

Emmia closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip, enjoying the sensation of having a man inside her, his body cupping hers, his warm breath on her skin.

“You feel good, Emmia,” Quinn murmured as he thrust steadily into the welcoming heat of her body. “Does it feel good to you too?”

She nodded, trying not to whimper and failing.

“Been a while, hasn’t it?” he asked softly. She found she couldn’t answer him.

Quinn stroked her clit as he thrust into her and Emmia felt her climax building and building. Pleasure seeped through every pore of her body as he took her against the counter, driving her harder and faster until it exploded and she cried out as the force of her orgasm overwhelmed her. Her body shuddered and gently convulsed under the power of it and she felt Quinn, jerk a little and groan as he released his seed within her.

She collapsed against him, feeling weak and sated. Emmia could feel his heart beating against her back. “Come, this was no place for that,” he murmured into her ear. He bore her back away from the countertop with strong arms.

Seemed like a fine place for it from Emmia’s perspective.

He adjusted his pants and led her to the stairs. She stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked at him sharply. “I feel regret coming from you,” she accused.

“Emmia. Do not misunderstand.” He cupped her face in his hands. “I feel regret only because I took you against the counter, fast and hard, when I meant to take you in a bed, slow and soft.” Quinn leaned in and kissed her.

His lips slid over hers like silk, making her knees feel like jelly. He tasted her, peppering her mouth with short and then long kisses, sometimes delving between her lips to rasp his tongue against hers, sometimes dragging her lower lip gently between his teeth.

Emmia gripped his shoulders, feeling herself growing warm and wet once more. Quinn slid a hand to the small of her back, the other to her nape and then slanted his mouth across hers hungrily for a deeper kiss. He inserted his thigh between hers and rubbed against her bare pussy, making her shudder.

Quinn broke the kiss and muttered an oath. "Come, let's go find a bed before I take you against the stairs."

* * * * *

Somehow, they made it to the second floor and into Emmia's bed. They undressed each slowly, kissing and exploring each other's body at leisure.

He stared at her for several heartbeats and then pushed her down onto the mattress. Bracing himself above her, he dipped his head and laved a nipple. With his other hand, he covered the small mound of her breast with his hand. Her breasts were small, but sweetly curved. He could probably fit the whole of one in his mouth. Staring at the sweet curve of one, he decided to try and found it fit, then set about treating each of her nipples like succulent pieces of candy. Gods, he thought he could snack on her breasts alone for the entire night.

She bucked beneath him and let out a little sighing moan that made his cock go rigid. Then he remembered that she had more than one tender place that deserved exploring. Quinn wanted to love them all thoroughly before dawn lit the horizon. He definitely wanted to feel her bare sex on his hand and tongue before he felt it wrapped around his cock.

He lifted his head and stared down into her pretty, shadowed face. "Spread your thighs for me," he demanded in a low, soft voice.

She parted her legs for him and he leaned back and took her in, lying there against the pillows, completely naked. The soft light filtered in through the window, caressing her small, pert breasts and their tightened nipples. Her pink pussy was plumped and aroused. She'd creamed nicely for him, more than ready to take his cock. Emmia lay

there looking up at him, spread out like a five-course meal. He hardly knew where to begin, although he definitely knew he wanted to consume his fill of her. She was a beautiful woman.

Magnus would appreciate a woman like this, he thought, before he remembered. He squelched the thought, squelched the moment where he'd lived in a world where Magnus wasn't suspected of murdering their lover and centered his complete attention on Emmia. He leaned down and kissed the smooth skin above her navel and enjoyed the shiver of her stomach beneath his lips. Slowly, he trailed his tongue through her short, curly dark pubic hair and licked her swollen clit.

Emmia gasped and buried her fingers in his hair.

He raised his head and grinned. "Do you like that?"

"Yes," she hissed. "A man has never done that to me before."

"Mmmm, stupid men." He settled down between her thighs and, with his thumb, spread her folds apart to examine all the beauty that was Emmia. Gods, she was so lusciously creamy. He licked her from her perineum to her clit with long, sure strokes and pulled her labia between his lips, gently sucking.

Emmia shuddered beneath him, her breathing becoming deeper and heavier. He could feel the tenseness in her muscles and then the sweet give of her body as she gave herself completely over to him. He groaned at the sweet taste of her spreading over his tongue as he lapped at her.

Her clit was engorged and had pulled all the way out from its hood. It looked like a small luscious piece of ripe fruit and he sucked at it, treating as such. She arched her back, stabbing her nipples into the air in the semidarkness.

He toyed with her clit, feeling it grow larger against the tip of his tongue. He circled it and drew into his mouth and back out, enjoying the sensation of the small bundle of nerves against his tongue and enjoying her reaction even more. He rubbed over it repeatedly, holding onto her waist as he worked her clit to a fever pitch. Her hips bucked forward, as though looking for something to fuck. It was a lovely gesture and it

made his cock harder than steel. He stroked a finger idly over her folds, rubbing and caressing them with his fingertip.

“Ah, yes,” she moaned.

“Do you like that?” he purred. “I know I do.” He set once more to spearing his tongue in and out of her until she keened for him.

“More,” she cried.

He grinned for a moment at her carnal greediness and toyed with the entrance to her pussy, stroking over the sensitive skin there, while he sucked on her clit. Finally, he slid a finger into her.

Quinn threw his head back and groaned at the feel of her muscles gripping his finger. She was so hot and tight. Emmia had spread her thighs as wide as she could. She whimpered and moaned as he drew his finger out and slowly pushed it back into her softness. He slipped another finger down and added it to the first. His fingers slipped in easily because of how wet she was, but her muscles were tight and clamped down around him.

“Faster. Harder,” Emmia gasped.

He drew his hand back and thrust into her. She gripped the blankets on either side of her and moaned. He could tell she was growing close to orgasm. Her body tensed and she cried out as she climaxed. The muscles of her pussy spasmed around his fingers and her hips bucked again.

“Ah, that was beautiful,” he said as he raised his head. He could see the answering curve of her lips in the dim light.

Quinn climbed up and curled his body around her. He felt her give a shuddering sigh as the post-climax languor settled over her body and ran his hands over her, exploring her curves and enjoying her soft, soft skin. She was lovely.

“I needed that,” she sighed and gave a quiet laugh.

Had she just *laughed*?

Chapter Three

She rolled over, her twined her arms around his neck, compelling his head down for a kiss. "I want more," she murmured, when they finally broke the kiss.

He tipped her face up to his with his index finger. "Patience. We have all night and I intended to use every moment of it. There's no reason to hurry. Slow" – his eyes went dark – "slow is better."

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, his lips sliding warm and soft over hers. Then he parted them and his tongue slipped into her mouth. With a sigh of pleasure, she explored every inch of his torso that she could reach, drawing her fingers over the gorgeous flex of his muscles and his silk-over-steel chest. She drew her hands up his arms, over his biceps and shoulders, down to his back to his lovely, lovely buttocks.

Quinn wrapped one arm around her waist and placed his other hand to her nape and kneaded the muscles there with strong fingers. When he pressed her up against him, she felt the hardness of his chest against her nipples, his bare skin next to hers. It was a sensation she'd not felt often in her life and it was one she could definitely become addicted to, were she not careful.

He pressed his hands flat on either side of her head and straddled her hips. She wanted him inside her again – the kitchen had been too short – but Quinn was taking his time with her. He was making every moment, every breath count. He slanted his mouth to the side and deepened their kiss until she could feel only his lips on hers, his tongue in her mouth.

Her breath caught when his mouth closed over one nipple, laving it and biting gently. At the same time, his fingers found her other breast and caressed it, running the

calloused pad of his thumb over the nipple. She arched her back and let out a small moan.

He lifted his head. The smoldering look in his eyes heated her blood to the boiling point. "Touch yourself for me, Emmia," he murmured.

Surprise jolted through her at his request. "Touch myself?"

He nodded. "I want to see you excite yourself before I fuck you."

Lust tingled up her spine at his words. They were coarse, but they excited the hell out of her. "I'm already excited," she replied in a breathless voice.

His lips curved in a feral smile. "Show me where you want me to touch you, where you want me to fuck you. Show me where you touch yourself when you're all alone. I want to watch." He settled on his back beside her, propped himself on one elbow and settled in to watch her. "Go ahead."

She bit her lip, watching him take his cock in his hand and stroke himself—his big hand around his big cock, pumping. Emmia remained fascinated by the sight for a moment before she slid her hands up her sides to cup both breasts. His pupils dilated as he watched her. Tentatively, she plumped her breasts, unsure of what he wanted.

He groaned and his cock jerked in his hand. "More. Give me more. Spread your thighs for me," Quinn said in a rasping voice.

Now that she knew the rules of the game, Emmia relaxed and became completely aroused. She did as he requested. She bent her knees and brought her heels up to touch her butt, letting her thighs fall open. In this position, she was utterly and completely exposed to him and she loved it.

Quinn ran his gaze over her sex, groaning.

"Touch me," she moaned.

"Not yet. I want to see you touch yourself, first."

She closed her eyes, kneaded her breasts and pulled at her nipples, enjoying the little bit of pain that seemed to make the pleasure seem even sweeter.

He made a sound in his throat that was caught somewhere between a growl and a groan. "Sink your fingers into that beautiful, creamy little pussy, Emmia."

Her breath caught in her throat at his words. She wanted to drive him as crazy as he was driving her. She stroked her hands down her breasts a last time and slowly, oh, so very slowly, down over her stomach to her pubic hair. He stared at the progression of her hands down her body with a strained expression on his face. It was clear, even when she didn't read his emotions, that he was holding himself from her with effort.

He had the control here and she'd given it up to him with pleasure, and yet, in reality, she was still the one with the power. She was the one driving him crazy with the touch of her own hands on her own body. The power she wielded over him made her feel a little dizzy, a little intoxicated, and a whole lot aroused.

His cock jumped visibly in his hand as he stroked himself, waiting for her to touch herself. She threaded her fingers through her pubic hair and dipped down to stroke her clit. Pleasure skittered through her body at the contact. "Oh God," she groaned, her hips bucking.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes. This is where I want your cock, Quinn," she said breathlessly. Teasingly, she ran her fingertip over herself. She whimpered as she imagined him fucking her there. Her hips thrust forward. Emmia rubbed two fingers around the entrance of her pussy, and then slipped them inside her. She gasped at the feel of her muscles clamping down, then rippled and pulsed. She'd had no idea it would feel that way, so warm and wet. She thrust in and out, the way a man would do. At the same time, she rubbed the base of her hand against her clit. "Oh, Quinn. I'm going to come."

"Let it go," he purred. "I want to see you climax."

Her hips bucked and her back arched as pleasure spread out from her sex and consumed her world. It drove all thought away, drove everything away and her reality was suddenly awash in white bliss.

Quinn moved her hands away and his hot, hungry mouth came down on her while she was in the grip of her orgasm. Her climax stuttered, and then flared to life once more. Emmia screamed as another, harder climax slammed into her body. Under the onslaught of his masterful hands and mouth, she couldn't resist it.

Her pussy still tingled when it was over, when the spasms of her double climax were finished. She'd never come twice in a row before. He hovered over her, a needful look in his dark eyes. "Quinn, please, fuck me," she whispered. "I need to feel you inside me."

Quinn guided the head of his cock to her entrance and eased in an inch. "Your wish is my command, love." He let out a shaky laugh. "As if you could stop me." He pushed in another inch, then another.

"Yes!" she cried out as the wide head of his cock pressed into her. He stretched her muscles so deliciously. He slid into her inch by mind-blowing, delicious inch. She felt completely possessed by his shaft, totally filled up. Every square inch of her pussy seemed touched by him. Slowly, so she could feel every little vein of him, he slid out, and then back in.

Quinn paused for a moment, hovering over her. "Are you all right?"

This time it was her turn to give a shaky laugh. "Quinn! I'm perfect. Please don't stop!"

"Perfect." The look in his hooded eyes almost stopped her heart. It definitely wiped the smile off her face. "Yes, I think you may be that, Emmia."

He dipped his head down and kissed her as he moved slowly in and out of her. She parted her lips and mated her tongue with his, tightening her hands on his shoulders as the pleasure of the experience overwhelmed her.

He brushed her hair away from her face and held her gaze as his cock tunneled in and out her. The half-light seemed to cling to his handsome face lovingly. His thrusts became surer and longer and harder with every stroke he made. Emmia let a moan rip from her throat as she arched her back. Her entire reality had narrowed to only feeling

him. He lowered his head to hers and swallowed the sound of it, kissing her ferociously, as though he meant to brand her or mark her in some way.

She went to pieces beneath him as a climax washed over her. Her reality seemed to momentarily break apart under the pleasurable racking spasm that dominated her body. She felt the muscles of her cunt grip and release his cock over and over as the climax rushed through her. At the same time, Quinn groaned and she felt him spill within her.

Once their climaxes had ebbed, he rolled to the side and gathered her against him. Together they lay tangled together, breathing heavily. They stayed that way for a long time, basking in the aftermath of their shared pleasure.

She turned and tucked her face against his chest, happy that his emotions were even and nice. He was content now, sated. He liked her a lot and when he'd told her that she was perfect...he'd meant it.

She hadn't been with a man like Quinn...ever.

Usually the aftermath of a sexual encounter was awkward, sometimes even painful for her. But Quinn had an honesty about him, a guilelessness, a sort of clarity of spirit that she'd never run into before.

He was a good man, straight down to his bones.

Tears stung her eyes. For once after sex she didn't have the sweet sharp tang of regret resting on the back of her tongue. "Thank you," she whispered.

He stilled for a moment and she felt confusion emanating from him, then understanding. He forced her chin up so he could meet her gaze. "Don't say such things to me, Emmia. I was not doing you a favor."

"I—"

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her soundly, then settled her against his side and pulled the blankets over them both. "I am here for completely selfish reasons, love. A sexy, sweet, strong woman like you? Catnip to a man like me." He paused and

she felt wistfulness coming from him. "I only wish we had longer together. Now rest, love, I'll want you again soon."

In the darkness, Emmia grinned, and then closed her eyes.

* * * * *

She awoke immersed in a lovely languor, her body twisted in the sheets of the bed and the new morning sunshine streaming through the window. She turned over, searching for Quinn and found him standing above her, half dressed. Emmia sat up a little and looked at him questioningly.

He leaned over her and kissed her. "I am leaving now, my lovely Emmia. Will you not come down to say goodbye to me?" He paused. "I will miss you." Quinn withdrew with obvious regret, gave her a lingering look and then continued dressing.

She could feel that it wasn't an act. He truly would miss her. And, damn it, she'd miss him too. Emmia had been reluctant at first to join with Quinn, but he had selflessly and, yes, lovingly, given her pleasure over and over during the night, never once emitting a negative emotion to ruin the experience. Quinn was a man like none she'd ever met before.

She swung her legs over the side of the mattress, holding the blanket to her. "You're going to leave without me, then?"

He stilled and then turned toward her with a puzzled expression on his face. "I thought you didn't want to take the job."

"He intrigues me, this man...Magnus. I've never met another empath before." She gave him a sidelong look and then said forcefully, "I wouldn't take the job at this time were it not for that." She didn't want to admit she was equally intrigued about Quinn and didn't want this to be the last time they saw each other.

Quinn regarded her for a moment, and then gave her a beaming smile. "In that case, I will wait."

* * * * *

Ravensbridge loomed on the horizon. It was a place of gray and black, a fortress that seemed to morph even the storm clouds that roiled above it.

She and Quinn rested their horses on the hill a distance away. Thunder boomed loudly and a light pattering of rain began. It looked like a forbidding place from this vantage point, like a building where they housed prisoners in one of Molari's large cities.

"It looks threatening, I know," Quinn said, flashing a smile at her. "But it is...well, *was*, a very good place to reside."

She heard the note of sadness in his voice and also felt it within him. Emmia reached across and squeezed his hand. "And hopefully we can clear this up and make it that place again."

"I hope so." A smile flickered across his lips. "Let's get going before these skies really open up."

They started down the hill and it was no time before they'd reached the keep, since Quinn's mount, now recovered from his injury, sensed he was home and there was feed to be had, and so traveled at a much quicker pace. Her horse met his strides. The keep's walls rose from a weed and briar-choked tangle. The massive wooden doors were open and Emmia could hear the clamor of the residents within. She could also feel their emotion, an awful tangle of it that rasped against her mind. Quickly, she threw up all the shields she could and braced herself to endure the rest.

Thunder boomed over their heads and the rain began to fall when they reached the outer walls. They passed under the portcullis, the horses' hoofs clapping on the cobblestone past the entrance. In a wave as they made their way into the courtyard, people stared and immediately began whispering to one another.

Quinn.

Magnus.

Justice mercenary.

So she was expected, then.

The courtyard was filled with whispering, muttering Ravensbridge residents, who held loaves of bread in their arms and other packages and foodstuffs. They'd all stopped in the drizzling rain, halting their daily errands to watch her make her way to the stables. Emmia felt the press of their emotions immediately. It made her head ache and her stomach roil in that familiar way she hated. Her fingers curled around the reins and she had to forcibly stop herself from turning her mount and heading back the way she'd come. One would think she would have grown accustomed to this horrible invasion of other people's feelings, but she never did, *never*.

Once they reached the small building standing in the shadow of the keep, a young boy ran out with eyes only for Emmia. "Are you really a justice mercenary?" he asked, his eyes shining bright.

She dismounted, pushing away a momentarily wave of dizziness, and handed the happy, curious brown-haired child her reins. "I am," she answered with a laugh. "And this is a real justice's mercenary's mount. Can you make sure he's treated well?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

Quinn handed over the reins of his mount and gave the boy instructions while Emmia looked on. Feeling the heavy weight of a gaze, a palpable pressure on her back, she turned around and looked up. In the one of the high windows of the keep, framed in black, stood a man. He was handsome, well-made, dark of hair and eye. They held each other's gaze for a moment and Emmia felt nothing from him, only a deep vacuum of non-emotion.

Magnus. It had to be him.

Quinn came to stand beside her and followed her gaze upward. Magnus took a step back, into the shadows. Quinn stood for a several heartbeats, saying nothing. Then he turned away without comment. Despair and guilt rolled off him in a wave so thick she nearly choked on it.

“Come, we’ll find you quarters,” said Quinn. “I hope you’re amenable to them adjoining mine.” He flashed a charming grin that she was coming to recognize well. She couldn’t help but return it.

They picked up their bags and made their way through the well-appointed keep, passing common areas laid with thick rugs and comfortable-looking divans and chairs. Artwork graced the gray walls and the wings of the building were connected with open-air walks which looked down onto the blooming gardens and cheery looking courtyards. Ravensbridge, aside from the emotional turmoil of its inhabitants, was, indeed, a very nice place.

Quinn deposited her at a room next to his. They were in the back part of the keep, away from the general population of the building. It was something she deeply appreciated, giving her a small respite from the seething emotions she was currently being buffeted by.

Looking as exhausted as she felt, Quinn kissed her lingeringly after he’d led her into the large chamber and left her to take a nap. She was happy to close the door behind him and take some moments of alone time. Emmia leaned against the door and allowed the press of the keep to ebb away. It would not totally leave her while she resided here, but it was marginally better when she could lock herself away in seclusion. A room at the back of a building was always a requirement of her employment.

She opened her eyes and briefly took in her surroundings. The bed was a large, canopied four-poster, hung with burgundy velvet draperies. A large trunk stood at the end of the bed. Across from the bed was a fireplace and a small table, and next to the fireplace was a large wardrobe. In the corner of the room stood a clawfoot tub with faucets. *Excellent.*

She turned the water on and let the tub fill while she unpacked her bags. After she’d bathed, she’d call for some food to be brought to the room. Washing the travel grime off her body took precedence over all else right now.

As she pulled a pair of leggings from her bag, a deck of cards fell out onto the floor. Emmia scooped them up and considered them. They were called *tarot cards*, according to her sister, Rhea. She'd brought them back as a gift from some strange place called Earth. Her sister had been forced to live there for some time. The cards were used to tell fortunes, apparently.

On a lark, Emmia settled at the table by the fireplace and pulled the deck from its box. It seemed that, with the introduction of Quinn into her life, she was at a crossroads. There was no sense in ignoring anything that might give her an indication of what fate had in store for her.

After shuffling, Emmia cut the deck and chose one card. She flipped it over, revealing a blindfolded woman balancing two crossed swords. She sat in a chair with a waxing moon in the sky, rocks and a body of water behind her.

Emmia stared down at the image for a time, feeling a certain kinship with the woman. She, indeed, would soon be balancing two swords of her own, in the forms of Quinn and Magnus. That was something she could tell already. The water was like emotion, drowning and changeable, always so prevalent in her life.

And blindfolded.

As, yes, she did feel blind. Despite the clarity she had into other people's emotions, she'd spent much of her life groping in the darkness of her own life. Not to mention in this case, she would be blind to the suspect's emotions. The tarot card seemed accurate.

Heart heavy, she slipped the card back into the deck.

* * * * *

Emmia leaned forward and studied the castellan, Rolf, tasting the man's emotions on the back of her tongue. She'd brought him to a room in the recesses of the keep to be interviewed because the crush of feeling in the structure was nearly overwhelming. She'd had a nonstop headache from the first day she'd arrived, quelled only by Quinn's

procurement of herbal remedies. Her head still ached a little, but now at least it was manageable.

“Tell me about the day Caith was killed,” she said.

Sorrow. A bright, shining note of love. Then blinding hatred.

Emmia’s mind reeled for a moment from the intensity of the emotions that Rolf emitted and how quick they were in succession.

The middle-aged, brown-haired man tried to force an expression of blandness onto his face, tried to control his inner turmoil.

It didn’t work.

Well, she hadn’t been expecting *this* reaction at all. She’d been expecting this interview to be fairly straightforward, not fraught with unexpected and confusing emotion. However, such was the way of these investigations and such was the nature of her gift. Nothing was ever predictable.

“I was about my castle duties all day long. I was busy and didn’t much keep track of Lord Magnus’ whereabouts or that of Quinn and Caith.” *Love – shiny and clear.* It had flared when he’d said Caith’s name. “But I did notice that Quinn was in the lists practicing swordplay and I did see Caith leave the keep’s gates in the morning.” He paused. “Lord Magnus was with her.”

Love. Love. Love. Hate. Hate. Hate. This time he couldn’t keep the vicious tumult of the feelings from his face. He twisted his dry, gnarled hands in his lap.

“And Lord Magnus’ weapon?” she prompted.

“At his side. It’s always at his side.” *Hate.*

“When did you find the bloody sword?”

“In the evening, after the day was done. I went in to badger a servant about laying a fire in Lord Magnus’ room and there was the sword stashed behind a chair, covered in Caith’s b-blood. Lord Magnus staggered into the room, covered in blood, right after.”

Sorrow – deep and painful. “It wasn’t long after that,” Rolf continued, “they found her body in the field beyond the keep.”

Yes, Magnus did appear to be guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt per Rolf’s telling of the tale, but Rolf’s strong, conflicted emotions cast uncertainty upon his words.

“I see. And would someone else have had access to Lord Magnus’ sword?”

He shook his head. “Lord Magnus guarded that sword at all times. It was a gift from his father. That was the first time in the fifteen years that I have served as Ravensbridge’s castellan that I have ever seen the sword without Lord Magnus near at hand.”

“What was your relationship with Caith?”

He colored to the roots of his hair and smacked his thick lips twice. “Nonexistent.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Is that a regret of yours?” It was. She could feel it emanating from him in powerful waves. She just wanted to hear what he had to say.

He inclined his head, equal parts of sorrow and hatred flowing from him. The mixture was so strong, it nearly made her tumble from her chair. “She didn’t want me,” he responded in a forced-sounding voice.

Emmia blinked. “Did that bother you?”

He raised his head and glared at her. A sudden surge of hatred tasted bitter on the back of her tongue. “I loved her.”

“Yes, I can sense that. So how do you feel about Magnus?”

More hate. The bitterness nearly made her gag.

“He killed her. How do you *think* I feel?” He stood with an impatient air. “May I leave now? This is taking me from my duties.”

Emmia also stood. “For now. But I may call upon you later for more information.”

He bowed stiffly and left the room.

She sat for a while longer in front of the flickering flames, letting Rolf’s emotions pass through her as much as she could and concentrating on not retaining them.

Well, that had been an interesting development. Rolf had been in love with Caith, and deeply, if his emotions had provided any sort of clue. He'd had to watch Quinn and his master both in a relationship with the woman he'd wanted. That must have been painful.

Painful enough to drive him to murder and make it seem as though Magnus had done it? Perhaps. Rolf was Ravensbridge's castellan. She didn't believe that he wouldn't have access to Magnus' sword at times. That was worth looking into a little more closely. The whole issue needed further exploration.

She shifted on the seat and sighed. This did not appear to be one of the easier investigations she'd ever undertaken, but she wasn't averse to new challenges.

When she left the room and walked down the corridor to the keep's gardens, she was soon confronted with an older man with black hair, graying at the temples.

He squinted blue eyes at her. "You're the justice mercenary." He felt curious to her and a little irritated.

She blinked. "I am."

"You gonna find my daughter's killer, then?"

Surprise rippled through her. "Are you Caith's father?"

"I am. My name is Arhild. It was my child found slain in the woods."

Love and contempt. Both emotions were very strong. No sorrow. No grief. *Interesting.*

"I'm very sorry for your loss, sir."

His face twisted and she caught a strong sense of regret from him. That was as close to grief as he got. "Thank you. If you need my help, need to know something about Caith, come to talk to me. I want to see this monster caught and punished."

She studied his face, wondering why he wasn't implicating the prime suspect immediately. "So you don't think Lord Magnus is the murderer?"

He stared at her for a moment and she caught another definite whiff of regret. “No, I meant Magnus when I said monster.” He turned on his heel and stalked away and left behind a puzzled Emmia.

* * * * *

Magnus assessed the woman from afar, watching as she walked down a corridor with Quinn. She wore hunting leathers and a long, white linen shirt. Her long dark hair she often wore braided down her back, though sometimes she wore it long and loose. She seemed often to have two finely made swords, both sheathed on either side of her. Although, after a few days at Ravensbridge, she didn’t wear them so often now. Did that mean she felt at ease here, perhaps?

She didn’t seem to own a dress, the mode of fashion typical for females in this part of Molari. Still, no matter what she wore, she always looked attractive. He could see why Quinn was smitten with her. She was taken with him as well. It was all over their body language. It was in the way they leaned toward each other and smiled at each other. Plus, he could feel Quinn’s emotions for the woman. He had to admit they pinched him a little.

She had been in the keep for three days, but had not yet sought him out. He was fully aware she was working, however. She’d been questioning the people of Ravensbridge—the castellan, the groundskeepers, the falconers, everyone she could find who knew himself and Caith personally. It was only a matter of time before she sought him out. Perhaps she was trying to make him nervous by deliberately ignoring him. The thought had crossed his mind once or twice. Justice mercenaries likely employed many tricks to manipulate the subjects of their investigations. However, Magnus didn’t take well to being manipulated.

Perhaps it was time he introduced himself.

He watched Quinn and Emmia turned a corner. After hesitating a moment, Magnus altered his course and headed in the other direction, intent on deliberately meeting

them head-on down the other corridor. As he progressed down the hallway, several people glanced at him and quickly looked away, suddenly finding the stone walls or something down in the courtyard incredibly fascinating. The emotions that battered him were confused, bitter, betrayed and angry.

Magnus sighed and buttressed his defenses in order to not feel them as acutely. Though, sadly, he was growing used to it. Although it still upset him that so many people should think so ill of him. Had no one known him at all? Did everyone think him capable of such cold-bloodedness? Of course, there were still some who refused to believe he had killed Caith, but most of them...

And Quinn. Out of everyone in the keep, his opinion mattered most. Quinn hurt most of all. They'd loved each other, had shared everything. Even worse, Magnus still loved Quinn...and he suspected that Quinn returned the sentiment.

Since thinking of Quinn was like poking a sharp stick in an open wound, Magnus backed away from the thought of him and continued to make progress down the corridor. Magnus had loved Caith. Nothing in the world would've made him hurt her. He missed her every day, thought of her every day.

He wished he wasn't an empath so that Emmia could feel all that inside him, feel his innocence in this matter. She would know in a heartbeat if she were able to peer inside his emotions that nothing in this world would have forced him to hurt Caith. Unfortunately, Emmia would have to judge him blindfolded.

Gods, he was so weary of this ordeal! He wished to be free of people's suspicions and he wanted nothing more than to find Caith's murderer and take his vengeance...for Caith, not for himself.

"Lord Magnus," came a cool, detached female voice.

Startled, he looked up. He'd been so caught up in his thoughts, he'd forgotten he'd put himself on a collision course with Quinn and Emmia. Now he didn't even have to feign surprise. Magnus looked down into the justice mercenary's dark brown eyes, suddenly at loss for words. Quinn only glared at him, his jaw tight.

“Emmia,” Magnus finally answered. “It is good to meet you.” He nodded at her companion. “Quinn.”

Quinn inclined his head a degree, but said nothing. His emotions were tightly clamped down from Magnus, even when Magnus opened his shields completely in order to deliberately sense them, though it was clear that Quinn was sad. Quinn had been sad since Caith had been killed.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Truly? You are happy to meet me when I may be here to take your life?”

He let a smile flicker over his mouth and relaxed a little. “*Truly*. I don’t think you’ll find me guilty, Emmia. I don’t think you err when you take on a case to judge. I trust we will talk soon? I very much wish to discuss things with you.”

Her returning smile had a touch of malice in it. “We can talk now, if you’d like. I have nothing left on my agenda for today.”

“Very well.” He gestured back the way he’d come. “My rooms are in this direction.”

The three of them turned and made their way there, amid the more curious stares and open whispering at the sight of Magnus and the justice mercenary together.

Once within, Magnus sent his servants away and closed the heavy door against prying eyes. Quinn and Emmia had found chairs near the fireplace. He took a third and sat across from them.

Quinn emitted two parts sorrow and one part curiosity. The justice mercenary emitted nothing at all that he could feel. The woman only watched him with her wide chocolate-colored eyes. Magnus wondered if she was thinking what he was thinking. It was strange...*nice* to be around someone and not sense his or her emotion. It was peaceful, a void in the constant battering of the defenses he’d learned to put against other people’s emotions.

“So,” he said, spreading his hands. “Have you come kill me, then?”

Emmia leaned forward. "I haven't decided yet. Quinn thinks you didn't do it. That confuses the issue a great deal for me. One would think that since he is the one who sought me out, that he would believe you to be guilty."

"I haven't said I thought Magnus innocent," Quinn said woodenly. "Nor have I indicated I think him guilty."

She glanced at him. "I can feel the truth from you. You don't truly believe Magnus capable of cold-blooded murder, especially of someone he cared about. You simply want an end to the situation here at Ravensbridge. You hope that I will declare Magnus innocent and things can return to what they were." She paused. "You miss Magnus. You care deeply for him and you feel guilty for doubting his innocence for a moment, yet you cannot help it."

Quinn blanched.

Emmia smiled. "That's what they pay me for, Quinn. That's what *you're* paying me for."

Magnus held Quinn's gaze, tried not to lose himself in the blue of his eyes. He'd always loved the color of Quinn's eyes. Once he'd loved everything about him. He still did, though he wasn't certain Quinn felt the same. Not anymore. It was hard to get an accurate reading on Quinn at all, in fact. "You don't think me guilty, Quinn?"

Quinn glanced away. "You're an empath, the same as her. Can't you look into my heart and see for yourself?"

"You're too close to my heart for me to see objectively," he answered honestly. "Your feelings are often cloudy when I try to look." For the most part, anyway. He lowered his voice a little when he spoke next. "You are too close to me, my friend. Even still."

Magnus felt a flash of deep pain from Quinn. He made a frustrated sound. "Of course I don't think you're capable of murder, but the evidence... The evidence is—"

"Damning," Magnus answered. "If you went by the evidence alone, one would come to the conclusion that I murdered Caith. I was seen leaving with her in the

morning. The next time anyone saw me, Rolf was holding the bloodied murder weapon, which he'd found in my quarters, and I was covered in Caith's blood." He paused. "Except I *did not kill her*. I had no reason to do such a thing and even if I did have a reason, I would not have done it. I am surprised certain people in this keep have entertained the idea that I might." He tried to keep a note of reproach out of his voice and failed. It had hurt him deeply that Quinn, of all people, had judged him even possibly guilty.

"You were the woman's lover and the murder weapon with her blood was found in your chambers by the castellan. Not to mention that you are the law in this place," answered Emmia. "That means you are the only person here capable of murder without repercussion. It's no mystery why your people think you guilty."

"I don't think you murdered Caith, Magnus. I will admit to suspicions, but in my heart, it's true that I don't believe you're capable of such a thing." Emotion surged from Quinn as he said the words, filling the room with a complex mixture of love and sorrow that stung the back of Magnus' throat.

Emmia must have felt it too, since she reached over and covered Quinn's hand with hers and squeezed. Quinn held onto her hand like a drowning man and Magnus watched them exchange a look of heat and caring. A surge of feeling came from Quinn as he gazed at Emmia, deep regard and lust. The emotion edged love, flirted dangerously with it.

So that was how it was.

He should have known that Quinn would never be able to resist a woman as beautiful as Emmia. Magnus was also attracted to her, not only because of her beauty, but also because of the fact he could not sense her emotion.

"Quinn, please give me a moment alone with Magnus," said Emmia.

"Of course." Quinn kept his eyes on Magnus as he got up and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

Once Quinn was free of the room, it was as if a heavy weight had been lifted. Emmia sighed in relief and noticed that Magnus' eyes grew a little less dark. He had obviously also experienced Quinn's intense emotions where Magnus was concerned. From the man opposite her, she felt nothing. Blessed, peaceful nothingness.

"So." She leaned forward. "How long have you and Quinn been lovers?" Best to get right to the point. She'd suspected it for some time, but had known it for certain when he'd reached Ravensbridge and she'd sensed Quinn's emotions every time he'd seen Magnus. It had been a combination of intense love, uncertainty and passion.

Magnus showed no reaction. He didn't even blink. He only answered smoothly, "For about five years now." He probably expected that she, as an empath, would've picked that up from Quinn, even though Quinn had never told her.

"So it was a threesome, then? You, Quinn and Caith."

"That's correct. We were in a loving relationship, the three of us. Though it was only myself and Quinn who could've been said to have anything that went beyond the physical relationship and friendship."

"Interesting." She leaned back.

"Why is that?"

She had to hide a smile. It was interesting because the thought of Magnus and Quinn together made ripples of pleasure course up her spine. But now was not the time for such thoughts or imaginings. Especially not about a man who stood accused of murder. She chose not to answer his question and was grateful for their inability to sense each other's emotions.

"Tell me what you remember of that day," she said.

He sat back and sighed. "We woke up together, the three of us. We had breakfast and took a walk in the keep's gardens. Afterward, Quinn left to practice some swordplay and Caith and I decided to go riding. In the afternoon, we stopped the horses and dismounted—"

“Where?”

He frowned. “Not far from the road to Hia, but not within view of it. We made love in the sun and then fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms on a horse blanket.”

“Sounds idyllic.”

His lips twisted. “Up until that point, it was. I awoke with a lump on my head and a raging headache.” His face grew pale. “I was covered in blood and Caith was-was *gone*.” He paused, seemed to gather himself, and went on. “The horses were still tied to the tree and while I searched all over for Caith, I never found her. I went back to the keep and had just staggered into my quarters while Rolf was pulling my bloodied sword out from behind a chair.”

“Hmmm. What do you know of Rolf?”

“My castellan?” he asked in surprised. “Why, is he a suspect?”

She shrugged, not wanting to give too much away. He was, indeed, after that messy emotional display at his initial interview. Plus, she did think the timing was rather convenient. Rolf had pulled the sword out just as Magnus had entered the room. “Were you aware he was in love with Caith?”

He frowned and rubbed his chin, which was covered with stubble. Shaving wasn’t high on his agenda these days, Emmia was sure. Magnus was an excessively handsome man with a powerful body, long dark hair and eyes. He had a face that any woman with half a libido would appreciate and his body was like Quinn’s—strong, honed from sword work and battle. She shifted her seat and forced those thoughts from her mind. “Sometimes I felt intense emotion from him when he saw her, but I never thought it went past lust.”

“What I felt from him wasn’t lust, it was *love*. It was strong and true even now, after her death. Along with the love, there was hatred. That also was very strong.” She paused. “These emotions give him motive, to my mind. At the very least, he deserves a deeper look. Oftentimes, these crimes are the result of passion, committed in the heat of the moment. That is why, as an empath, I am so good at sniffing out the perpetrators. So

very much of it is emotional. Also, do not forget that Rolf was the one to find your sword, Magnus."

"Are you saying he committed the crime and then planted the sword to make me look guilty? Impossible! Rolf is loyal. He would never do such a thing."

She smiled. "When you have seen all that I have seen, sir, you quickly learn that anything is possible. He is definitely on my list of suspects at this moment." She drew a breath and schooled her expression. "As are you." Less so now that she'd conducted her interviews, though she didn't want to advertise that information.

"If it must be. I trust your judgment. I trust your abilities as an empath, Emmia, to come to the correct conclusion. I believe, as an empath, you are far superior to me. Count yourself lucky to have such skill."

"It isn't always a blessing," she muttered, turning her head away. "It's more like a curse most days." Goddess, she had no idea why she was saying such things to this man. Perhaps because he was also an empath, and who else could better understand her plight? It had been a long time since she could talk to someone about how she felt about her Talent, let alone to someone who might actually understand.

Magnus leaned forward. "Is it truly so strong for you that you would count the ability ill?"

She scoffed. "Don't you?" Emmia gestured toward the room. "How can you stand to reside here, among these people? All their emotions whirling around like a tempest, always pushing at you, demanding your attention. I must live deep in the woods, away from everyone, in order not to go insane from it. Even now, even with herbal remedies, I feel sick from it."

Magnus leaned back in his seat and frowned at her. "Sometimes it can be a little overwhelming, but I regulate my exposure to it, a little like opening and closing flood gates in my mind. Surely you have mental barriers erected to stave off the most powerful emotions you encounter? Doesn't every empath?"

She shook her head. "I have tried a million ways to acquire this skill. I don't mean to boast, because I don't consider it an advantage, but I think my ability is far too strong to allow me to build barriers."

He sat silent for a moment. "Nonsense."

She blinked in surprise and then smiled. "Nonsense?"

"Let me help you, Emmia. I think together we can find a way. It took me a long time to build my barriers too, but I was able to do it because I found the key inside me."

He stared at her speculatively for a moment. "I may know your key, too."

She chewed her lip for a moment. As much as she was tempted to take him up on the offer, it wasn't right she should align herself so closely with a suspect. It was against every justice mercenary code she knew. Anyway... "I don't think there's any technique you could show me that I haven't already tried."

She stood.

"Well, we'll never know if we don't explore it, will we?" His smile was slow and sure and seemed to refer to things that had nothing to do with the building of psychic barriers and everything to do with sex.

It was wrong on so many levels, but she couldn't stop her body from reacting to him. She felt strongly drawn to this man on a physical level. She had felt this attraction from the moment she'd seen him in the courtyard when she'd arrived. Magnus had what she could only describe as *presence*. He had the aura of a leader—power, strength and fairness.

And Emmia truly didn't think he'd killed Caith. It was a gut feeling she had and her gut feelings were rarely wrong. Her intuition was the second tool she used in her investigations.

She felt a blush creep into her cheeks. "I must go."

He stood and walked her to the door. "I look forward to meeting with you again soon, Emmia. I trust in your skill and your intelligence."

He was so close to her that she could scent his bathing soap mixed with the smell of warm, worn leather. She mumbled something nearly intelligible and slipped out the door.

Quinn stood a short way down the corridor, leaning against the wall and wearing a brooding expression. She could feel that he was deep in thought. Emmia approached him and put a hand to his arm. He startled and looked at her. He held her gaze for a moment before his expression changed from surprise to knowingness.

Quinn smiled and his eyes went half-lidded. "Yes, he's very charming, isn't he?" His voice was low and smooth, like melted chocolate. "Good-looking too."

"Don't be ridiculous." She glanced away. Was she so easy to read? Her face did still feel a little flushed. She cleared her throat. "We had a good talk."

"You don't think he did it, do you?"

She licked her lips and glanced around to make sure no one could overhear her. "My primary suspect right now is Rolf. Rolf had the motive, whereas I can't see Magnus did. Magnus had what he wanted from Caith—a friendly, casual relationship. Rolf did not and may have been guided by jealousy. However, I haven't yet ruled out the possibility that Magnus committed this crime." She paused, chewing her lip. "Who had more of a relationship with Caith, you or Magnus?"

Quinn thought for a moment. His emotions spiraled quickly, almost too fast for Emmia to follow, as he remembered. "Magnus...I think."

She nodded. "That would explain why, if Rolf is responsible, he went after Magnus and not you."

"And me? Why I am I not on your list of suspects?"

Emmia allowed her expression to soften. She reached up and cupped his cheek. "Because I can look into your heart and what I have seen there is good—love and compassion. I have never met a man like you, Quinn, not ever. I know you didn't kill Caith."

He took her hand and kissed it. His eyes darkened. "I think that if you could look into Magnus' heart, you would see the same thing."

She shrugged. "Perhaps, but I cannot. We'll have to let this play out in another way."

He pulled her against him, dragging her up against his chest. "Speaking of playing..."

Feeling the weight of disapproving stares, she whispered, "Let's go somewhere a little more private. In any case, I need some solitude. I need to escape these pounding emotions for a time."

They retreated to Quinn's apartment in the keep. It consisted of three rooms in total—a sitting room, his bedroom and a bathing room complete with a large tub and a commode. He shut the door behind them and pulled her into his bedroom, yanking off her clothing as he went.

"I want you," he growled into her ear as he pulled her shirt over her head.

As he said those words, Emmia felt emotion course from him. He wasn't sure what he meant. He wanted her sexually, that was certain, but there was something more there and he wasn't sure what it was yet.

Neither was she, but it was beginning to feel a lot...like *love*. Oddly, it didn't frighten her. It only made her want more. It was a salve for her whole life, when she'd had to hold herself away from everyone.

Anyway, her feelings for Quinn were growing daily too.

"How do you want me, Quinn? Your emotions feel oddly confused right now."

He paused and looked down at her. "I find you very attractive, Emmia. Not only physically, but..." He swore under his breath and kissed her hard. His tongue penetrated her mouth and swiped up against hers.

With one powerful swoop, he had her up in his arms. Emmia threw her head back and laughed as he walked to the bed and threw her down onto the deep, soft mattress.

Giving her an evil little grin, he pushed her thighs apart and fastened his mouth over her cunt.

Her laughter became a gasp and then a moan as Quinn's skillful tongue licked her and then settled in to tease her clit. He kept her thighs braced wide apart as he feasted on her, so she couldn't move away...not that she wanted to escape this.

* * * * *

Magnus pushed the heavy tapestry to the side and glimpsed the erotic scene on the bed. After their conversation, he'd wanted...no, *needed*, to speak with Quinn in private. Unable to bear the looks and emotion of the keep's inhabitants, he'd traveled via the secret tunnels within the keep, taking a chance that Quinn had returned to his room.

He had returned, but he wasn't alone. Magnus should have expected that, but now it was too late to change course.

Lust twisting low in his gut and making his cock grow hard, he watched Quinn's head bob between Emmia's long, creamy legs as he suckled her pussy. Emmia's back was arched and her eyes were closed. A look of erotic rapture made her face even more beautiful than it was ordinarily. Her breasts stabbed up into the air, pinked and hard from her excitement.

Magnus' fingers curled as he imagined pulling them and teasing them as Quinn licked her cunt to climax. Together, they could make her scream...just as they had Caith so many times.

The thought of Caith instantly made Magnus feel guilty for spying. He should leave them. He should go back to his room and continue to mourn the loss of one his best friends. Anyway, it was wrong to invade their privacy like this, though it used to be a game for Caith, Quinn and him. It was unfair to Emmia that he watched them in private, at the very least.

He turned away, but heard his name whispered...*Magnus*...and turned back. Quinn was now between her spread thighs, hovering over her with his magnificent, hard cock

pressed against the opening of her cunt. He frowned. Why were they saying *his* name at a time like this? He pitched his hearing to catch their soft conversation.

“Have you ever been with two men at once?” Quinn asked.

Emmia squirmed under Quinn, pressing her hips upward in an effort to force his cock inside her. “No. Quinn! Please, you’re killing me.”

He grabbed her wrists and pressed them down on the mattress at either side of her head. “I know you find Magnus attractive. I *know* you do. Can you imagine what it would be like to have both us in the same bed at the same time, love?”

“Quinn, please fuck me! I’m so close to coming!”

He teased her clit with the head of his cock, dragging a groan from Emmia’s throat. “Answer my question and you get my cock. Answer it honestly. Has the thought crossed your mind? Have you imagined Magnus in this bed with us?”

“This isn’t right. This isn’t proper!”

“Oh, and what do we care about that? Right and proper? How boring. Give me your answer, Emmia and I’ll fuck you until you can’t think.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes, I’ve thought of it. Goddess help me, I’m thinking of it now.”

Quinn flexed his ass and slid his thick cock into her cunt. They both groaned. “Good girl, Emmia. Good girl for telling me the truth. I knew it all along, love. I knew it and could see it in your eyes, on your pretty face.”

Magnus gripped the tapestry, now totally unable to make himself do the right thing and turn away. He watched as Quinn fucked her, his long cock glistening wetly with her juices on every outward stroke. Emmia moaned and bucked as he took her harder and faster. Her body moved on the bed every time he pumped into her, seating himself deep inside her cunt.

“Think of it,” he whispered to her. “Think of four hands on you, two pairs of lips. Think of two cocks inside you, two to pleasure you.”

Emmia tossed her head and panted. "I'm going to come."

Just then, Quinn raised his head and looked directly at Magnus. Holding his gaze he said, "Yes, love, come for me. Come thinking about me and Magnus fucking you."

Emmia cried out and Quinn tipped his head back, likely enjoying the feeling of her rippling cunt around his length as she orgasmed. She thrashed on the bed beneath his ever-pistoning cock, caught in a powerful climax.

Once her orgasm had eased, Emmia reached up and tenderly touched Quinn's cheek. "What did you mean *two* cocks inside me?" The words were a little satisfaction-slurred. "At the same time? That's not possible."

Quinn threw his head back and laughed. "That's one thing I like about you, Emmia. You're incredibly jaded and world-weary in most ways." He shook his head. "But not in *all* ways." He pulled his still hard cock from her body. "On your hands and knees."

She gave him a quizzical look.

"I'm going to show you how, love."

As Emmia changed position, Quinn got up and retrieved a bottle of liquid Magnus recognized as a sexual lubricant. As Quinn turned and went back to the bed, he looked again straight at Magnus. It was almost a look of challenge and it left Magnus feeling a mixture of emotions he couldn't sort out.

Quinn's cock still stood at painful erect attention as he eased Emmia to her stomach and squeezed some of the viscous liquid lubricant into his palm. He massaged it into her shoulders and down her back, drawing a groan of pleasure from her. Magnus watched Quinn work, tracing the lines of his fine body with his gaze and longing to stroke his lovely cock, to take it into his mouth.

"Mmmm, Quinn, you're going to put me to sleep," murmured Emmia.

"So you're relaxed, then?"

She nodded.

"Stay relaxed, love. Know I would never do anything to hurt you, all right?"

“Mmmm,” she mumbled in response.

Magnus watched Quinn’s hand skate lower and lower over the curves and valleys of Emmia’s fine body. He knew what was coming, because this was the same way they’d introduced Caith to the possibilities of having two lovers at the same time. Quinn eased his hand between the cheeks of her buttocks, urging her to spread her thighs. Quinn eased his fingers over her little rosebud of an anus and Magnus heard Emmia’s quick intake of breath.

“Say stop and I will,” Quinn said softly. “But if you want true pleasure, you’ll allow me to play.” He pulled her up to her hands and knees and stood beside her.

Magnus had a clear view from where he stood, something he was certain Quinn had orchestrated for whatever reason. Quinn’s emotions were too centered on Emmia to get a clear read. Quinn slid his other hand down her front, letting it disappear between her spread thighs to tease and caress her clit. In the same moment, he pressed a finger softly and easily into her nether hole.

“Oh Gods,” she cried. Her fingers curled into the bedding.

“Mmm, it’s good, isn’t it, love?” His finger thrust in and out of her as his other hand stroked her clit from the front.

“Yes,” she gasped breathlessly.

He pushed his fingers deep into her cunt as he continued to thrust into her ass. “This is how you would take two men at once,” he purred. “See? You were made for it.”

“I’ve never had a man...ah!...do...this before.” Her body looked tense and a look of lust had overtaken her features. She looked even lovelier than normal, intoxicated with pleasure and passion, her perfect features slack.

Quinn added a second finger to her ass, stretching her slowly and easily, making her ready for his cock. “Poor baby. You’ve been neglected by your lovers, then. Do you want more?”

"More?" she choked out. "There's more?"

A low, masculine chuckle came from Quinn. "There's more, love." He added yet another finger into her rear, widening her muscles back there even more. Slowly, he thrust his thick fingers in and out of her cunt at the same time. "So much more."

She tossed her head. "Yes," she hissed.

"Does it hurt?"

She said nothing for a few moments, then finally said, "A little, but the pain is slight and feels...good in a strange way. I never knew..." She trailed off.

"That this was a place of pleasure? Oh yes, love. It is. I can't wait to take you here," he groaned. "You're relaxing back here enough for me to fit. You're going to feel so good around my cock."

Magnus' hand slipped down and he stroked himself through the fabric of his trousers for a moment. His cock was harder than his sword. It had been so long since he'd had sex. Goddess, how he wanted Emmia. He wanted Quinn too. Seeing them together like this was like taunting a starving man with a four-course meal. It was torture. He sank his teeth into his bottom lip and returned to watching...only because he couldn't bring himself to look away.

Emmia bucked against Quinn's hand and lowered her head to raise her ass up, offering herself to him without restrictions. "Quinn," she gasped. "Take me."

"You want it, love?"

She nodded. "Take me before I come again."

"You're going to come again, Emmia? Well, then, let's see how fast we can make you." Magnus watched as Quinn repositioned his hand, probably so he could stroke the spot deep inside a woman's cunt where it was so sensitive.

"Quinn!" Emmia cried out, her hips bucking as she climaxed. Magnus could practically feel the way her pussy spasmed around Quinn's fingers and how her slick, hot juices drenched his hand.

“Ah, that’s what I wanted,” Quinn purred. Are you ready to take me into your sweet little ass?”

“Yes!” she sobbed.

While she was still caught in the tail end of her climax and her body was relaxed and pliable, Quinn shifted position, setting the head of his cock to the entrance of her ass. He uncapped the bottle of lubricant again and dowsed himself in it. If Magnus had been there, he would have spread it on his cock, worked it in well before Quinn took her rear.

“Remember, I’d never do anything to hurt you, Emmia,” whispered Quinn. “Stay relaxed.”

She took a deep breath. “I know.”

He grabbed her hips, holding her in place, and then brushed the head of his cock across her opening. “Gods,” he groaned. “Your body is completely ready for this. You’re aroused, nice and open.”

“Take me, Quinn,” she murmured. “I can’t wait to have you in there.”

“The crown will be the worst,” he said through gritted teeth. Quinn placed his broad hands on her hips. The head of his cock pressed into her, breaching the tight ring of muscles of her anus. He pressed inside her slowly, oh so very slowly.

“More,” she gasped. She pushed back, trying to impale herself. “It’s so good.” Her words were slurred again. Gods, but Emmia was eager in bed. So lush, so ripe and perfect for sexual experiment. Magnus’ fingers curled to stroke her satiny skin, feel the heat of her cunt. At the moment, he wanted her with a bone-deep yearning that was hard to explain. Magnus wanted her with an intensity that almost entered insanity. He had to force himself to stay behind the curtain, to keep himself hidden.

Quinn groaned and held both hands on her hips, stilling her movement. “Emmia, you’re going to make me come before I’ve even hilted.” He eased her back against him and slowly thrust his shaft deeper into her. “You’re so sweet and tight.”

Finally, he seated himself within her to the base of his cock. His hips pulled back and thrust forward as he set up a relentless rhythm. With every thrust, the penetration grew easier. "I can't hold back," he groaned as he picked up speed, pushing her harder and harder.

"Don't stop," she moaned. "Please, don't stop, Quinn."

He slid his hand around her front, stroking his fingers through her dark pubic hair. She bucked her hips when he thrust two fingers into her creaming pussy. She moaned out his name and tossed her head like a wild thing being mounted against her will.

"Gods, you feel so good," Quinn groaned. He extracted his fingers from her dripping pussy and slicked her cream over her clit as he worked the sensitized bundle between two fingers, pushing her harder and faster toward orgasm as he rode her ass.

Emmia cried out again, lost once more to climax.

"*Emmia.*" Behind her, she heard Quinn's deep groan as he came. Magnus watched him thrust balls-deep within her and climax, his head thrown back and his eyes closed.

Magnus passed his hand over his cock once more and then melted back into the shadows, leaving them at least a little privacy.

In that moment, he vowed he'd have Emmia. He'd have Quinn back too.

Chapter Four

Quinn pulled Emmia against his body and glanced up to find Magnus had retreated. He wasn't sure what had come over him when he realized that his old lover had followed the secret pathway they always used to use to get to one another's rooms and had found himself watching Quinn make love to Emmia.

Magnus had been a part of him for so long. Quinn had shared everything important with him for years now. Emmia was becoming important to him and Quinn was finding that he couldn't leave Magnus out of his relationship with her, even if Magnus was only an outsider in the shadowed corner.

Even though he stood accused of murder.

Emmia tucked her head between his cheek and collarbone and sighed. His heart squeezed as he admitted something to himself that he'd been having trouble acknowledging since this ordeal had begun. He loved Magnus. With every inch of his being, he loved him.

She raised her head. "What? Am I feeling this emotion correctly, Quinn? Do I feel love coming from you?" There was a slight sheen of panic in her dark eyes. "Quinn?" she repeated.

He reached out and touched her cheek. "Are you truly so afraid that someone might love you, Emmia? Why is that? I find you very loveable."

She pulled away from him. Wrapping herself in the sheet, she sat on the edge of the bed with her back to him. "I don't know. I feel...conflicted on the issue."

He sat up and rubbed her back. "I do have very strong feelings for you, love. They get stronger with every moment I spend in your glorious, strong, fragile presence. However, in this case, it was Magnus I was thinking of when you felt the love coming from me. It's Magnus I love irrefutably."

She looked at him and he tried not to be offended by the look of relief in her eyes. "Magnus? Well, I already knew that, although before now your feelings for him have been quite confused. What I felt just now from you was a pure, brilliant and clear note of love."

"Yes."

She leaned over and kissed him. "You're a special man, Quinn. I care deeply for you, as well."

He wrapped his hand around the back of her head, pressed her mouth to his and then rolled her beneath his body. She laughed and squirmed as he attempted to kiss her senseless. He loved it when he could make her laugh. Quinn wanted to hear her do it every single day.

* * * * *

"Magnus?"

Magnus jerked, startled by the sound of Quinn's voice. He spilled the container of ink he was using to write a letter all over his desk. "Damn it!" He leapt up as black ink trickled over the edge of the desk and into his lap.

Quinn's boot heels sounded on the stone floor as he approached to help him. "I'm sorry I surprised you. You didn't answer when I knocked, but I could hear you muttering to yourself in here."

He wiped his pants off with some scrap paper. "It's all right. I guess I was distracted by the letter I was writing to my sister."

"To Caroline?"

Magnus nodded and dropped his ink-stained hands to his sides. "I was telling her about Emmia."

Quinn smiled. "You tell her everything." He laughed. "I think she knows more of your secrets than I do." He instantly sobered once he'd realized what he'd said. For a

moment, it had seemed as if everything had been back to normal. But, of course, the world was far, far from normal these days.

An awkward silence fell.

“What did you need?” Magnus said impatiently. He couldn’t stand this tension between them. He’d rather they have no contact at all if they were meant to suffer this way every time they came face-to-face. “Have you come to discuss what happened several nights ago in your chamber?”

Quinn took a step forward and then stopped. “I’m not sure what that was. When I saw you there in the corner, I guess I needed for you to be a part of what was happening between myself and Emmia.”

“You care about her, don’t you?”

He nodded. “She’s tough, and while she is strong, mostly it’s an act. She’s been damaged by the strength of her empathic abilities and she’s been forced to keep herself away from people.” He paused. “I want to see her happy.”

“I haven’t spent much time with her, but I’m also drawn to her.”

“Even though she came here to possibly kill you?”

Magnus nodded. “Strange, isn’t it?”

“Not really. You always did like a little danger with your sex.”

They held each other’s gazes for a long moment, each clearly caught in their own memories. Magnus wanted to close the distance between them, wanted to crush Quinn against him and kiss him deeply. He wanted to slip his hand down his pants and touch his cock, arouse him the way he would have before this mess had begun. Magnus wanted to tease him to a fever pitch, then lean him over the desk and take Quinn right here and now.

Heat emanated from Quinn, sexual heat and love in a heady mix that had Magnus taking a step forward. Then Quinn’s emotions changed, grew cooler and more confused.

And the spell was broken.

Magnus froze in place. They stood looking at each other for another long moment. “You never said why you decided to stop by, Quinn.” Magnus’ voice sounded clipped and cold to his own ears. He just couldn’t take this anymore.

He shrugged in response. “I guess I wanted to talk to you.”

“I’m surprised. I would’ve thought you’d want to stay far away from Caith’s murderer.” The tone of his voice was bitter, but he couldn’t force it to be any sweeter. The fact that Quinn had abandoned him after he’d been accused still cut deeply.

“I told you I never thought you did it, not deep down.”

“But you did think there was a possibility.”

“The evidence—”

“The evidence! Come on, Quinn. You’re my best and dearest friend, as well as my longtime lover. You should know me better than to think me capable of such a thing.”

Quinn went silent for a few moments before measuring out his words, “Your sword had her blood on it, Magnus. Your clothes had her—”

“You abandoned me, Quinn.”

Regret came off Quinn in a wave. “I know,” he said quietly.

They stared at each other for a long heartbeat. There was a knock on the door and Magnus called *enter* in a sharp, bitter voice.

Emmia stepped into the room, assessed the situation at a glance and pulled Quinn back toward the door. “Quinn, I’ve been looking for you. Do you have a moment?”

Quinn held Magnus’ gaze a moment longer. “Magnus—”

Magnus turned his back to them both. “Just go.” Bitterness soured the words. He could taste it on the back of his tongue. He loved Quinn, but so much lay between them. He hoped they would both be able to get through this, but at the moment it wasn’t looking hopeful.

“Of course, Emmia. Let’s go,” Quinn answered sadly.

Together they left. Magnus watched the door close behind them with sorrow curling through his stomach...and relief that Quinn was gone.

* * * * *

"Are you all right?" Emmia asked as she led Quinn down the corridor.

Quinn started to answer, snapped his mouth shut and then simply said, "Yes." It was a lie and Quinn knew that Emmia could feel it. He simply didn't want to talk about what had just happened.

Emmia nodded and thankfully changed the subject. "I need to speak with Arhild again. "I'd prefer not to do it alone."

"Why?"

She grimaced. "Arhild feels...*icky*."

He nodded. "I never liked him and I can't even feel his emotions."

She hooked her arm through his. "Thank you for coming with me."

He smiled at her, warm regard filling his being at the mere sight of her. "Emmia, you crook your finger, I obey."

His nerves were shot from his encounter with Magnus moments before. So he was grateful that Emmia had sought him out before he'd done something he would've regretted. He and Magnus been ready to fuck for a moment...then ready to fight. His heart had whiplash and his mind reeled from the web of conflict they'd been caught in. He didn't know how to unravel the tangle. Now he had something to take his mind from the incident and he was glad of it.

They found Arhild in the stables, where he was saddling his horse. When he glimpsed them, he grumbled something unintelligible at them and went back to his task.

"Are you going somewhere, Arhild?" Emmia asked.

He turned to her, gripping his horse's bit in one hand tight enough to turn his fingers white. Quinn wondered what sort of emotion Emmia was getting from him. "Have you found my daughter's killer yet?"

She took a step forward. "You didn't answer my question."

He squinted. "Nor did you answer mine." He shifted and glanced to the left. "I'm leaving, aye. Going back to see to my estate for a time."

"Did you get leave from Lord Magnus for that?" Quinn asked.

Arhild's grip on the bit tightened impossibly further. "I'm not asking leave of my child's murderer!" His voice sounded like a whip in the small building. His bay mare stamped her feet and snorted, likely sensing her master's disquiet.

"I would prefer if you did not leave just now," responded Emmia calmly.

"Why? Am I a suspect?"

Emmia paused for a heartbeat and then said, "Yes."

Arhild stared, his face purpling. Then he threw the bit down to the straw-covered stable floor. The mare danced to the side, startled, and Quinn had an urge to gentle the poor, skittish beast. To his horseman's eyes, she'd been mistreated.

"I do not have time for this trouble!" Arhild yelled. "I have lands to keep in Hia and farming tariffs to collect. I cannot remain here and wait for you to do your job. Why have you not taken Magnus for the murder yet? The evidence clearly indicates him."

"The investigation of a justice mercenary encompasses more than just evidence. I need to dig deeper than just the surface, into the heart of those concerned. *You* are one concerned, Arhild."

Quinn thought Emmia was acting with admirable restraint. He wanted to punch Arhild, personally.

Arhild stood fuming at her for a moment and stormed out of the stables muttering to himself.

"That was interesting," Quinn commented.

Emmia frowned. "I didn't even get to ask my questions."

"Well, Arhild always had an unpredictable character."

"I see that. How was his relationship with his daughter?"

"Nearly nonexistent, from what I could tell. Arhild never wanted much to do with her, nor she him."

"Hmmm."

Quinn watched that expression steal over her face that meant she needed to think. As much as he enjoyed spending time with her, the job came first. He took the hint. "Well, I need to go over to the armory."

"Mmmm."

"I'll see you later?"

"Mmmhmm."

He leaned in and gave her a lingering kiss on her cheek which he wasn't sure she even felt, then took his leave.

* * * * *

Emmia watched Quinn walk away, still trying to sort through and interpret the tumult of emotion Arhild had emitted. She supposed it was normal that he should be confused, considering his daughter had been brutally murdered, but what Emmia didn't understand was the lack of grief. There was love, sorrow and anger, lots of anger.

There was no grief.

Frowning, she walked away from the stables and back into the keep. Rolling the complex blend of feeling around on her tongue, she found herself just walking and hardly paying attention to anything or anyone around her.

Soon she found herself sitting on a plush chair somewhere in a part of the keep near her room. She'd chosen it because of the lack of people around to confuse her thought process about Arhild and Rolf.

Rolf had the motive, not Arhild. So why did she consider Arhild suspicious? Why was her intuition telling her to pay closer attention to him? Was it simply because she found him grating and unpleasant? If that was the case, she needed to separate her personal distaste of Arhild from the investigation and make certain that she was on task. She owed that much to Caith.

“Emmia?”

Her head jerked up to see Magnus staring down at her with a frown on his face. He’d shaven, finally.

“I said your name three times before you noticed me.”

“I’m thinking,” she responded impatiently.

“I apologize. I’ll leave you alone.” He turned to leave.

“No, wait. Stay. I’d like to talk to you a little.”

He turned back toward her. “Well, in that case...thinking about what?”

She chewed the edge of the thumbnail. She’d been thinking that Magnus looked less and less guilty by the day. She glanced up at him and let a smile flutter over her lips. “It still amazes me how you can approach me that way and I can’t even tell.”

He smiled. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “I like it more than I ever imagined I would. In fact, honestly, I wasn’t going to take this case.”

“Truly?”

She shook her head. “I’d just returned from the battle with The Nameless, at my sister, Rhea’s, side, and was exhausted. I didn’t think I’d be at my best on an investigation like this one, but once I found out you were an empath, I wanted to come. Come to meet you, that is.

“I’m flattered, but I’m sure Quinn played at least a small role in your decision.”

She blushed a little. “You caught me. Mostly it was you, though.” She motioned at the place beside her. “Please sit down.”

They sat for a moment in silence, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one. Emmia thought he probably felt like she did, simply happy to be with someone and have things be...*noiseless*.

"I liked to spend time with Caith too," said Magnus after a time. "If only because she was so carefree and kind of...detached."

"Quinn mentioned that she was very sexually adventurous and didn't want to have any kind of deeper, emotional relationship with either of you."

"That's true. She was young in so many ways. She was simply content to live in the moment and enjoy every aspect of life as it came to her. Her emotions were always a joy to be around, never heavy, never a burden to bear." He paused. His voice cracked. "I miss her."

Emmia didn't need to psychically sense his emotions to know that he was being sincere. From all accounts that she'd heard of Caith, what Magnus said was true. "I'm truly sorry that you lost your friend."

He didn't speak for a moment. "Yes, me too."

"I will find her killer."

"I know you will." He drew a tired-sounding breath.

She turned to him and said exactly what she shouldn't say, but felt a need to, "I don't think it's you."

He nodded. "I hoped you'd cross me off the list."

"Formally, you're still on it, but..." She chewed the inside of her lip for a moment. "What do you think of Caith's father?"

"Arhild?" He sounded surprised she'd asked about him. "I always felt strong love come from him regarding Caith, yet he berated her at every turn. He didn't approve of her lifestyle and wanted her to find a husband, settle down and have children. Caith didn't want any of that. Why? Is he a suspect?"

Motive. Maybe. She shook her head and then shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. There are several people in the keep with motive enough to have committed the murder. There's only one person who had both the motive to murder Caith and the opportunity to plant the sword in your chamber, however."

"Rolf."

She nodded.

He shook his head. "I don't think he did it."

She gave him a sharp look. "Shouldn't you be eager to have me latch onto someone other than you?"

He smiled. "I just want you to find Caith's killer and I want you to be right when you do, that's all."

She returned his smile and then turned back around, sighing. They stayed that way for a long time, simply enjoying each other's presence.

* * * * *

"I see why you like her."

Quinn turned from his place at one of the long dining room tables to see Magnus. He fought the rise of emotion that always accompanied the sight of him and took a bite of his sandwich, chewing and swallowing before answering.

The man could wait.

"I do like her. Very much," he answered finally. He scooted to the side without looking at his former lover, giving him an invitation to sit. Magnus took it, making Quinn's stomach tighten and his cock twitch at the scent of him so close.

"How much do you like her?" Magnus' voice was deep, smooth and intimately close to his ear. It brought back memories of long, hot sweaty nights.

Gods, how he missed those nights. Would there ever be another one?

Quinn dropped his sandwich to the plate and pushed it away. "Enough that for the first time in a very long time I'm actually considering being in a serious relationship again."

"I think I'm a little jealous." Magnus was quiet for several moments before asking, "How long has it been since you considered such a thing?"

"Don't play with my emotions, Magnus. That's not fair when you can feel them." His voice sounded low and threatening to his own ears. "I can't hide anything from you. Never could. It's irritating."

"You haven't answered my question."

Quinn sighed. "Since you, of course."

"I just needed to hear it." He waited a heartbeat and then said, "I still love you, Quinn. Despite everything, I still love you. I just need for you to know that."

Quinn glanced at him. "I can't do this right now." His voice was heavy with emotion. He wanted to scream at him that he still loved him as well and that he'd never stopped loving him and that he was sorry for not standing by him after Caith's murder.

That he'd made a mistake.

That he'd never be able to forgive himself for giving up heaven, trading it for mistrust and suspicion. Gods, what had he been thinking? Magnus hadn't killed Caith. Not even Emmia thought he had. Why hadn't he stood by Magnus' side the way he should've? Had it been pure shock? Had it been grief? Quinn just didn't know.

"Fine," answered Magnus in a clipped tone. "I just wanted you to know that. I also need you to know that I want Emmia."

"She and I have no formal commitment." Still, it pricked a little. He'd never felt jealous over Caith, but Emmia was different. However, he had no idea how Emmia regarded him. His feelings for her were deepening, but she probably didn't feel the same for him. She was probably too afraid to let her feelings for him go very deep.

Sometimes where Emmia was concerned Quinn wished he had the Talent of empathy. The woman was difficult to read.

“I just want you to know that I don’t want her because of her connection to you, although that does make her more attractive to me. I can be honest about that. But I want Emmia for Emmia. Because I find her very attractive on many levels.”

“I’m not standing in your way.”

Magnus placed his hand on Quinn’s thigh under the table. Quinn started, and then relaxed under Magnus’ familiar touch. He’d missed the warm, heavy weight of that hand, missed the taste of Magnus’ mouth and the feel of his cock.

“I want you to know that not only am I going after Emmia, I’m also coming after you, Quinn.” Magnus paused. “I want you back. I want things the way they were...before, between you and me.”

Quinn just shook his head. “Too much has happened –”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Magnus’ voice was like the lash of a whip. “Doesn’t change the fact that I still have feelings for you, Quinn.”

Quinn stared at the table until Magnus had left. Magnus would forgive him for what he’d done? Magnus still loved him after he’d suspected, along with everyone else, that Magnus may have killed Caith?

Gods, was there still hope?

* * * * *

Emmia and Magnus had taken to playing *lochart* in the afternoons in Magnus’ chambers, a board game of strategy.

She was still interviewing the suspects for Caith’s murder, letting their emotions sit in her mind, allowing herself to study them, live with them. This was how she worked. Oftentimes, a person could only shield and hide their emotions from her for a certain amount of time. Eventually, they slipped under the stress of her constant presence and then she had them. Sometimes time told the truth when the perpetrator would not.

Magnus was still officially still on her list, but he was the last one in terms of ranking.

Anyway, she liked playing *lochart* with him.

She moved her knight to the side and captured his king.

"By the Gods, Emmia, you're going to beat me again," Magnus grouched, leaning over the board to consider his next move. "You're too good at this game by half."

"I used to play it with my sister, Rhea, when we were young. I used to get angry because she beat me all the time, so I studied the game until I could play very well."

"Curse your determination," he murmured, then caught his tongue between his teeth and frowned down at the board. Magnus made his move.

So did Emmia.

He stared down at the board for a moment. "Blast it!"

Emmia laughed.

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Well, at least if I must lose, I'm losing to someone pretty."

Emmia's laugh faded and she self-consciously touched a lock of her hair. Men usually didn't regard her as such. Quinn was the first one who'd repeatedly told her over and over how attractive she was. If Magnus started it too, she might just start believing it.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No." She glanced away. "I'm just tired, I guess. Having to live with so many people and their emotions for so long this way is very wearing. Especially since I'm just coming off the battle with the The Nameless."

"I heard you had a large role to play in that."

"Everyone did. It was very...draining."

Magnus chuckled. "You're the only person I know who would refer to nearly having their world destroyed and almost dying as merely *draining*."

She let a smile flicker across her mouth.

Magnus stared at her for a moment, then stood and held out a hand. "Come."

Emmia stared at his broad hand with a confused look on her face.

"I know you said you tried everything there was to try to build up your shields, but how do you *know* everything there is to try?"

"Magnus..."

"There is no harm in *trying*, Emmia. Please. Humor me. I don't like to see you suffer so."

She glanced up at him sharply. "Why should you care?"

"So prickly! When I spend so much time being beaten at *lochart* by someone, I tend to get attached, all right?" He motioned with his hand again. "Now, please, Emmia, take my hand."

She hesitated for a moment, and then put her hand in his. He helped her to stand and led her to the center of the room. His body was warm—it seemed warmer than Quinn's for some reason, like Magnus' body temperature was naturally higher. In addition, she could smell the scent of him—leather from his horse's saddle and the now-familiar spice-scented soap he used. The combination of his scent, his warmth and the aura of his masculinity made shivers run down her spine.

She'd been fighting her attraction for Magnus because of the investigation. It wasn't right that a justice mercenary become involved with a suspect, even one she believed innocent. Such a situation might not ruin her career, but it could damage her reputation.

Being able to abstain from Magnus was made easy by the steady and satisfying supply of sex she received from Quinn. Quinn was a wonderful man, a giving and supportive man. He was a man she thought she could grow to love. He had awoken her sexuality, something she'd repressed since it had first been stirred to life within her for a fear of aligning herself forevermore with another person's emotions.

And Quinn had turned out to be no great burden in this regard. Emmia found that aligning herself with Quinn's emotions was actually more a pleasure than a pain. He liked her very much and love flickered from time to time. She found she minded those flickers less as time passed. She even kind of liked them.

Perhaps it was because she had such flickers for him as well.

Magnus pulled her into his arms and she went stiff at first, and then relaxed into him. He threaded his fingers through her hair and she allowed it. It was...nice. She liked having physical contact with him.

"Now, close your eyes and feel all that emotion that batters at you."

Dutifully, she did as he requested...but sighed.

"No sighing with resignation. Give yourself to this exercise, Emmia. Give yourself to it completely and open your mind. You must *want it* for it to work." His voice was low and silken.

She pushed away from him. "Of course I *want it!*"

"Do you?" He smiled. "Do you really? Are you sure? Maybe there's a part of you that truly doesn't want to sever your ability to sense all emotion. Way deep down inside."

"Ridiculous."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is it? Really? Search your heart. I know that for myself, that need and desire is what initially prevented me from erecting shields for my Talent."

She frowned, licked her lips and glanced down. Could it be true? Was there some part of her that craved the contact with others? Some part far deep within her that kept her from erecting the psychic walls she needed to protect herself?

All her life she'd held herself back from people, even her own family, in an effort to reduce the rasp of raw emotion against her most tender psychic flesh. And yet, she'd always longed for the contact of others...for as long as she could remember.

She looked up at him. "Maybe."

“Ah. Yes, *maybe*.” He touched her cheek. “I know you, Emmia. I know you because you so closely parallel me.” He held out his arms. “Now, please, do as I request.”

She stepped forward and allowed him to embrace her. She closed her eyes and searched deep within to find that part of her that wanted the abuse, the part of her that craved it because it meant contact with others...no matter how unbearable and violent at times.

“There’s the way,” Magnus crooned. “Take your time. Find the root. Don’t pull it out, though. It needs to be there. It’s healthy, that drive to connect. Instead, acknowledge it. Make friends with it. Pull it out into the daylight of your consciousness, so that you can deal with it, manage it and make it yours.”

She squeezed her eyes shut as though it would help her concentrate better. Her fingers found purchase in the sleeves of his shirt and fisted. Memories from her childhood flitted through her brain—the first time she could remember being overwhelmed by emotion, the first time she pushed someone away because of it, the first time she mourned the loss of that person in her life. She took all those memories and rolled them around in her mind as though tasting a dish that was both bitter and sweet at the same time. In the back of her throat, she made a whimpering sound.

“You found it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Put it away in a safe place, somewhere you can find it again whenever you want to. Now let’s start building the walls. But before we start, assure yourself that just because you erect them, you still will be able to have contact with others. Know that because of the walls you build, you’ll actually be able to have *more* contact with others, deeper relationships. You’ll be happier with the shields in place.”

Together they worked, doing things that Emmia had already tried before. She felt it was more successful this time because she had acknowledged what had been blocking her.

When she'd finished building up the psychic walls around her ability, the ever-present pressure of the keep's inhabitants had eased. She opened her eyes, took a step back, blinked and smiled.

He stared at her. "Beautiful."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you were beautiful before, to be sure, but without that tension in your face and shoulders..." His voice held a note of awe. "Do you feel better?"

"Yes." She inclined her head a degree. "Thank you."

He reached out and pulled her against him once more and she allowed it. "I want to touch you," Magnus said somewhere near her ear. She shivered against him.

Emmia knew she shouldn't want him to touch her, but the *shoulds* of her world were rapidly fading in the face of her desire. She couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have sex with Magnus and completely allow herself to succumb to the purely physical experience of it, without any distraction from the other person's emotions at all.

Apparently, Magnus wondered as well.

It was wrong, seeing as he was still on the list of suspects, formally, but...her body didn't seem to mind. Her breasts had grown sensitive and her cunt slick with the mere possibility of having sex with him.

He eased his hand to her upper thigh. His lips found her ear and she closed her eyes, feeling goose bumps rise along her body and her pussy grow warmer and damper.

"Emmia? Let me touch you."

She couldn't respond. Her lips parted and he rubbed his thumb along her lower lip. He murmured that he was going to kiss her, and then he did.

She snaked her hand between them and pushed him away. He looked at her with questions in his eyes, his mouth only a breath away. "This is a mistake, Magnus. This

isn't right. I should leave this room immediately and put a mile between us," she whispered.

He stared at her lips. "I know." He pressed her into him while his mouth descended on hers.

Emmia went stiff at first, but then relaxed, curving to fit Magnus' body perfectly. Her lips rested against his for a moment until a need stronger than anything she could combat rose up within her. She returned his kiss with a sudden urgency, allowing him to coax her lips apart. His tongue slipped within to explore.

Her hands came up, sliding over his biceps to his shoulders. He was a bit taller than Quinn and she suddenly felt a little shy, realizing that this was not her current lover she now kissed. This was a different man with a different feel and a different taste. Finally, she curled the fingers of one hand into the hair at the nape of his neck. The other she pressed tight against the back of his shoulder.

Her tongue found his and moved against it, stroking it the way she kissed Quinn. Magnus groaned in the back of his throat and held her closer, so close every breath she took dragged her hard nipples against his chest. It made her want fewer clothes between them.

As if reading her mind and knowing exactly what she wanted, he brought a hand around and cupped her breast through the material of her shirt. He brushed his thumb back and forth over her erect nipple, making her moan and arch into him. At the same time he pressed his hard cock against her so she could feel what she was doing to him, and how much he wanted her.

Emmia found his hand on her breast and pushed it beneath her shirt. She guided him upward until he found her bare, unbound breast. He made an appreciative sound in his throat and worked it with skillful fingers until Emmia felt weak in the knees and felt herself cream between her thighs. Then he let his hand roam down. She helped him get down her pants in the front and he guided his hand between her thighs, where he found hot, aroused pussy and cupped it.

Emmia made a low, satisfied sound in her throat and spread her legs to give him better access. He pushed the material of her panties away and dragged his fingers over her sex. He shuddered against her and she felt a sudden flicker of power at the way the touch of her seemed to be affecting him.

Magnus slanted his mouth over her and hungrily sank his tongue into her hot mouth over and over, as if trying to consume her. The way he kissed her, like he'd been starving and she was his first meal in months, made her breath come in short, sharp puffs. He teased and stroked her clit until her body tensed, and he slid first one thick finger up inside her, and then added a second, and slowly, surely began to thrust into her with them.

He worked them in and out of her, still kissing her deeply, until her interior muscles spasmed and she let out a low moan into the interior of Magnus' mouth. An orgasm skittered through her body, teasing her, then crashed into her at a force so strong it made her knees weak. The muscles of her cunt squeezed around Magnus' thrusting fingers as she came. He caught all her soft cries against his mouth. It hadn't taken long to make her climax. It was almost embarrassing how excited he made her with merely the stroke of his fingers deep inside her pussy.

She groaned into his mouth, catching and gently dragging his lower lip between her teeth. Magnus' whole body shook in response, revealing how excited he was. All she wanted in the world right now was for this man to take off all her clothes and take her so hard she wouldn't be able to see straight for a week.

He re-intensified his kiss and she snaked her hand between their bodies, feeling out his long, hard cock through his clothing and stroking him. Being kissed by this man was like being battered with pleasure. His lips worked magic over hers, making love to her mouth and to her tongue with the same skill he'd likely employ to her entire body.

Gods, how she wanted to find out if that was true.

Magnus made a sound deep in his throat, snaked his arms around her and lifted her. Emmia gasped at the ease with which he hoisted her. She grabbed his shoulders,

feeling his muscles work as he moved. He turned and took several steps to the bed and laid her down on the mattress. Then he came down on top of her, slanting his mouth hungrily over hers. Every little movement he made rasped her shirt across her stiff, sensitive nipples. Finally he reached between them and ripped the offending garment off her, allowing her bare breasts to spill free. The ache between her thighs intensified as the material of his shirt rubbed her sensitized nipples, then he palmed her breasts both in turn.

Magnus slid his hands down her back and cupped her buttocks, lifting her cunt to press against his hard cock. She cursed every thread of material that still lay between them and ground against him needfully, pressing herself up against him as if trying to climb his body.

Magnus broke the kiss with a heartfelt groan. "Emmia, you don't know how much I want you."

"I do, because it's as much as I want you." She curled her fingers into the fabric of his shirt. "What's holding you back?"

He stared down at her for a moment, breathing heavily. "I don't know. I-I don't want to damage anything between us."

Emmia let out a little laugh. "I'm here to investigate you for murder. How much more can we damage things?"

He smiled. "Good point."

"Then fuck me, Magnus. Please."

Magnus held her gaze as he reached down and yanked the waistband of her pants down and cupped her bare buttock. She felt the rasp of his calloused palm against her skin. Her pussy seemed to grow hotter and wetter, anticipating the feel of him touching her more intimately.

"Touch me, Magnus," she whispered. "Touch me before I lose my mind."

“Like this? Is this how you want to be touched?” He dragged a finger along her exposed, swollen labia and then over her anus.

Emmia tensed and shut her eyes, trying to get past the sudden tang of fear and more fully into the pleasure. She liked it when Quinn had taken her there. It had been surprisingly good. “Yes,” she breathed. “Like that. *More.*”

“You feel like heaven,” he murmured, his voice shaking a little. “I will give you *more*, sweet Emmia.”

She reached up, unbuttoned his shirt and he pulled it over his head, revealing a chest made powerfully strong and scarred by sword practice and war. She traced her palms down his satin-over-steel skin, incredulous she should be given the delicious bounty of both Quinn and Magnus in such a short span of time. How lucky was she? She was definitely making up for lost time, that was for certain.

His gaze focused on her face as he ran his palms up her thighs and waist. She spread her legs for him, slipping them around his hips and arching up at him hungrily. “You’re beautiful, Emmia. Irresistible. I wanted from you from the first moment I saw you in the courtyard, even though your presence perhaps meant my death.” He slid down her body, parted her thighs and licked her.

“Magnus!” She grabbed on to the blankets on either side of her and held on under the swell of a near climax that rippled through her body. Gods, how embarrassing it was that this man could make her orgasm so easily. She felt like some untried virgin in his arms.

Magnus groaned and lifted his head briefly. “You taste so good. Just like I imagined.”

“You imagined?” she gasped out.

He raised his head and groaned. “Too many times to count.”

His hands found her hips and clamped down, holding her in place. The erotic sight of his dark head between her thighs, his strong hands gripping her and the muscles of his shoulders working as he licked and sucked her was nearly enough to drive her to

the edge of another orgasm. His thumbs pulled her labia apart, revealing the heart of her. Magnus studied her for a moment, then groaned and dropped his head to devour her once more. He toyed with her sensitive clit with the tip of his tongue and then slowly licked her labia, easing into every fold.

She arched her back and moaned. Her orgasm rose, tingling through her body. He kept it at bay, managed it, until she teetered on the razor's edge of a climax.

"Look at me, Emmia," he murmured.

She tipped her head forward and let her eyes flicker open. She felt like she'd been drinking wine, intoxicated on the carnal pleasure of it.

"Look right into my eyes. I want you to know who it is that's making you come."

"Magnus," she breathed, unable to make any other kind of response. She held his gaze as he lowered his mouth to her clit and sucked it between his sensual lips. He kept his gaze focused on hers, up the line of her body. Ecstasy skittered through her body as he teased it, driving her to the brilliant, sharp edge of another orgasm.

With his finger, Magnus stroked her sensitive entrance, massaging the area around her labia. Then he eased his skillful tongue up into her and thrust in and out. At the same time, he stroked her clit with the pad of his thumb, rubbing the small bundle of nerves to climax.

"Come for me, Emmia," he demanded.

Emmia's climax exploded through her body. She cried out as it washed through her body. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't even form words. Magnus had made it more powerful by withholding it, building it up and then skillfully sending it to crash down over her. Magnus drew it out even longer by gently caressing her clit.

"Magnus," she breathed when she finally could. "Gods, Magnus."

He climbed up her body with a hungry, almost dangerous, look in his eyes. Magnus sealed his mouth over hers once more impatiently. At the same time, he thrust his still fabric-clad pelvis against her cunt, rasping over her sensitized and aroused clit.

Emmia arched her back and wrapped her legs around his waist, grinding her cunt against him. Holding her hips, he settled himself between her thighs and ground back until she cried from the hard edge of the pleasure of it. His rock-hard, huge cock juttied against her tender folds, rasped against her and made her feel empty inside. Why was he making her wait so long for his cock?

“I want to ease inside your sweet pussy, Emmia,” Magnus whispered.

She slipped her hand between their bodies and undid his pants. “Then don’t make me wait any longer.” She pushed at the waistband of his pants and he slipped them down and off.

Thanks the Goddess and all the Gods, he was finally naked.

And, ah, but he was pretty. Long, broad and hard. She rose up, pushed him down and closed her mouth around him.

Her turn.

“Gods, Emmia!” His back arched and his fingers tangled in her hair.

She suppressed a grin and licked the length of him instead. He felt good in her mouth. His back arched again when she sucked him deep into the recesses and then slowly drew him out again, all the while letting her tongue play along the length of him.

Emmia loved this most, loved doing this to Quinn as well. Loved the fact that she could bring these men to their knees with only the swipe of her tongue. Men were slaves to a woman’s mouth around their cock. Quinn reacted the same way. For a moment, she imagined having both them in bed with her. That night when Quinn had made her imagine it, it had made her come. It made her cunt damp now to even think of it.

Magnus’ fingers twisted in her hair as she worked his cock in and out of her mouth. Then, abruptly, he slid out from beneath her. “You keep doing that and I won’t last much longer.”

“Would that be so bad?”

He came over her, muscling her thighs apart and settling between them. “Yes, Emmia, because I want to feel your sweet cunt around my cock and I don’t know if this is my only opportunity. By this time tomorrow, you’ll have come to your senses and you won’t want me anymore.”

She thrust her hips up at him. “I want you now, Magnus. Please.”

“I want to make this last. I don’t want it to go quickly.”

She reached up and cupped his cheek. “Why?”

“It’s like dessert, Emmia. You’re like fine chocolate from D’ar in eastern Molari. I know you’re rare and I want to savor you.” He took her hand and guided it between their bodies to her pussy. Taking her fingers in his hand, he made her pet her own clit, finger her creamy labia and finally sink her own fingers deep into her cunt.

“It’s like heaven in there,” Magnus whispered. He eased her hand away and brushed the head of his cock against her. “What are you thinking about right now, Emmia? Are you thinking about Quinn?”

Her eyes fluttered shut, and then opened. She looked up and caught his gaze. “Yes, I’m thinking about Quinn. When I’m with Quinn sometimes I think about you.”

“Do you think about having us both at the same time?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“It excites you.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, now give me more. You’re making me insane with this slow pace.”

He slid the smooth crown of his cock past the lips of her cunt. She arched into him, wanting more. The way he stretched her muscles felt exquisite. Magnus groaned and slid in another few inches.

“More?” he asked her.

“More!”

Magnus thrust until he hilted. He remained motionless for a few moments, allowing her body to adjust to his length and width, then pulled out and thrust in again so slowly she could almost memorize every vein of his cock as it glided inside her. Her breath hissed between her teeth at the sensation of it. He held her hips, keeping her from writhing as he shafted her slowly.

“Faster,” she whispered. She could feel the rising edge of a climax, a powerful one that grew closer and closer.

Magnus pulled back and drove into her hard and fast, all the way to the base of him. Then again and again. He took her fast and hard, possessing her body with every masterful stroke.

Emmia came. The waves of her orgasm washed over her, nearly drowning her with their intensity. She felt her sex spasm around his still thrusting cock, her muscles contracting around him.

His big body tensed and he thrust all the way up inside her. “Emmia, Gods, I’m coming.” She felt him shudder and his cock jump deep inside her. He whispered her name and then groaned low as he climaxed.

He collapsed on her and held her tight, his cock still thrust deep into her body. They stayed that way until the waves passed, then Magnus rolled to the side. Her body felt sore in places, but it was a delicious soreness. It was the kind of soreness that declared her body well loved. Emmia lay on the bed, her body still tingling from pleasure. She cupped her breast, feeling the press of her still hardened nipple against her palm.

When her breathing had returned to normal, Emmia looked over at him. His cock glistened with her juices and was still hard as a rock.

He glanced at her, noticing where her gaze had landed. “It’s been a long time,” he explained. “I haven’t had sex since...” he trailed off, as unwilling as she to bring that subject up now.

"It was wonderful," she murmured. "It was *incredible*." She gave a little laugh of pure satisfaction and joy. She always felt this way with Quinn after they'd joined as well. Sated. Bone-deep happiness.

He reached over to pet her cunt. Leisurely, he slid a finger into her and, using their combined juices as a lubricant, slowly fucked her with it until she moaned. "Are you sore?"

She spread her thighs a little farther, giving him better access. "A little."

"I love the way you feel." He leaned over and slanted his mouth over hers. "I love to make you come. I love the way you sound when you do it. How you call my name." He stroked his finger over and over that knot of nerves inside her. Masterfully. Perfectly. Magnus knew how to touch her, the right pressure, and the right place.

"Umm." That's all she was capable of saying in response. She closed her eyes and gave herself over completely to the pleasure he exerted over her body.

"Are you going to come again for me, Emmia?" he whispered into her ear.

"Yes," she breathed, closing her eyes. Just then it exploded softly over her body, making her cry out. This one was longer, almost gentle. Magnus kissed her, eating up her groans, as he drew the climax out longer and longer.

When it came to its shuddering conclusion, Emmia felt every muscle in her body relax. She threaded her fingers through his thick hair and kissed the side of his head, realizing only afterward what an intimate gesture it was. It had seemed like such a natural thing to do.

He rolled to the side and pulled her against him, cradling her against the hard curve of his body. Together, they lay and breathed heavily, enjoying the aftermath of their pleasure.

Her face shielded from Magnus' view, Emmia smiled. It was so magnificent to lie in his arms, in perfect peace, in perfect satisfaction. No emotional distractions marred her enjoyment of his moment and the poignant memory of his body moving with hers. She didn't know how he felt about any of this, and he didn't know how she felt.

And that was a good thing.

She snuggled back against him, allowing all other concerns to leave her mind for the moment. His arms tightened around her and he gave a contented sigh. "I'm glad you came to Ravensbridge," he whispered. "I'm glad you came to my bed."

She laughed softly. "You're a strange man, Magnus, but I'm glad too."

"Did you leave anyone behind? Anyone you care about?"

She drew a careful breath. "No. I live alone. It's...easier that way." She paused. "But maybe, just maybe, if what we did this night works, perhaps I can learn eventually to live among others." The seething emotions of the keep were still being held at bay by the walls she'd built with Magnus, but she still doubted they'd hold. It just seemed too good to be true that they would.

Magnus urged her to roll over and she slid onto her back. He braced himself on his elbow and stared down into her face. "I think you are a magnificent woman, Emmia."

She felt her cheeks color. "Thank you."

"You need to give yourself to the world more often." He touched her cheek and then slid his hand down her throat, over her collarbone to tease a nipple. "And I love your body." He grinned wickedly. "I think you need to give it to me more often."

Her laugh came out a little raspy as he touched and gently squeezed her nipple. Her cunt responded, growing warm and soft with her honey. She shifted on the mattress, suppressing a moan.

"And you're lush," he continued, trailing his hand down her stomach, over her mound and to her pussy. She spread her thighs to allow him to play. "So sensual and sexual. Gods, I want you again."

Indeed, his cock had begun to harden once more against her thigh. Magnus stroked her clit over and over, pushing her to one more gentle and long climax. She shuddered in his arms and Magnus ate up her sounds by placing his mouth over hers as she came against his hand.

Then he pulled her against him once more and they slept.

* * * * *

Emmia closed the door of Magnus' room in the wee morning hours. The keep was quiet and dark. She'd slept full into the middle of the night in his bed. It had been a good sleep, untroubled by excess emotion that wasn't hers. It had been the best sleep she could remember having and she had to wonder if it was because of the walls that Magnus had helped her to build, or if it had been Magnus himself.

Just the fact that it was a question in her mind bothered her, but there it was, all the same, defying logic and her wishes.

Deep in thought, she turned to head down the corridor to her room...and ran smack into a broad chest. Startled, she looked up into Quinn's darkened eyes.

Emmia grabbed his arms. "You frightened me!" she exclaimed in a surprised and excited voice.

"I'm sorry."

"No! No, you don't understand. I didn't know you were there!"

He just stared down at her with a funny look on his face.

She sighed in exasperation. Magnus would know exactly what she meant. "I couldn't feel your emotions!"

"Have you learned to manage your ability?"

"Yes...no." She shook her head. "I don't know. Magnus had a fresh perspective on the matter. He may have helped me to get over the mental block I didn't know I had. Only time will tell if it works or not."

In the cool, dim light, Quinn blinked slowly. "You've been all this time with Magnus?"

Gods...

There was a note of jealousy in his voice and she dropped her guard a little to see if his emotion matched. It did. She built the walls back up and frowned. "Why are you jealous, Quinn? Why be jealous of Magnus' time with me? You and I have no understanding of monogamy in our relationship." She inhaled swiftly as understanding struck. "You're not jealous of Magnus' time with me, you're jealous of *my* time with *Magnus*. That's it, isn't it?"

Quinn took her shoulders and eased her back against the wall behind her. He placed his hands to either side of her head, pinning her there. "You misunderstand how swiftly my regard for you is developing, Emmia. You're only half correct. I *am* jealous that you spent the evening making love to Magnus, but I am also jealous that he made love to you."

"Quinn—"

"I can smell him on you and his scent on your flesh—the two of them mingling—is the best thing I can think of. I could lick every inch of your body right now and be happy." He grabbed her hips and pulled her up against him. She could feel the press of his cock against her stomach. "I want both of you and I want you at the same time."

Emmia's breath came swift and shallow at the thought of it. Was it wrong that she wanted that too? She closed her eyes as he nuzzled her ear. "Magnus still...cares for you, Quinn."

He stilled. "I know. But much lies between us now. I don't know if it's surmountable." He paused. "And it's my fault."

She kissed him on the lips, long and hard. The pain Quinn felt was in his eyes and in his voice and she wanted to take it away. "Come," she said, leading him down the corridor. "Let's go sleep."

* * * * *

From the other side of the door, Magnus listened to them progress down the hallway. His heart ached to go to Quinn, but part of him still hurt.

Gods, he wanted Quinn back so much.

Chapter Five

"Where are you taking me?" Quinn asked, his voice raspy with good-natured annoyance.

Emmia only glanced back with a smile and continued to drag him down the hall. On either side of the wide, open corridor that looked down on the courtyard, people stared. Their curiosity and wonderment pressed against her psychic barriers, but her new walls held up and sheltered her against the worst of it.

"Emmia!" Quinn grabbed her wrist and pulled her backward against him.

She laughed as he dragged her into a nearby alcove and pressed her against the wall. There they were sheltered from all prying eyes.

He slipped his hands to her waist and pressed his mouth to hers. His breath smelled of sweet mint and warmed her lips. "Tell me where we're going, or I'll take you back to my room and torture the information from you."

She tilted her head to the side and smiled. "Promise?"

She felt him smile in return. Then he kissed her breathless. His tongue slid between her lips and played restlessly with hers, making her body tighten. Her fingers curled into his upper arms.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against her. "Would it scare you if I said I were falling for you, Emmia? In ways not physical? In ways that might even involve the word...*love*?"

She bit her lower lip and suppressed a smile. It was nice to be desired, nice to be in a relationship, *nice* to be cared for. She felt so light today, so free from the heavy emotion that normal plagued her that it didn't scare her at all. "On the contrary. I care deeply for you too, Quinn. In any case, do you really think you can hide your emotions from me? I *know* what you feel for me." She paused. "I think I love you back, Quinn."

A smile spread over his face. "Oh good. Then tell me where you're taking me."

She laughed and slipped under his arm, dancing away from him into the corridor.

Quinn stared at her for a moment in disbelief and then smiled broadly. "Who are you and what have you done with Emmia?"

"Magnus freed her." She crooked a finger and continued down the corridor. "Come on now."

He fell into step beside her. "I'll go anywhere you lead, even if I don't know where it is. Although I am a little jealous that it was Magnus who helped you overcome your problem and not me."

She stopped short in the corridor. He took another couple steps before he realized she'd halted and turned to her with questions in his eyes. She took a step toward him and caught his hands in hers. "Quinn, you have no idea what your presence in my life means to me. Please understand how much you've helped me and how much I care for you. If it weren't for you I would still be on my cottage in the woods. I never would've discovered that I could be in a relationship despite my Talent. You showed me I could." Tears pricked her eyes. "I care so much about you."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. She inhaled and the scent of the soap he used filled her nostrils. "Likewise, my little love. Likewise."

She pulled away from him. "Now, come on. You keep slowing us down."

Emmia continued down the corridor and he followed. They approached a set of heavy, elaborately carved wooden doors and Emmia pushed them open. The room within was dark, lit only by a fire in the hearth. It was the way Magnus mostly spent his days, away from the pressing suspicion and seething emotion of the keep. She could hardly blame him.

He turned from the hearth. "Emmia," he greeted warmly. Then he got a glimpse of her companion and his voice took on a note of uncertainty, "Quinn."

Emmia stood to the side to let Quinn enter the room first. She'd set up a meeting between herself and Magnus in this room, not telling her either her true objective. "Now, I want you two to talk. I'll be back later." With that, she closed the doors, took the key from a chain under her shirt and secured the lock.

With a final, satisfied smile at the door, she turned and walked away.

* * * * *

Quinn tried the doors. "She locked us in."

"That minx."

Quinn stared at the doors for a long moment before turning. He had no idea what to do or say in this situation. Magnus gazed back, mute. Apparently, he didn't know what to do or say either.

So, inevitably, an awkward silence fell that seemed to last forever, but really only spanned a few seconds. Quinn shifted his weight and cleared his throat.

Magnus motioned to a small table near the fire. "I have some ale. Would you like a little?"

Quinn nodded and went to the table where Magnus poured him a glass. They sat down together and both took a drink. The cool, sweet ale cleared his mind a little so that he could think again. Didn't have anything to say? Wrong. He had lots to say.

"Magnus," he started, stopped, and then started again, "Magnus, I'm so sorry about these last months. I'm sorry that I ever doubted your innocence, even for a moment. I loved you then...as I love you now and I should have stayed by your side through everything—" He broke off, his chest filling with a warm mixture of emotion that he knew Magnus sensed. "Damn it, Magnus, I made so many mistakes. I wouldn't fault you for never forgiving me."

Magnus reached over and put his hand on Quinn's leg. His body reacted instantly to the other man's touch, his cock hardening. "I admit that it was...difficult." He paused. "But I love you too, Quinn, and that love is unconditional."

Quinn stood and paced to the fire and back. "How can you forgive me when I can't forgive myself, Magnus?"

Magnus rose and walked to him. In the dim light, he could see a familiar look on his face. Lust. Love. A heady combination of the two emotions. It was an expression that Quinn liked to see, or had...*before*.

Quinn's gaze traced the lines of Magnus' upper arms and chest as he approached. Then his gaze descended to Magnus' cock. It strained against the zipper of his pants.

"I can forgive you," said Magnus in a low, steady voice, "because I can feel what is in your heart right now." He reached out and placed his palm flat to Quinn's chest. The heat of his palm bled through the material of his shirt and into his skin. "You do still care for me, don't you, Quinn?"

Quinn closed his eyes for a moment, trying to quell the sexual response he felt. "With everything that I am."

"I still care for you, Quinn, and I want you right now." Magnus hand drifted down his chest to his groin, where he cupped Quinn's hardness in his hand. "And you want me too, don't you?"

"Yes." Quinn felt his heart rate speed up as Magnus stroked him through the material of his pants, making him harder. He stared into Magnus' eyes, feeling the need to dominant him rise up. "And I will have you."

Magnus' mouth curled in a satisfied smile. They often took turns taking the lead in sex, though Quinn was more often the more aggressive of the two in this regard. It was a game they played and Magnus knew he'd just pushed all of Quinn's buttons...and Magnus liked it.

He pulled away from Magnus and circled him, his eyes heavy-lidded. As he stalked around his former lover, he took in his gorgeous male body. They'd been dancing on the knife's edge of this for a long time now. It was time they gave in. He wanted to take Magnus, and take him forcefully. He wanted to assert his connection to him once more

and make him his. In this one blessed moment it was as if nothing had happened and they were the same two lovers they'd been before Caith's death.

Quinn stopped behind Magnus and traced over his shoulders and down his arms. He inhaled the scent of his skin and enjoyed the warmth of his flesh under his hands. "Gods, I've missed you," he said on a groan. This moment was just about perfect. The only thing that would have made it better was if Emmia had been present. He greatly desired to see that happen sometime in the near future.

Magnus covered his hands with his own. "I've missed you too."

Quinn dropped down to the button and zipper of Magnus' pants and undid them. His pants fell to the floor and Magnus' cock sprang free. Anticipation building within him, along with a huge dose of impatience, Quinn wrapped his hand around it and pumped. This time, it was Magnus who groaned.

His cock was long and thick and heavily veined. Right now, it was very, very hard—like silk-covered steel. He ran his fingers teasingly over the broad tip and then down to stroke his shaft. Magnus still had his hand over Quinn's and he moved with Quinn, pumping his cock against Quinn's palm until Magnus' breath came fast.

"I need you," Quinn rasped out. "I need you now."

In response, Magnus kissed him roughly, his tongue spearing past his lips and tangling. They wrestled each other to the floor, each pulling at the other's clothing until they were both half undressed. The buttons on Quinn's shirt popped and flew, while Quinn undid his fly with shaking hands. Quinn's need to join physically with the man he loved was like nothing he'd ever experienced.

Quinn flipped his lover to his stomach ran his hand down Magnus' ass. He pressed a finger into his anus, eliciting groans from them both. Magnus' cock jumped and he let out a guttural groan as Quinn skillfully manipulated his body into relaxing and opening.

When Magnus was ready, Quinn slipped the head of his cock within him, and then fed the length to him slowly, inch by inch. Magnus splayed his hand flat on the floor and pressed back against him on every thrust.

Quinn reached around and took Magnus' cock in hand, stroking in time as he thrust. He knew Magnus so well, knew that when his breathing hitched and changed that he was ready to climax. His cock jerked in Quinn's hand, he groaned his name and then came.

Quinn went right after him.

Panting, they collapsed to the floor. Quinn rolled onto his back and gave a short bark of laughter. "Emmia told us to *talk*."

After a moment, Magnus rolled over and grinned. "I'm glad we didn't just talk."

Quinn leaned in and gave him a lingering kiss. "That was explosive. Gods, I wanted you so much." His heart felt lighter than it had in a long time, looking into Magnus' smiling eyes. *This* was where he belonged. Anywhere Magnus was, that was home for Quinn. If one good thing had come out of their recent ordeal, it was that Quinn had truly realized how much he loved him.

Magnus tangled his hands through his hair. "I forgive you, Quinn."

His smile faded and he looked away. In the heat of the moment, he'd forgotten about that. Magnus' grip tightened in his hair, forcing his gaze back to his face. "No. *Look at me*. I forgive you." He paused. "Please. Please, just don't ever leave me again."

Quinn pulled his body against his. "Oh Gods, I won't. I promise that I'll never leave you again. I love you, Magnus." Their arms twined and they hung on to one another as if drowning.

They lay tangled together on the floor, listening to the fire crackle and pop and watching the shadows play along the walls. For the first time in a very long time, Quinn felt almost at peace. He was missing just one thing for perfect contentment.

They heard the lock on the door turning. Sunlight from outside spilled in, haloing Emmia's head as she peeked in.

And there it was now.

"Hello?" she called. "I hope you haven't killed each other while I've been gone."

Magnus chuckled.

Emmia closed the door behind her and caught a glimpse of them lying on the floor once her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. Her footsteps sounded on the floor as she walked to them. "Well," she said, standing over them with a hand to her hip and a superior look on her face. "I see there was no murder after all. Just some sexual mayhem. I hope you two had fun—"

Quinn moved fast as a snake, reaching up and pulling her down into his arms. She let out a squeal of surprise which he quickly swallowed as he sealed her mouth with his and rolled her to lie in between himself and Magnus.

Finally he broke the kiss and Emmia lay there looking dazed. Magnus had moved in on her other side so that she was effectively sandwiched between them. Emmia sighed and snuggled against them both. "Mmm...I was a bit chilled. Not anymore."

Magnus shared a look with Quinn over her head. It was one of hunger laid bare. There was no question they would try to get Emmia into bed with them. It was definitely an objective they shared. Quinn didn't think it would be all that hard. He knew well she was fascinated with the idea.

Emmia closed her eyes and murmured, "So, I take it you two kissed and made up."

"We did more than kiss," Magnus said, running his fingers through her hair. "But yes, we made up."

"Good," she murmured. "It was painful watching you both pine away for one another."

"Although," continued Magnus. "We should put you over our knees for locking us up in this room that way."

She gave a soft, throaty laugh. "It was the only way I knew how to do it and, anyway, I'd probably like being put over your knee. Not much of a punishment, that."

Quinn traced his index finger down her cheek, to the full plumpness of her breast and brushed her nipple. It hardened instantly beneath the fabric of her shirt and her breathing quickened. Her eyes flew open and she struggled to stand. "Oh no, you don't, Quinn. I have work to do and you two don't need me right now –"

"I'll always need you, love," answered Quinn right away. He propped his elbow on the floor and rested his chin in his palm. "Come back down here. I don't mean for anything major to happen, just a little petting. Nothing wrong with a little petting." He flashed a wicked grin. "Never hurt anyone."

She shook her head. "No. You two need time to be alone."

Magnus went to grab for her and she stepped out of his way, laughing. "I'm leaving now," she called as she went toward the door. "I won't lock it this time, though."

* * * * *

She closed the doors behind her and walked to the edge of the balcony for a moment, smiling and enjoying the deepening twilight.

Life had suddenly started to get good.

"Where is Lord Magnus?"

She jumped, startled and turned to find Arhild squinting at her. "He's in his chambers."

Arhild turned and stalked toward the doors. Emmia dropped her shields, wanting to know how Arhild was feeling, and quickly followed him.

"You can't go in there!" she said, pulling at his arm.

Annoyance. "I need to speak with his lordship immediately." He reached for the doorknob.

"No! He's not alone. He's with...he's with Quinn."

Hatred. Disgust. Murderous rage.

The sudden burst of dark feeling socked her in the stomach and made her take several steps back from him.

Arhild turned toward her. "Revolting." He pointed at the door. "It's an abomination what they do. T'was an abomination what they did with Caith!" Then he turned on his heel and stalked in the opposite direction, leaving Emmia at loss for words or thought, swimming in the backlash of Arhild's abhorrence.

Chapter Six

Two days later, Emmia sat in her room contemplating all she knew. She had narrowed her list of suspects to two—Arhild and Rolf. With no concrete evidence, she was going on pure emotion to make her determination.

And she couldn't.

Before the episode with Arhild outside Magnus' chamber, her main suspect had been Rolf. Then Arhild had unleashed that heavy stream of violent emotion at her over the fact that Magnus and Quinn were lovers and that had made her uncertain about Rolf once again.

She stared into the low burning fire in the hearth with her eyes unfocused and curled deeper into the blanket she had snuggled into against the morning chill. A steaming cup of coffee sat next to her on a small table. She thought best in the morning hours, when most of the keep—and their emotions—still slumbered. The shields had been a huge boon, but they didn't block everything, just made it more manageable.

Right now she simply couldn't make a determination one way or another. She had to wait for one of them to implicate themselves. Usually it happened that way. The perpetrator would break under the stress and scrutiny of the ever-present justice mercenary and do something to out himself.

The tension had seemed to have grown steadily since her arrival. It was just a matter of time before things exploded. She'd seen it happen over and over.

And what happened when the mystery was solved, the bad guy brought to justice and her work here was done? That remained unclear. So much had happened to her since Quinn had first stepped onto her lands and cajoled her to come here. She had changed so much. She'd made connections with other people—real, live, breathing people—and she'd never realized just how much she'd wanted them or *needed* them.

She also needed those she'd connected with, namely Magnus and Quinn.

She'd fallen for Quinn hard in the past weeks since she'd arrived at Ravensbridge. She knew how easily she could fall for Magnus as well. She stood staring at the edge of cliff where he was concerned. One little push would send her head over heels.

The thought of leaving them, going back to her secluded cottage, was nearly unbearable. At one time she'd counted that place her only refuge and her only opportunity to retain her sanity. Now that she'd managed to harness and control her gift, now that she'd fallen in love, it seemed a prison.

She felt a warm tear slide down her cheek and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. Love was a double-edged sword. She'd been so happy lately. Now she had to brace for sorrow.

Someone knocked at her door, startling her. She called for the person to enter, but knew it was Quinn before he even came into the room. Magnus was close behind him. She brushed her fingers through her long, loose hair a little self-consciously as they closed the door behind them and approached her chair. She'd hardly expected visitors this early in the morning.

Quinn kissed her lips and knelt beside her chair. "We wanted to ask you to go riding with us today."

"Yes. I'd love that." She didn't have anything pressing on her agenda today. Now it was just a matter of waiting.

Magnus knelt on his other side and slipped his hand over hers. "Why do you look so sad, Emmia?"

She glanced away from him, unwilling to reveal her feelings. What if they thought she was silly for wanting more than a sexual relationship with them? What if she scared them away with her emotions? What they rejected her? She wasn't carefree, life-loving Caith, in it just for the sex, but did they know that?

No, she couldn't tell Magnus the truth. There was too much risk. She wanted as much time with them both as possible, so she couldn't say a word about how she really felt. That path was fraught with too much danger.

Quinn's brow furrowed. "What is it, love?"

"I want you to make love to me," she whispered. "Both of you."

Quinn and Magnus exchanged a look, and then Quinn took her hand and helped her to stand. Her blanket fell away, leaving her in just the linen shift she slept in. He pulled her against his body and laid a kiss to the top of her head. "I believe that's something Magnus and I both want too. We weren't expecting it here and now, but it's a gift we'd never turn away from."

She closed her eyes when she felt Magnus press against her back. The warmth of both their bodies was a tonic for her frayed emotions and it drew a deep sigh of contentment from her. Magnus' hand grasped her shift and drew it up and over her head, tossing it to the floor at their feet. Now she was nude from her toes to the top of her head and sandwiched between two still fully clothed men.

Her breath came heavy and her heart beat as deep desire filled her. Her cunt felt warm and wet already and they hadn't even touched her yet. Quinn drew her up against his chest, kissing her open-mouthed. His tongue hungrily mated with hers while his hand delved down to stroke her sex. He teased her clit, and slid his finger inside her to prime her cunt. Behind her, Magnus ran his hand over her skin, running his fingers along the cleft of her ass and kissing and nipping her shoulder.

Emmia let out another shuddering sigh of happiness and clung to Quinn's shoulders. She felt like she was drowning in a sea of pleasure. Without a word, Magnus took her from Quinn, lifted her and carried her to the bed. He lay down on top of her, still fully clothed, his gaze intent on her face. Balancing on one hand, he stroked her between her thighs, still staring into her eyes. She shuddering under his touch, feeling a gush of warm honey as her body responded to him.

"You two never doubted that I'd want this, did you?" she murmured.

Quinn lay on the bed beside her. He was now undressed. "Not for a moment."

"We're going to tie you," said Magnus.

She blinked in surprise. That hadn't been something she'd expected at all. "That didn't sound like a question."

Quinn smiled. "That's because it wasn't."

She lifted a brow. "Have you two been discussing this?"

Quinn just gave her a sexy little smile and didn't answer.

Magnus slid from the bed and, in the trunk at the end of the bed, found two long silk scarves that she hadn't even known were there. He and Quinn each bound a wrist and tied her to the bed frame. She tried them and found the bonds secure, but not uncomfortable. They'd tied the knots so the scarves restrained her, but didn't hurt her.

Then they stood back and admired their handiwork. "She looks beautiful bound that way, don't you think?" commented Quinn with a glint of mischievousness in his eyes.

"I could stand here all day and admire her," answered Magnus as he undressed, "if I didn't want to fuck her so badly. Do you want to fuck her, Quinn?"

Quinn let his gaze slide down her body, warming every inch of her skin it touched. "Until she can't even think. I want to fuck her fast and hard, and then make love to her slow and easy."

"Excellent plan."

Together they crawled onto the bed on either side of her and stroked their hands down her body, petting her breasts, teasing her nipples and delving between her thighs to stroke her cunt. Soon she was twisting against her bonds, wanting more than just this foreplay. She wanted their cocks, both of them. She wanted to touch them, lick them, bring them deep into her body.

"Please," she whispered.

The two men exchanged another look, seeming to communicate nonverbally. It was Magnus who mounted her first, spreading her legs and setting the head of his smooth cock to the entrance of her needy cunt. Quinn settled down beside them, allowing his hand to stroke Magnus' shaft and her pussy with an easy, equal skill.

"How does she feel?" Quinn asked Magnus.

Magnus slid the crown of his cock between her nether lips, making her gasp. "Hot and silky sweet." He pushed in another inch, stretching her muscles with his incredible width. "Like heaven," he finished in a strained voice. "She always feels like heaven." With one sharp jab of his hips, he seated himself within her.

Emmia grabbed the scarves in her fists and wallowed in the intense feeling of having Magnus so deep inside her. When he began to thrust, she thought she'd lose her mind from the pleasure. Quinn leaned over and kissed her, eating up all the small sounds she made, all her sighs, and every time she murmured their names.

Magnus hooked his broad hands under her knees and spread her thighs as he took her, allowing Quinn to watch his cock tunneling in and out of her pussy. Quinn settled in to play with them both, running his fingers along Magnus' shaft on every outward thrust and petting Emmia's clit skillfully. His fingers stroked her over and over, relentlessly driving her to the brink of climax...and then pushed her right over the edge.

Emmia's body tensed as pleasure poured through her. Quinn continued to stroke her clit while Magnus took her harder and faster, driving her orgasm to a shattering crescendo that made her cry out nearly full-throated and practically see stars. She felt Magnus' big body tense as well, and soon felt him shoot deep within her with a groan that reverberated through her.

She sagged in the scarves, her body limp in the aftermath of the pleasure. "Untie me," she said to Quinn. "If I can't touch you two soon, I'm going to go crazy."

Quinn untied her and she got up on her hands and knees and crawled across the bed to Magnus. She pressed her lips to his and kissed him deeply, as they both rested

on their knees in the center of the mattress. He threaded his fingers through her hair and slanted his mouth greedily over hers, delving his tongue between her lips to possess every inch of her mouth.

Behind her, Quinn pressed his body to hers and ran his hands down her back, over her buttocks. He lingered there a moment before sliding his hands between her and Magnus to cup her breasts.

Though she'd just climaxed hard and long, all it had seemed to do was prime her body for more. She'd never been with two men at once this way and it was pure ecstasy. She wanted to take advantage of every moment of it.

She broke her kiss with Magnus and turned to Quinn. Knowing her mouth was swollen and red from Magnus' kiss, she pressed her lips to Quinn's, wanting to share Magnus with him in this way.

Quinn made a hungry, growling sound deep in his throat and pressed her down onto the mattress beneath him. He placed his palms flat against the bed on either side of her head, pinning her there, and kissed her deeply. Eventually, he moved down her body, stopping to suck at her nipples at leisure and then forcing her legs apart and settling there to lick her.

In the meantime, Magnus had straddled her chest and she took his cock in hand eagerly. She pulled him toward her mouth and suckled his now flaccid flesh between her lips, tasting the musky flavor of herself on him just slightly.

Between her thighs, Quinn had gone to work, driving her back to that point of pure pleasure where she couldn't form thought anymore. He slipped two fingers inside and worked them in and out, rasping over her g-spot with every inward thrust as he set about sucking and licking her fat, aroused clit.

Meanwhile, she played with Magnus' cock, enjoying how soft it was and the texture of it against her tongue. It didn't stay soft for long, however. Soon Magnus was again growing hard between her lips.

“Emmia,” Magnus breathed, staring down at her. “You’re going to make me come again and Quinn has barely had a chance to touch you yet.” He moved off from her.

Quinn looked up from between her spread thighs with a look so needful, so feral, that it sent shivers up her spine. “On your hands and knees,” he commanded.

She went to her hands and knees and felt the press of Quinn’s cock to her sex as he mounted her. He was not gentle. He’d obviously waited too long for that. Quinn grasped her hips and thrust, seating himself within her to his balls in one powerful movement. Emmia’s head whipped back and groaned at the sensation of it.

Magnus moved to her head and she took him into her mouth once again as Quinn set up an easy, steady rhythm. Quinn’s thrusts slid Magnus’ cock between her lips every time. Magnus threaded his fingers through her hair and fucked her mouth as sure and easy as Quinn thrust into her pussy. The three of them became like a machine, all the parts moving in perfect accord. They seemed to fit together flawlessly, each giving pleasure to the other in turn.

Emmia went first, tipping into her climax so fast and hard she nearly lost her hold on Magnus’ cock. Magnus went next, shooting deep down Emma’s throat even as her orgasm was fading. Finally Quinn’s climax exploded and he called both their names over and over as he filled her with his seed.

They collapsed onto the mattress, all satisfied and limp as noodles. Each of them was sheened with perspiration, despite the morning chill. Emmia’s long hair was sticking to her skin. When the cold did finally start to bite, the two men pulled her near and cuddled her close, protecting her from shivering.

Emmia drowsed as their hands idly stroked her, unsure of the last time she’d felt so content, so...complete. “Is this what it was like between you two and Caith?”

There was silence for a moment and then Magnus said, “No. It was a little different with Caith. The mood wasn’t so serious, so—”

“Loving,” Quinn supplied from behind her.

Emmia turned that over in her mind for a moment. "What does that mean...exactly?"

Magnus stroked his fingers through her hair as he mulled his response. "With Caith, it was always very playful and detached. She was about the pleasure, about the sex itself. With you, it's different, more...intense. Deeper, if you will pardon the unintentional pun."

Quinn spooned her back and kissed her shoulder. "For example, Caith would never have stayed here with us afterward this way. She had her fun and then left."

"Was she frightened of connecting with someone on a deeper level?"

"No," answered Magnus. "I don't think so. I think Caith simply wasn't made for that. She wished for superficial relationships, ones she could toss aside when she was bored. She wanted to experience every aspect of life and wanted nothing to hold her back. She was very much a free spirit."

Had her love of experiencing life without regard for propriety led to her death? It was possible.

Emmia snuggled back against Quinn and nuzzled the place where Magnus' throat and shoulder met, inhaling the scent of him happily. "I can't think of anything better than this. *This* is almost better than sex."

Quinn's hand skated down between her thighs to stroke her softly. "I like it when you come, Emmia," he whispered into her ear. "You're so beautiful when you climax."

Her breath caught as Magnus kissed her, and then moved down to suckle her nipples. The two men slowly, easily worked her body to another shuddering climax. The muscles of her cunt pulsed and contracted around Quinn's pistoning fingers and her finger twisted into Magnus' hair where he laved her nipples, each in turn.

By now Magnus and Quinn were hard once more. Emmia took them both in hand and stroked them until the two men were groaning. Seeing the possibilities of having two cocks at her disposal, she urged them to their knees, side by side in front her and took turns taking each of them deep into her mouth.

When she thought Magnus was going to go, he pulled away from her. "No, in you, love. I want for us to finish inside your sweet body."

"Both of you?" Her eyes widened. "At the same time?"

"Both of us," answered Quinn. "Remember how I showed you, love?"

While Magnus lay down and guided her to mount him, Quinn sought the small vial of olive oil a servant had brought for her morning bread and returned to the bed.

Magnus jabbed his hips up into her already well-loved cunt and she gasped with pleasure and surprise. Quinn wasted no time settling behind her. He spread the olive oil on his cock and also on the opening of her ass.

She stiffened in apprehension, knowing what Quinn was about to do, even though the combination of all those little nerves being stimulated along with Magnus' gentle in and out thrusts was very distracting. Once more, she felt drunk on passion and lust.

"It's all right," Quinn murmured into her ear. He slid a finger into her, then two, widening her, stretching her for his cock. "Remember in my room that day? Remember how I took you and how much you liked it?"

She closed her eyes, bit her lower lip and nodded.

"Remember how fantasizing about how Magnus and I would make love to you at the same time made you come? It's not a fantasy now, is it?"

She shook her head slightly, lost in the dual sensation of having her cunt and ass stimulated at the same time.

"Did you know that day that Magnus was watching us from the corner?"

Her eyes flew open and met Magnus' gaze.

"It's true," said Magnus. "I watched you two and longed to be a part of your intimacy, as I am now. Gods, you were beautiful, Emmia, the stretch and lines of your body, how you gave yourself over to passion with so few inhibitions."

She should have been mad, should have left them both right then and there, but they knew her better than that. They knew this information would arouse her, and it did. "You-you watched us?" It came out all breathy sounding.

A very male, very self-satisfied smile spread over Magnus' face. "Watched and wanted."

Quinn chose that moment to ease the head of his cock into her ass. She gasped at the stretch of her muscles and grabbed the headboard above. Magnus reached up and rolled her nipples between his fingers as Quinn worked slowly inch-by-well-lubricated-inch deep within her.

It burned. It stung. It stretched. But mostly it felt very, *very* good. There was a moment when she almost told him to back out, that she didn't want to be taken this way, but her muscles relaxed a bit more and all was well.

She eased down to press her hands on either side of Magnus' body. He grabbed her hips and shafted her slowly. While, behind her, Quinn did the same.

Emmia saw stars.

Never had she thought her body capable of this much pleasure. Being filled by the two men she cared so very deeply for, having both her orifices pleased this way, brought tears to her eyes.

The three of them moved together in perfect unison, giving and taking pleasure in equal amounts. Magnus moved deep within her, playing with her breasts and kissing her as he drove her to a shattering climax.

Quinn came first, with a shout of exaltation and both their names rolling off his tongue in succession. Emmia went right after him, like a domino, feeding off his ecstasy. Magnus went last, pulling her down against him and kissing her all over her face as he whispered sweet, loving things in her ear.

As Emmia lay sandwiched between them once more, with the scent of them both on her skin and their seed deep inside her, she knew she didn't want to leave.

Not ever.

* * * * *

It was a beautiful day, bright and full of sunshine. By the time the three of them had bathed and dressed, it was midafternoon, but the day had warmed considerably from the morning.

They each took their favorite horses from the stables and rode from the courtyard and into the meadows that lay around Ravensbridge keep. It was so nice to be away from all of Ravensbridge's inhabitants for the day. It was true she'd been able to build walls to protect herself from the rawest emotions, but the barriers weren't completely soundproof, some emotion always made its way through.

Magnus had brought a small lunch for them all, so they found a good, shaded place to stop in the forest, dismounted and secured their horses. Quinn spread a few blankets on the grass and they all sat down to partake of the bread, cheese and wine.

"I'm starving," Emmia said, biting into a thick piece of nutty bread.

"It's well-earned. You were very...*active* this morning, Emmia," answered Quinn with a twinkle in his eye. "We all were."

Magnus laughed. "I'd like to be...*active* again sometime today too."

"And now I'm hungry and exhausted, but in a good way," she replied after she'd chewed and swallowed. "I'm so happy to see you both together again. It's like I can feel *both* your emotions and they're singing at the proximity of each other. It's just beautiful."

Magnus leaned over and gave her a long, deep kiss. He set his forehead to hers and murmured against her lips, "It's not only because Quinn and I are together, Emmia. It's also because you're with us."

She smiled and held his gaze for a long, pregnant moment.

Quinn set his wine bottle to the side and joined them, pressing his body close to theirs, so that the three of them kissed.

Emmia backed away to allow the two men a moment. They took it with both hands and crushed their bodies together. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she watched Quinn and Magnus kiss. Their lips and tongue mated tenderly and their hands found purchase on each other's body as though they'd drown if they didn't have each other. It made her heart swell with happiness to see them both that way and her Talent responded, taking Quinn's love and making her heart fill with euphoria.

"Disgusting!"

The joy Emmia felt shattered into bitter fragments at the sound of Arhild's voice behind her. She'd been so focused on the emotion she felt from Quinn and Magnus that she hadn't even felt him approach. Now his hatred and revulsion rolled over her with the force of a team of workhorses. She built up her walls a little, but not completely. Something in her sensed she needed her Talent now.

"Arhild?" Magnus queried, coming to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

Arhild stood with his horse's reins in hand. "I went see to my lands, then came back through the forest and saw you *three* like that. It's an abomination! A sacrilege!"

"It's love!" Emmia shouted at him, unable to tamp down her ire. "See with different eyes. See *correctly*, Arhild!"

Arhild took several menacing steps toward her. "What I see is a little *slut* who is so deviant she can't limit herself to one man." There was a light in Arhild's eyes that Emmia didn't like.

Magnus and Quinn both rushed Arhild at the same time, having taken offense at what he'd said to her, but Arhild grabbed her first and produced a long, wickedly thin blade, which he pressed to her throat.

Emmia gasped, feeling herself pressed up against Arhild and the blade making an incision in her skin. A thread of hot red blood ran down her throat and pain burned her, making her wince.

Oh, if only she'd come with her swords. She'd left them in her room, not expecting to encounter violence on an innocent horse ride.

She was certain Caith hadn't been expecting it, either.

Sorrow for Caith welled up within her as she realized who had killed her. Goddess, she hoped Arhild had killed her in her sleep so she'd never seen the hatred in her own father's eyes.

"Back away!" shouted Arhild at the two men. "Back away from me, or I will cut her. Don't doubt me."

Quinn and Magnus both stopped dead in their tracks.

"Don't hurt her," rasped out Magnus. "I swear, Arhild. Hurt her and I'll mount your head outside the gates of Ravensbridge."

"You would kill me over this little slut?" yelled Arhild. "I'm the richest and most powerful of your retainers. You wouldn't dare hurt me."

Magnus took a menacing step forward, but Quinn stopped him with a hand to his chest. Magnus narrowed his eyes and when he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous-sounding. "I would flay every inch of your skin from your body and ensure you were conscious while I did it."

"I am Caith's father! The last bit of her you have to hang on to."

"But you killed her, didn't you?" Emmia asked. She made her voice sound weak and shaky, though the only emotion she felt now was anger, not fear. She could free herself from Arhild's sloppy hold at any time she chose, though she was likely the only one in this company who knew that. "You killed Caith because you found out about her relationship with Magnus and Quinn." It wasn't a question. Riding the waves of Arhild's emotions now, she knew it to be truth.

Arhild made a keening noise and she felt a wave of grief from him. "She dishonored our family. She had to die before she could disgrace our name even more."

Quinn's face twisted in grief and Magnus dropped his head for a long moment. When Magnus raised his head, there was a look pure malice on his face. Emmia knew she had to be free of Arhild's grip soon. Magnus was barely hanging on to his control.

“So you knocked Magnus out as he slept, took his sword and killed your daughter with it?” Emmia asked, her voice harsh with emotion and her gaze fixed on Magnus, who seethed with a rage even she could feel. “Then you put blood on Magnus’ shirt and planted the sword in his chamber, didn’t you, Arhild?”

“Yes.” Arhild wailed. “Gods, *yes.*” Relief washed through the man, almost as if his confession was a burden lifted. His body shuddered as a sob rose up from the depths of him and covered her over with grief.

Finally, she felt grief from him.

Emmia grabbed his wrist, pushed it away from her throat and spun away from him in one fluid movement. Her booted foot came up in a flash and kicked him in the stomach. He doubled over and Magnus and Quinn were on him in a flash.

Emmia stumbled backward and fell on her butt in the grass, watching as Arhild fought Magnus and Quinn tooth and nail. Quinn and Magnus battled to restrain him, but Arhild was wiry and strong.

It happened so fast it almost seemed to occur in slow motion. Arhild lunged to the ground, found the knife he’d dropped and plunged it into his own throat.

Emmia stared, watching the blood flow and trying to block the gurgling sound from her ears. Magnus and Quinn stilled, watching the dying man at their feet.

Regret washed through Arhild, poignant and deep. It was sweet and bitter and burned the back of Emmia’s tongue with its strength. Then, there was no emotion and Arhild was still and silent.

Silence descended on the meadow. All Emmia could hear was the sound of the men’s labored breathing and her own beating heart.

She stared at Arhild’s crumpled body, pitiful on the ground at their feet. Tears rolled down her cheeks and her face crumpled as she sobbed in relief for Arhild, who had wanted death in the end, and in relief for Magnus.

It was over. Magnus was free.

Chapter Seven

Emmia packed the rest of her things in her sack and sighed. It was indeed over. The keep's inhabitants had accepted Arhild's guilt and Magnus' rule without apprehension once more. When she dropped her shields, the keep felt light and joyous, instead of heavy with suspicion and fear as it had before.

Yes, her work was done and now she had no excuse to stay. In any case, neither Quinn nor Magnus had asked her to. When she'd mentioned it the night before, neither man had raised a syllable in protest.

It was no huge surprise. After all, they had no formal understanding of a relationship beyond the sexual and, while she had fallen in love with both Quinn and Magnus, she'd had no true, *clear* indication that they shared her feelings as deeply. She'd perceived love from both of them at various times, of course, but she could have easily been confusing love with lust. Anyway, they had each other now.

She picked up her bag and turned toward the door, ready to finally take her leave of his place. Slowly, she made her way down to the stables. She would make her horse ready and store her gear, then go and find the men to say her goodbyes.

She stepped off the last step into the courtyard, and raised her head to see Magnus and Quinn both astride. "Where have you been, Emmia?" asked Magnus. "It's nearly noon. We've been waiting forever."

"Excuse me?" she asked, walking toward them. "What are you talking about?"

"You said last night that you were returning home," answered Quinn. "Surely you didn't think you were leaving without us."

"Uh..."

"I thought a trip into the forests was an excellent idea," added Magnus. "I could use a little vacation from this place and Rolf is more than able to take care of things in my

absence. A short vacation at your cottage, alone, just the three of us, sounds very good to me.”

“Then we can talk about what happens next,” Quinn put in. His face grew serious. “You have gotten over your inability to stomach human companionship, haven’t you, love?”

Emmia blinked.

“Because I thought maybe we could all live here at Ravensbridge,” said Magnus. “If that’s all right with you, of course.”

“Umm.”

“Or perhaps we could travel a bit, go and see your sister Rhea. You miss her, don’t you, Emmia?”

“I do, but... What are you talking about?”

Quinn slid from his horse and Magnus followed. They both approached her, getting down on bended knee and each of them taking a hand.

“Emmia,” started Magnus.

“Emmia,” said Quinn, with a glance at Magnus. “We love you.” At his words, Quinn’s love for her poured past her barriers, breaking them utterly and filling her chest up with warmth.

“We love you, Emmia,” added Magnus. And even though she couldn’t feel emotion from Magnus normally, she felt it then. The love increased by half, making joy bubble through her body and the taste of honey tease the back of her tongue.

“Live with us,” said Quinn.

“Marry us,” put in Magnus. He pulled a bracelet from his pocket. It was thin, gold and encrusted with rubies and sapphires. “Rubies are the jewel of my house and sapphires are the jewel of Quinn’s. We had this piece of jewelry forged for you to wear as our bride, so that all who view it know that you belong to us.”

“I-I don’t know what to say.” Her voice came out a whisper.

“Say you’ll wear it. Say you’ll marry us, Emmia,” said Quinn. “Say no and you break our hearts forever.”

Emmia fell to her knees before the two men and embraced them. “Of course, it’s yes. I love you both and want nothing more than to spend my days with you.”

Around them came cheers and clapping. She glanced up and realized that a crowd had formed. Then Magnus and Quinn crushed her to them, kissing her over her face.

“What do you feel right now, my Emmia,” Quinn whispered into her ear.

“Happy,” she murmured. “Happy and loved.”

“We aim to keep you that way, love,” Magnus murmured. “Forevermore.”

About the Author

Anya Bast is a multipublished erotic fantasy & paranormal romance author. Primarily, she writes happily-ever-afters with lots of steamy sex. After all, happily-ever-afters with lots of sex are the very best kind.

She enjoys the study of Celtic myth, dreaming, and shamanism and incorporates what she learns into her paranormal stories.

Anya got her start writing fantasy romance. Since writing a little hotter seemed to come naturally to her, she had no trouble making the move to erotic romance. She loves writing books that are heavy on plot, emotion and character development, and also have spicy, no-holds-barred sex scenes. Exploring the elements of dark sexual fantasy in her writing is what Anya does best.

She lives in the country with her husband. They share their lives with eight cats and one perplexed dog.

Anya welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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