



Kate Steele

*Soul
Familiar 3:*
Fated

Changeling Press

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Soul Familiar 3: Fated

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“Fate is not an eagle, it creeps like a rat.” In other words it’s a sneaky, hairy little bast... um, son-of-a-gun and you have two options on how to handle it. You let it walk all over you, or you wrestle it into submission. Not that I’m into rat wrestling, but I for one do not intend to have tiny footprints all over whatever part of my life fate chooses to use as a doormat.

My name is Alex Layton and enough with the metaphors already. My lover, wizard-partner and soul mate Tyler Montgomery and I have run out of time. As decreed by the Council of Elders that governs the affairs of soul familiars, Tyler and I must now face a trial of magical combat. If we win, our bond becomes permanent. If we lose, we are separated forever.

With options like those, fate had better watch her ass.

Chapter One

The present...

"Are those facing challenge ready to begin?"

I turned my head, my gaze locking on the most beautiful, violet-blue eyes I'd ever seen. Should other eyes somehow manage to outshine them, I would never notice. These are the eyes that see me as friend, as partner, as lover. The eyes of my soul mate, Tyler Montgomery. In answer to my unspoken question, he nodded his head. There was confidence and determination writ large in his regard, not to mention something even more precious to me at this moment. A level of warmth, trust, and caring bestowed on me and unsurpassed by the efforts of any other living being. I returned his gift full measure, then gave my attention back to the Council of Elders and replied in a voice that rang with conviction, a voice echoed by that of my lover.

"We are."

Eight hours earlier...

It all felt so good. The firm mattress beneath me. The firmer body that blanketed me from above. Tyler's mouth was fused to mine, his tongue doing a unique, twisting, sensual dance in my mouth that shut my brain functions down while heightening the sensations of every other nerve ending in my body. Arms looped around my shoulders and neck, he undulated against me, bare skin sliding across bare skin, our taut muscles flexing in a mutual, lazy rhythm as we tried to absorb each other.

My hands were full of sculpted yet plump flesh. Tyler's ass. Those smooth cheeks tensed and released within the curve of my palms each time he ground himself against me. Our hard cocks were sandwiched between our bellies, and I could feel the

flinty buds of his aroused nipples boring into my chest just as I'm sure he could feel mine. Roiling rivers of sensation flowed from the top of my head to my toes and back, or perhaps it was just the hot rush of blood pouring through my veins. At times like these, such things are not always clear. I do know for sure that my heart was pounding and my lungs were laboring as I poured each life-giving breath into my lover and took his in return.

My need continued to rise with every passing second, the fire in my loins burning, my cock aching to be buried within him, but I held on, held off, wanting this to last and last and last. I needed him, needed Tyler with every ounce of desire, passion, and love I possessed. He was my all, my everything, and I knew, even as we tried desperately to crawl inside one another, that in a matter of hours it could all be over.

That fleeting thought swept through me, rousing a torrent of enraged denial. With a mindless growl, I bucked and twisted. Rolling Tyler beneath me, with a flurry of movements more instinctual than reasoned, I physically joined us. Fully, completely. His tight entrance -- already lubed and ready -- softened to ease my way in, and the hot, moist chamber that awaited within molded itself to my burrowing shaft. Gasping for air, I voiced my defiance aloud, a harsh, rasping promise to any and every power in the universe.

"Never. Never, never, never, never! I will never let him go. Do you hear me? Never."

"I hear you," Tyler answered, his own voice rusty and hoarse. "And so does whoever else you're standing up to. I'm not going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. Now give it to me, Alex. Everything. All of you. Fuck me. Fill me up."

Tyler's desperate plea got me moving. Following the mating dictates of nature ingrained into every male since time began, I pumped my hips, thrusting my cock deep within the sheath of his velvety passage.

At first it was just me, alone in the knowledge of my feelings, my sensations, my impressions of what transpired between us, but with each stroke the barriers between us weakened. Tyler's consciousness bled into mine. Ethereal tendrils, born of Tyler's

essence, wrapped around my sense of self, sinking their roots into me until we were no longer two separate entities, but one. One spirit, one soul, one body joined and experiencing every touch, every sound, every taste and smell created by our lovemaking.

Not only did I feel my hands touching his skin, I felt his skin being touched. Just as breath left my lungs, I sensed it warm and caress the flesh of his throat as though his throat was my own. As friction brushed across my tongue and pressure was exerted against my teeth, I experienced the wet caress across his shoulder and the sharp pleasurable pain of my bite as it dug into his muscle.

What was his became mine, and mine his. All the pleasure, passion, doubt, desperation, joy, excitement, need and desire was ours, magnified twofold into one gigantic, tumultuous bubble of existence. Instinct alone kept me moving, that and a lust so pure and sweet it demanded fulfillment. I thrust into my lover again and again and though it was I who fucked him, I, in turn felt penetrated, taken, fucked, hard and fast and deep.

The need to come morphed from a niggling craving to a full-fledged ravenous hunger. It gnawed at our bellies, the multiple stabs of its razor sharp teeth sending bright, glowing streams of lava-like heat shooting up our spines and into our balls until it erupted in a flood of hot seed that raced the lengths of our cocks, bursting free to drench the tight sleeve of Tyler's passage and the slim space between our torsos.

Our cries rang out in unison; our bodies shuddered and jerked. Our orgasm washed over us in a tsunami that sent us tumbling into a maelstrom of near-agonizing pleasure. It blanked our minds and vision with the sheer power of its being, holding us in what seemed an endless stasis of bliss.

As much as we'd like such experiences to last, they don't. Gradually our climax relinquished its total dominion over us and ebbed away. What remained were two men, exhausted, sated, boneless, and entangled together in a stunned yet oh-so-satisfied heap.

Tyler was the first to stir, his hand rubbing my back. "You're hot when you're defiant," he teased with a husky rasp.

I managed a snort of amusement. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, and I love you, you know. That's never gonna change."

"Same here," I answered. "I wish I could come up with something more profound, but I guess that says it all."

"It's more than enough," Tyler softly replied then sighed. "Shall we get cleaned up?"

"Not yet. This is one time I don't mind being sweaty and covered with cum."

"Don't complain if you wake up and we have to peel ourselves apart."

"I won't. If you knew I'd been considering sealing us together with superglue you'd know how unlikely I'd be to complain about something like that."

"Are you that worried?"

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried, but I have confidence in us. I know my own abilities and I've watched you grow into yours over the past few months. We have everything we need to win this contest, including the motivation."

"Especially the motivation," Tyler emphasized.

"So true."

I closed my eyes. I believe I dozed as often as I lay there awake and aware of every nuance of my surroundings. My thoughts drifted in random patterns, never really settling in one place, which gave me ample time to enjoy the sensory impressions I wallowed in. The bedroom windows were open. The air that drifted in brought the scent of dirt and grass and ozone. It had rained a few hours earlier. I always love how the rain intensifies the outdoor, earthy scents.

Inside, the aromas were even more to my liking. Male sweat and cum times two. Wafting on the warm and slightly humid air, it was an invisible haze of musk that surrounded us, concrete evidence of the sex we'd indulged in. You know, cleanliness has its place, and I'm all for it. I shower every day, but there are times, especially like this, when the pheromones emitted by the body's natural secretions satisfy some

primitive need. It cements the bonds between mates. Who else would tolerate and even enjoy your b.o.?

As the few remaining hours before our fate would be decided passed, Tyler and I made the bed our haven. There were lazy strokes of fingers against warm skin and firm muscle, languorous kisses and softly murmured words. We didn't talk about the love we had for each other but rather simple things: places we'd like to go; the new recipe for chicken marsala Tyler wanted to try; my burgeoning interest in earning a pilot's license. Even as we dozed we touched, never losing contact with one another, until inevitably, by mutual consent, we left the fragile sanctuary we'd constructed.

Though we showered together, we kept it strictly to the business of getting clean. Afterwards, we did all those other little chores that people do when morning comes and they ready themselves to face the world. Each act drove away the last wisps of the languid haze we'd wrapped ourselves in and served to sharpen our awareness. We chose to wear simple, comfortable clothes. There was no need or desire to impress anyone with our fashionable wardrobe, only the strength of our magic. After tucking his shirt in and zipping up his jeans, Tyler stood with his gaze on our rumpled bed.

"Should we change the sheets and make it up before we go?"

"Leave it. We'll do it when we get back." No way was I going to tell him that it was a just-in-case measure on my part.

If something went wrong, I was going to need those dirty sheets. Our essences were mixed together on that cotton fabric, and if the Council tried to separate us, I had a plan to try and cheat their decree. Would it work? I didn't have a clue, but I knew I'd try everything in my power to bring us back together if by some horrible twist of fate we lost today. If there's one thing that can be said about me, it's that I'm stubborn, and I don't take kindly to those who would try to dictate my life or that of my soul mate.

Neither one of us was particularly hungry. Instead of food, we drank strong cups of dark Colombian coffee for an added burst of caffeine-induced energy. Kohe joined us. The little gargoyle didn't drink coffee, but he scarfed down a couple of bananas and

an apple. Before leaving, he fixed those big brown eyes on each of us in turn and gently patted our cheeks before disappearing. Me he gave an especially long look.

My ally was silently telling me he was prepared. No matter how the day's events might unfold or how the Council might tamper with my or Tyler's memories if we should lose, they couldn't touch Kohe. He was my ace in the hole. My own little supernatural flash drive, if you will. If needed, Kohe would open the deleted files and do a system restore on my memory. I'm not particularly computer savvy, but even I know it's a smart move to back up your data.

"We can't lose now," I said with a smile. "What would our baby do without his mommy and daddy?"

"And just which one of us is the mommy?"

"Well, your hair is longer than mine."

Tyler gave me the evil eye. "Just wait till we get back." He brought his mouth to my ear. "I'm gonna do things to you no mommy ever could."

"Ooo, daddy. Bring it on."

It was weak banter, but we managed creditable smiles.

"Ready?" I asked. We knew there was no more time to linger.

"Let's do it."

With a nod, I summoned a portal. It formed before us, a nimbus of light with darkness at its center and a synchronized step forward took us into the ether corridor. In seconds we arrived at our destination, the stage that would serve as the battleground for our magical combat.

It was actually quite a beautiful, peaceful place. I'd been here before in this open meadow, surrounded by a forest of trees. It was just as I remembered it. The grass was lush and green and wildflowers abounded. Here and there were outcroppings of boulders and a wide, beautifully sparkling river diagonally bisected the open field. I had once told Tyler during one of our training sessions that using natural elements to perform magic were the ideal and this place provided plenty of everything we needed.

The whole area sat atop a flat peaked mountain, whose brothers of various heights, surrounded us, some so tall they bore snow at their summits. Had we been there for a different purpose, this is the kind of place I'd have chosen for a picnic.

Unfortunately, the vista was ruined by two things. A group of thirteen men and women, the Soul Familiar Council of Elders, was present in the form of a hologram. They hovered to our left above the tree line, an odd sight indeed as their seated images were being projected from the Council chambers. The second thing that spoiled the view, an even bigger eyesore in my opinion, was our opponents, Blake Whitten and his partner, my former lover, Lucas Tarrasen.

We faced them across the angled slash of river that separated us. As a unit, Tyler and I took their measure, just as I'm sure they took ours. They looked fit and confident, but then so were we. I was glad. This was going to be a good contest and I felt anticipation rising until I could no longer contain the smile that pulled at my lips.

"Something about us you find amusing, Alex? I promise you won't be smiling for long," Blake called. A frown had formed between his brows.

You'd think I might have trouble hearing him across the wide expanse of water that separated us, but this place was ensorcelled. An explosion of epic proportions could go off here and wouldn't be picked up by any type of modern detection device. It was undetectable by radar and satellite, and the field of power generated around it enhanced the acoustics to an extremely fine degree. I didn't even have to raise my voice to reply to Blake's fretful inquiry.

"See, now that's your problem. You always take things so personally." I rubbed my hands together. "I was only thinking about how much I'm going to enjoy this."

"I'm certainly glad you think so. It's just that much more shock you'll have to deal with when losing wipes that smile off your face. Which will be a nice little bonus for us."

"Why so testy, Blake? Didn't your boy put out last night?"

Blake's frown deepened, and the supercilious look of boredom on Lucas's face turned sour. Yeah, even for me it was a petty, juvenile gambit, but you know what they

say, all's fair in love and war, and I wasn't above trying to rattle them with a little trash talk. Besides, I was just following Blake's lead.

"You guys really need to learn to relax," I continued. "You're always so uptight. For instance, take Tyler and me. Last night our, shall we say, commune with the Gods, was absolutely sublime. One for the record books. Nearly blew the top of my skull off."

Tyler turned his gaze to me, one brow rising in a gesture of mildly disgruntled inquiry. Apparently he wasn't exactly thrilled with me broadcasting even the unspecific details of our love life. I sent him the most wicked smirk and wink I could dredge up. "At least I didn't brag about the fine points... and they were fiiiine."

His grin was instantaneous along with his slight snort of amusement. When he gave his head a resigned shake, I knew we were on solid ground. Tyler wouldn't get upset with me over such a minor infraction, but just the same, I now knew not to push it.

"You always were vulgar, Alex," Lucas commented.

Predictably, he joined the verbal fray by taking a potshot at my personality, a tactic that was pretty much useless. Since meeting Tyler, I'd been coming more and more to terms with my faults. In some cases I was even taking steps to improve them, but the main point here is when you've accepted your own shortcomings, it takes the sting out of it when someone points them out to you.

"Unlike the ultra refined, those of us who are vulgar at least manage to have fun. You remember fun, don't you, Lucas? I'm sure you're able to have it now and then... if only by accident."

"You..."

Lucas was cut off almost before he'd begun.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. While I'm sure further discussion of your sex lives might prove highly entertaining, it's hardly the purpose for which we are gathered here today."

These words were spoken by Gerald Grant, chairman of the Soul Familiar Council and he immediately had our attention. Gerald is like that investment firm

whose commercials used to be on television -- when he talks, everyone listens. He's been a fixture on the Council for the sum total of my entire life, not to mention my father's as well. We're talking seven hundred plus years here and that doesn't take into account the years he lived before becoming a Council member.

If you're picturing an ancient wizard type with long, flowing white hair and beard, forget it. Gerald is more like a well groomed CEO in his early forties with a touch of silver at the temples of his stylishly barbered hair. And no long flowing robes for him either. At the moment he was definitely going for casual in what looked like a loosely fitted white linen tunic over black jeans. For an old guy he was in optimal physical condition, definitely stylin' and if he could read that thought in my mind, I'd probably get a zap from a bolt of lightning for insolence.

Physical appearance aside, he's ancient and powerful. Fortunately for us, he's also proven himself to be fair and impartial as well as a man well able to keep things in perspective. For someone who could easily descend into megalomania, he just doesn't take life that seriously... a fact revealed by his next comment.

"Alex, I'm glad to hear the plumbing's still in order. How've you been?"

"Fine, sir," I replied with a grin. Did I forget to mention Gerald is my great-great-grandfather? "You're looking well. I'm betting you're still active in the bedroom."

"Whelp. You're as brash as ever. I always liked that about you." Gerald turned his attention to Lucas. "You're looking well, boy. Everything all right with you?"

"Very well, thank you for asking, sir."

"How's dear Cecily? We haven't seen her in awhile."

"She's fine. I believe she's visiting a friend in Ireland at the moment," Lucas responded.

Cecily is the sister of Mattie, Gerald's soul mate. She's also a matriarch in the Terrasen clan which, by marriage, makes Gerald also related to Lucas as his great-great-uncle or something like that. I tend to lose track of these things. It seems we soul familiars all end up related in some way or other, perhaps that's what makes us special... or strangely weird however you want to look at it. Not that in this case being

related to Gerald does either Lucas or me any good. As I said, Gerald is impartial, almost fanatically so.

After finishing with Lucas, Gerald greeted Blake then turned his attention to Tyler. "And last but not least," he said. "What's your name, young man?"

"Tyler Montgomery, sir."

I knew perfectly well that Gerald was aware of Tyler's name. With Tyler having come under his scrutiny and being subject to Gerald's judgment, he'd know just about everything there is to know about Tyler, just as I'm sure he did about the rest of us gathered here. By having Tyler state his name, Gerald was being honestly polite, but for some reason my heart began to pick up speed. Not that there was anything to be anxious about. I guess it was just seeing my lover under Gerald's uncompromising eye that suddenly had me on edge. I knew Tyler would handle it with his usual composure, but it still made me nervous.

I hadn't realized it until now, but I wanted Gerald's approval which is just strange coming from a guy like me. I don't usually give a shit what anyone thinks of me or what I do or don't do. Guess that just goes to show how much I respect Gerald. Puzzling over this unexpected realization, I almost missed Gerald's wisecrack.

"First of all my sympathies, Tyler. Dame Fortune was certainly in a capricious mood when she decided to tie you to Alex." His remark invoked some snickers from the other Council members.

"Hey," I protested, but was ignored.

"Be that as it may, are you wholeheartedly prepared to defend your bond?"

"I am," Tyler answered.

His quiet conviction stabilized and sobered me. All the frivolous emotions and banter were relegated to their proper place in favor of serious mental preparation. This was it. No more delays.

"I understand Alex has explained the rules to you, and you've agreed to accept the consequences of this contest."

"Yes."

“Very well, gentlemen, I see no reason to delay. Are those bringing challenge, ready?”

“We’re ready,” Blake and Lucas answered.

“Are those being challenged, ready?”

Exchanging a look that spoke volumes, Tyler and I turned our attention to the Council and spoke out as one. “We are.”

There were several beats of silence then the fateful word rang out.

“Begin.”

Chapter Two

Just as we had decided during practice, Tyler had placed himself several paces forward and to the left of me. As the primary conduit, he needed to take the dominant position. This way too, we both had room to work whatever gestures were called for, as well as improve our field of vision.

Across from us I could see Blake and Lucas in similar formation. Blake was wasting no time and was already chanting a spell. I could feel the pressure in the air change as a breeze began to stir. A large area of grass in front of our opponents rippled in waves then suddenly stiffened. The organic aura it emitted shifted composition just as its appearance changed. Each individual blade of grass became blades in truth, shiny, green metallic weapons torn free of their roots and flung at us in a concerted rush.

My system barely had time to deal with the shocking zap of adrenalin it was hit with when with a gesture, Tyler summoned a half dozen thick tree saplings from the nearby forest. Each one was approximately five feet in length and stripped to the bare wood. They hovered in evenly spaced positions before us and Tyler set them in motion, rotating them like fan blades even as he spoke the words that altered their genetic structure. When those deadly green blades hit Tyler's defense there were a multitude of metallic pings and the grass knives were sent spinning harmlessly away... at least from us.

Lucas and Blake had to dodge as a few of them returned the way they came. The surprise on Blake's face was priceless and it was all I could do not to laugh out loud. Not that I was given time to laugh.

The next barrage came in the form of a hail of fist sized and larger stones. Tyler responded by turning his tree branch fans into curved metal shields that repelled the rocks. His solution to this attack worked perfectly, although I have to admit my ears

were ringing from the constant clangs by the time the last of the rocks bounced off them. I was forcibly reminded of why I don't like ringing bells up close and personal.

"Next time change the metal to hard rubber," I yelled over the tinny reverberations in my ears. "But points for effort and originality."

Tyler grinned and kept his attention firmly fixed on our opponents. He wasn't about to be taken unawares, a very good thing since the rocks were followed by an actual tornado. I've never seen one up close and I have to say that this one was impressive. It wasn't large, but for what it lacked in breadth and height, it made up for in sheer strength. It barreled toward us at what seemed warp speed, digging up the ground as it came.

The sound was deafening, terrifying. The wind was blowing so hard I could barely keep my feet. Tyler was staggering under the pressure, and I managed to plow my way through the hail of debris that pelted us to grab on to him. When we touched, our power, which had been wavering and undirected, solidified. Tyler took control of the curved metal shields that had earlier protected us and slammed them into the ground with enough force to bury half their length.

Enclosed in a protected semi-circle, he strengthened it by compelling foot-thick slabs of earth to seal themselves to the metal then turned the dirt into solid concrete. We crouched down behind it and when Blake's tornado hit our bunker, the clash between solid and moving objects, shook the ground beneath us enough to make my teeth rattle. The tornado's base shattered sending wild gusts of air pouring over our heads. When the force of the wind finally dispersed, I inched out of the protective overhang of our fortress in time to see the rest of the cone disappear.

Believe me, the sigh I heaved was heavy and heartfelt. "I knew that fucker was full of hot air, but damn."

My declaration drew a huff of amusement from Tyler and we crawled out of our bunker to take a look around. Between Tyler's use of it and the tornado's destructive power, the ground around us was torn and bare. Blake and Lucas seemed to be

standing in paradise while we were in Death Valley and I was not appreciating the supercilious looks of derision on their faces.

“Did you enjoy that refreshing breeze, Alex?” Blake shouted. “How about a bath to go with it?”

I had just enough time to whisper, “Shit,” when it came into view.

In the distance, what looked like a tidal wave was headed right for us. Blake had apparently started applying pressure to the river water from quite a distance downstream and was now bringing it to bear against us. The water roiled and foamed with the force of its coming, and even as I watched it began to take shape into something totally unexpected.

“What the fuck?” I whispered.

“Holy shit!” Tyler exclaimed.

A translucent great white shark, fully formed and at least twenty-five feet long, rode at the forefront of a gigantic wave. Its jaws gaped wide and razor sharp teeth glinted in the sunlight. Cold sightless eyes fastened on me and I froze. Had I been alone, I don’t know if I’d have survived this. Without realizing it, Blake hit on the perfect twist to his spell to disable me.

I hate to admit it, but I was one of those people who fell prey to the *Jaws* phenomenon. For months after seeing the movie I had nightmares. Even now, years later, I hate the thought of swimming, even in a pool. To see this creature coming toward me dredged up every bit of terror I’d suppressed at the idea of such a meeting. My heart was pounding, I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. Fortunately, I didn’t have to.

I felt a pulling drain as Tyler gathered our power, and a gigantic net appeared at the river’s edge before us. Thick strands of finely woven energy glowed. The bunker Tyler had built melted and was sucked into those strands until they solidified into a shining web. The water-formed shark and the wave that carried it hit the net with a force that bowed it inward. For a split second the net actually groaned under the pressure then shark and water burst. We were hit by a combination of pelting drops

resembling rain and a multitude of hard, spraying shafts of water. The rain drenched us while the shafts of water shot toward us like javelins through the gaps in the net. Most fell short of reaching us but for one.

It hit my shoulder like a knife and plunged into my flesh as though one of the shark's teeth had truly reached me. My vision blurred as my body spun from the strength of the blow. I had time to feel a jolt of stunning pain before my knees gave out and I crumpled to the ground. Muddy earth rushed up to greet me and I landed with a grunt that drove the air out of my lungs.

Before I could think about moving, Tyler was with me, gently rolling me so I was face up. "Alex! Oh God, Alex! Are you all right? Oh fuck, you're bleeding!"

I wanted to reassure him, but I was still having trouble catching my breath. Tyler on the other hand was already reacting. He ripped his shirt off and pressed it to my shoulder.

The pain made me draw a deep breath. "Fuck, that hurts," I managed.

"Son of a bitch! Goddamn it," he hissed. "What was I thinking? I should have done something different. All I could think was fish... fishnet. Fuck!"

Tyler's self-castigating rant drew a breathless chuckle from me. "Fish? God, what an understatement." I was about to say something else when from the corner of my eye, I saw a movement and shouted, "Shield, Tyler!"

Instantly the bubble formed around us just as knotted tendrils hit it. Outside the clear protective barrier, a half dozen men had appeared. Did I say men? Well, not men of flesh, but men made of slim tree trunks, branches and gnarled roots. They gathered around us and began throwing themselves at the curved walls. They pounded their branched hands and feet so hard against our shield that the wood which formed them shattered, and all the while these eerie, moaning sighs sounded from them. It was just plain creepy and enough to make my hair stand on end.

"That's enough," Tyler growled.

His low, gravel-filled declaration drew my gaze to him and I'll admit the look in his eyes stunned me. My mild mannered lover's face had taken on an expression I'd

never seen. It was hard and grim and the look in his eyes was that of a man about to be completely ruthless.

“Up to now it’s been defense, defense, defense and all it’s gotten us was you injured. No more.”

With that, Tyler began a familiar chant. He was summoning some friends; I just hadn’t realize how many new acquaintances he’d made. Before I even saw them, I could feel the ground beneath me growing warmer. Steam began to rise from the excess water that permeated the earth around us. Tyler helped me to my feet and just as he did, several ruptures appeared in the ground just outside our shield and fire elementals poured forth. Resembling burning snakes, several attacked each of the wooden men, slithering up their limbs and setting them ablaze until there was nothing left but ash.

I’d been so morbidly fascinated by what was taking place before my very eyes that I’d failed to notice the scene across the river. It was the vicious curses that finally got my attention. Blake and Lucas were surrounded. Not by small elementals like those that had consumed the stick men but by one of their gigantic cousins. It had trapped the two of them within the circle of its coiled body and now stood with its head towering over them like an enraged cobra ready to strike.

Its scales writhed with life, as though boiling lava was contained within the boundaries of each one while flames of orange and yellow crackled and sparked above them. The air around it shimmered with the waves of heat it produced and our stunned opponents stood frozen within the space it had allotted them. I’m sure they were well aware that any movement they made would be deemed hostile and would cause the elemental to attack. Though the fire-born creature had made no actual contact with them, the heat must have been intense. Even from this distance, I could see the sweat pouring down their faces, forming on their skin and dampening their clothing.

Tyler dropped our shield and called out to them, “Are you ready to concede?”

Blake and Lucas exchanged a few words then with a look that could curdle the freshest of cream, Blake gave a curt nod.

“Too bad,” Tyler muttered. “At this point I’m not above wanting to sear the seat of your pants off.”

“Tyler,” I admonished, although I can’t say as I blamed him. After all, I was the one standing here with my lover’s torn shirt pressed to my bleeding flesh.

“The challengers have conceded,” Gerald declared, again taking control of the proceedings. “Your pets are quite impressive, Tyler. Please call them off so we can render medical assistance to those in need.”

Tyler’s retreat spell, punctuated by heartfelt words of gratitude, dismissed the elementals, allowing them to return from whence they came. I could actually see Lucas and Blake breathe sighs of relief when their captor disappeared into the earth and Blake’s knees actually gave way causing his partner to grab hold of him to keep him on his feet. Untouched by the elemental, the two of them were soggy, flushed, and slightly singed around the edges. Again, I’m being childish, but I was glad to see them humbled a bit. Finally Tyler and I weren’t the only ones showing some wear and tear. I was willing to bet just about anything that right at this moment, Lucas’s main concern was how quickly he could leave to take a bath. The thought brought a weary smile to my face.

At that moment a portal appeared and two people, one man and one woman, appeared. “Please step in,” the female medic said.

We did so and in less time than it takes to blink, were transported across the meadow and out of the war zone. Blake and Lucas also appeared with two more medics. The area we’d been transported to was outfitted as an aid station. I was immediately led to an examination table set up under an open tent structure where my shoulder was treated. Tyler hovered by my side and refused to leave even though the medic working on me assured him that the damage was minimal and my recovery would be quick with no lasting damage having been done. Not that I wasn’t glad to hear it, but considering the amount of pain I was in, it hardly seemed as if she knew what she was talking about... until the pain meds she gave me kicked in. After that mellow was my middle name.

From where I sat I could see Blake and Lucas having some kind of ointment smeared on any parts of them that were exposed by their clothing. They both looked as though they'd stayed outdoors too long and were suffering from severe cases of sunburn.

After the necessary medical aid was rendered, we were invited to rest in a shaded area that was set up as an outdoor lounge. There was a table laden with assorted refreshments, beverages, light snacks, cheese, and fruit. I grabbed two bottles of water and retreated to one of two plump and comfy sofas while Tyler piled a plate with goodies for us to share. After all the effort we'd put forth and all the energy we'd expended fending off our opponents' attacks, I have to admit, I was not only tired but starving.

Lucas and Blake found places on the other sofa and with the silent determination of men intent on refueling; we ignored our earlier animosity and dug into our food. A couple of times while eating I failed to remember my injured shoulder until an unconscious reach for something reminded me with an uncomfortable twinge despite the pain meds I'd been given. It wasn't particularly hard putting a brave face on it, but my lover wasn't exactly dealing well with my injury. A glance at Tyler's face confirmed the vibe I'd been getting from him. Even as he chewed his food there was a hard set to the corners of his mouth and an unmistakable tension in the way he held himself.

Hoping to put his mind at ease, I settled my hand on his thigh and gave it a light squeeze. "Hey, relax. I'm fine."

"I know you are, but that's not what's bothering me."

"Then what?"

Before he could answer, Gerald stepped out of a portal entrance and settled himself into the wingchair that completed the set of furnishings in our impromptu gathering place. "I must admit that was an impressive display, gentlemen -- from both sides," he praised while making himself comfortable. "For someone who's been practicing the arts for so short a time, you've apparently taken your studies quite seriously, Tyler."

“Thank you. I’ve worked damned hard because of what was on the line here and I didn’t mind that one bit, but I’ve just got to ask... what the hell is wrong with you people?”

At the tone of Tyler’s voice, my eyes widened in dismay. I knew the shock visibly evident and radiating from Lucas and Blake, perfectly matched the expression on my face.

“Tyler,” I hissed in warning.

“No, Alex. I know he’s the big bad of the soul familiars, but that’s not enough to keep me quiet about what happened here today.” Tyler focused his gaze on Gerald. “I was prepared for someone trying to turn us into frogs or snakes, but they threw stuff at us that had the potential to cause serious bodily injury if not death. Alex could have been killed!”

“That would never happen,” Gerald replied with calm conviction.

“How can you say that? You weren’t out there dodging the knives, the rocks, and the tornado not to mention the fucking water shark. I made one wrong decision and you saw the results, but what really pisses me off is that it could have been much, much worse. I agreed to do this because I love Alex and I was determined to keep our bond intact, but no one said a damned thing about risking his life to do it.”

“Would you have refused to try had you thought it possible he’d die?”

Gerald’s question stopped Tyler cold. After a moment’s silence he said, “No.”

“Why?”

“Because we love each other enough to risk our lives to stay together.”

“Well said. I must tell you though; death is not a possibility in these contests. This arena has an enchantment over it that disallows the death of any human or soul familiar engaged in combat. Injury yes, death no. Any element of a spell that’s worked which makes it through a combatant’s defenses is neutralized at the point where life-threatening injury could occur.

“Take a look at the area in which the four of you fought. If you look closely, you can see the land mending itself as we speak. By this time tomorrow there will be no

trace of the damage that has taken place here today. Not to the land and not to Alex. That too is part of the spell that guards this place.”

Seeing the evidence with his own eyes took the wind out of Tyler’s sails. “I apologize if I was out of line, but someone could have at least said something beforehand.”

“Would you have fought as hard?”

“I don’t honestly know,” Tyler replied. “Certainly it might have unconsciously prompted me to be a little lazy in our defense.”

“Exactly,” Gerald replied. “As the newcomer here, it was your skills we were most interested in testing. We had to see your full potential. It’s this that decides if you’re worthy to be the mate of a soul familiar.”

“And am I worthy?”

“The Council has deemed it so, yes. Your bond with Alex is officially recognized. Congratulations.”

Though he tried to keep his mien of disgruntled offense in place, I could see Tyler’s lips twitch and when our eyes met the grins just burst free. Chuckling, I slipped my uninjured arm around him and pulled him too me. “We’re official,” I crowed and it was all I could do to keep from giggling like a school-girl who’s just spotted her favorite teen idol.

“For us it’s been that way since the day we met,” Tyler answered.

All the aching love and tenderness I had for him boiled up inside me and that, along with the intense joy I was feeling prompted me to plant a fierce kiss on his lips. Tyler gave back as good as he got and the intensity of the moment swept us away.

“Considering the circumstances, you’d think he’d exercise a little more decorum, but then again, he probably doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”

Hearing these sarcastic sentiments voiced aloud, made me end our kiss with a sputtering laugh. I released my grip on Tyler and turned my gaze toward Lucas. “Decorum. Dignity or correctness that is socially expected,” I said, reciting the meaning of the word. My tongue has never been too tightly reined, but the pain meds had

relaxed me to the point where it decided to freely express things I'd never had the courage to say before. "See, I do know what decorum means, but where's the fun in being decorous? Let your hair down, Lucas. Don't you get tired of always being dignified? Do you hate me so much that you can't even smile anymore? You used to have the most beautiful smile. I'm so sorry I took that away from you."

Stunned shock filled Lucas's eyes, and his entire body stiffened as though he was waiting for a physical attack. He stared at me for a long moment, and just as suddenly as he'd tensed, the stiffness flowed away. He closed his eyes, tilted his head forward, and rubbed at his forehead before straightening and returning his gaze to mine.

The expression in his eyes had changed to sad regret. "You always manage to come up with the most ingenuous remarks." Pausing for a moment as though searching for words, he confessed to something I thought he'd never admit to. "It wasn't just you. I had a hand in what happened between us. I hate feeling foolish, but I did so many stupid things back then for such idiotic reasons. The worst of it was trying to put all the blame on you. I'm sorry, Alex. I really am." Lucas turned to his partner and reached for Blake's hand. "I want to go now."

Lucas had the look of a man totally exhausted and not just physically.

"If you'll please excuse us?" Blake asked, addressing Gerald.

"Of course. Both of you rest well."

"Thank you."

Blake slid an arm around his lover's waist and called forth a portal. Before they stepped in, I heard him say, "I'm proud of you... Brat."

"Don't call me that." Lucas half-heartedly protested, but he freely leaned against his partner, his body language obviously broadcasting his affection for the man who teased him. I gazed at them in wonder until the portal closed and they disappeared from view.

"They really love each other," I said, voicing my stunned disbelief.

"Did you doubt it?" Gerald responded.

"I guess. Sometimes. I just couldn't put the two of them in context with a loving relationship."

"Perhaps their animosity toward you made it difficult."

"Probably," I admitted.

"I'm happy you said what you did... even though it took drugs to make it happen," Gerald said, an admission that took me by surprise. "I've been rather worried about them."

"How so?"

"The guilt Lucas carried caused his continued hostility toward you and naturally Blake supported his lover, but I fear that support was rooted in jealousy. Blake was disturbed that his lover continued to have such strong feelings for you. As you know, love and hate are but two sides of the same coin, and one can so easily turn into the other. Now that Lucas has purged himself of that guilt by admitting to himself, and to you, that he was also responsible for the disaster your relationship became, hopefully he can put it behind him."

"How did you know all this?"

"Observation, intuition, gossip."

"Gossip?"

"Of course. Your relationship with Lucas, the subsequent breakup, and your continued animosity toward each other have all been discussed at length. You may not like it Alex, but you carry a rather high profile among us. Your actions will always be of interest to those with magical abilities. I believe you're the soul familiar equivalent of what would be considered a movie or rock star among humans."

"Still? I thought all that had blown over." I frowned at my lover who had the temerity to snicker at me. "It's not funny. I don't want to be under everyone's scrutiny like some lab rat."

"Oh, I believe it's a bit more respectful than that, but I must say you've provided some highly entertaining intervals for us."

"Crap. Now I want to go home."

Gerald and Tyler both outright laughed at me and deciding I'd had enough, I rose to my feet. Or at least tried to. Those pain meds were wicked and my legs were none too steady when I tried to get them under me. Thankfully, Tyler was immediately there to support me.

"It seems we're leaving," Tyler said and held his hand out to Gerald. "It was a pleasure to meet you, sir."

"You too, young man," Gerald replied shaking his hand. "Alex, don't be a stranger. The two of you come to dinner sometime soon. I'll have Mattie contact you."

"We'll look forward to it," I managed to say although at this point I was feeling a little woozy.

"Tyler, can you manage all right? I can send someone to help you with him if you'd like."

"I think we can make it. Right, Alex?"

"Sure, sure. But, hurry. I think I need to lie down."

Gerald himself brought forth the portal and with a last good-bye, seconds later, Tyler and I arrived back home. We conveniently stepped out into the bedroom and, without further delay, Tyler helped me to the bed.

I flopped back with a sigh of relief and enjoyed the luxury of lying there like a sack of potatoes while Tyler relieved me of my shoes and clothes. Watching him peel out of his own garments made my body react in the usual manner. The unmistakable pulse of arousal started beating in my groin and my cock elongated with the hot blood pumping into it.

How could I not get hard? Tyler's body was such a total turn-on. His slim physique was rife with the kind of defined muscle groups that made my mouth water. Arms, legs, torso, hips and buttocks, all were symmetrical, beautifully balanced and harmonious parts of male anatomy, blended into a total package of lord-have-mercy hotness.

My fingers ached to touch him, my lips to kiss him, my cock to be buried inside the encompassing heat of him. "Hey. Come here," I growled, drunkenly motioning for him to join me on the bed.

Tyler looked me over, his eyes lingering on my sturdy erection. One brow rose and a smile curved his lips. "I thought those pain meds had taken you out of the game for awhile."

"My knees are weak," I admitted. "But look at my little soldier. He's standing at attention, ready for inspection, sir," I finished with what I thought was a snappy salute but which probably came off more as a drunken wave.

"Hmm, then maybe I should inspect him," Tyler purred and that sound brought a flush to my skin.

My breath started to speed up when he climbed on the bed and crawled between my legs. The look in his eyes had my balls drawing up. It was violet-blue fire, pure molten heat. Elementals had nothing on my lover when it came to setting something ablaze. The fire was lit and I was about to get singed.

Tyler leaned down. I felt the tickle of his breath and the soft, moist touch of his tongue as he used it to draw a line on the underside of my cock from root to tip. My hips arched, straining toward his mouth and I was not disappointed when his tongue swept over the crown of my cock before he took me in. With a soft, sighing groan ghosting from between my parted lips, I closed my eyes, intent on enjoying my trip to heaven.

Friction, slippery wet and warm teased the length of my cock. The downward slide was arousing but the upward sweep incited a riot of sensation in my gut. I felt the pull and draw of the suction Tyler applied not only in my cock, but in my balls, the base of my spine and even my anus. With every upward stroke of his mouth, my muscles tightened making that needy opening twitch.

I desperately wanted him to touch me there, and as though he'd read my mind, a spit-slick finger suddenly nudged me. It teased the nerve-rich and delicate contours of flesh that surrounded my entrance then wiggled in, drawing a harsh groan from me.

My flesh stretched to accommodate him and the rub of that exploring digit on hidden, intimate tissues was exquisite. I couldn't stop the undulation of my body moving in counterpoint to the bobs of Tyler's head, and each motion sent my cock deeper into his mouth or thrust his finger deeper within me.

A second finger joined the first, opening me, making vulnerable the most private part of my physical being and I readily accepted it -- the touch, the invasion, the taking my lover played out on my body. Fingertips thrust deep within me, found my sweet spot and brushed over it again and again. Every tender graze of contact drew a panting moan from me and when his tongue entered the fray, I was done in.

It danced over my shaft, tracing blood-rich veins. Swirling over the saliva-drenched flesh before moving on to the crown, it caressed every plump millimeter of that swollen cap before dipping into the slit, alternately nestling in then fluttering over it in a rhythm designed to drive me insane.

My stomach and abdomen muscles flexed, blind bliss hit dead center of my groin, and my cock pulsed with the first stream of semen that rushed out to flood Tyler's mouth. Our soul bond was wide open, and I felt every sensation from both his perspective and mine. There was no cock in my mouth, but I felt the twitch and throb as each spurt of seed burst free. Though my mouth was dry from all the panting I'd done, I convulsively swallowed in conjunction with Tyler who actually received the salt-bitter musk of my ejaculate.

My climax, which kept me on edge, my body straining for untold moments of pleasure, had just started to recede when a second orgasm blasted through me. The sensations made my insides tense and tremble, tearing a wail from my throat even as the physical ecstasy blanked my mind and enthralled my body. That renewed intensity of feeling was Tyler's. I felt the jerk of his hips and several warm, liquid splashes against my leg. Apparently overwhelmed by the depth of my climax, Tyler's followed whether he'd been ready or not. Not, I was soon to learn.

"Fuck," he growled. "Didn't mean to do that. Wanted to fuck you." His graveled, breathless declaration brought what I'm sure must have been a dopey smile to my face.

"Next time," I soothed and at that point, the starch totally drained out of me. My head was spinning, and it felt as though my bones had turned to mush. Pain meds and sex were too powerful a combination to fight.

Tyler eased away from me, my leg was bent up and his mouth landed on my skin, his tongue licking me.

"Mmm... what?" I managed to mutter before he shifted position yet again and his mouth covered mine. I opened for him and was rewarded with his semen coated tongue. Our combined essences burst on my palate, and I greedily sucked the flavor in, savoring it even as exhaustion began rolling me under.

"Wanna celebrate," I mumbled. "Wanna make love with you. More, more, more."

"Later," Tyler crooned and lay down beside me. "I'm beat. Let's sleep."

"Umm hmm," I agreed.

We slept.

I dreamed.

"Alex."

Roused by the sound of my name, I opened eyes bleary with sleep and blinked in surprise when I saw Council-member Court Davis standing at the foot of our bed.

"What? What is it? What's wrong?"

Even as I questioned his presence the first thing I did was check Tyler. He slept on, undisturbed and I had only a moment to wonder at that before my question was answered.

"It's come to the attention of the Council that you and your mate, Tyler Montgomery, had an unfair advantage during your trial."

"Unfair advantage? What are you talking about?"

"Robert Cauley has reported his loss of status as a soul familiar and your role in his current condition."

"Robert Cauley? I don't know... wait! You mean Bobby?"

"Yes."

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Robert's powers were transferred to Tyler giving him greater abilities."

"Bullshit! I admit Tyler received Bobby's powers, but that has nothing to do with ability and you know it," I hotly protested. "Tyler's actions were formed of his own inborn capabilities and the hours of study he devoted to learning spells. If he didn't inherently have those skills and take the time to improve them, no amount of power would have changed the outcome of the contest."

"Opponents are chosen on the basis of power levels. Blake and Lucas's combined powers against the known combination of yours and Tyler's was considered a fair match. By not informing the Council of Tyler's change in status you broke the rules and therefore, your union is now dissolved."

"No! You can't do this! I won't allow it. I want to speak with Gerald." Stunned, I tore my gaze from him and turned to my lover. Tyler still lay with his eyes closed, his body relaxed in sleep. I couldn't understand why he didn't wake up until, before my horrified eyes, he turned transparent and began to disappear. "No! Stop it! Tyler! Tyler, wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

With panic gripping me, I tried binding spells and anything else I could think of to keep him tied to me. Nothing worked. In a matter of moments he was gone and I was left clutching my chest as though trying to hold together the shreds of flesh that remained where my heart had been ripped out.

"This can't be happening," I whispered. The sense of loss that hit me was so overwhelming that tears filled my eyes and overflowed. "No. No. No."

Chapter Three

I was still muttering that word when, drawing in a sharp, startled breath, I woke up. Lying there for a moment, I tried to capture the dregs of the dream that had so disturbed me but as in the manner of such things, the images broke apart and like smoke, drifted away. I touched my face, and with a frown, brushed away the tears.

“That must have been some dream,” I muttered, and rolled out of bed.

It was late morning and I padded over to the window to look outside. The sun was shining and it looked to be a beautiful day. My stomach grumbled and I reached up to scratch my head. Opening my mouth I started to comment on the weather, then paused in puzzled confusion. Who had I been intending to talk to? Turning around, I looked at my bed with its rumpled sheets. With a frown, I approached it.

“Something’s not right,” I said aloud and waited for a hint of what that something might be. Nothing came to me and shrugging, I went off to the bathroom for a shower and a shave.

I spent the entire day in solitude. I fixed myself meals, watched a favorite movie on DVD went outside to wander around for a bit and even took a nap in the sunshine. No matter what I did, a feeling of unease followed me. I’ve never been particularly superstitious, but as a soul familiar I’d learned to pay attention to certain things and this feeling dogging me was disturbing on a level greater than a simple mood change. Something was wrong, I just knew it, but I couldn’t put my finger on just what it was.

Deciding it was time to turn my energies toward doing something constructive, I climbed the stairs to the loft and went to work on my latest project. There’s been many a time when losing myself in sculpting helped me find a resolution to issues that were bothering me and I was hoping for the same this time around.

Uncovering the griffin I was working on, I stared at it for a moment. My griffin had acquired a rider. When did that happen? A part of me was voicing its contempt at my mental lapse with a sarcastic, *duh*, while another part was trying to deal with my confusion. If I didn't know better, I'd have said someone was messing with me except the style of the sculpting was definitely mine. Planting my hands on the table, I leaned in to look at the features of the rider. They were vague and not yet fully formed. I had the distinct impression I'd been basing them on someone, but who?

Irritated by this unexplainable lapse in my memory, I pulled my stool in place and sat down to continue where I'd left off. Fingers hovering over the rider's face, I waited for a visage to present itself to me and was further frustrated when nothing came. I was tempted to try anyway to see if it would spark my memory and was within millimeters of touching it when I backed off.

"What if I flub you up and you look totally different from whoever you were meant to be?" Indecision ruled me for a moment until a mild curse formed on my lips. "Crap."

With that single word, I turned to another part of the griffin and began. His wings were intricate affairs with individual feathers formed by the use of toothpicks, the handiest tool I could find, to shape and carve the moist clay. I worked steadily, my mind a blank and just as I'd hoped, the anxiety that had followed me the entire day eased, leaving me at peace. The rest of the day passed evening followed and in the wee hours of the morning I was still at it.

I stopped only for bathroom breaks and once to fix myself dinner, but every stop saw the return of my unease, so I hurried back to immerse myself in the one thing capable of relieving that nagging emotion. My progress was sure and steady, and I was determined enough to even ignore the cramping of my fingers. Unwilling to stop, I soldiered on, my hands moving of their own volition. As though caught in a dream, I turned to the face of the figure that clung to the griffin's back.

Without conscious thought my fingers moved, and the clay features were refined and smoothed until a face with blank eyes looked back at me. At that moment

something seemed to snap inside, and a sharp pain hit me square in the chest. I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. My vision went gray, my head began to spin from lack of oxygen until with a wrenching effort I flung myself backward, landing on the floor with a thud that jumpstarted the breath in my lungs.

Sprawled out on the hardwood, sucking in much needed air, I closed my eyes and let the image swim toward me. I knew that face, but I just couldn't place it. "Who are you?" I whispered and was answered by a furious chittering, not to mention a pile of dirty laundry in the face.

Levering myself up into a sitting position, I pulled what turned out to be soiled sheets off my head and found myself staring at Kohe. "What the hell? What are you doing? What is this?" I growled. Some serious disgust was kicking in when I realized those sheets I'd just been wearing were marred by the remnants of dried semen and sweat stains. "This is seriously gross, you little bastard. What's the idea of throwing dirty laundry on me?"

I could feel explosive anger building inside me, much larger in proportion to what Kohe had done, and even knowing it was the result of the cloud of anxiety I'd been under all day did nothing to stop the roiling buildup that was about to use Kohe as its target. I could feel the electrical charge I summoned tingling the tips of my fingers. I needed an outlet and, friendship aside, I was determined that Kohe was going to pay the price for incurring my wrath. I was sure nothing could stop me until he did something I've never seen before and never would have believed possible.

A glowing mauve tinted nimbus engulfed him. It not only emanated from him but was mimicked by the deeper rosy hue that glowed in his eyes. With one look he froze me in place and once again I found myself in the position of being unable to move or speak.

Thus disabled, I could do nothing beyond accepting the small hands that settled to either side of my face and directed my unbelieving gaze to his. I stared into the mesmerizing color that filled his eyes and watched it swirl and dance until images appeared. Unfamiliar images. Pictures of me and a beautiful blond man with violet-blue

eyes doing things together. Sharing meals in my kitchen, studying spells here in the loft, going shopping at the grocery and all the other stores I frequented.

My anger drained away to be replaced by complete bafflement at what I was seeing. When had I done these things? Who was that person who regarded me with such a loving expression? No answer was forthcoming, and I had no time to puzzle it out before the next round of images came. These were beyond what I been given before. These told the story of a relationship steeped in intimacy. There was kissing, touching, lovemaking, our bodies entwined and moving together on my bed with an undeniable passion that kindled a fire in my groin that had my cock thickening.

Harsh breaths roared from laboring lungs as I fought Kohe's hold and won my freedom. A desperate, instinctive need filled me, and I reached for the pile of sheets he'd thrown on me. Burying my face in them, I took a deep breath. The scent that swept into my nostrils was the final trigger that allowed my memories to come flooding back.

"Tyler," I whispered and despite the fact that I wanted to scream his name to the heavens that pale wisp of sound was all I could manage.

Emotions I had no idea a living being could contain crushed me, and I rocked my body in an effort to contain the grief that threatened to tear me apart. Awkward, gasping sobs were wrenched from my lungs and I welcomed the pain. It distracted me from the utter hopelessness that threatened to eat me alive.

They did it. They took my lover, took my life, took my Tyler. The magnitude of what had happened dropped me into a place so cold and so dark, I at first felt I'd never be able to crawl free of it... until I felt a small hand patting my back. Kohe, my stalwart companion, my friend, and in this case, my savior, was softly crooning and petting me in an effort to make me feel better.

It's funny how something like that, some small, insignificant gesture can turn everything around. The loft grew silent but for Kohe's soothing little song. It worked its magic, smoothing the frayed and tattered fabric of my current reality until I was able to wipe my face on the sheets that held the remnants of mine and Tyler's essence. Lifting my head, I took a deep, steadying breath.

“I’m all right now,” I told him and even managed to scrounge up what must surely have been a pitiful excuse for a smile. “I owe you so much. I can’t even begin to repay you,” I told the little creature who stood at my side. “I’m gonna buy you a side of beef and ten gallons of rocky road ice cream... but first, we’re going to get Tyler back. I don’t care if I have to fight the whole damned Council including Gerald to keep him, but nobody’s going to stand between us. Nobody.”

Chapter Four

I hate to admit it, but the first thing I did after making my lofty announcement was fall asleep. After the blow my psyche took absorbing the power Kohe zapped me with to jar my memory and all the emotional upheaval that tore me into tiny pieces as a result, I was exhausted. Too, I think the aftereffects of the combat Tyler and I had engaged in, not to mention the drugs I'd been given, were working themselves out of my system. After staggering to my bedroom, I flopped on the bed and, still clutching those soiled sheets like a child does his favorite teddy bear, I crashed for nine hours.

I woke feeling refreshed and a little guilty until I convinced myself that I'd need to be in optimum condition for what was to come next. Once the Council realized I'd regained my memory and was engaged in actively seeking to renew my relationship with Tyler, I'd have a fight on my hands. I had no doubt they'd be checking on me, therefore I was going to have to move things along as stealthily as possible which was going to slow things considerably. It would have been nice to be able to simply charge in and reclaim my lover, but the main obstacle in that scenario would be Tyler himself.

I'm not sure what they did to him or how they accomplished it, but I did know that rushing to his side and proclaiming myself to be his lover wasn't going to work. He'd think I was nuts. I needed time to interact with him, to get a feel for what kind of spell had been worked on him then fashion a counter-spell. To do that I had to find him and insinuate myself into his life. It was going to be a challenge, and the thought of it had my spirits on the rise. This could even turn out to be fun.

Now don't sit there thinking I'm frivolous for saying that. You know when things go wrong or when bad things happen the best thing you can do is to try and find some humor in it. Not always possible, I know, but in this case it's not like Tyler was totally beyond my reach, and therefore I intended to enjoy winning him back and

thwarting the Council. Sitting around and dwelling on the negative aspects of the situation certainly wouldn't help. Right? Right.

So, with that in mind, I started the next day bright and early by going on a Tyler hunt.

The first thing I did was to make sure he was still living with his aunt and uncle. He was. From my vantage point, parked in my SUV, when he came out the front door of their home he looked incredible, edible and just... oh God... I wanted to go to him so badly it was all I could do to stay hidden behind the tinted windows of my vehicle. I followed him, watched him get on a public bus and use it to complete his journey to his part-time job.

Since I was no longer in his life, Tyler's time line had reverted back to where it had been before we met. By now it was late summer and he was working part-time for a landscaping firm to help offset the cost of college and ease the financial burden of his tuition from the aunt and uncle who took him in when his mother died.

Tyler and I originally met when he'd summoned a magic practitioner to help rid himself of a smaller version of a Cerberus-type creature called a cerbretta. His mother, a practicing witch who was suffering from a terminal illness, had summoned the creature to watch over her son. The only trouble with that was the cerbretta did its job so well Tyler was banned from more than a few fleeting moments of physical contact with anyone. It was a singular situation which became more and more painful as time went on. While there are some living creatures who have no wish to be touched, for the majority of us, to be held, caressed or even to simply hold hands with a fellow being is a comforting, life-affirming essential.

Tyler began searching for a way out of his dilemma and discovered a certain book in a local library. With the help of an inborn ability bequeathed to him by his mother, he put out a silent call which I, as a soul familiar, was forced to answer. We never did get rid of the cerbretta whom I subsequently named Trip. Instead we began a relationship that grew to become a true mating between a magic practitioner and his familiar.

At first I held on to the small hope that we'd have a chance to resume our relationship the way it had begun. As the days went by, I let that hope dissolve. The Council must have back-tracked Tyler's past with me from the moment we met and made sure our previous history did not repeat itself. Forced to accept this situation, I had to take the bull by the horns and devise a new plan for us to meet.

What I came up with was, if I do say so myself, something quite clever. The new semester was set to begin in a couple of weeks and I figured inserting myself as a part of Tyler's college routine would be an excellent way for us to get acquainted. At first I thought to become a fellow student, until an idea came to mind that I felt was truly inspirational.

Knowing Tyler's natural inclinations, considering the hidden abilities he inherited from his mother, plus his current situation and the need I'm sure he still felt to rid himself of Trip, I was sure he couldn't help but be drawn to certain types of classes. Sure enough, after hacking into the college computer system and investigating his upcoming class schedule, I discovered that he was indeed enrolled in just the sort of course I was looking for. Thus was born my new persona. Enter Alex Layton, professor of occult studies. With my plan formulated, I then had to spend considerable effort in seeing it carried out.

Certainly I couldn't just show up at the university on the opening day of the semester and expect to have a job and so I went to work making myself a member of the collegiate system. With some behind the scenes machinations on my part, the professor who was teaching the occult studies course received a research grant from the Ford foundation which prompted him to take an immediate sabbatical. The man couldn't leave fast enough to pursue his dream of studying psychic surgery as practiced by an obscure tribe in South America.

After that it was mere child's play to submit a set of falsified credentials and to get myself hired as the defecting professor's replacement. On the opening day of classes I was juggling excitement, anticipation, and certain amount of smug satisfaction. I was set to wow my class in a way that was sure to get Tyler's attention. Look out Criss

Angel, David Copperfield, Harry Houdini, and any one else who had a claim to fame as a magician. If they were lucky enough to view my upcoming performance, they'd weep for their lack of skills.

I carefully prepared for my first class starting with the simple things. Morning ablutions, breakfast, and picking out clothes that were casual yet trendy. With that in mind I chose a pair of gray, alligator-skin loafers, a comfortable, ass-hugging pair of nicely worn blue jeans into which I tucked a white button-down shirt and topped with a gray tailored jacket. My dark hair was clean, shiny, and tied back with a piece of gray leather lace and to make things interesting, I added a pair glasses with designer frames. The lenses were non-prescription. I don't need glasses; I just thought they'd make me look umm, dignified, professorial? Who am I kidding? They just increased the hotness factor.

Black, zip-topped leather briefcase in hand, I left the house, levered myself behind the wheel of my SUV and headed out for my first day of class. Now, I know what you're thinking. Here I am, going off to play at being a teacher to win back my lover without even thinking how the consequences of my actions were going to affect the other students. Wrong. I was fully prepared to not only do the job but to do it well and carry on until the end of the semester. I had no intention of shortchanging the other students or of wasting their time, not to mention the money it was costing them or their parents to take my class.

While I've never taught professionally, I'm not unacquainted with what it takes to pass on information, data, facts, and conjecture. God knows I'm not shy of speaking in public, and the occult is certainly a subject on which I have a vast store of knowledge. No, never fear, I was going to give them their money's worth and probably more. I'd even taken the time to map out a lesson plan of sorts, though I intended to let things go in whatever direction the students and I found interesting. Unless things got too off track, at which time I'd steer us back on course.

I'd already spent some time on campus acquainting myself with the layout, my colleagues, and the lecture hall which had been assigned to me for my class. When I

arrived, it was a simple matter of checking in at the administration offices and heading for the faculty lounge to grab a cup of coffee before my first class.

As I was filling my cup at the coffee urn, I was greeted by Bill McMasters, who was teaching a course on computer science. "Professor Layton, good morning."

"Morning," I replied with a smile. To my way of thinking, Bill looked more like a P.E. coach than a computer nerd. He stood five ten with short cropped hair, and had a rather prominent musculature which was visible despite the suit he wore. "Call me Alex," I continued, making room for Bill to fill his own cup.

"Alex it is. Bill, to you. Ready for your first day with the kiddies?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Um. I know what you mean."

A man with whom I was unfamiliar, joined us. "Gentlemen, good morning. How's the coffee?"

"It'll do the job if caffeine's what you're looking for," Bill answered. "Alex Layton, have you met Sam Foster? Sam's a teacher of literature and the fine art of crafting a story."

"Very amusing. In short I'm teaching a course on creative writing. Nice to meet you, Professor Layton," he said, holding out his hand.

I shook his hand and again as with Bill, gave and was given permission to use first names. Sam Foster was a different breed than Bill. Taller, slimmer, cooler and definitely gayer. Not that he was a flamer by any means, but you know how they say it takes one to know one? Well we did. Immediately. And just because two people share a certain trait doesn't mean they'll necessarily like each other.

If you're the type easily attuned to such things and you'd been standing there, you'd have been able to feel the animosity oozing into the air between us. It's the same effect you get when two unaltered tomcats suddenly come face to face. Fortunately, we lacked the physiology and primitive natures which would have had us extending our claws and battling it out until one was defeated and sent fleeing.

I believe I'm a pretty good judge of character and from his attitude, I had the distinct feeling that Professor Foster was one of those not above trolling for ass among his students. While college-age young people were certainly old enough and hopefully wise enough to protect themselves, I'm sure there were still some sweet young things among them who didn't know what's what in the real world. This guy struck me as one who wouldn't bother taking that into consideration, thus my hostility.

As for his? Maybe he saw me as competition. Hardly flattering, which inched the intensity of my enmity meter a bit higher. I've been a dog in my day, but I'd never dipped so much as a toe into the underage-and-unaware pool. I definitely never felt the need to entertain myself by breaking some innocent's heart while stealing their virginity. Tyler was my one and only virgin, and being with him was all about love and commitment.

After exchanging the usual trite pleasantries, I made my escape with the sincere intention of having as little contact with Sam Foster as possible. Leaving the lounge and the oppressive effects of that encounter, I walked the halls and felt my spirits rise. Ah, academia. Lord, it'd been an age since I'd experienced such things. Young people chattered away in wide tile-lined hallways that echoed with the sounds of their comings and goings. Just the scent alone was distinctive.

Reaching my assigned lecture hall, I entered and took possession of my territory by placing my coffee mug just so and distributing the papers and notebooks in my briefcase across the top of my desk. Arranged to my satisfaction, I took out the book I'd brought with me, made myself comfortable in the chair provided and delved into *The Sacred and the Profane* by Mircea Eliade and Willard R. Trask while waiting for my students to put in an appearance.

Eliade's writings are considered some of the most influential contributions to religious studies, most especial his theory on Eternal Return which has become one of the most widely accepted ways of understanding the purpose of myths and ritual. As part of the course, I intended to delve into the subject of myths and legends and the possibility of their being based in fact. Along with the performance I intended to put on,

it was something I hoped would stimulate Tyler's curiosity and hopefully nudge him to come to me with his problem.

A few young people began to drift in, in ones and twos until the sounding of the bell brought them in, in a modified rush. My stomach began to dance and my nerves to jitter a bit as I pretended unconcern while watching for Tyler out of the corner of my eye. When he arrived and took a seat fairly close to the front, the nearly overwhelming urge to go to him tried to swallow me. I fought it down and instead put my book down, rose from my chair and turned to write my name on the blackboard behind me.

After doing so, I turned a smile on the class. "Good morning. As you can see, I'm Alex Layton, Professor Layton to you all. I'll be your instructor for this semester's course in occult studies." Reaching for a pile of papers, I handed them to the first student I came to. "Please take one and pass them on," I instructed. "I've prepared a fairly flexible syllabus which I hope will give us quite a bit of leeway to follow subjects and discussions we'll all take interest in. Occult studies is a fairly broad term which could cover anything from folklore in cultural anthropology to fraternal societies and Freemasonry to witches, wizards, ghosts and anything else that goes bump in the night. Personally, I opt for the spooky stuff. It's much more fun, don't you think?"

My meager comedic foray netted me some smiles, a few chuckles, and a raised hand. "Yes, Miss...?"

"Alison Decker. I was just wondering, Professor Layton. What happened to Professor Woodworth? I thought he was originally slated to teach this class? Not that I'm complaining. Professor Woodworth is short, stocky, and in his fifties with a bald spot on top of his head. You're much more... well, much more."

Alison's observation prompted some outright laughter.

"Why thank you, Alison. As for Professor Woodworth, he took an unexpected sabbatical to pursue some important research. While he's away, I'll continue to endeavor to fulfill the role of eye candy as well as teacher, and I hope the performance of either one won't prevent you and the rest of the class from taking adequate notes. Notes, by the way, will account for one quarter of your grade, so make them legible,

people. I don't expect to have to engage the services of a professional code-breaker to be able to decipher your handwriting."

Amid some heartfelt groans I continued on with my professorial spiel, finally arriving at the topic from which I intended to launch my demonstration, if you will. "If you've perused the syllabus, you've seen that part of the course will deal with myth, legends, and their basis in reality. I'm sure we've all heard of creatures such as dragons, mermaids, and the like, with some of them achieving such importance as to acquire given names such as the famous Greek three-headed dog, Cerberus."

Watching for Tyler's reaction, I was gratified to have his full attention. Those violet-blue eyes were now attentively following me as I casually walked around to the front of my desk and leaned back against it. "Did or does such an animal exist? It's entirely possible, given the caprice of genetics, that a three-headed dog could have been born and even survived long enough for many people to see. Or even if they didn't actually see it, such a thing would surely be talked of. If such a creature existed, it was of enough significance to make it into the pages of Greek mythology. Now is that how the legend came about? No one knows for sure but then again, it's entirely possible.

"Simple things, things which could easily be explained away by today's scientific knowledge, would have had great impact during the times in which these seemingly magical events or skills became part of cultural legend and lore. Take for instance what I'm about to show you, and keep in mind this is merely a demonstration. There's no need for fear or panic."

With that, I brought into use the skills I'm best known for, and no I don't mean anything to do with my sexual prowess. Mind out of the gutter, people.

First I dimmed the lights in the room. Wisps of fog began to emanate from my desk and trail over the floor, writhing tendrils and clouds drifting upward toward the tiers of student seating to embrace them in waist-high shrouds.

Reaching up, I removed my glasses and the tie from my hair, shaking it free. After placing those two items on my desk, I lowered my head, clasped my hands in front of me and speaking a short spell, I summoned a clone of myself to either side. Two

perfect copies of me, one to my right and one to my left. From that point I changed their appearance. I'd decided that gargoyles would be impressive and re-formed their faces into the typically accepted demonic visages complete with horns. Their clothes became simple loin cloths and their bodies took on a grayish stone-like hue and became shorter and bulky with bulging muscle. I lifted my head and raised my arms, causing wings to grow and unfurl from their backs.

By this time my students were stupefied into shocked silence and speaking another word, I set my gargoyles into motion. Large, leathery wings flapped. The fog in the room spun in wild swirls and my guys lifted into the air, flying in lazy spins and circles over the heads of the students whose reactions ran the gamut of disbelief and amazement to wide-eyed terror.

The din in the room steadily rose as my students voiced their surprise, excitement and in some cases, dismay. I'd had the foresight to surround the lecture hall with an impenetrable sound barrier. Too, if anyone happened to pass by and glance in through the panes of glass in the door, they'd see nothing more than a normal class in progress. The room was also sealed, no entry or exit allowed. Not wanting to push my luck and wanting time to bring everyone down and have them calm before leaving, I quickly ended my display.

With a few chosen words of dispersal the gargoyles faded into nothingness and the fog disappeared. The lights came back up, and when the students' attention was returned to me, I was as I'd been before, with my glasses in place and my hair tied back.

"As you can see," I said, overriding the tide of their continuing comments, "illusion is a powerful tool. Had my act been seen by people in centuries past, I'd probably be touted as a powerful wizard the likes of Merlin, and my name would be synonymous with magic."

As expected, I was hit by a fusillade of questions and exclamations. I answered the questions of how'd-you-do-that by showing them a projector, a mist ionizer, and the secret switch I'd used to dim the lights. These things were merely props as I'd really

used magic, but I had to give them a logical explanation they could accept in the face of the supposed impossible.

“As you can see, it’s all smoke and mirrors, as they say, but without a reasonable explanation, we enter into the realm in which legends are born.”

At that point, the thing I hoped for happened. Tyler raised his hand.

“Yes, mister...?”

“Montgomery, sir. Tyler Montgomery. Um, my question is then do you truly believe there’s no such thing as magic? No explanations for the unexplained rather than to say it’s all trickery or genetic malfunction?”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t be so reckless or arrogant. There’s definitely magic in the world, Tyler. Be it the workings of nature that allows a flower to bloom or rain to fall, or something greater that causes a spirit to manifest in hopes of speaking once more with loved ones, or something that allows people to see the Loch Ness monster or Bigfoot. It’s my belief that not everything can be boiled down to a set of scientific facts. The unexplainable does exist, and I hope you and everyone else will enjoy exploring and debating these things with me over the course of the semester.”

At that point the bell rang. “Thank you, everyone. I’ll see you Wednesday. Be prepared. There will be a homework assignment.” A chorus of groans followed my announcement. “Now, now. Remember, despite how it looked today, this is a college class and not a Vegas stage show.”

By this time I was surrounded by students, all of whom were excitedly chattering about my magical illusion. Tyler wasn’t among them. I saw him hesitate several times on his way out, his eyes glancing back at me before he finally exited the room. I admit I was a little disappointed, but I had a feeling it was just a matter of time before he approached me to discuss his problem with Trip. I needed only to make sure I kept up the appearance of someone who firmly believed in the premise of anything being possible -- and who could manage it better than someone whose entire life was steeped in magic.

Chapter Five

Several days went by and I settled into the routine of teaching. Surprisingly enough, I actually found myself enjoying my new occupation. Perhaps it was my personality and methods that made for such enthusiastic responses from my students during class. Whatever the reason for it, I found it gratifying. Class time passed swiftly which was all to the good, but each time I watched Tyler walk out the door of the lecture hall, I had to deal with an unpleasant wrench to my heart.

Despite the progress I felt I was making, I couldn't prevent certain doubts that plagued me, especially at night. Lying alone in the bed that used to be a haven which bordered on paradisiacal when Tyler shared it with me, was now something akin to torture. I'd even tried masturbating using my memories of the lovemaking we'd shared. It didn't work. Partway through, my enthusiasm would wilt, along with my hard-on. God knows thoughts of Tyler filled my mind to the bursting point, but being without him had sent my libido into the crapper.

Heart, soul, and body all wanted him back, and without him, my body refused to cooperate... until I was in class with him and then it was just embarrassing. My cock kept getting hard at the most inconvenient moments. While teaching, I'd taken to holding a large spiral bound notebook in hand that could be strategically placed to hide a sudden erection. You have no idea what a physical pain yet emotional relief it is to lever yourself into a seat behind a desk to conceal a raging woody.

A week passed and Friday afternoon rolled around. With an empty weekend glaring at me, I was feeling a little down when I made my way to the small office that had been allotted to me. The majority of faculty offices were all located along a certain hallway, and as I walked by them I could see several of my fellow professors busy at their desks, involved with paperwork or student meetings.

I'd just started to pass Professor Foster's office when, through the door which was slightly ajar, I heard a voice I'd come to know better than my own. I came to an abrupt halt, not caring in the least that I was blatantly eavesdropping.

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"No? Oh come on. I'm just asking you to come and have a drink with me. For now. I like you, Tyler. I think we could have a very special relationship, if you know what I mean."

"I think I catch your drift, but I'm not interested. I really don't think it would be a good idea to get involved with one of my professors that way."

"That's such a shame. I could make you feel so good."

"Hey! Cut it out!"

That's all I needed to hear. That lurch, Foster was putting the moves on my lover! Blood boiling, I smartly rapped on the door before pushing it wide open. Tyler was backed against the wall with Sam Foster looming over him. Foster had one hand flattened against the wall near Tyler's shoulder, allowing him to lean in and Tyler held his other hand at the wrist, obviously in the act of pushing it away.

Using every ounce of control I possessed, I managed to hold back the bolt of lightning I wanted to skewer that bastard with and instead pasted a smile on my face. "Tyler! There you are. I've been looking for you. If you want to discuss the details of that project you're involved in, let's get a move on. I'll be leaving soon."

"Uh, sure, Professor Layton. The project. Um, sorry to keep you waiting. Excuse me, Professor Foster."

Tyler released his libidinous professor's arm, eased by him and with his eyes averted and his cheeks flushed, started to walk past me as well. I halted him with a hand on his arm. "Relax, everything's fine. My office. Three doors down. Go on ahead, I'll be there in a second."

He sent me a hesitant glance and a tentative smile. "Okay."

I could see the uncertainty in Tyler's eyes, but he did as I asked. When he was out of earshot, I gave Sam Foster my full attention. "You ever touch him again and the next guy you'll be looking for will be a Prince."

Foster's brow furrowed. "A Prince?"

"After I turn you into a toad, you'll need a kiss from one to break the spell."

"The spell," he scoffed. His blasé attitude succeeded in pissing me off just that much more. "I realize you're teaching occult studies, Professor," the emphasis he put on my title clearly broadcast his disdain for me, "but don't you think that's taking the joke a little too far?"

"Is it?" Silently I invoked a spell which brought a red glow to my eyes and created flames that crackled from my fingertips. I left the special effects in place for a couple of beats and took a few steps closer to the man who'd incurred my wrath.

Foster's eyes widened and he stumbled back a few paces. "What the fuck!"

Letting my appearance return to normal, I answered him. "Believe me, you don't want to know what the fuck. Remember what I said, hands off Tyler, and for that matter, any other students. Don't try my patience, Foster. Unless you want to find your slimy ass planted on a lily pad in a swamp somewhere while you chow down on the finest bugs nature has to offer -- for as long as you can dodge the cranes and crocodiles." I started to leave the room, pulling the door shut behind me then twisted around and popped my head back in. Professor Foster was staring at the door and jumped when I made my reappearance. It was a pleasing sight. "I almost forgot," I nonchalantly rattled off, "have a nice weekend."

"Uh... you too."

"Thanks."

I can't tell you how satisfied I felt at that moment having done my good deed for the day. Plus the fact that Tyler was now waiting in my office. If this wasn't a golden opportunity to truly get the ball rolling on restoring our relationship then I didn't know an opening when I saw one, and I intended to take full advantage of this one.

When I reached my office, Tyler was sitting in one of two chairs that faced my desk. I closed the door and took my seat on the other side to face him. "So. Professor Foster."

Tyler's cheeks flushed. "Yeah, it's not the first time he's hit on me, although he was a little more aggressive this time around. I could have handled him, you know. Even so, thanks for the timely interruption."

"You're welcome. I knew he was a sleeze the moment I met him. If he's smart, he won't bother you again."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"I threatened to turn him into a frog."

Tyler grinned and chuckled. "Do you think he bought it?"

"Actually? Yeah, he did. I can be very persuasive."

Tyler's smiling face developed a furrow between the brows. "I kind of got that impression in class. You speak with such conviction about certain things." He paused for a moment as though debating something then took the plunge. "You were serious, weren't you? About threatening to turn him into a frog?"

"Very serious."

"But... how could you make him believe something like that? Unless you tricked him somehow."

I wanted to crow from the rooftops not to mention dance around like a crazy man while maniacally laughing. This was it. I had him. However, instead of doing those things which surely would have sent Tyler running from my office in search of the nearest phone to call the loony bin, I remained calm, captured his gaze with mine, and told him the absolute truth.

"There was no trick to it. The reason I so vehemently believe in magic is because I can do it. I'm what's known in paranormal circles as a soul familiar."

"Soul familiar?"

Just as I'd hoped, Tyler too was keeping his cool. Considering his background I'd had little fear that he would doubt me, at least in this. "You've heard of familiars, right?"

"A spirit or power that enhances a witch's or wizard's power."

"Correct. Soul familiars not only enhance power, we bond with the magic practitioner's heart, mind, body, and soul. We become their mate."

Another frown creased Tyler's brow. "Why do I feel like I've heard this before?"

"There are a couple of books that make mention of us, though they're very obscure and rare works."

At this point I felt it was too soon for a full confession. I wanted Tyler to be the next one to reveal a secret. It would prove to me that he was willing to open up and extend his trust to me. His next words made my heart feel like it was swelling and ready to burst forth out of my chest with joy.

"Hmm. That might be it. Lord knows I've done a lot of reading on the subject." He sighed. "Professor Layton, do you think... what I mean is... I've got a problem I was wondering if maybe you could advise me on or help me with."

"I'd be happy to help if can. What's the problem?"

"My mother was a witch."

"Was?"

"Yeah. She died when I was twelve."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I answered, and truly I was.

Even though I already knew this fact about Tyler's past, it hit me right in the gut every time to think about him being so young and losing his mother. I guess because I know what it's like. I wasn't as young as he was when my own mother died. Despite that, I don't believe the loss I felt was any less even if our relationship wasn't as close as that of Tyler and his mother.

"Thank you, but well, see... the problem stems from that. During the time she was ill, even though arrangements were made for me to live with relatives, I guess my

mother was afraid to leave me without extra protection, and so she gave me something.”

“And your difficulty stems from this something.”

“Yes.”

“I see. So you want to get rid of it?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll have to see what it is.”

“I thought you might say that,” Tyler said with a slight grimace. “Um, the thing is, it only comes out when I touch someone for more than a few moments. So, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“That’s unusual, but I have no problem with touching you, Tyler. My preferred partners have always been male so physical contact with another man holds no discomfort for me. If I’m not mistaken, perhaps you’re the same?”

“Yes, though I’ve never been able to put my inclinations to practical use.”

The tone in which he expressed this sentiment reminded me so much of the plaintive young man who, upon our first meeting, openly bemoaned the fact that he feared he was going to die a virgin. He was precious then but, oh God, so much more so now that I knew the depth and scope of the feelings I would develop for him.

“So what do we do? Hold hands?”

“That’ll work, um, kissing would make it happen faster.”

“Kissing it is.” Lord knows I wasn’t about to object to kissing him. I rose from my chair and Tyler followed my lead. The two of us came face-to-face at the corner of my desk.

Unlike the first time we met when Tyler had boldly planted himself on my lap and initiated the kiss, this time he was looking distinctly bashful and nervous. Of course our first meeting had taken place when he’d reached a point of such desperation that using the untrained powers he’d inherited from his mother, he’d put out a magical call for help. The conditions this time around were quite different.

"I really appreciate you doing this," Tyler softly said, not meeting my eyes. "I've really been getting close to my wits end trying to figure out what to do. I've studied books and talked to a lot of different people. Not one of them gave off even a hint of the vibe of true power I feel from you. I've been debating approaching you with this, wondering if I was mistaken about you or if you'd just think I was nuts. All those other people, they were all just pretenders and I kind of knew it but I was so desperate I --"

"Tyler?"

He lifted his head and anxious, violet-blue eyes squarely met my gaze. "Yes?"

"It's okay. Hush." Cupping his shoulder with one hand and gently holding his chin with the other, I leaned in and kissed him.

I had a feeling it would happen so I was somewhat prepared, but it was so much more than even I could have imagined. The resultant explosion of sensation I experienced when our lips met blanked my mind and set every nerve in my body tingling. Tiny jolts of electricity fired through those miniscule fibers with such power it was a wonder my skin didn't spew fiery particles like sparklers on the Fourth of July.

While our memories may have been returned to the way they were before Tyler and I met, there were certain things nothing could change. He might still think he was an inexperienced virgin, but on an unconscious level, Tyler's body knew better. This time around there was no need to coax him into opening his mouth for me. Before I could even think about wanting it, his tongue swept in and took possession of mine.

Kissing me with an expertise he'd learned with months of practice, in this scenario, I was the one who ended up with his back to the wall. Practically from head to toe, Tyler plastered his body to mine and ground his hips against me in a way that brought our two, already rigid, cocks together. Twinkling stars appeared behind my closed eyelids and I groaned into his mouth, unable to stop myself from voicing the arousal that was quickly threatening to overwhelm me.

Tyler's hands grabbed my ass and the hot, sweet moans he pumped between my lips vibrated against my tongue causing a wave of lust to slide down my spine, lodge in my balls, and turn my gut into a ball of twisting, aching need. It was so potent I bucked

against him and nearly cried out when I felt his hand at my zipper. I heard the metallic grind as he slid it open and a split second later, my cock was in the palm of his hand. His fingers spread the copious juices already welling from the slit in the crown before wrapping around me to squeeze and stroke and tease.

My shirt was yanked upward and my chest exposed. His mouth landed on my nipple, licking, sucking, and nipping while his thigh pushed between mine and aggressively nudged my balls. The hand still on my ass rhythmically kneaded my flesh and encouraged me to rock myself against him. Between that, his mouth at my nipple and what he was doing to my cock, I shot my load, groaning as it gushed forth over his fingers with random spurts landing on my torso and belly.

Having Tyler once more in my arms made all the difference to my libido. It responded by going from wimp to superhero complete with cape, and took off flat-footed from the earth to rise so high into the atmosphere the lack of oxygen made me dizzy.

Giddy and lightheaded I might have been, but I retained enough sense to realize I wanted nothing more at this point than to return the favor and get my lover off. Pushing him back, we slammed into the desk. "Sit," I gasped, and when he did I attacked his zipper with all the zeal of a crazed zealot.

In seconds flat I had his cock in my hand then into my mouth where I enthusiastically sucked him like a turbocharged vacuum cleaner. His flavor burst upon my palate and I swirled my tongue over the silky-hot flesh that covered the solid tube of his erection, seeking every bit of Tyler's essence I could find. The concentrated, musky tang of his body odor rose from his pubes and I swallowed his cock to the root just for the pleasure of burying my nose in those tickly, fragrant hairs.

Tyler's groans and the fingers grasping handfuls of my hair more than transmitted the pleasure he was receiving from my frantic blowjob. I've been told my technique is superb and Tyler had been spelled to think he'd never had sex of any kind with a partner. With the odds against him, he didn't last long. When his jizz sprayed my tongue and launched itself down my throat after what seemed just a few

determined bobs of my head, I was ready for it and swallowed like a pro. Damned happy I was about it too.

Yes, I most definitely wanted him to feel good, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't somewhat relieved his climax had barreled in on a hard and fast wave just the way mine had done. After the short time it took for him to get me off, it was a matter of male pride to return the favor and not to be the only minuteman in the room. Thank God, our level of horniness seemed to be perfectly matched.

After swallowing down every drop of cum I could coax out of him, I gently let his cock slip from my mouth and laid my head on his stomach. One of his hands remained in my hair, lazily ruffling through the strands and I smiled against his skin. "Mmm, feels good," I mumbled.

He agreed with a husky wordless rumble. "Mmm hmm."

I let myself rest against him for a minute, content to delay the rest of the scene I knew would now have to play out between us. If all went well and Tyler continued to follow his instincts, I'd soon be working to break the spell that imprisoned his memories of me and our life together. Feeling my anticipation and impatience reassert itself, I lifted myself up. Tyler, who'd fallen back against my desk, followed suit and the two of us, after exchanging wry grins, began setting our clothes to rights.

It was during this process that Tyler remembered the reason for our impromptu sex-fest. "Wait a minute. That shouldn't have happened. Where is he?"

Knowing exactly who he was asking about, I pointed out his whereabouts. "There." Tyler bent, peered over the edge of my desk and sure enough, Trip lay curled up on the floor snoozing, totally unconcerned by what had just taken place. "Trip. Come here, boy."

With his typical lazy-dog enthusiasm in the face of a nonthreatening situation, Trip lifted his heads, stood up, stretched, and wagging his tail, came to me to be petted.

Tyler's face was a study in amazed confusion. "That's impossible. He never lets anyone near me. Or him, for that matter. What's going on? How can you... did you call him Trip?"

“Yes. This guy and I are well acquainted with each other, but not as close as you and I are.”

“What are you talking about? We’ve only just met.”

“Have we? Is that how you really feel?” Tyler opened his mouth to answer and I lifted a hand to forestall him. “Think about it before you answer. Really, really think about what just happened between us. How easy it was, how everything just naturally fell into place. Think about it not just with your intellect, but with your gut instincts, your emotions.”

Frowning and obviously truly puzzled by my request and Trip’s complete acceptance of me, Tyler stared at me for a moment then moved away to settle heavily into the chair he’d earlier quitted. Instead of retaking my seat behind the desk, I eased into the chair next to him and waited.

It wasn’t long before he answered me. “It’s true. What you said. There should have been some awkwardness, some hesitation on my part, but there wasn’t. It was like I knew you, like I’d touched you, been with you in this way before. Though my mind is telling me it’s impossible, there’s something else that’s contradicting that belief. I’m racking my brain here, but every time a vaguely familiar image starts to form, it melts and fades away. What’s going on, Professor Layton? How do I know you?”

Tyler’s heartfelt question and confusion made my chest tighten. I needed him to remember me so badly it hurt. “Alex, please call me Alex,” I pleaded, tamping down the flurry of emotions that threatened to spill over and leave me feeling embarrassed at my lack of self control. I had to stay composed even though I sometimes felt I was steadily edging closer to losing it. “You’re my soul mate. I’m your soul familiar. We were together for four months and faced a trial by magical combat to solidify our bond. We won, but on a technicality, they, the Council of Soul Familiars, separated us. Our memories were erased. I decided to hedge my bets and made provision beforehand to have mine restored to me if anything went wrong. Now I’m here, hoping, praying, you’ll trust me enough to believe what I’m telling you and that you’ll give me the

chance to break the spell that's keeping you from remembering all that we had, all that we meant to each other."

Tyler said nothing and I could feel my stomach twist with apprehension. He was going to reject me. The Council's spell was too potent, and even now it was probably fighting any desire he felt to give me the chance I'd begged for. He was going to say something that would shatter me into a million pieces. I just knew it... until his next words proved me wrong.

"Why do I suddenly feel like I want to cry?" Tyler asked and self-consciously looked away.

Relief tore through me and, not realizing I'd been afraid to even breathe lest I influence him, I inhaled a shaky breath and reached for his hand. For a moment he remained stiff and unresponsive then relaxed and twined his fingers with mine.

"Because it hurts. It hurts so fucking much. I feel like a part of my heart's been ripped away." My voice shook and I swallowed hard, struggling to regain my composure as Tyler turned his gaze toward me. "I have a feeling that even though you don't remember, part of you, your subconscious maybe, is fighting this. You're not powerless. You're a wizard who was coming into his own. You're trapped inside an enchantment and now that you've consciously been made aware of it, your psyche is reaching for those lost memories and finding at least enough bits and pieces to affect your emotions.

"Or, all lofty explanations aside, maybe you're just channeling my pain. Whatever it is, will you... trust me a little bit? Give me the chance to set things right?"

"This is so strange, so totally out of left field. Logically I should be telling myself that you're either nuts or this is just some elaborate scheme you've cooked up so I'll bend over for you." Tyler laughed and the sound wasn't entirely pleasant. "The truth is, I can't. There's too much evidence to the contrary. Too much I can't refute with pure logic. The... the dog."

"Cerbretta," I interrupted, "Trip," I sympathetically added.

"Cerbretta? A derivative of Cerberus?"

"Yeah."

"Jeez. And Trip?"

"Three heads, you know... triple."

Tyler laughed again and this time the sound held genuine amusement. "You named him?"

I nodded.

"Logical, but anyway, how can I argue with this? There's Trip, how he knows you, and then there are these feelings I have. You practice magic so I suppose you could be making all this up with some sleight of hand, mumbo jumbo or genuine ability, although I just don't feel that from you. Professor Foster, he exudes dishonesty when he says he cares about me and wants to hook up, but you, you're definitely different so, yeah, let's fix this."

Relief filled me, and I couldn't hold back a grin so wide it hurt.

"Just one thing," Tyler added. "If you're fucking with me, I will get even."

"You won't have to, I promise."

"So where do we start?"

I didn't think it was possible, but I'm sure my grin got bigger. "Come home with me."

Tyler raised one brow and gave me a doubtful look. "Why is it I don't like the sound of that?"

I laughed out loud. "How do you like roller coaster rides?"

"I'm actually not a big fan."

"Then you definitely won't like this."

Chapter Six

I called a portal into being. Grabbing Tyler's arm, I whistled to Trip, and the three of us stepped into the ether corridor. Seconds later we were home, and déjà vu struck. Tyler turned green, and I hustled him into the bathroom. I know it was wrong of me. I was practically giggling with delight as he puked.

I'm not going to do a play by play about what happened next. The déjà vu continued with events unfolding much as they'd done the first time I brought Tyler home, through my giving him ginger ale for his upset stomach to his reintroduction to Kohe. It was a rather rowdy meeting this time around. Kohe was so delighted to see him, he launched himself into Tyler's arms, nearly scaring the poor guy to death. When Tyler yelled, Trip had a fit, barking and dancing around, and I was laughing so hard at all the ruckus I nearly peed in my pants.

When we finally straightened everything out and everyone calmed down, I fixed us all, even Kohe and Trip, a simple meal of soup and sandwiches which I figured would be easy on Tyler's stomach. After the meal, Tyler helped me with the cleanup and we retired to the loft. It was there I anticipated that right away the real work would begin. Wrong. Hey, even I can't be right all the time.

"Have a seat," I told him and the two of us took chairs side-by-side at the round table that, had he remembered it, Tyler would have known he'd done a good deal of studying at. "I need to look at you."

"Look at me?" Tyler asked.

His vaguely doubtful expression had me smiling. "I need to decipher the spell that was used to repress your memories, so I need to touch you and" -- with two fingers I made a vague back and forth motion between us -- "look into your eyes."

"Okay," he agreed. "So what part of me do you need to touch?"

At first I thought he was being ingenuous... until I saw the flare of mischief in his eyes. I suppose I should have ignored it and kept things strictly on track, but I just couldn't help myself. A playful Tyler was impossible to resist and the taste I'd had of him in my office back at the university had merely wetted my appetite for more.

"Well, the more skin to skin contact we have, the easier it'll be to get a feel for what's going on inside you."

"Did you say get a feel or cop a feel?"

I snorted with amusement. "Whichever you prefer."

"I'll take both."

Tyler stood up and pulled his tee shirt off over his head. The sight of that firm beautiful chest and those cut, flexing abdominals was all I needed. I rose from my seat, hooked a finger in one of his belt loops and tugged him in the direction of the bedroom.

"You're not being shy at all this time around," I commented.

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, I'm just wondering why that is. I guess I'm operating under the assumption that the spell should still have you believing you're a bashful virgin. You're acting more like a seasoned seducer."

"I haven't felt like a virgin since we kissed. Remember what we both agreed on earlier? My mind may not know it, but my body damn sure does. I'd swear on a stack of Bibles we've done this before."

"We have. So many times," I told him, and my voice came out a husky rasp. Pulling him into the bedroom, I turned and stepped into the arms that welcomed me. "I've missed you so much."

Our lips came together and the kiss ranged the scale from spiritually sublime to carnal sensuality incarnate. It made me realize why people who wanted no emotional involvement with their sex didn't kiss. Kisses are designed to link the participants in a singular intimacy the likes of which no other act, even intercourse, can match.

Our kiss began with the exchange of breath, warm wisps of air, mingling and inhaled, mine into Tyler, his into me. The first, ethereal joining. Next, came the pressing

together of our lips, silky bits of plump flesh rich with sensitized nerve endings that brushed against each other again and again until settling together in the perfect configuration. On the wave of passion invoked by that contact, our mouths opened and our tongues touched, slid against each other and caressed. With that decadent act, taste added to the increasing web of sensory delights that bound us together.

Every being possesses a unique flavor. When you taste the right one, you can't help but savor their essence. It's like being on the verge of starvation and suddenly being presented with the perfect meal. It ensnares your attention, beckons to you, fills the deep void of emptiness inside of you, imbuing you with such a profound sense of satisfaction that it borders on, and in this case, spills over into arousal. Tyler was my perfect meal. No food ever conceived of could sate my hunger the way he could. He invaded my senses with his savory, rich flavor and seasoned it with his scent.

When kissing, so deeply are you enmeshed in the person whose lips are sealed to yours, the subtle nuance of aromas you may once have overlooked come stealing in. For me there were faint hints of herbal soap and male musk from flesh that had grown warmer, heated by the flush of blood that had infused the incalculable multitude of capillaries under Tyler's smooth, tan, skin.

Needing to more fully experience his taste, his scent, I pulled my mouth from his and nuzzled his throat. The texture was satiny-soft. It encouraged me to explore, an act that brought brief rousing moans from Tyler as my mouth traveled over his collarbone, chest, and pecs to find one small copper circle dotted by a hard kernel of flesh. His nipple felt good against my tongue, a hard diamond-like peak displayed on a bed of velvety flesh and I laved it, sucked it, loved it well before moving to the other.

By the time I started to move lower, Tyler's chest was heaving with the force of the breaths being pulled in and expelled from his lungs. "Professor Layton, Alex. Bed. Before my knees buckle."

I managed a chuckle, though it was rather strained. I didn't want to stop. Still, it was a good excuse to get rid of the rest of his clothes and mine. I straightened and began unbuttoning my shirt. "Lose the pants," I ordered, and Tyler complied.

He made short work of toeing off his shoes, peeling off his socks, and skimming his jeans down and off. Without any further instruction, he went to the bed, pulled the comforter to the foot of the mattress, climbed on and halfway reclined, using the pillows for support. I let my eyes wander the length of his body from head to toe, paying particular attention to the erection that rested against his belly. It was long and solid, the crown already glistening with pearls of precum. I knew it would be warm, the skin softer than the silky texture of a newborn foal's muzzle and the thick bluish-tinted veins I could see would pulse with blood, with life.

"Man, I never thought just having someone stare at my dick would be enough to make me come, but it's getting to be a near thing. You better hurry up before I lose it," Tyler warned.

"That would be a terrible waste. Sit up straight, please," I directed. I shed the rest of my clothes, joined him on the bed, and straddled his lap. "I'm supposed to be studying the spell you're bound with," I continued calmly while inwardly reciting hosannas to the heavens for a position that brought me within inches of being able to rub my cock against his. It was all I could do to resist, especially when he began petting me.

"Does that mean we can't do anything else?" Tyler asked. Not waiting for an answer, his hands settled on my back and lazily stroked my skin which sent chills down my spine.

"Not necessarily, just don't get too inventive. I need to concentrate."

I really wanted to fuck him, but urgency of a different nature had suddenly gripped me. I had the ominous feeling that someone would be checking up on us soon, and I needed Tyler whole and standing by me when they came for us again. Now that I knew what to expect, there was no way they'd take us down so easily. If they gave me no choice I intended to fight tooth and nail, using every dirty tactic I'd learned in my two hundred-plus years of life.

Closing my eyes, I did my best to clear my head and find a place of complete stillness. I found it, and yet even as I did, strange whispers of doubt began to assail me.

Puzzled, I struggled with them, crushing them, ruthlessly pushing them aside to prepare myself. The effort had me breaking into a sweat, but finally, I believed I found the tranquility I needed to proceed. Tyler had stopped caressing my back. When I opened my eyes, he was watching me, his expression turned serious. Saying nothing, I cupped his face with my hands, noticing that even my palms were damp. Shoving that knowledge to the back of my mind, I locked my gaze with his.

At first all I saw was the multiple tints that made up the color of his eyes. They flowed, one into the other, in concentric circles. The outermost circle was the violet of spring pansies which blended into a smaller circle of intense blue touched by tiny dabs of lavender. That blue then darkened to navy until it merged with the black of his pupil. It was a beautiful combination of hues, one I knew would intensify or pale to match his mood.

Concentrating on his pupils, I let myself be drawn into the darkness. There was nothing to be seen, only sensed. This was a place of peace and absolute silence, ruled by the spirit and soul of Tyler. I searched for anything that didn't belong and easily found it. An illusion wrapped around nothingness -- the Council's spell, and entwined with it, the enchantment Tyler's mother had cast. The cerbretta spell.

The two of them had been deliberately joined. To be rid of one I had to dissolve both, and the realization struck hard at something I'd kept hidden even from myself. The shock jolted me free of Tyler's inner self, slamming me back into my own consciousness with a force that made me cry out in pain.

"Are you all right?" Tyler gripped my upper arms, holding me steady. His concern served only to intensify my guilt.

Breathing hard, I stared at him, stunned by a fear I hadn't let myself feel and the deliberate step I'd taken to keep Tyler tied to me. I'd never completely broken the cerbretta spell. Yes, during those first days we'd spent together, I'd modified it so Trip would allow me to be with Tyler. I intended to soon after truly break it, but as time passed, I'd let it slide. I kept telling myself I'd get to it. I'd do the right thing and give

Tyler his complete and total freedom. I didn't follow through. I hadn't because I was afraid to.

How could I have buried such a truth about me from myself? How could I have not acknowledged to myself that I feared the possibility that Tyler might someday choose to leave me? Even though we were soul mates, if one or the other partner truly wished it, the bond could be broken. I'd never heard of it being done, but the very idea that it could happen scared me. You know why? For all my braggadocio, for all my vaunted talent and self confidence, I didn't truly believe I was worthy of Tyler.

He was wonderful. Sweet, strong, kind, understanding, and loving. He was a man of high moral standards who had compassion and intelligence. And then there was me, flip, narcissistic, promiscuous to the nth degree in the years before Tyler came into my life, uncaring what others thought of me, content to do whatever I wanted regardless of the consequences. Yeah, maybe I could claim that I'd never deliberately hurt anyone, except Lucas, even so, it didn't mean that others hadn't been hurt. I'd just been too selfish and unconcerned to care.

Even though we'd talked about my faults, did Tyler truly see me and if so, how could he love me? My own mother hadn't loved me enough to stick around. Why would anyone else? Those strange whispers of doubt I thought I'd destroyed reassembled themselves and grew stronger, their murmurs turning into shouts so loud I couldn't ignore them. My breath came harsher, a fresh wave of sweat breaking over me and I feared I was on the verge of a full blown anxiety attack until I was distracted.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Tyler asked, interrupting my morbid nosedive into the bottomless pool of self pity. "I've never seen anyone lose their *joie de vivre* so quickly. You look like a puppy that's just had his nose bopped with a rolled up newspaper for peeing on the carpet. What's wrong, Alex? Is breaking the spell impossible? Or is it something worse?"

It was definitely worse, but I couldn't reveal such a thing to Tyler. When we did what was necessary to shatter the enchantment, all my hidden truths would be exposed,

and he'd see me for the fraud I really am. "No, it's not that. I can do it and there'll even be an added bonus. The spell binding Trip to you will be broken as well."

"That's great, so what's the problem? Something hurt you a moment ago, and I can see you're upset. Talk to me. Confide in me. It can't be that bad."

The compassion and caring sympathy I saw in Tyler's eyes was nothing less than I'd expect from him. He was everything I'd never be. Everything I'd never deserve. Squelching my personal demons, I concentrated on doing well by the man I loved with all my heart. "Let's take care of this first then I'll tell you, if you still want to know."

"Of course I will. I want to know now, and when my memories are restored, as your soul mate, I'll want to know even more. Stop looking so sad. I'm beginning to think maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"No. Never that. It is a good idea. You need to be yourself again."

I took a deep, cleansing breath in hopes of bracing myself for the inevitable. When he saw the truth, Tyler was going to leave me, I was now convinced of it, but I couldn't bind him to me by means arcane. It just wasn't right, wasn't fair and I was determined, for once in my life, to put someone else's welfare above my own.

I reached out and caressed Tyler's cheek with my fingertips. Though I'd decided to let him go, I selfishly wanted just one more thing. "Will you fuck me? It'll help me if we're physically joined."

A flare of heat lit Tyler's eyes, and I expected his immediate agreement. Instead he shook his head. "No." Disappointment joined the other emotions threatening to crush me, until Tyler's next words lightened the burden. "I will however, make love to you."

I smiled at him. It was just like him to be able to add joy to the uncharacteristically gloomy mix of my emotions. For a time after that, I gave myself into his keeping.

Reaching for the handle of the drawer in the bedside table, I pulled it open, liberated our ever present bottle of lube, and handed it to him. "You know what to do with this, right?"

"I think I have a vague notion," Tyler sarcastically responded, taking the sting out of his words by grinning and lightly pinching one cheek of my ass. "It's to slick the hole so the weasel can slide in."

His analogy drew full fledged laughter from me, and it was quite a relief from my previous depression. "I never thought of this as a weasel," I managed to croak, reaching out to skim my fingertips over his cock. My touch caused us both to sober, and with a synchronized lean, we came together for a kiss.

Tyler ably took over the proceedings, and I let myself be taken. With mouth, tongue and hands, he caressed me, infused my flesh with fire and created an ache of need so intense it took me to the verge of madness. He owned me, body and soul and opened me at his leisure, finally possessing me with the slide of his cock into my tight passage made slippery with lube and plundering fingers.

At the joining of our bodies, the soul bond opened between us. I felt the thrust of his thick member inside me and the hot wet glide and grip of my sheath where it surrounded him. I heard his moan and felt it vibrate in my own chest. I felt the grasp of his fingers against the mounds of my ass at the same time he felt the bunch and release of my muscles against his hands as I undulated against him.

Our two hearts raced together, our lungs captured and released air as one. Sweat trickled down Tyler's spine, and I felt the tickle. We were becoming one entity, and my spirit sank within him, resisting the pleasure that threatened to swallow me, instead reaching for the one barrier that kept us from truly being whole.

The spells were lit by incandescence. Not physically present in that space which held the wellspring of Tyler's essence, I touched them with the only tool at my disposal. My senses brushed against the spells and were burned. I felt the white-hot sear, heard the sizzle and cried out, thrown back and left cradling my phantom injury.

Shaken, I waited, uncertain if I could continue until I felt a cool sensation and the feel of a ghostly embrace. Tyler's inner awareness had wakened and surrounded me, held me, healed the burn, and strengthened me. More importantly it weakened the

barrier to my own essence, joining us and revealing something unexpected. A spell, connected to the one which kept Tyler's memories prisoner, resided within me.

I was astounded and appalled. How could I have not detected it? How had it slipped by Kohe's restoration of me? I didn't know, couldn't guess, but it made me angry, furious, a feeling I passed to Tyler.

We needed no words. This was not the place for them. In such a place, the counter-spell I wove was not spoken, it was enacted. With Tyler melded to me, we went forward with metaphysical claws extended. The power of our intent and desire attacked the foreign spells, slicing them, shredding them, pulling them apart until they lost all cohesion and faded, disappearing into nothingness. With the disappearance of the last tiny piece, our bond realized its full potential.

The sheer intensity of sensation that crashed over us was too much, too bright, too exquisite a joy and pain. Even mates of our ilk are prohibited from looking upon each other's souls. That was something reserved for our creator, and Tyler and I had gotten too close.

I was ejected from within the depths of Tyler's essence, and he from mine. We were compensated for it by being rooted in the physical. Our bodies, still joined, teetered on the precipice of orgasm. Tyler rolled and brought me beneath him. His hips snapped forward and his cock surged within me. He rose up, pushed my legs up and back and pounded into me. I loved it. Took every stroke and gave him back my grunts and groans as proof.

The pleasure spiked and twisted, wrenching my stomach muscles as my body seized and milky seed spewed from my cock. I yelled, a polite term for the indescribable sound that tore from my throat. At that point I couldn't have cared less about what kind of strange noises I was making. I was buried under an avalanche of bliss, and I took my pseudo demise in stride, hanging on to every ripple of sensation that caused me to shudder and shake.

Tyler collapsed against me and I held him, fighting for oxygen, grinning like a fool and nearly crying from relief. "Did you see that?" I gasped. "That spell in me. It was a stew of doubt and self-recrimination."

"I saw it," Tyler managed to answer. He eased off me, lying down to face me and I rolled to my side to face him. "What was the purpose?"

"To stop me. To make me believe that if I lifted the spell from you, you'd leave me."

"Well that's just ridiculous. You wouldn't allow something like that to get to you. Besides, a spell like that -- I got the impression that it would have to be built on a foundation of true belief emanating from the one on whom it was cast. You've never felt that way, have you?"

Busted. Self-consciously I dropped my gaze from Tyler's. Before I could say anything, he was on me. I was pushed flat on my back. Tyler straddled my torso, my hands were grasped, my arms extended and trapped over my head.

"You have. Admit it. That's why you looked so sad, before. You thought I was going to walk. How could you even think such a thing?" Tyler asked. I could tell by his tone he was not only touched by disbelief but hurt. "Have I ever given you reason to believe I'd leave you? Didn't I express myself adequately? How could you not accept how much I love you?"

"I did, I do. It wasn't your fault, it was me. The cerbretta spell. I didn't break it. I kept you chained to me. I didn't realize that, deep down, a part of me was so... damn I hate admitting this... afraid. I guess I've got issues I didn't know I had. My doubts were small and I really believe they'd have eventually disappeared, but you're right, that spell enhanced them to the point where I couldn't ignore them."

"And yet you went forward anyway. Believing you'd lose me, you freed me." Tyler's eyes were aswim with unshed tears. "Do you know how proud I am of you right now?"

I mustered a bashful smile. I could actually feel heat suffuse my cheeks. If I'd been on my feet, I'm sure I would have shuffled them. It was all I could do not to mutter, "aw shucks," and the thought made me laugh.

"What? I can see you're embarrassed. You're blushing," Tyler crowed.

"Shut up. It's nothing. Let me up."

"I don't think so. I like you this way. The brash Alex Layton, laid low by a little compliment. I have to say it," he leaned down and nuzzled my ear, "it's adorable."

"Shit, goddamn it, Tyler. I am not adorable. Teacup poodles are adorable."

"Say woof for Daddy," Tyler teased, nipping my earlobe.

I'd intended to wrestle my way free. Instead I started laughing. I laughed so hard tears spilled from my eyes, and Tyler joined me in my mirth. Perhaps it was relief, or perhaps it was just the joy of being totally together again. We laughed until we were exhausted and crumbled together in a boneless heap.

At that point, the thing I'd dreaded happened.

A portal opened and out stepped a member of the Council. And not just any member. Gerald Grant himself. Tyler and I scrambled out of bed, both of us taking defensive postures. Kohe and Trip appeared to back us up.

"You may as well go back to wherever you came from. Tyler and I won't be separated. If you force the issue, we'll fight you." Staring at that impassive visage, and despite my conviction, I felt my insides curdle. Gerald could squash me like a bug and I knew it, but I wouldn't lie down and accept a fate forced upon me. No fucking way. I preferred at least the semblance of carving out my own.

"Good. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. Now would you mind putting on some pants? I think this conversation can be carried out in a more businesslike manner if you're at least partially clothed." Gerald took a seat in the wing chair that stood by the dresser.

Tyler and I exchanged a puzzled look, and I shrugged. Picking up my pants from the floor, I handed Tyler his, and after donning them, we seated ourselves on the edge of the mattress.

"What's going on?" I asked. "I thought you'd be pissed that Tyler and I are back together."

"Alex, sometimes I despair of your intelligence. I thought you, at least, would figure it out."

"Figure what out?"

"Can you name me one instance of a soul familiar bond that was broken by the Council?"

I thought about it for a moment and came up with nothing. "No."

"I'd be surprised if you could. It's never happened."

"Then what's the purpose of all this? Why did we suffer through this false separation you put us through? Would you have restored us if we hadn't managed it ourselves?" I'll admit I was getting pissed.

"No, I wouldn't. This was all part of the test. Every couple faces the combat, a known entity and afterward there's more, something that they, as a couple, defeat and keep to themselves."

"But why? Why do you make it so hard on us?"

Gerald's impassivity melted and he gave me a sympathetic and somewhat somber smile. "We're long-lived creatures, Alex. We need a companion to share our existence, someone who will keep us from self-destructing as the years go by. We can't indulge in the human habit of marriage and divorce, marriage and divorce. Such constant heartbreak would destroy us.

"When the soul bond is formed, it must be tempered in the fires of adversity to test its strength, to make sure it won't shatter in the first battle. It may seem cruel, but everyone before you has endured this and everyone after you will as well. In the long run, when you have time to think about, you'll understand that it's truly a kindness."

I silently contemplated his words and couldn't deny their validity. "I think I already understand. So is it over? The test?"

"It's over. You and Tyler have officially joined the ranks of the soul bonded. Congratulations. Welcome, Tyler."

"Thank you," he responded.

Gerald rose from his chair. "Well, I'm off. You boys carry on."

"Thanks," I said, and we followed him to the portal. For all Gerald's explanation made perfect sense as to why we'd been put through the ringer, I could feel his regret. These things couldn't be easy for him either. I instinctively knew he wasn't a man who enjoyed inflicting pain on anyone. "Hey."

"Yes?"

"Are we still invited to dinner?"

His smile this time was true and warm. "Of course. I'll have Mattie contact you."

"We look forward to it... Grandfather."

One finely formed brow rose. His smile was unaffected and the twinkle in his eyes intensified. "As do we... Imp."

I laughed as the portal winked out and turned back to Tyler. "Well, you heard the man. He said carry on."

I grabbed him and giving him a solid push, landed both of us in the middle of the mattress. I was totally pleased with the results, but what I didn't expect was to have the breath driven from my lungs when a three-headed dog and a short gargoyle landed on top of me. What ensued was a four way wrestling match punctuated by utter chaos.

By the time the bodies were sorted out, the bedding had been pulled from the mattress, and we were all on the floor with it. I lay back, gasping for air between whoops of laughter.

When he'd managed to catch his breath, Tyler was the first one to speak. "Hey? How come Trip's still here? The spell's broken, right?"

"It is. Trip is now a free agent. I'm guessing he's chosen to stay with you, with us."

"That's good. I'd miss him," Tyler admitted, giving one of Trip's heads a rub.

I smiled indulgently then noticed something. "You know what? I'm starving. Let's eat."

"Sounds good," Tyler agreed. "Let's order out and hey, let's invite Bobby and Kent over."

"That's a good idea. I want to see the imp, make sure he's getting along all right." I levered myself up off the floor, gave Tyler a hand and got Trip and Kohe moving. "Come on guys, food."

The two of them scampered out the bedroom door ahead of us, Tyler on their heels, and me following after. My lover looked back at me, his violet-blue eyes expectant as he waited for me to catch up. We paused at the top of the stairs and exchanged a lingering kiss. I couldn't be happier. I'd found my place in the scheme of things, my soul mate, my family, and I intended to enjoy it for however long the creator of us all let me.

Just about to take the first downward step, Tyler stopped and sniffed the air.

"What?"

"You know, maybe we should take a shower first. We're a little fragrant for company."

I took my own sniff. We were redolent with tart male sweat and the musk of sex. "You're right, but what about those two?" I asked, indicating Kohe and Trip. "They're waiting for us."

"Let 'em wait," Tyler flippantly replied. Contrary to his surface unconcern, I felt a surge of power, and from where I stood, I suddenly heard excited chittering coming from the kitchen, not to mention some pretty loud chewing sounds.

"What did you do?"

"Just gave them a little treat to distract them. I don't want them joining us in the shower." Tyler's smile was positively wicked, and I felt my cock start to firm.

I slipped my arm around his waist, and the two of us did an about face to head for the bathroom. Is it possible to have down and dirty sex while getting squeaky clean? I'll bet more than a few of you already know the answer to that. As for the rest of you, I'll let you know.

Kate Steele

What is it they say? Watch out for the quiet ones? Kate Steele has found that writing is the ideal way to release all those wild inner urges and she's just getting started. "I'm aging in reverse. With the help of lots of plastic surgery and vitamins I fully expect to have my own male harem by the time I hit 90." For now she's settling for the quiet life in rural Indiana with family and pets. Guilty pleasure: Singing in the car. "With the volume loud enough I sound just like Celine Dion!" You can contact Kate and sing-a-long at katesteele27@yahoo.com or visit her website at www.katesteele.com.