

Forgiven



Mary
Winter

StarMyst Book Two



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STARMYST: FORGIVEN

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StarMyst: Forgiven
by Mary Winter

Reid Montano promised Edwin's doctor he'd keep her secret and not reveal her sorcerer heritage...until he found her in bed with his brother.

After fleeing her over protective father, Dr. Laura Ingress found a haven with Edwin and the StarMyst Conclave. Though still officially a member of her father's Conclave, the two men had an uneasy truce. But now the one man who could protect her from her father was dead, and her father's henchmen are back in town, ready to claim her back into one of the most powerful Sorcerer Conclaves still in existence.

Laura is going to have to trust the one man she loves to keep her safe and Reid will have to convince her that all is forgiven.

Reid forced himself to stop several paces from her. "Your father's men said if I didn't claim you, they would. My control is hanging by a thread, baby. This isn't the right time or the right place. And to be honest, I probably should clear it with Te first, though I know he'll approve. What do you want me to do, Laura?" Asking that question had to be the hardest thing he'd ever done. He knew what *he* wanted to do, had known ever since he'd seen her. Not even the remembrance of finding her in bed with his brother dimmed his ardor. Not tonight. Not after feeling her fingers, her lips against his flesh and knowing just how fucking sweet they could be together.

He waited for her answer. Seconds ticked by like falling stars from the sky. Laura licked her lips. He watched the pink bud of her tongue swipe across a mouth he'd just kissed. Her taste blossomed with a reminder of shared passion.

In some ways, he suspected she should probably thank her father when they went to Brazos. Reid had no doubt he'd see the man face-to-face. After all, Laura had to confront him, especially if she wanted to stay at StarMyst. Without his overt manipulation, he and Laura might have continued dancing around their attraction and their past.

She stepped forward. Holding out her hand, she let the *lussor* flare. It washed over him like rain. "I'm yours, Reid. I've always been yours," she whispered.

He rushed into her arms. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe there wouldn't be any regrets.

Cool night air wrapped around him as he pulled her tight against him. The blanket slid to a floor in a swish of fabric. Cupping the back of her head, Reid simply held her. He breathed in her scent, that honeysuckle fragrance he always associated with her. The silken strands of her hair tangled around his fingers, her curves pressed against the hard planes of his chest and legs.

His cock throbbed. Reid ignored it. Though it happened far too soon for his liking, he knew what they'd do tonight was inevitable. It had been from the moment Laura had arrived in their small corner of Illinois with her Texas twang and her easy smile. If Edwin were alive, he would have said it should have happened long ago, and perhaps, Reid thought with a pang of regret, if he'd acted on his desires then maybe Laura wouldn't have had sex with his brother. Maybe her father's men wouldn't be here the day of Edwin's funeral to bring her back to Brazos. Edwin would have been strong enough to keep her here. The need to make up for lost time had him cupping her cheek and tilting her face up to meet his.

"I should have done this a long time ago," he whispered, his lips just millimeters from hers.

"Yeah, you should have. Kiss me, Reid." She parted her lips in an invitation he couldn't refuse.

Lights from inside the house shone through the curtains giving him just enough light to see the need in her eyes. She pressed against him, pushing him to the edge of the porch where the moonlight slanted over their bodies. If her father's men were still out there, she wanted them to see this. Reid agreed with her. Let them watch. Let them want.

He kissed her, trying to hold back, wanting to make this last. The sweet taste of her mouth filled him with a longing to find out if she tasted as sweet in other places as well. Entwining his fingers in her hair, he slanted his lips across hers and deepened the kiss. His tongue traced her full, lower lip before drawing it into his mouth and suckling gently.

Her lips parted, releasing a needy moan that wrapped around him and squeezed. With his free hand, he skimmed her side until his fingers eventually rested on her buttocks, where he hauled her against the hard length of his erection. She shivered in his arms.

Reluctantly, he ended the kiss. "Let's get you inside," he whispered. Not even looking over his shoulder, though he felt her father's men staring daggers into his back, he guided her over the wadded mess of her blanket and inside the front door.

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Chapter One

“Everything happens for a reason. We may not know what those reasons are, but they’re there. The universe cycles. Life. Death. Rebirth. The old must make way for the new, no matter how painful the process. The important thing is to forgive ourselves for our failings and move forward into the future.”

The man who had spoken those words lay in the chrome and silver casket about to be lowered into the Illinois soil. Laura Ingress stood a discreet distance away from Edwin’s foster children. Jacy clung to her lover, Te, as tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. Beside her, Reid Montano held her other arm. His brother Kade was conspicuously absent. Cord stood awkwardly on the other side of Reid, hands shoved in his pockets.

No one else attended the funeral.

Laura bit her lip, not wanting the tears stinging her eyes to fall. As a respected sorcerer and leader of the StarMyst Conclave, other Conclave leaders should have been here. Her father should have been here.

Laura shivered at the thought. She glanced beyond the wrought-iron fence that marked the border of the private cemetery to where a tan sedan was parked, her heart hammering in her chest. The one man, who could have protected her, lay dead in the casket.

She looked at Te, the new leader of StarMyst. If she told him her problems, the reason why she had come to Illinois to work as a doctor and Edwin’s personal physician, perhaps he could intercede. Though she had no doubts he’d be strong enough, she didn’t want to burden to the new leader of StarMyst. He’d have enough issues to deal with as it were.

She glanced at Reid through lowered lashes. Awareness, quickly banked, flared through her. Of all the members of the StarMyst Conclave, she’d miss him most of all. So many regrets and none that she could fix right now. Curling her fingers around a handkerchief, she pulled it from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. The priest finished his decidedly generic religious ceremony and bowed his head. The funeral had ended, leaving her with the rest of the afternoon free on a too-sunny day. She didn’t want a free day to herself, not when the clear sky invited yard work or going to her favorite park just outside of town and walking. On a day like today, the day of Edwin’s funeral, she wanted clouds and rain to match her gloomy mood.

She expected a final gong or bells, something to mark the passing of the man who had once been her protector. She heard nothing but Jacy’s hiccupping sobs and the crunching of dried grasses beneath the expensive Italian shoes of the men coming to get her—the men her father had hired.

Jacy and Te stepped to the casket which was adorned with a spray of flowers—five red roses for Edwin’s five foster children. Jacy fingered the ribbon that said father. Her sobs broke.

Te pulled her against his chest, tucking her head beneath his chin as if his arms alone could protect her from the merciless world. Reid looked at them and then at her.

Regret. Sadness. Pain. It all showed there in his eyes, mirrored in her own gaze. Her one stupid act, fueled by too much beer and too much *lussor* had lost her the chance with the man she had loved—still loved. Her arms ached to wrap around him. She longed to hold him, to let him use her shoulder to ease his sorrow. She stepped forward to do just that then stopped.

Reid had made it very clear he wanted little more to do with her. *Just treat my foster father and get the hell out of my life*, he’d once snarled. And she’d done just that. Edwin was gone. She had nothing left to do but get out of his life, out of all their lives. If the men waiting by the sedan had their way, she’d be gone tonight.

It wasn't supposed to end this way. But then again she wasn't supposed to have been found in bed with his brother either. Laura started to rub her hand over her eyes then stopped, wanting to preserve what little makeup she had left. Hell, she'd jumped from the frying pan into the fire, and the flames had been on slow simmer ever since she'd seen Reid Montano.

She fought the urge to walk over and comfort him. With the exception of her actions when she'd first arrived, she had nothing about which to be ashamed. As a medical doctor, she'd worked her ass off to save Edwin's life. In the end, the cancer had proven stronger than the most cutting-edge medical treatments. "I'm sorry," she mouthed.

Reid nodded and turned away.

Waiting until the attending members of StarMyst stepped back, Laura walked toward the casket. Her legs shook, her low heels finding every rut in the grass leading to the burial plot. Other headstones, all of them bearing the names of sorcerers long gone, mocked her. Return to Texas, they said. Do your duty to Brazos Conclave.

Laura rested her hand on the closed casket lid. She bent her head, not caring now if tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. Only Edwin had kept her father from hunting her. Edwin believed she'd had another choice. For Edwin she wouldn't give into the men waiting by the gate. "I'm sorry." Seemed like she was saying that a lot now that Edwin had died.

Laura swallowed hard. She'd worked hard to keep her past buried deep inside, to make sure Edwin had been the only one who knew. And she believed he'd taken her secrets to the grave. Her stomach fell. The closeness of Jacy and Te reminding her what she wanted for herself. Laura had heard enough of the arguments to know Kade had wanted to parcel Jacy off like a broodmare, like her father had wanted to do to her. Except Kade had left, and her father had simply called her a miserable little failure. At his words, she'd walked away. Only to fall prey to another just like him. That Laura had allowed Kade even a single night sickened her. Now wasn't the time to rehash the past.

Squaring her shoulders, she stepped away from the casket.

"Are you all right?" Reid spoke the words stiffly.

Laura jumped at his sudden appearance beside her. Unable to resist and knowing it would be her last time, she reached for him and rested her hand on the sleeve of his suit jacket. "I'll be fine. Thank you."

Reid flinched.

"Are you okay? This has to be difficult for you." She didn't know whether she spoke about their meeting or the funeral or both.

"We'll get through this," Reid replied.

Laura wanted to believe his "we" included her. It didn't. He made that fact clear when he shrugged out from her touch and stepped away. "If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to call me. I can find a home for the medical equipment, if you'd like. I'm sure it would be well received by a low-income family." One thing her father had given her was connections. She had no doubt she'd be able to put the hospital bed, oxygen machine, and other assorted medical paraphernalia to good use with a needy family. They'd welcome the generosity, and she knew Edwin would appreciate the gesture, no matter where his soul was now.

"Probably in a few days. Jacy's taking this hard."

"It's understandable. Edwin was like a father to all of us. If you need to talk...or something, give me a call. All right?" She searched his face for some emotion, some reason other than the fact

that she was a friend to the Conclave that he would make the offer. When she saw none, she stepped back.

Reid stepped forward. He wrapped her in his arms, pulling her against his hard chest. For a moment, she stiffened. Reid was actually hugging her. Then, when he didn't release her, she gave in, relishing the feel of his strong muscles beneath his suit coat and dress shirt, the crisp smell of his cologne. Reid's arms squeezed her, and for a moment, a long, luxurious moment, she leaned against him, content to be in his arms.

He released her as quickly as he'd embraced her. "Good luck," he whispered before turning away. Long strides carried him back to where Jacy and Te stood.

Laura watched for several moments. She breathed deep, even breaths in an attempt to regain her equilibrium. A brief moment of heaven, and then nothing. Back to being alone and facing her father's goons. Had she looked so horrible that Reid thought she needed a hug? She dabbed at her eyes and turned her attention back to the men hovering by the wrought iron gate. Time to get this over with. At least if she were going to be forcibly hauled back to Texas, she'd go with the memory of Reid's arms around her one more time.

Unless he'd hugged her because he wanted to. The thought stopped her in her tracks. She pressed a hand to her chest as if she could stop her suddenly-racing heart. No, the images of the Reid who just hugged her and the Reid who told her to treat his foster father and stay the hell away from him, clashed in her mind.

She put her thoughts aside as she walked down to the gate where her father's men waited. They looked at her as if she were something distasteful, a runaway child in need of punishment. To her father, she supposed she was exactly that. He never considered she was thirty years old and more than capable of taking care of herself.

Two of her father's hired goons stood at the end of the driveway. Though their names escaped her, she recognized them. The one on her left, a handsome Latino man, wore his hair short. His white dress shirt contrasted sharply with his tanned skin. His charcoal grey suit and polished shoes were undeniably expensive. *Only the best for Father's men.* The blond man next to him looked pale next to his partner's dark complexion. His sun-streaked hair and blue eyes made him look like a surfer boy. His almost casual slouch against the side of the car completed the look.

"Laura," he said. "It's been a long time."

"Not long enough." She kept her answers short to the point of rudeness. The blond had once asked her out. All he'd wanted was to date the daughter of the Brazos Conclave leader.

"Now, Laura. Is that any way to greet old friends?" the Latino stepped forward. "Surely you remember us?" He held out his arms as if he wanted a welcoming embrace.

She kept her arms deliberately at her sides. "You work for my father. That's all I need to know."

"And we're here to take you home. You've been gone far too long," he held out his hand. "Why don't you come with us? We'll take you back where you belong."

"I belong here. I'm sorry you drove all this way for nothing. Now if you'll excuse me."

He closed his hand around Laura's arm. His grip tightened, hard enough that through the long sleeve of her blouse she feared he'd leave bruises.

"Let go of me," she said, glancing behind her to see if anyone noticed. Reid appeared deep in conversation with Jacy and Te. Cord stood beside them. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her. Laura shook her arm. "You don't want to cause a scene here."

He laughed. His blond partner lounged against the car, content to simply watch the exchange.

“What does it matter? StarMyst’s leader is dead. They’re not strong enough to keep us from taking you back where you belong. Quit playing your games, Laura. You know your father wants you back.”

Laura yanked her arm away from his grip. The lace cuff of her shirt tore. She fingered it, not liking that these men, her father’s men, still held the ability to harm her, even superficially.

“Who bid for my hand this time? How much is he going to sell my breeding rights for now?” she spat. She hitched her purse higher on her shoulder, making a mental note of its contents. Nothing she could use, though the bag might pack a wallop if she swung it upside his head. No. She wouldn’t do anything to cause a ruckus at the funeral.

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Reid fisted his hands in his pockets, restraining himself from following Laura. He frowned. What possessed him to hug Laura like that? She looked so lost, so in need of comforting, that he’d done what any gentleman should have done. He’d hugged her. Except his thoughts had been far from gentlemanly.

In the instant her breasts crushed against his chest—her long legs brushing his—he wondered what she’d do if he undid one-by-one the pins holding up that golden blonde hair, caressed the smattering of freckles across her nose and kissed her the way he’d been wanting to ever since he’d first seen her. Of course that’d been before he’d found her in bed with his brother.

Damn Kade! Everywhere he went he was trouble. First with Laura, then with Jacy. And now, he was gone. He didn’t know whether the hole in his chest hurt more from Edwin’s death or his brother’s disappearance. After Kade had attacked Jacy and he, Te had magically beaten the crap out of him. Which was good, because if Reid had been in any condition to do so, he would have taken care of his older brother himself. Te had forced Kade off StarMyst property, and Reid had no idea where his brother had gone. All because Kade didn’t agree that Sorcerer women should make up their own minds about who to love.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Laura talking to two men. One had his hand on her arm and she didn’t look happy about it. His stomach churned. He didn’t know her past. She kept very secretive, except for the tiniest hint of a Texas twang that still colored her voice occasionally. Whoever these men were, she clearly didn’t want to go with them. And he’d be damned if they caused a scene as his foster father’s funeral.

“I’ll be right back,” he said to Te. The new leader of StarMyst nodded, Jacy still held firmly in his arms.

Reid strode purposefully across the cemetery. “Is everything all right?” he said, resting his hand on her arm in a proprietary gesture.

Laura looked at him, the worry in her eyes telling him everything wasn’t all right.

“It’s fine. Laura was just coming back with us.” Reid watched the man eye the way he was touching Laura, a speculative gleam in his eye. He looked scarily enough like Kade when Sonora Rising Conclave had visited and wanted to barter a marriage between Jacy and...fuck! “Laura, is there something your father should know?”

“N-no,” she said softly, almost regretfully.

“Good. Then you can return to Texas with us. If you’ll excuse us, sir, we’ll be leaving now.”

Reid didn’t like the men’s attitudes. The blond sat back, as if he expected the other Latino gentleman to do all the work. Subordinate and boss, maybe. They looked like hired heavies. Men like the Sonora Rising Conclave had brought with them. The faintest hint of power surrounded the two men. Sorcerers.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. Reid Montano of the StarMyst clan. If you’d like, I can take you to meet Te Mulligan, our new leader.” He gestured behind him. “I’m sure he would like to convey his thanks for attending our father’s funeral.”

“Reid, it’s all right,” Laura said. It was the first time he’d seen her gorgeous brown eyes clouded with fear. His hand slipped from her arm to her waist to pull her possessively against him. Confronted with these men, the need to claim her drummed through his veins. The *lussor* reared to life. A floral scent surrounded him, one he knew he’d forever associate with the sexy doctor.

“It doesn’t look all right, Laura. I won’t have these men causing a scene. We’re at a funeral for Christ’s sake. Now, if there’s something they’d like to discuss with Te, they’re more than welcome to at a later time. But not right now.” He spoke calmly, deliberately, a man in control of his world.

“When could we discuss this with your leader?” the Latino man said, clearly not happy about the situation.

If he thought he could whisk Laura away from under their noses, he had another thing coming. “Give us a few days to mourn our loss. Let me know where you’re staying and I’ll have Te contact you when we’re ready.”

Laura opened her mouth and quickly closed it again.

“She’s not one of you.”

“Yes, she is. As Edwin’s physician, I consider her as much a member of StarMyst as I am. Since she’s here, and not with her home Conclave, perhaps even more. I believe the lady has made her choice.” Reid inched closer to the men.

“I’d like to hear her say that.”

The blond still hadn’t spoken. Whether he didn’t think he needed to, or he preferred to let his partner do all the talking, Reid didn’t know.

“I’ve made my choice. I thought my father understood that,” Laura said. She spoke in a soft, firm voice.

“Your father doesn’t see it that way,” the blond said as he straightened from the car. He brushed his fingers across her cheek. “Things would be so much easier if you’d just come with us. We miss you.”

Laura started to inch away and Reid pulled her even closer. She was StarMyst, because she helped Edwin if for no other reason. These men couldn’t have her. “If you want to take Laura back to her Conclave against her wishes, you’ll need to talk to StarMyst’s leader. That’s how it’s done. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to make sure Ms. Ingress gets home safely.” Without waiting for an answer, Reid cupped her shoulder and turned her away from the men.

They’d walked nearly halfway across the cemetery before she spoke. “You didn’t have to do that. I’m perfectly able of taking care of myself.”

“I know you are, but those men weren’t going to take no for an answer. At least not from you. I know their type. I’ll let everyone know I’m taking you back to your place and then we need to talk, Laura.”

“About what? Those men are from Brazos Conclave. You can’t fight them.”

The knowledge of the Conclave’s name rocked Reid back on his heels. He stopped, whirling to face her. “You’re a member of Brazos Conclave? Why didn’t you say something, especially when Sonora Rising visited? Between the two of them, they control most of the south and southwest.”

“I have my reasons,” Laura retorted.

“I see. Well let’s get you home, and then I want to know everything.” Damn, he knew Laura had been running from something, but Brazos Conclave? And Edwin hadn’t said a word. Which, if he thought about it, was perfect Edward. Secretive when he needed to be, like in bringing Jacy back home when he was sick. Crossing that powerful Conclave would put StarMyst in a precarious position. With Te handling the transition as well as Jacy, Reid knew he’d have to be the one to get the information.

“Everything?” she asked.

“Everything,” he confirmed. Stopping, he turned her to face him. Drawn to her like a magnet, he brushed his thumb across her lower lip. They’d danced around each other ever since she’d arrived, and then...Reid tore his thoughts away from that night. “Everything including why I found you in bed with Kade.”

Laura gave an involuntary squeak. “You want to talk about that now?” Her eyes grew wide. She looked around, from the sedan where the two men still waited to where Jacy, Te, and Cord stood at the top of the hill. They caught her gaze and she gave them a nervous wave.

“If StarMyst is going to protect you from your home Conclave, a Conclave we never knew your connections to, then it’s high time we knew everything. Don’t you think?” Reid continued caressing her lower lip. Sparks from the simple touch jolted through his body. The *lussor*, the sexual power that fed their magic, flared to life. He tamped it down, knowing it was inappropriate at a funeral, even one filled with sorcerers. “Do you know what you do to me, Laura? What you’ve done to me ever since I first saw you? I don’t know what happened between you and my brother. Hell, I’m not sure I want to know, but right now I can’t look at you without seeing those sheets tangled around your long, smooth legs and knowing that you fucked my brother instead of me.” His voice grew hard, his anger pointed. The *lussor* flared, responding to the emotions bursting forth within him. It tightened around his cock, bringing it to full awareness. His skin hummed at her nearness. Power leapt from her, dancing along her skin.

As quick as it had come, the *lussor* died.

“You make me lose control,” Reid admitted. “So let’s go to your place and this time, no more secrets.” A part of him wondered if he’d be able to deal with the truth. Turning toward his family, he knew he’d have to, because regardless of what he learned, he knew he’d recommend StarMyst protect the doctor with everything it had. She’d cared for Edwin. No betrayal, no matter how big, would be enough to wipe out that favor to the Conclave.

After ignoring Jacy’s questioning look and telling Te he’d ensure the doctor got home safely, Reid drove Laura back to her small one-bedroom house. He’d always wondered why she’d never gotten anything larger. Surely as a doctor she could have afforded a large house and now that he knew she’d come from Brazos, he figured they’d insist on it. Maybe it was her way of rebelling against her family. As she led him into her home decorated in shades of blue, he found it comforting.

“Why don’t you sit down?” he suggested, steering her toward a rocking chair in the living room. A computer table and chair sat along the other wall with a small television set nestled beside it. “Can I get you something?”

"A bottle of water please. Help yourself to whatever you want," she said as she moved a quilt and sat in the chair. She dropped her purse to the floor beside it.

"I'll be right back." The open floor plan meant that he watched her out of the corner of his eye as he opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water. Several bottles of beer sat on the bottom shelf. He snagged one, not taking Laura for a beer drinker. At least it wasn't his brother's brand. His brother always preferred pale ales to the hearty stout Reid held in his hand. It seemed the doctor might share his taste in beer. He handed her the water. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," she replied.

Reid pulled out the desk chair. He sat, planting his elbows on his knees. Twisting the lid from the beer bottle, he took a long swallow. "So, let's start at the beginning. You're from Brazos Conclave, and I take it those men want you to come back with them. Right?"

Laura nodded.

"Did Edwin know?"

She nodded again.

This was going to be an interesting conversation if she wasn't going to answer him. Her lower lip trembled, her eyes glassy. He hoped she didn't cry. If she did, he'd have to tuck her into his arms and comfort her. That would lead to the *lussor* and things they shouldn't do the afternoon of a funeral, even if the best way to deal with death might be to celebrate life. No. He decided to try a different tactic. "Edwin never said anything to us. Whatever secrets you shared with him, he took to his grave. I want to help you, Laura. I want to know the truth."

"Even about your brother?" She spoke softly.

"Yes, even about Kade." After the way his brother had treated Jacy and this betrayal he should hate him. Instead, just saying his brother's name added to the loss Reid felt from Edwin's death.

"And you'll help me? Because if you do, Reid, I need you to forgive me. You have to understand that what happened that night was a mistake, a horrible mistake that I regret every day. I don't just need your help, Reid. I need your forgiveness."

Like the woman herself, her words took his breath away. Help he could give. Forgiveness was something completely different. As much as he wanted to give it to her, he honestly didn't know if he could.

Chapter Two

Laura stared at the man sitting across from her, knowing she asked an awful lot of him. Taking a long drink of water, she stalled for time. How could she possibly tell him about a stupid, foolish mistake she'd made when she was drunk and hurt so badly from Reid's rejection? Looking at him now, she suspected it was a rejection he really didn't mean. He hurt. She did, too. Edwin had meant a lot to both of them. Even so, the *lussor* hovered in the room with them, a reminder of what they were and how they fed their power. If all the magic in the world could have brought Edwin back or fixed her situation, she would have given into this thing months ago. And that's all that night with Kade had been, the result of uncontrolled *lussor*.

She turned the chilly bottle of water in her hands, trying to meet Reid's gaze. Swallowing hard, she knew she needed to tell him the truth. Just remembering the men from Brazos waiting for her sent shivers down her spine. Her father had sent them to fetch her, yet hadn't seen fit to send a representative to the funeral. The bastard.

"Brazos Conclave may be one of the strongest Conclaves in the country and my father works hard to keep it that way. He rules with an iron fist. What he says go, and if he wants you married off to breed more little sorcerers, well you do that too. He is obeyed. No questions asked. He opposed my going to medical school. I finally convinced him by telling him that the sorcerer community needed its own health care system. I'm currently working with other doctors to try and form a network of sorcerer-friendly doctors. Edwin asked, as a personal favor, to allow me to come up here and treat him. That was the only way my father let me leave Brazos."

"But you arrived before Edwin got cancer," Reid interjected.

Laura closed her eyes. This was the hardest part of the story. "I think Edwin knew what was going to happen. Our magic works in ways that not even I understand. I've tried to stay away from it. It's only brought me trouble as far as I'm concerned. I put my faith in science, not sorcery." When she opened her eyes again, Reid looked hurt.

"You're saying he knew about this and didn't tell us?" His voice caught, and he swallowed hard. "Why?"

"Maybe he wanted to spare you," Laura set her bottle down on floor. She moved across the room, kneeling beside Reid. Taking his hand between hers, she brought it to her chest. The doctor in her noted his cold skin, the tense set of his jaw. Reid was not a man in control of his emotions.

Reid stared at where her hands held his. "How does my brother fit into all of this?"

The moment of truth. Laura took both of Reid's hands in hers, partially to feel the *lussor* that marked them both as sorcerers, and partially for support. "It was a mistake. He was drunk. I was stinging from your rejection, and the *lussor* overcame us both. What can I say? I was fresh from my father's influence, hundreds of miles away from Brazos and for the first time, able to do something on my own. The man I wanted had just tossed me aside. I believe you used the phrase "rich bitch." When your brother came to me offering a shoulder, I took it. And when the *lussor* became too much...well, I fed it. It was a moment of stupidity, and I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you that I don't think Kade was entirely honorable in his actions."

"Neither were you." Reid pulled his hands from her grip. "My brother, Laura. If you knew..."

"Then why did you reject me? I came to you once, shortly after I arrived. Don't you remember?" Tears stung her eyes. Rejected then, and now rejected again as she bared her soul to him. Dammit, why did Reid have this ability to get under her skin like this. "Edwin was having a picnic, a get together to welcome me. It was just StarMyst and me. We flirted, if you remember. I

thought you wanted me, and when I suggested we go out for dinner, you said you didn't want someone rich and spoiled. You wanted someone like Jacy, someone down to earth. And all I knew how to be back then was the daughter of Brazos. You compared me to your foster sister and I felt woefully short. Kade came and apologized for your behavior. We all make mistakes."

Laura wished she possessed telepathy in addition to her other skills. She longed to know what was happening inside Reid's skull, what thoughts he was thinking. "I didn't bring you here to reject me twice. You know the score. Edwin's dead. My father wants me back. There's only one way to keep me from returning to Brazos, and that's to have someone from StarMyst claim me."

She pulled away, not wanting to be close to him when he rejected her for a second time. A tear slid over her cheek. First one, then another, until she couldn't stop the torrent. Burying her face in her hands, she realized the futility of her situation. She just asked the one man who would never in a million years take her in to save her from her home Conclave. She hiccupped, and suddenly, Reid was there.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her into his chest. She nestled there, aware of the scratchy wool of his suit jacket, the crisp cotton of his shirt. If it had taken this to finally get Reid to notice her, she didn't know whether to be thankful or just very, very sad. And yet, a part of her relished that she was exactly where she wanted to be—in Reid's arms. She melted against him, savoring the feel of his hard, muscled body against hers. She'd fantasized about this moment a thousand times; her dreams didn't compare to the reality. "I'm sorry," she whispered against his shirt, "I shouldn't ask this of you, of any of you."

Reid's silence weighed on her. His hand moved in lazy strokes along her back, from the nape of her neck down her spine and back up again. The silky material of her dress glided beneath his touch. His fingers skimmed across the clasp on her bra. Her breath hitched in her throat.

The *lussor* brought a flush to her cheeks and cream to her pussy. Drawing a deep breath, she pulled back far enough to put some space between them. Not a lot, but enough daylight so she couldn't feel the hard planes of his muscles against her chest and imagine how his body would feel tangled with hers.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Reid finally asked.

Laura searched his gaze. The relief in his blue eyes made her knees weak with relief. Sinking to the floor, she swallowed hard. "Because you made your position clear, and I would have returned to Brazos before I took anyone else." She knew her past actions made her sound like a hypocrite and hoped Reid didn't see her that way.

"You took my brother," Reid countered.

Laura flinched. "Yes, but not permanently. You didn't know about the times he dropped by expecting a repeat performance. I told him no. If I wanted to use your brother to get out of my obligations to Brazos I would have a long time ago and none of this would be an issue right now." She shook with tension and the need to make him understand.

"Same with Cord," she continued, "if you want to throw him up at me, though I never slept with him, thank goodness. There's a reason why I haven't done any of that." Her gaze clashed with his. "It's because I want you, Reid. You're the only member of StarMyst I've ever wanted."

She gauged his reaction. He seemed stunned by her heartfelt admission and Laura knew she was exposing herself but she couldn't stop. "Hell, you're the only sorcerer I've ever wanted. At least with you, I know that whatever it is between us is because you want me and not my Conclave." She threw the words at him, as ashamed of her own need as she was the fact that she still kept crawling toward him, even if he told her in no uncertain terms he didn't want her. Spoiled princess. She sure as hell wasn't that now and he had to know it.

Rising from the floor, she backed into the rocking chair. Right now, she wanted as much space as possible between them. Reid sat on the couch completely still. He clenched his hands together, elbows resting on his thighs. The stony look on his face gave her no reassurance. Even if he hated her, even if he never forgave her, she'd told him the truth.

Her heart clenched. If she had to go back to Brazos she would...no, she couldn't. Fresh tears stung her eyes. Returning to her father's Conclave would kill her, maybe not in body, but surely in spirit. A cold chill laced its way through her bones. After leaving Brazos, who knew what her father had in store for her? She struggled to draw air into her lungs.

"StarMyst isn't strong enough to go against Brazos Conclave. How do I know this isn't just a game?" Reid asked.

"Because it isn't." Laura forced herself to look him in the eyes. "I'd never do that to you."

He opened his mouth to speak but then closed it again.

"Look, what happened with your brother is in the past. If you're going to bring it up every time we get into an argument then forget it. Just forget it."

"I wish I could." Reid closed his eyes as if not looking at her could block out whatever memories filled his mind. "Every time I look at you all I can see is your lying naked in bed with my brother. He looked at me like he'd won a prize and he did. He'd won you."

"My body, Reid. Only my body and only for one night. Haven't you had a night where your *lussor* made you do something you regretted?"

"Yeah," Reid growled.

An opening, however small, and she took it. "Then don't you judge me on what happened. Look, I won't ask you to do anything that you don't want to do, but if I go back to Brazos, I guarantee you I won't be back to see StarMyst again. My father thinks of me as nothing more than a broodmare. Just like Edwin chose the best stallions for his mares and only booked Jazz to the best stock, my father wants the best sorcerer to claim me. Barefoot and pregnant doesn't begin to explain his views on women. I saw what happened the night your brother attacked you and Jacy. I know you don't want that for anyone. Not even me."

She drew a shuddering breath, determined not to cry. "I'm nothing more than a way for him to get more sorcerers for Brazos Conclave. And if I have baby girls, heaven help—" Her voice broke as memories of her mother filled her mind. When her oldest child, a male, died at birth, she'd had miscarriage after miscarriage. Until Laura. And though he never said it, her father made it clear a woman who produced only daughters wasn't fit to be his leader. Rumor had it she had several half brothers from her father's many mistresses. Laura's birth had nearly killed her mother. Her father's brutal tyranny had finished the job.

"Your father wouldn't..." Reid started to speak then stopped as he saw the horror she couldn't keep from her face.

"He would. Not directly. My father's too smart for that, but indirectly, he could. I don't think StarMyst could stand up to Brazos. But if you don't try then you might as well kill me now."

"No!" Reid recoiled from her words.

"Then we have to do something. I can't go back." Her resolve broke in a flood of tears. Too many for today, so many her cheeks felt raw and her nose stung. Burying her face in her hands, she cared little for her makeup. Most likely it was gone by now anyway. "I can't go back," she repeated. "I really can't."

"And if what you said is true, I can't let you go back," he admitted.

“What?” Laura couldn’t hide the surprise in her voice. She expected...well, she didn’t know what to expect, except that she doubted Reid would take her in.

“You’re right. I wouldn’t let Jacy be treated that way, and I can’t let that happen to you either.”

Lifting her chin, she looked at him and managed to smile through her tears. “Thank you.”

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Reid didn’t know what possessed him to make the offer. There was no way in hell StarMyst could stand up to a Conclave as powerful as Brazos. Even when Edward had been alive and healthy, they’d struggled to keep their position as an independent Conclave. All of Edwin’s foster children had lost parents because of the Sorcerer Wars. The last thing Reid wanted was to start round two.

He had no other choice. Even if he hadn’t had feelings toward Laura, she’d been too good of a friend to the Conclave for him to send her back. Not with the way Laura described it. A part of him wondered if she might not have embellished what her father would do in an attempt to sway him to her cause. Yet, she’d been fearfully honest with Edwin’s condition. She never once minced words. It made no sense she’d do so now.

Her soft words of gratitude tore through his heart. “Don’t cry, honey,” he said.

Laura sniffed. “I can’t help it.” She dashed away tears, only to have more run down her cheeks.

“We’re all hurting,” Reid admitted as he slid off his chair. He knelt before her, pulling her into his arms. She went willingly, burying her head against his chest. Even now, with both of them reeling from Edwin’s death and the news she’d dropped on him, he noted how well she fit against his frame. Her slender body nestled against him almost as if she were made for him and him alone.

He let her cry. Releasing her long enough to shrug from his suit jacket, he cupped her cheek and pressed her against the crisp, cotton of his white dress shirt. Her hair, all honey gold, had started to come undone from its clasp to spill across his chest. Another image, of her astride him, her hair brushing his chest with each thrust filled his mind.

His cock hardened as the *lussor* pulled, an insistent demand with the knowledge that if he were to fight the Brazos Conclave he’d need all the power he could get. Fed by sexual energy, the *lussor* allowed them to access their sorcerer powers. It was their curse. It was their salvation. If Laura felt it too, and surely she must for she was a sorcerer just like he, she gave no notice.

Reid drew deep breaths to try and steady his emotions. Edwin had taught all of them the exercises to keep the *lussor* from ruling them. He knew what uncontrolled *lussor* did. He’d experienced the energy flaring from Te when he’d returned to StarMyst. In fact, Reid suspected it was that power surge that sent Kade over the edge. Not that Reid blamed Te. Not at all, for after hearing what had happened, Reid finally understood that the new leader of the StarMyst had his own demons with which he had to deal.

Laura wriggled deeper into his arms, which traitorously tightened their hold on her. The depth of his need failed to surprise him. Eyes closed, he nestled his chin against the top of her head while she sobbed quietly against him. Each cry broke his heart. She placed him in an awkward position. The bottom line was he had to forgive her. Maybe not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, but someday he’d have to put their past behind them and move on. Preferably sooner rather than later, especially if they were to present a united front to the Brazos Conclave.

Reid wanted to curse but instead, he focused only on how damn good she felt in his arms. He longed to tilt her head back and slide his lips across her cheeks. He could drink her tears away, lingering over her pouty lips until she moaned and thought of only how good he'd feel inside her. The *lussor* flared with tempting encouragement.

Her small, competent hands fisted in the back of his shirt. The proximity of her lithe, warm body was driving him crazy. Pressing his lips to her hair, he inhaled her unique scent. Holding her, he felt as if it pulled him under like a riptide. His hand moved against her back. The gentle sweep grew more insistent, the clasp of her bra tormenting him.

Her sobs quieted.

Reid hated the relief surging through his veins. Gingerly, he released his hold enough to tilt her head back and look at her face. Even with running mascara, her nose red from crying, her eyes puffy, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He brushed a tear from her chin. "You going to be okay?" he asked.

She nodded, pulling her plump, lower lip between her teeth. "I think so," she whispered. She pressed her fingers against a dark stain on his shirt. "I got make up on you. I'm sorry."

He looked down and saw it not as a stain but as a mark of courage. His courage in taking her in and protecting her from her family. "It's just a shirt. It'll be all right." He looked at her for a moment knowing the longer he stayed this close to her the more likely it was he'd give into temptation. He started to inch away.

Her fingers closed around his arm. "What do we do now?" she asked.

Give into the lussor. Have sex all night until I get this need for you out of my system. Now wasn't an appropriate time for any of those responses. They'd just come from a funeral. She'd cried her eyes out against his chest. "Well we're going to need to tell Te and I'll need to know exactly what to expect. I suppose we're going to have to take you home."

Her eyes grew wide. "Take me home? Back to Texas?" She inched away. "I thought you were going to protect me from Brazos."

Reid followed her, noting that she spoke of her home Conclave like they were a bunch of strangers. They scooted across the floor. Not the most dignified position, but Reid was determined to keep up with her. He didn't want her to get away. They had to finish this discussion first. "Eventually, yeah, you'll have to go back to Texas. If you don't face your father, you'll never get out from beneath his shadow."

Laura barked mocking laughter. "You realize, don't you, that once my father has me in his grasp he's not going to let me go."

"So what do you want me to do, Laura? If you don't face your father, you'll never be free of him." Reid knew he repeated himself, but she had to see the truth.

"Would it be wrong if I said I want you to forgive me and pretend all of this never happened?" She swallowed hard, gamely holding back her tears. A quick shake of her head, a few blinks of those lush lashes, and she looked as if she'd never started to cry. "You're a very sweet man, Reid. You shouldn't have to put up with my problems. So why do you?"

"Maybe to take my mind off of my own?" He countered with a half-laugh.

Laura joined in. She reached for him, her slender fingers curving around his arm. "Would it be so wrong if I said I just want you to hold me right now?" Without waiting for his response, she moved into his arms.

It was awkward with both of them on the floor, but Laura managed to snuggle against him. Reid stretched out his leg, pulling her against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her. The *lussor* rose like a tide inside him. Reid battled it down. Lowering his head, he nuzzled her hair. The sweet fragrance of her shampoo surrounded him, made him think of removing the clip and spreading out her hair so he could run his fingers through the strands. Reid swallowed hard.

“So what do you propose?” Laura asked after long moments.

“Well we need to get Te’s official approval for our actions. It’s just a formality. I know after all you’ve done for Edwin that he’ll grant you StarMyst’s protection. Then, we’ll have to face your father. But, I have a question for you first. When was the last time you fed the *lussor*, and I mean really feed it? We both know ways of dealing with it. I’m not talking about that.” Reid asked the question, needing to know, other than his brother, how many men she’d been with since coming here. Maybe it was to torture himself and maybe it was just to prove there indeed was something between them. Either way he felt her *lussor* reach for his, an underpinning of power like the low thrum of a bass guitar vibrating through his body. He figured any sorcerer within five miles probably felt it and wondered if her father’s goons lingered nearby.

“You mean had sex.” Her matter-of-fact statement jolted him. He cupped her chin, tilting her head back so he could stare into her brown eyes. She was a medical doctor. No doubt the quasi-clinical terms didn’t bother her in the slightest.

“Yeah,” Reid admitted, his voice husky, the images racing through his mind far from clinical.

“No one since that night with your brother. I’ve been, as you so gentlemanly said, dealing with the *lussor* on my own since then.” Her cheeks colored.

“I see.” And he did. He imagined her lying in bed, her legs spread, fingers working along her creamy slit. Did she have a vibrator? Something large, or was it a slim dildo? Did she prefer the touch of her own fingers, and why, oh why, hadn’t she called him to take care of things for her? He knew the answer. Because he’d made it clear that he didn’t want her, even when he did.

“We’re going to have to remedy that you know. Not tonight, maybe in a few days when things aren’t so raw. But I think, before we face anyone, we’ll both need to be at our best, and feeding the *lussor* will help.” He tried to sound detached, as if he were the doctor and she the patient.

“Is it really bad if I don’t want to wait?” Laura whispered.

Reid groaned. “Don’t tempt me.” His fingers slid from her chin to stroke along the line of her jaw. He reached behind her and removed the clip from her hair. It tumbled down, falling over his hands, and he couldn’t resist sliding his fingers through it.

“You can make me forget,” she said. “Don’t make me beg, Reid. It’s been too long, for both of us.” Rising up, she pressed her lips to his.

The *lussor* flared. At one time he’d accused Te of having no control, but as her warm breath caressed his lips, it was he who lacked control. Curling his fingers against the back of her head, he held her in place. As soon as they touched, his mouth opened. His tongue caressed her lower lip, coaxing her to open against him. With a tiny, needy moan she surrendered.

He leaned back against the edge of the chair, pulling her across his chest. Stretching out his legs, he nestled her against him. His cock pounded. Surely she felt the ridge through his dress pants.

Laura wriggled against him. Her fingers curled around the collar of his shirt, and she slipped a button free. Her fingers darted into the opening to caress him.

Her touch fired the *lussor* into a fever pitch. With one hand tangled in her hair, he slid the other down the slope of her back. He cupped her rear, her buttocks a perfect handful. He squeezed.

Laura rocked against him.

His cock jerked, so hard he ached. A button pinged off his shirt, drawing him back to himself. "Laura, wait," he managed to gasp. Releasing her, he caught her wrists. "Laura, stop!"

She stared at him with wide eyes. "Do you know how long it's been since I've fed the *lussor*?" she asked. He saw the war in her gaze, the need and the grief battling together to create a maelstrom of emotions.

"Yeah, I do. And that's why I have to leave now." Releasing her, Reid slowly extracted himself from the tangle of limbs on the floor. No matter how much the *lussor* drove him now wasn't the time. They'd both lost someone dear to them today. One of them had to walk away. Otherwise, both of them would have regrets. Rising to his feet, he looked down at her. "This isn't finished, not by a long shot." He stared at her for a moment longer and then walked out the door.

Chapter Three

Stepping into the night air did little to cool the heat in his blood. Tipping his head back, Reid closed his eyes and let the moonlight bathe his face. He still felt her inside the house, the *lussor* a pounding need in his veins. It taunted him like a desert mirage. Just a little further and then he'd find refreshment the likes of which he hadn't known. Swallowing hard, Reid forced himself to open his eyes and stride toward his car. He had to get back to StarMyst and tell Te what was going on.

Two shadows stepped from the darkness. *Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum*. Reid stopped and crossed his arms over his chest. His dick ached. His heart hurt. He really wasn't in the mood to deal with this right now.

"You sure there's nothing going on between you and the doctor?" the blond man said. "With *lussor* like that I'm surprised we haven't felt it back at Brazos."

Reid remained silent.

"She doesn't belong to you. You haven't claimed her. We're not going to play these games. If StarMyst isn't strong enough to hold onto her that isn't our problem. Laura is going back to Texas tonight." The blond stepped forward.

Reid closed his fingers around the man's arm, stopping him. "You're not taking Laura anywhere." His fingers tightened.

The blond stared down at Reid's hand. He motioned for his partner to remain where he was. "The way I see it you have two choices. You can either let Laura return to Brazos where she belongs. Or, you can claim her and then see if StarMyst is strong enough to keep her. Either way, I'm sure you're going to lose." The man smiled a cruel parody of a smile.

"If Laura had wanted to return home, she would have done it by now." Reid glanced over his shoulder to see if Laura noticed them. So far, the curtains remained drawn. "Look, let's not have this discussion in front of her house. I'm returning to StarMyst. Why don't you follow me?" He didn't want to toss this into Te's lap right now, but he had little choice.

"We don't need to see StarMyst. We were just letting you know as a courtesy anyway. Laura belongs to us. We're taking her home." The blond strode forward, pushing past Reid.

Reid snagged the man's arm. Whirling him around, Reid shoved him back toward the street. "No, you're not. Someone we cared about very much just died. If you don't have the decency to wait, then I'll make you wait." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the second man stepping forward. Two to one odds weren't the best. But he had excess energy to burn.

"Claim her or we will." The blond must have been under orders for he snarled at the second man and the two of them faded into the darkness. Moments later, Laura's front door opened.

"Reid, you okay? What's going on out here?" She stood on the porch, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She glanced from him to where the men had been. "Don't tell me my father's goons came back."

"Okay, I won't." Reid stepped toward her, drawn like a moth to a flame. Looking at her, he knew he only had one choice. Claim Laura. The *lussor* flared to renewed life within him. She must have felt it for she gasped and closed her hand around the column of the porch.

"Reid?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied, his voice husky. He forced himself to stop several paces from her. "Your father's men said if I didn't claim you, they would. My control is hanging by a thread, baby. This

isn't the right time or the right place. And to be honest, I probably should clear it with Te first, though I know he'll approve. What do you want me to do, Laura?" Asking that question had to be the hardest thing he'd ever done. He knew what *he* wanted to do, had known ever since he'd seen her. Not even the remembrance of finding her in bed with his brother dimmed his ardor. Not tonight. Not after feeling her fingers, her lips against his flesh and knowing just how fucking sweet they could be together.

He waited for her answer. Seconds ticked by like falling stars from the sky. Laura licked her lips. He watched the pink bud of her tongue swipe across a mouth he'd just kissed. Her taste blossomed with a reminder of shared passion.

In some ways, he suspected she should probably thank her father when they went to Brazos. Reid had no doubt he'd see the man face-to-face. After all, Laura had to confront him, especially if she wanted to stay at StarMyst. Without his overt manipulation, he and Laura might have continued dancing around their attraction and their past.

She stepped forward. Holding out her hand, she let the *lussor* flare. It washed over him like rain. "I'm yours, Reid. I've always been yours," she whispered.

He rushed into her arms. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe there wouldn't be any regrets.

Cool night air wrapped around him as he pulled her tight against him. The blanket slid to a floor in a swish of fabric. Cupping the back of her head, Reid simply held her. He breathed in her scent, that honeysuckle fragrance he always associated with her. The silken strands of her hair tangled around his fingers, her curves pressed against the hard planes of his chest and legs.

His cock throbbed. Reid ignored it. Though it happened far too soon for his liking, he knew what they'd do tonight was inevitable. It had been from the moment Laura had arrived in their small corner of Illinois with her Texas twang and her easy smile. If Edwin were alive, he would have said it should have happened long ago, and perhaps, Reid thought with a pang of regret, if he'd acted on his desires then maybe Laura wouldn't have had sex with his brother. Maybe her father's men wouldn't be here the day of Edwin's funeral to bring her back to Brazos. Edwin would have been strong enough to keep her here. The need to make up for lost time had him cupping her cheek and tilting her face up to meet his.

"I should have done this a long time ago," he whispered, his lips just millimeters from hers.

"Yeah, you should have. Kiss me, Reid." She parted her lips in an invitation he couldn't refuse.

Lights from inside the house shone through the curtains giving him just enough light to see the need in her eyes. She pressed against him, pushing him to the edge of the porch where the moonlight slanted over their bodies. If her father's men were still out there, she wanted them to see this. Reid agreed with her. Let them watch. Let them want.

He kissed her, trying to hold back, wanting to make this last. The sweet taste of her mouth filled him with a longing to find out if she tasted as sweet in other places as well. Entwining his fingers in her hair, he slanted his lips across hers and deepened the kiss. His tongue traced her full, lower lip before drawing it into his mouth and suckling gently.

Her lips parted, releasing a needy moan that wrapped around him and squeezed. With his free hand, he skimmed her side until his fingers eventually rested on her buttocks, where he hauled her against the hard length of his erection. She shivered in his arms.

Reluctantly, he ended the kiss. "Let's get you inside," he whispered. Not even looking over his shoulder, though he felt her father's men staring daggers into his back, he guided her over the

wadded mess of her blanket and inside the front door. It closed behind them with a deafening click and her house engulfed them once more.

Laura stood there, her chest rising and falling. She stared at him, eyes wide, lips swollen from his kisses. "I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do." Her gaze slid from his face down the length of buttons on his white dress shirt. Briefly, she glanced beneath his belt before twin spots of red colored her cheeks and she drew her gaze back to his face. "This probably isn't the best time."

"No," he agreed as he strode forward. "But there's no time like the present."

She backed away from him. Wary, or simply to lead him back into her home, he didn't know. Stalking her, he pinned her between his body and the counter and rested his hands against the square corners in an attempt to keep her from ducking away. "I offered you an out. You said you wanted me. You haven't changed your mind, have you?" He gave a meaningful look to the door. Even the roots of his hair ached with the need to take her. This close, her breasts brushed against his chest with each breath and he couldn't help but imagine what they'd be like freed to his gaze and his touch. His nostrils flared at the need building in his veins.

And the *lussor* answered. It burned through him, turned his guts inside out and made him nearly spontaneously combust. The long nights of willing it away, or taking matters into his own hands finally took their toll. Whatever happened might not be gentle and it might not be pretty, but it'd feed the hunger. Right now he suspected that's all Laura wanted too, for she gave a tiny whimper and pressed her hand into his chest.

He covered her slender fingers with his own. Releasing the counter, he reached for her dress and unfastened it, slipping the fabric off her shoulders. Her slip came next, a whisper of silk that pooled around her feet, leaving her dressed in a modest bra and panty set that still took his breath away. He struggled to slow, to relish the pale flesh rising above the lace cups. "I'll try to take this easy," he whispered as he reached behind her to unfasten the hooks.

"That can come later," she whispered. Her fingers fumbled as she unbuttoned his shirt. She slid it aside, flattening her palms against his chest and stroking him from clavicle to navel. "Just claim me, so hard and so fast my father's men have no choice but to accept that I belong to you."

His mind focused on those four little words. *I belong to you*. He cupped her ass and pulled her against him. "Hang on, baby." Laura tucked her head against his shoulder and he carried her into her bedroom. Unerringly, he found it, and laid her down on the middle of her queen-sized bed.

Gently, he slipped her high heels from her feet, pausing to caress to her arches, her calves. His hands shook as he peeled her stockings down over her thighs, past her knees, until he dropped them on the floor and she lay naked. Her parted thighs revealed her pussy, swollen and wet for him. Drawing her scent into his lungs, Reid forced himself to slow. This was Laura and their first time had to be perfect.

He cupped one foot in his hand. Caressing her soft skin, he used the slow seduction as a chance to get his raging need under control. He fluttered his fingers across her arch, the gentle tickle making her curl her toes against his skin. Her slender ankle made him circle them with his fingers. Feather-light caresses stroked across her muscled calves. He reached the backs of her knees and pressed his lips to the tender flesh.

Laura shivered. She clutched the bedspread to keep from reaching for him.

Smiling against her skin, Reid tongued the erogenous zone he'd found. He sucked her skin into his mouth, wanting her to come from his lips and nothing more. The scent of her musk drifted to him, a heady scent full of woman and want. The plump folds of her sex beacons to him. Not yet, not until she screamed his name and begged to have him deep inside her.

He released her skin to turn his attention to her other knee. Not as sensitive as the first, he listened to her whimpers as he licked her skin. He kissed a path across the top of her thigh, avoiding the very place she wanted him to touch. His fingers met across her hipbones, and he nuzzled her navel.

“You taste so good. I could eat you for hours,” he whispered against her skin.

His words went straight to her clit like the brush of slick fingers. “Let me touch you,” she begged. Uncurling her fingers from the bedspread, she speared her fingers into his hair. “Please.”

That tiny whimper was his undoing. Sliding his fingers beneath her, he reached the fastener on her bra. She arched her back, allowing him to release it, so he could slide the lacy fabric from her shoulders. Though he was half on-half off the bed, he rose onto his elbows to look down at her breasts. The rounded globes drew his attention. Just looking at the prominent nipples made his mouth water. Reverently, he reached up to caress his fingers across them.

Laura shivered. The tiny ripples darted through her body.

Reid watched, still not quite believing he was here. Rearing back, he quickly shed his clothing. Naked, he returned to the bed, settling between Laura’s spread thighs. A part of him wanted to move her, to make it more comfortable than lying sideways on the bed. She didn’t complain and her ankles would be around his hips soon enough. He lowered his mouth to her left nipple and drew it into his mouth.

Her low moan of pleasure echoed around him. Fingers tunneled into his hair to hold his lips to her breast. Her other hand curled against his shoulder as he palmed the breast he wasn’t kissing. So warm. So responsive. He drew her nipple deep into his mouth, grazing it with his teeth.

Laura wrapped her legs around his hips. Feeling her strong thighs gripping him, her hot cunt brushing against his abs with each pump of her hips, stroked the *lussor*. They were sorcerers. This was so much more than two people coming together in a bout of hot, sweaty sex. The energy between them raised power, so much so, it tingled along his skin.

Releasing her nipple, he turned his attention to her other breast. Laura belonged to him. She’d spoken the words aloud. In the world of the magician, that was as good as a brand. Surely, her father’s goons felt it. He sure knew he did.

He shifted to the side to skim her ribs with his fingers. Laura parted her legs in invitation, lifting her hips toward his searching fingers. He stroked her trimmed pelt, enjoying the heat and wetness of her need. He did this. He made her hot and wet and when she came, it would be because of him. His lips. His fingers. His cock. All him.

His fingers moved easily over her slick labia. Light strokes of his fingers had her moans escalating. They grew higher pitched. Her hips rising and falling to draw him deeper into her body. Not yet. He wanted her poised on the edge of satisfaction, screaming his name when she tumbled over to the other side.

He kissed over the top of her breast, pausing to lave the sensitive place where her neck met her shoulder. “You like that?” he hummed against her skin.

“Yes,” she sobbed.

“You want me inside you?” he taunted. Following her pounding pulse, he drew the skin over it into his mouth and bit gently. “You want me to fuck you?” He swirled his finger around her engorged clitoris. Mouthing her skin, he raised a hickey on her neck. There—his—for everyone to see including her father’s thugs. He drew her earlobe into his mouth and sucked.

“Reid,” she shrieked. The tiny flutters he felt in her pussy grew in strength and number until she came apart in his arms and her body trembled against him. Her cries turned to wordless sounds of pleasure. Her cream flowed over his fingers and his cock ached to be inside her tight channel, feeling her muscles tighten around his rod.

“Yeah, sweetheart. That’s it. Come for me.” He rocked his hips against her. A surge of masculine pride made him painfully erect. Dipping his fingers into her, he thrust through her orgasm.

Her fingers curled into his shoulder hard enough to leave tiny red marks from her nails. The *lussor* wrapped them in a warm cocoon. Energy crackled along his skin. Forcing his eyes open, he watched it surround them like an aura. Pale blue light raced between his body and hers, wrapping them in steel-like bands of power. For better or worse, they had been joined by the power. Brazos couldn’t claim Laura. Not now or ever.

She shuddered to completion, her panting breaths the only noise in the room. Reid moved between her thighs. He nestled his hips against hers. Her softness cushioned his erection, her body soft and pliant beneath his. Dipping his head, he brushed his lips across hers. The feather-light caresses turned into a deeper kiss. His tongue traced the seal of her mouth, delving inside.

God, he wanted this woman. His body burned with the need to be inside her. Plunging his tongue into her mouth, he claimed her. A shift of his hips brushed the head of his cock against her curls. He hovered there for a moment, her warmth, her softness drawing him past her folds. He nudged her clit with the tip, loving the whimpering moans he swallowed.

The *lussor* flared around them. To someone with magical senses, he suspected that they were lit up like flares. Never had it been so hot like this. But never had he made love to another sorcerer before either.

“Reid, please,” Laura whispered as the need for air parted their mouths. “I need you inside me.”

Her words proved his undoing. A subtle movement had him poised at her entrance. Thrusting his hips, he buried himself to the hilt. He savored the sensation of her muscles clamping around him. His balls hung full and heavy against her, the muscles in his arms bunched from supporting his weight off of her. Looking down at her, he drank in the sight of her eyelashes fanned against her cheeks, her kiss-swollen lips parted in silent invitation.

Laura wrapped her legs around him. Her tiny heels dug into his buttocks, her fingers curled into his shoulders. Tiny movements of her hips took him even deeper. She was so tight, so wet, he breathed deeply to regain some semblance of control. Slowly, he pulled out. She gripped him, making him want to sink inside her and never leave. He hovered at her opening then surged forward once more.

Energy filled him. Even with his eyes closed, he sensed the *lussor* wrapping around them, tying them together. It was deeper than a marriage vow, far more profound than any declarations of love. Like lost pieces of a puzzle coming together, they fit. Perfectly.

Laura. Laura. Laura. He chanted her name with each stroke. In this moment, the past didn’t exist. Only the two of them, coming together, joining as sorcerers were meant to join. He thrust harder, faster, feeling her explode beneath him. Reaching down, he splayed his hands across her buttocks, pulling her even closer to him.

Her primal scream of pleasure echoed around him as she exploded in his arms. Over and over again her cunt milked him, the contracting muscles massaging his shaft. Reid claimed her lips. He held himself at the precipice, his need for release humming in his veins like the energy. One final plunge of his hips and Laura exploded around him. He came like a freight train, so hard and fast he

felt as if he'd been turned inside out. His guttural shout echoed around him. His seed pumped from his shaft, filling her with his warmth and life.

And still, he was hard. He rested on her a moment before quickly levering his weight off of her. His cock was buried deep inside her, his erection barely softened. A fine sheen of sweat covered them. The smell of sex hung redolent in the room. Reid looked down at Laura, watching her breasts rise and fall with her panting breaths, and grinned like a madman.

Slowly Laura opened her eyes. She blinked, almost as if she didn't believe this had happened. A wicked grin spread over her lips. Hitching her legs higher on his hips, she wriggled beneath him. She traced a path between his pectorals, her fingers making patterns in the swirls of chest hair she found there. "You're still hard," she breathed, eyes wide with wonder. Lifting her hips, she punctuated her point with a short thrust.

Inside her, his cock swelled to full life once more. "You make me hard." He lowered himself onto her then grabbing her ass, rolled on the bed so she straddled him.

Laura sat up, her palms braced on his chest. "Is that so?" She rocked against him. When he grabbed her hips and joined them even more intimately, she thrust again.

He let her set the pace this time, the *lussor* a dull throb instead of the blazing need. As she rocked them both to ecstasy once more, he couldn't help but marvel at her beauty. After all this time, they both were finally where they wanted to be.

But as he watched her, a niggling doubt hung in the back of his mind. He tried to lose himself in the motion, but with the initial rush of lust spent, he had to wonder. Had she done this with his brother?

Reid forced his attention on Laura, on the rise and fall of her body. Her breasts hung before him like twin globes, and he reached up to palm them. From the little noises she made, she enjoyed herself. Soon, her cries filled the room as she came again. He watched her tumble from the peak, eyes half-lidded, breathy little sighs surrounding him. Pumping into her, he lost himself on the flow of pleasure through his body. Balls tightening once more, he spilled himself into her as he came in tiny ripples rather than a pounding torrent.

Leaning forward, Laura nestled against his chest, her ear pressed against his heart. Surely, she heard its pounding. And surely, she realized what this meant for both of them. In the morning, he had to go to Te and explain what had happened. Then, the real fight for Laura would begin. But for now, he wanted to enjoy the moment. He feared it wouldn't last.

Laura snuggled contentedly against him, already drifting off to sleep. He watched her, and he knew, in spite of their past, in spite of the bitterness he felt toward his brother, he'd fight for her. And damn anyone who got in his way.

Chapter Four

Laura's mouth went dry as she ascended the stairs to the front porch of the StarMyst house. She clenched her fingers, not wanting to wipe her palms on her jeans. Next to her, Reid had gone silent the closer they'd come to his home, and outside of the heavy falls of his boots against the worn boards, he made no sound. She glanced at him, wondering if he were as nervous as she.

He didn't knock. Instead, he opened the door and held it so she could enter. "I bet everyone is in the kitchen."

The restrained words were a far cry from the man who had made love to her so exquisitely last night. Her *lussor* flared, sated, yet still interested. She tamped it down, not wanting to be so obvious inside his house. At one time she'd worked in these rooms, an angel of hope and mercy. Now she returned, and it was she who needed the help, not Edwin and his family.

As she stepped inside, the smell of a home cooked breakfast filled the air. Ham and eggs, bacon and sausage, her stomach rumbled with the scents. The bitter scent of coffee reminded her that she and Reid had dressed and come over here as soon as they'd awakened. He'd made a passing joke about Te feeding them, but she never expected a spread like this.

She waited for Reid to close the door behind them. With his hand on her back, he propelled her forward into the kitchen.

"Figured you'd show up when we decided to eat," Te said to his younger foster brother. He turned and looked at Laura. His eyes widened, a hint of a smile crossed his lips. "Laura, what a nice surprise. Come on in and sit down. If I know Reid, he hasn't fed you."

Jacy rose to her feet, quickly heaping up a plate and setting it before an empty chair. "Here you go. We'll let Reid get his own."

Reid grumbled, but she could tell the joking camaraderie was commonplace around this table. He filled a plate and sat down beside her, a little too close for them to be just friends. Jacy and Te were both sorcerers. Certainly they could feel the *lussor* sparking between them. If they did, they kindly said nothing.

"Thanks," Laura replied. She dug into her food, the activities of the prior night reminding her she never did get supper. Soon, the plate was empty, and she found Te and Jacy watching her and Reid with expectant looks on their faces. She battled a heated flush that threatened to creep into her cheeks.

"Well that tells me what I need to know," Jacy said. "This is about those guys hanging out at Edwin's funeral, isn't it?" She scooted closer to Te, almost as if she needed his support. Dark circles showed under the other woman's puffy eyes, a testament to her grief.

Te reached for Jacy under the table. "I think Reid has a story to tell us."

"Actually, it's Laura's story," Reid said, giving her thigh a squeeze. "Where's Cord? This affects him too."

"He left for a rodeo. Don't know when he'll be back," Te replied.

"And Kade hasn't returned yet?" Reid asked.

Laura ached at the sadness in Reid's voice. She'd witnessed the trouble his older brother had caused for StarMyst, had even ordered the boys not to fight in the house while Edwin was ill. That had been the fateful night when Kade had left. She slid her hand over Reid's.

Reid glanced at her and smiled, though the expression didn't quite reach his eyes. He tried to fathom what must be going through her mind. Not only was she dealing with Edwin's loss, but

also worrying about her father's actions. Reid tried to compare the two. Not only had he lost his foster father, but also his brother.

Te shook his head. No words were necessary.

Reid squeezed his eyes closed. When he opened them again, there were no signs of his loss. "Laura needs our help. I'll let her tell the details about it, but I think it's something Edwin would have wanted us to do."

She nodded, trying not to be hurt that he hadn't said that he wanted to help her. His actions said that he did, even if his words didn't. After all, he'd fought off her father's heavies and then they'd raised the *lussor*. She focused on the two people sitting across the table from her, the two people she would call her closest friends in the world. Taking a deep breath, she wrapped the memories of Edwin's caring around her and began to speak.

"Edwin offered me sanctuary from my home conclave, Brazos Conclave, when I arrived."

Jacy gasped.

Te squeezed his lover's hand.

"Now that Edwin is gone, my father wants me back by any means necessary. I can't go back. I hate to bring this to your doorstep, especially at a time like this. But my father has his own view of female sorcerers. We're to breed more sorcerers, preferably with males of whose lineage and powers he approves. That I'm here, and not under his control, makes it all the more important that my father get me back and get me bred off. My mother never gave my father any sons. Until I produce those sons..." Her voice cracked. She took deep breaths.

Reid wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry." She dragged air into her lungs and dashed away the hints of tears. "I've got to be strong to face my father. I have no right to drag StarMyst into this. I have no idea what my father would do to any Conclave who tries to keep me from him, but it won't be good. When Edwin was alive, he'd been strong enough to keep my father away. As he got sicker...there had been some sort of gentleman's agreement between them, I think. I believe my father honestly thought once Edwin was gone that I'd come back without a fuss. He was wrong. He was completely wrong." She sighed and resisted the urge to lean into Reid's strength. If she wanted StarMyst to back her, she had to appear strong enough to defy her father.

"I see," Te said.

Silence fell over the room.

Jacy's chair scraped across the floor as she stood and started putting away the remnants of breakfast.

Laura watched the other woman, uncertain how to take her silence. Of course Te ran StarMyst now, though Laura thought she and Jacy had grown close over the course of Edwin's illness. Then again, there was that pesky night she'd slept with Kade. A stupid, foolish decision, one she had regretted the instant it had happened. Could it be that Reid had told Jacy and she disliked Laura because of the strife she'd brought to StarMyst? Did she hate that Laura couldn't save Edwin? Laura wished she could read minds, though she feared what she'd find.

"StarMyst will support you. I know there's a history between you and my foster brothers and that's something you'll have to work out for yourselves. What I do know is you fought to save Edwin and when we realized this wasn't a battle you could win, you made him as comfortable as possible to the end. Let me make some phone calls. See what kind of support I can muster among the other Conclaves." Te didn't look hopeful.

“Thank you. Do you think the other Conclaves will support us? My father is a very powerful man.” Laura asked. For the first time since seeing her father’s goons lurking at the edges of Edwin’s funeral, she held hope. Reid sat beside her, his strength unwavering. The leader of his Conclave had agreed to help her.

“Sonora Rising probably won’t. They were trying for a take-over bid when Edwin was sick. Sacred Forest might. They’re not that far away and have connections to Chicago’s main conclave. Appalachian Mountain usually keeps to itself. Everglades Heart could help.” Te shrugged. “Then again, they all should have sent representatives to Edwin’s funeral. Their silence may speak louder than anything they may say on the phone. What do you think, Jacy? Edwin kept you more in the loop than he did me.”

Jacy turned from the sink and wiped her hands on a dish towel. She swallowed hard. “I don’t know. You’re right about all those Conclaves and more. We should have a full house, more sorcerers than we know what to do with. It’s just us four. I think that’s all it’s going to be for this fight.” Jacy crossed the few steps to the table and clutched the back of the chair. “I don’t know what happened in the past and I tried to forget it because you helped Edwin so much and neither Reid nor Kade mentioned it. Seeing him beside you, he looks happier than I’ve seen him in a long time. Whatever we need to do, Laura, we’ll do it.” She rested her hand on Te’s shoulder, a show of strength from StarMyst’s leaders.

Laura blinked back the sting of relieved tears. “Thank you. And you’re right. All those Conclaves should have been here. Don’t call anyone, not yet. We don’t want them to go to my father and alert him that something’s going on. I think we need to go to Brazos.” The moment the words left her mouth she knew they were the right decision.

Reid looked startled, but not as much as Te and Jacy.

“If you go and your father decides to keep you there—” Jacy started.

“I know,” Laura confirmed, cutting off what Jacy was about to say. She refused to say it aloud. If they failed, her father was within his rights to keep her at the Conclave and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Unless...

Laura breathed deeply. She couldn’t force this on Reid. Whatever happened had to be his decision, except, there might be one way to bind her to StarMyst forever.

“If I return to Brazos and bring Reid with me, at least then my father will see that I’m joining with another sorcerer. No, it’s not the one he wants me to join with. But maybe, just maybe, at this stage of the game, my father will be happy to learn that I’m joining with *any* sorcerer and using Brazos law to do so. It’s a long shot, and I won’t force anyone into a decision, but I think it’s the only chance we got.”

Reid sat stony beside her.

Laura willed him to understand, to see she wasn’t trying to force a decision on him. *I know I slept with your brother. I know you may not have forgiven me for that, but you said you’d do anything to help me. This is my chance, our chance.* When he said nothing, she reached across the table and laid her hand on his arm.

Reid flinched.

Jacy and Te looked between them.

“And if that doesn’t work?” Te asked.

“Then I’m stuck at Brazos and Reid can return here if he wants.”

“Sounds like you’re making decisions for Reid. I’d like to hear what he has to say,” Te said.

"I don't know what to say. If that's what it takes, that's what it takes." Reid sounded resigned, not the way she wanted him. But what choice did they have?

"You don't sound happy about it," Jacy said with a pointed glance at Laura. "You know we'll support you, but we want you to be happy."

"If I don't go down there, you both know what will happen. Brazos will send those men back, maybe more. There'll be a sorcerer pissing match the likes of which probably hasn't been seen since the wars. I don't want to involve StarMyst in that. As much as I love StarMyst, we're not strong enough to face that. And if we lose, Brazos would be well within its rights to take us over. And StarMyst would cease to exist. The horses, the barns, our stallion Jazz, everything would just be gone." Reid turned to Laura. The fatalism she saw in his eyes scared her. A cold, dark emotion completely at odds with the man with whom she'd had sex last night. "I'll do it."

"If that's what you want," Jacy said.

"It's what I want." Reid shoved back his chair. "It'll take me a minute to pack." Before anyone could answer, he left, his footfalls heavy on the stairs.

Laura sat there in stunned silence.

"You know, if you hurt him, whatever your father will do to you will pale compared to what I'll do to you," Jacy said, her voice ice-cold. "He's putting his neck out for you. I hope you understand what that means."

Laura held Jacy's gaze. "I do," she said, and knew once she reached her father's those words would have a completely different meaning.

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Reid stormed upstairs, trying hard not to be upset at Laura's declaration. She had a point. Going to her father gave them the stronger position. Though if he denied her request, there was a good chance he'd bring the wrath of Brazos down on StarMyst. Then once again, Laura would hurt them, just like her actions with his brother hurt him so long ago.

He grabbed his suitcase out of his closet, throwing in clothing. Most of his wardrobe was jeans, boots and shirts. A garment bag held his best suit, and he threw it on the bed too. If they were going to face Brazos, he needed to look his best.

Though neither of them said it, there was one way to join together: a bonding ceremony. Under other circumstances, he would have been overjoyed to be contemplating asking her. He could see it now, the two of them, deeply in love. Him on his knees asking her to bond with him. Jacy and Te hadn't gone through the ceremony yet, and he hadn't pressed his fellow Conclave members as to the reason why. He zipped closed the suitcase. Some things, he supposed he was better off not knowing. And maybe that's why neither he, nor Laura, had suggested a Bonding ceremony.

For some reason, the thought of venturing deep into Brazos territory didn't bother him. While he may not be a great sorcerer, he wasn't without power. The *lussor* hummed. With Laura by his side, he had no doubts he could feed it.

Slinging the garment bag over his shoulder, he carried it and his suitcase downstairs. "Ready?" he called to the kitchen.

Chairs scraped. Laura, followed by Jacy and Te stepped into the foyer. She glanced from him to his bags, the first signs of hesitation showing in her eyes. *Too late for that, sweetheart.*

"I need to pack and then we can head out," she said, the bold tone in her voice at odds with the wary look in her eyes.

"Are you sure you don't want me to make those phone calls?" Te laid a hand on her shoulder. Jacy hovered nearby, concern etched into her features. "I can see what we can do. I hate the thought of you going in there all alone."

Jealousy blurred his vision and turned it red. The *lussor* flared, a harsh snap of energy that pulled Jacy's gaze to him. He stared at where Te touched Laura's arm. A friendly gesture, one from a Conclave leader to someone who would be joining the Conclave, there was nothing intimate about it. And yet, the sight of the other man's hand on Laura's arm incensed him.

"She'll be fine," Reid stepped forward with a pointed stare at Te's hand. "I'll take care of her."

"Reid's right. I'll be fine. I'm going back home, and then I'm coming back here, to my real family."

Te looked dubious. "If you need anything, you know where we are, and I'm sure Reid will take good care of you."

Laura followed Te's attention to him and the hope in her eyes nearly made his heart break. Whatever she was doing, whatever machinations to get free from her father's influence, she really trusted him. Such trust punched him in the gut with a right-hook he didn't see coming.

"Yeah, I will," he stumbled out then picked up his suitcase before he could say or do something stupid. His head reeled. Not only from the trust Laura had placed in him, but also from the stab of jealousy. Te loved Jacy for Christ's sake. He had no more designs on Laura than he did on Cord. He sensed her presence behind him as he led her back to the car.

By the time he put his suitcase in the car, Laura had already slid into the passenger seat. It took him only a few moments to slip behind the wheel and pull out of the driveway. The minutes spent driving back to Laura's place passed in silence. He glanced at the clock. Late afternoon. If she intended him to drive for Texas this evening, they'd be getting a late start. He frowned.

"Everything okay?" she asked as he pulled into the driveway.

Truth time. "Not exactly," he replied, immediately regretting his words as a shocked expression descended over her features.

"What do you mean 'not exactly', Reid?" Her voice wavered and he hated himself for causing it.

His stomach rolled. She'd been the one to sleep with his brother. Sure, he'd thought he was over that. Hell, he'd slept with her. Had sex, there was no sleeping involved whatsoever. Mind-blowing, ball-tightening, cock-hardening sex. Even with all of that, he realized, deep in his heart, he hadn't forgiven her yet.

He turned the key and the engine died.

Kind of like his hopes about there being an easy resolution to this. "You seem to have all the decisions made in this, Laura. You've done a lot for Edwin, probably kept him alive a lot longer than he would have on his own. StarMyst owes you for that. But you brought this problem to our door step." He took a deep breath and dragged his fingers through his hair. The crestfallen look on her face tore at his heart.

Sitting this close to her, in the confines of the car made him painfully aware of her. The rise and fall of her breasts drew his attention. Her lips parted. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips, and all he could think about was tilting her head toward him and kissing the frown off her face.

Focus man, focus. Reid dragged a ragged breath into his lungs. He curled his fingers around the door handle. "Look, let's talk about this inside." He opened the door.

Laura frowned. She stepped out, and he could kick himself for bringing this up now. An image of her lying beneath his brother filled his mind. Drawing a deep breath, he helped her inside.

"If there was any way I could make this better, I would," Laura said, her voice quiet.

Reid stopped.

He looked at her, standing just inside her door. His bags were in the car. It was implied that he would be staying the night here. Could he do that and not let the *lussor* take over? Drawing a deep breath, he stepped forward.

"Look. I'm sorry. I promised I'd take care of you and I will, regardless of what happened in the past." He braced his hand against the door, pinning her there. Dipping his head, he forced her gaze to his face. "I won't say I'm completely comfortable with this, but I'll do it." He resigned himself. For Edwin, if not for himself. He wasn't quite ready yet to give into his own emotions. He cared for her. Deep down, he may not have quite forgiven her yet, but he cared. Damn, did he care.

He swallowed hard. Even now, his feelings swirling like a tornado across the Illinois landscape, he wanted her. The *lussor* pulsed between them, hardening his cock. His breathing became ragged. His fingers curled with the need to touch her.

"Reid," Laura whispered.

"Yes?" He rested his forehead against hers, his body humming with anticipation.

"If you don't want to do this, you don't have to. I won't make you."

The fight drained out of him. Her simple admission, her concern for his well-being, no matter what might have happened in the past, touched him. This was difficult for all of them. He had to remember that. Not put his own feelings aside. No, he'd have to deal with them. "Honey, you can't make me do anything I don't want to do," he drawled.

Her relief was palpable. She sagged against him, her arms coming up to circle around his torso. She rested her cheek against his chest, snuggling up to him. "Thank you. Thank you." She hugged him tight.

Reid looked down at the top of her head. Still dressed in his coat, his dick throbbing, he shouldn't be doing this. He should peel her fingers away and step back—now—before something happened that they'd both regret. He'd fucked her last night. Would do so again in a heartbeat, unless he stepped away.

So why wasn't he moving?

Laura whimpered and burrowed deeper into his warmth. Reluctantly, slowly, he wrapped an arm around her back, holding her to him. *Get away. Don't do this.* His emotions were confused enough without adding sex to it. And yet, the *lussor* crackled between them, a draw neither one could resist.

Move damn you. Step away from the woman. He remained frozen, his feet firmly on the ground. His hand slid up and down her spine. Even through her bulky coat, her slender figure called to him. He reached between them and lowered the zipper. It parted with a hiss of metal teeth, the

sweater beneath thick and inviting. He stroked the soft fabric, fingers just barely brushing the undersides of her breasts.

She drew a quick breath.

Widening his stance, he let his hand slide down to her buttocks and then brought her flush against him. His own coat was in the way, as was hers. Sliding his hand to her shoulders, he shoved her coat down. She released her arms long enough for the garment to slide to the floor.

The point of no return. "If I go with you," Reid said, his voice rough with desire, "it's going to be for real. This isn't a show just to free you from your father."

"I know," she answered in a breathy voice. "I want that, Reid. If you knew how much I wanted it..."

Her words trailed off as he captured her wrist with his fingers. Flattening her palm on his chest, he slid it lower, down past the button at the waistband of his jeans until he curled her fingers against his hard shaft. "When it's just you and me, I want it too," he admitted.

Laura smiled the soft, sensual smile of a woman about to be well-loved. Curling her fingers tighter, she stroked him through the denim. Back and forth. Up and down. Her lips parted, the plump lower one calling him so he dipped his head and captured it. Sucking on her lower lip, he drew it into his mouth.

Her tiny moan wrapped around his cock and squeezed. Legs tangling, he pressed her against the door. He released her only to claim her mouth, his tongue delving past her parted lips. She tasted like a home cooked breakfast, warm and welcoming. Te. Jacy. The Conclaves. None of it mattered at the moment so long as he had her body pressed against his and the *lussor* sparking with promise between them. Yeah, he'd be staying the night, because he wouldn't let them leave for Brazos until he'd taken her over and over again. Then, she'd truly know what it meant to be his.

Chapter Five

For a moment in the car, Laura had thought she'd lost him. But here, with his mouth devouring hers, his hand pressing her palm to his denim-clad erection, she knew, at least when it came to sex, they were on the same page. Her father's Conclave was something completely different. Right now, Brazos didn't matter. Nothing did, except the feel of Reid's hands on her sweater and the *lussor* burning her up from the inside out.

Reid tugged on her shirt. His warm fingers slid beneath to caress her skin. She shuddered, the pleasure going straight to her veins. It had always been like this with Reid. Just one look, a hint that there might be something more, and her pussy dampened. With every touch, her clit throbbed. Her nipples rasped against the lace of her bra. Beneath her palm, he throbbed. That tightness, that wanting, it filled every inch of her body. Take her hands away to pull off her sweater or keep touching him. The delicious dilemma made her writhe in his arms. She made little mewling noises against his mouth.

His fingers found the front clasp of her bra and flicked it open. Her breasts spilled into his palm. Lifting his mouth from hers, he tugged at her sweater with his free hand. "Let me see you," he said. His deep voice massaged already aroused nerve endings.

Her breath caught in her throat. Looking into his blue eyes was like falling into the ocean. The hunger, the heat she saw there made her folds slick. Giving his cock a squeeze, she grabbed the hem and pulled her sweater over her head. She dropped it to the floor beside them. Her bra joined it.

Reid dipped his head to her breasts. He nuzzled her flesh, both palms reaching up to cup the rounded globes. Using his thumbs, he caressed her nipples into tight beads. Open mouth kisses branded her skin.

Laura threaded her fingers through his wavy, light brown hair. The sun-kissed strands matched his tanned skin. Her own bronze god. Tilting her head back against the door, she sighed as his warm mouth closed around her left nipple.

Flicks of his tongue drove her mad. She rocked her hips in a futile attempt to get closer to him. He devoured her. Each tug against her nipple created an answering pull deep inside her. The graze of his teeth, a roughness that contrasted with his gentleness.

This was the Reid she wanted. No holds barred, nothing except him, her, and the *lussor* sating itself with their passion. She clutched at his coat, managing to slide it off his shoulders. His shirt came next, her tugs at the buttons, popping one then two. They pinged to the floor.

Reid released her nipple. "Laura," he moaned. "We should...the bedroom."

"Here." She demanded, using the little space he gave her to unfasten her jeans. She toed off her shoes then shoved denim and cotton down her legs.

Reid gasped and moved back enough to allow her to strip. He watched. A summer storm raged in his darkening eyes. Like the clouds rolling in on a humid day, the weather was about to break, and she'd enjoy every minute of it. He tore off his shirt then unfastened his belt and let jeans and briefs pool around his knees.

"My boots, damn," he snarled as he jerked them off and stepped out of his clothing. He stood before her, gloriously naked.

Laura's mouth went dry. She'd fucked him, had him before, and yet, barely inside her front door, her back close enough to feel the chill radiating from it, made things seem more urgent.

Reid stepped forward. He reached behind her cupping her ass, as if aware of the door as he sank to his knees.

“Spread your legs, honey,” he whispered.

She complied, watching his tawny head come level with her pussy. He blew a puff of warm breath across her damp curls. She spread her legs wider.

“Put your hands on my shoulders.”

She followed his orders. Beneath her palms, his muscles bunched. She leaned into him, his strength, his warmth.

He snaked his tongue along her labia.

Laura gasped, that first tremulous touch as fresh and new as it had been yesterday. Spreading her legs wider, she tilted her hips in silent invitation.

Reid smiled against her. His tongue continued its leisurely caresses along her folds, occasionally dipping inside to brush across her clit.

Laura dug her fingers into his shoulders. The need to lift her legs and wrap her thighs around his head had her shifting her weight onto the balls of her feet. God, his mouth was like heaven, mobile lips and tongue stroking her in all the right places. He ate her like she ate rocky road ice cream, savoring every single lick. Her whimpers escalated into full-out moans.

“Please,” she begged. “I need you inside me.”

Reid continued his leisurely caresses of her clitoris. He swirled his tongue around it then wrapped his lips around the swollen bud and drew it into his mouth. He stroked the organ with long, licks, each one driving her closer to orgasm.

Her channel tightened. Would it always be like this, the hot and heavy need between them? The *lussor* sparked, going from a dull roar to a full-out scream. In all the times they’d had sex the last few days, she expected it to be sated. It wasn’t, and oh how she needed.

He speared her with his tongue.

Laura cried out. Eyes squeezed closed, she rode the pulses of sensation as her release neared. In tune with the thrusting of his tongue and the rising *lussor*, her body tightened with anticipation. Almost. There.

He thrust into her once more.

“Reid,” she screamed his name. Her orgasm hit hard enough to make spots swim in front of her eyes. Bent over, she clung to Reid, her nails leaving tiny furrows in his shoulders. Between her legs, his mouth stilled.

Her ragged breaths echoed around her. The cold door against her back forgotten, she watched as he pulled back. Her juices glistened on his lips and chin, and she hungered to taste herself on his mouth.

He eased her feet to the ground, standing in the process. With his hands just beneath her buttocks, he lifted her once more. “Wrap your legs around my hips, babe.” His cock brushed against her soft folds.

Laura moaned. She followed his instructions, locking her ankles around his lower back. His tip slid between her labia, and with a single thrust of his hips, he buried himself deep inside her.

“Oh yeah,” Reid growled. One step backed her against the door. He claimed her mouth, plunging his tongue inside.

She tasted herself on his lips, tart and salty. Pumping her hips, she clung to him, certain he couldn't get deep enough to sate her body and her soul. Their tongues danced, mated, and each thrust of his hips drove her higher. She whimpered against his mouth. Flesh slid against flesh, the sounds of sex mingling with their panting breaths. She wanted it to be just like this. All the time.

Her fingers flexed. Her channel tightened. *Please. Please.* Her mental chant never quite made it to her lips. Her throat tightened, and she forced herself to open her eyes as Reid pulled his lips from hers. The need to watch him burned in her veins. With his eyes closed, his head tilted back, the cords stood out in his neck. The tight press of his lips, the determination etched into his features, all of it added to her pleasure.

He wanted her. He was fucking *her*. And right now, that simple knowledge made her past wrongs fade away. He promised to stand by her as she fought her family. That, and his passion for her, was all that counted. She'd do whatever it took to make sure he never regretted that decision.

She trailed kisses along his throat. She nipped at his shoulder, and he plunged into her hard enough to rattle the front door on its hinges. The head of his cock brushed against her cervix, and she whimpered at the added pleasure. He found the space up next to it, high and deep inside, that always drove her crazy. Grinding her hips against his, she worked him deeper, her pussy tightening around his like a fist.

With a ragged groan, Reid stiffened. His cock jerked inside her, and he came. The warm splash of his seed triggered her own orgasm, and she exploded around him. Eyes closed, forehead buried against his shoulder, she tried to find purchase as her release sent her spiraling out of control. Reid. He filled her senses, his musky aroma deep in her lungs, the taste of her juices still on her lips. With his cock buried inside her, she realized that she'd gotten far deeper in this than she'd planned.

Tiny aftershocks darted the length of her channel. With his hands still on her ass, Reid followed her to the ground. They toppled, with her landing sprawled across his chest. His palms cupped her, his lips searching for, and then finding hers. He kissed her, drawing out her release until she lay silent and sated against him.

"I think," she said, pausing to catch her breath. "That we're going to need a full day to pack." Rearing back, she grinned at him. "Because something tells me that you and I may spend half of it in bed."

Reid chuckled. "That is a distinct possibility." He ran his hands along her spine. "You feel cold, let's get you warm." He started to lift her off of him.

"I don't feel cold," she purred. Lying on him, she was aware of his wadded jeans and knew he'd be more comfortable. Laura rolled to the side. She crawled down to his feet and started to pull off his boots. "Except you're still way overdressed."

Reid sat, those magnificent muscles in his abdomen contracting. She watched, aware her gaze was drawn to the arrow of hair leading down to his hardening cock. Her mouth watered. She leaned forward, running her finger along it from base to tip. If they continued like this, they'd never get to bed. And that was a bad thing? She stroked him, feeling him harden beneath her touch. Turning, she watched his expression as she lowered her mouth to him. His eyes widened then closed, a sublime smile on his lips as she wrapped her mouth around the head of his cock and sucked.

She drew her lips down his length, cherishing every moan, every swiftly indrawn breath. If she was going to make this work, and she'd be damned if she did anything to harm it, she'd have to seduce him without the *lussor*. Not today. Not when she could feel it running up and down her spine and pooling in her womb. No, once they were on the road.

Relaxing her muscles, she took him deeper. She made love to him with her mouth, drawing her lips along his shaft before taking him deep in her throat. With her tongue, she stroked him, pausing to toy with the nerves behind the head, probing his eye. His hips rose and fell, fucking her mouth. One large hand cradled the back of her head, holding her there for his thrusts.

Her pussy ached. Even as sated as she was, Laura wanted him again. She cupped his balls, fondling them. She rolled them in her palm and took time to caress the skin between and behind. His husky moans deepened. Could she make him come again?

The personal challenge galvanized her. She knew she wanted him. Her slick folds testified to the depth of her need. A hand closed around her ankle, drawing her legs toward him. Reid walked his fingers up her leg, pausing to caress the sensitive place behind her knees. Then, two fingers stroked her labia. His thumb found her clit, the fingers sliding inside her channel to finger fuck her in time with her sucking.

Laura moaned around the thick cock in her mouth. She couldn't last much longer, not with Reid curling his fingers and stroking her G-spot on every thrust.

"Come for me, Laura. I want to feel your pussy tighten around my fingers." His rough order sent a fresh wave of moisture to her sex.

It wouldn't be much longer. Already, she felt the telltale contractions of her release flutter through her.

Reid pressed his thumb against her clit, rotating it slightly.

Laura tried to hold back her escalating whimpers. She focused on Reid's cock, on his husky moans and the rise and fall of his hips. It became a race to see if she could make him come before she exploded. She doubled her efforts, her fingers tracing the path her lips followed before dipping down to fondle his balls. She toyed with the soft skin behind, even slipping up to press a finger against the tight ring of his anus.

Reid groaned.

In the palm of her hand, his balls tightened. So close, just as his fingers curled and stroked her G-spot. *Remember this. Remember how good we are together.*

A ragged moan erupted from Reid. He stiffened, his cock twitching in her mouth. Relaxing her throat, she took him deeper, and with a harsh cry, he came. Warm seed splashed down her throat, and she swallowed every drop before licking him clean with her tongue. Only then, did she allow herself to come. A final thrust of his fingers, and she exploded around his hand. Releasing his cock, she cried out as she slumped against his legs. Tiny explosions darted through her body. Her panting breaths echoed while her channel contracted and released around his fingers.

Sated, they lay on the floor.

The barest hint of a breeze from around the closed door combined with the cool floor urged her to action. "The bed," she whispered.

His fingers trailed down her body, caressing her flank, he reached for his clothing then dropped them. "The bed," he agreed. And together, they tumbled into the bedroom and under the covers. Laura tucked the idyllic moment back in her mind, because she feared, once she got to her father's, things were about to change, and not for the better.

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The next day, Reid found Te in the barn cleaning stalls. Apparently, Jacy had gone into town because the truck wasn't there. He stopped at the end of the aisle, watching Spot poke his nose over the stall door. A few mares were inside, the familiarity of the barn seeming at once old and new. If he went to Texas with Laura, this wouldn't be his life anymore, would it? They hadn't discussed what would happen once her father released his hold on her, whether they returned to StarMyst or stayed down there. He'd assumed that they'd come back, but now, standing here, watching Te complete the endless chore of stall cleaning, he didn't know.

Te leaned the pitchfork against the wall and turned to face him. "Thought you'd be on the road to Texas." He nodded.

Reid battled with how much to really tell his foster brother. The *lussor* crackled around him, as sated as it'd been in a long time. It wouldn't take a genius, or a really powerful sorcerer for that matter, to know what he and Laura had been doing. "Decided to take a day to pack."

"And other things I see." Te's grin sobered. "You know, I should be mad as hell at Laura for bringing this to our doorstep. But then again, Edwin never told any of us. I asked Jacy. She didn't know anything about Laura being from Brazos." Te exhaled a long sigh and grabbed the handle of the pitchfork. "I'm more worried about you."

"I'm fine," Reid replied a bit too quickly to be believed.

"Bullshit," Te shook his head. "I haven't been here that long, but even I saw the way you were mooning after Laura. She's got you wrapped around her little finger, and you're following her like a stud after a mare in heat. You're not thinking with the brain between your ears and we both know it."

Reid stiffened at the worry in Te's words. "What do you know? You ran away from StarMyst and stayed away until it was almost too late." Reid flung the accusation back in Te's face.

To his credit, Te remained firm. He dragged his fingers through his long, black hair, dislodging it from the tie that held it back at the nape of his neck. "You're right. I just don't want you to make the same mistakes I did all because of a woman."

"Yeah, but Jacy's one hell of a woman," Reid said.

"And so's the doctor," Te agreed. "So where does that leave us except acting like two gangly colts tripping over our own feet?" Te's mood lightened. He let the pitchfork fall and strode down the barn aisle toward Reid. Grabbing his younger foster brother in a hug, Te clapped him on the back. "Look, I just don't want to see you get hurt. I think you can agree that we've all been through enough."

"Yeah, we have." Reid returned the embrace, startled by the show of emotion from the Conclave's leader.

"If you love Laura the way I love Jacy, then you do whatever it takes to bring her back. Okay? StarMyst is her home too. Edwin gave her his protection. I can do no less." Te released Reid and picked up the pitchfork. "Now you going to help or do I have to do chores all by myself again?"

"All right," Reid admitted. He went to the tack room and grabbed a second pitchfork, prepared for what may be his last normal afternoon at StarMyst.

Chapter Six

After eight hours of driving the next day, Reid was more than happy to see the city limits for Memphis, the halfway point on their journey. Laura told him she'd taken care of all the arrangements, and after sitting on his butt for so long, right now he didn't care if they ended up in a tent. Somehow, with Laura, he doubted it.

"Take this exit," she said. Just the sound of her voice tightened his cock. Her. Him. A cozy hotel room. Yeah, he could dig that, and if the promising looks she'd been giving him all day were any indication, so could she.

The drive had given him way too much time to think. Conversation had run out around Springfield, Illinois. The radio stations became even too much country for him as they entered Missouri. Sliding out of the boot heel and into Tennessee was almost like entering a different world. A world from which Laura had come.

So, he remained quiet and followed her directions. She sounded better than any GPS system he'd tested, and soon, she steered him into the parking lot of a huge, historic hotel. Yeah, no bargain chain motels for him tonight. He grinned.

"I hope you don't mind," she said as he turned off the engine, "but I booked us for two nights. I thought it'd be nice to have some time to ourselves before we entered Brazos politics." She opened the car door.

He hurried to catch up with her, holding the door open as she exited. Grabbing their two overnight bags and leaving the rest of the luggage in the car, he followed her to the elevators. She moved like she'd been here before. With her Conclave, he figured she probably had.

"I didn't use my connections if that's what you're wondering," she said. The elevator doors slid closed.

Reid stared at their mirrored surfaces. The more he and Laura fed the *lussor*, the closer they'd become, until at times like this, he swore she could read his mind. Or was he really that transparent? "I wasn't," he lied.

"Of course you were. I would have if I were in your shoes. This is Presley Conclave territory, by the way. They're pretty friendly. We might have a welcoming note in our suite, but that's about it. They tend to stay out of other people's business."

"So Elvis, he was a..."

Laura laughed. "Nah. Though there are rumors there were Sorcerers somewhere in his family tree. I think it's because of the notoriety. They tend to stick to themselves, which makes Memphis a good place to hold meetings."

The elevator doors opened. Reid said nothing, his head whirling with all the politics that he knew was out there and never had taken part in before. Good thing Laura knew it. He figured he'd make a *faux pas* and start the Sorcerer Wars all over again. Not a pretty thought.

Laura smiled at the bellhop and made her way confidently to the front desk. A large fountain with splashing ducks in it dominated most of the lobby. Polished gilt and rich woods made a subtle statement about the luxury of the hotel. While he gawked, Laura took care of the transaction, and she handed him his key.

The bellhop stepped forward to take care of their bags and Reid waved them away. Neither his nor Laura's bag were very heavy and he never liked the idea of someone else carrying his luggage. The elevator slid open, and Laura slid her key card then pushed one of the top buttons.

Apparently, she spared no expense, and he wondered how to approach the topic of splitting the cost.

His heels sank into the plush carpeting as Laura led him down the hall. At the last door, she paused and opened it.

Reid stepped into one of the nicest hotel rooms he'd ever been in. A huge king-sized bed, piled high with pillows dominated the center of the room. A loveseat and recliner created a living area on one side, the desk next to them with a big, leather chair. Next to the bathroom was a nook with what looked like a wet bar and the obligatory coffeemaker, and the bathroom looked big enough for a family of four. What caught his eye though was on a raised tile platform. A huge Jacuzzi tub and fireplace sat opposite of the living area. Instantly, his cock hardened.

"Wow," he breathed as he set their bags on the floor of the already-open closet. "This is really nice."

"I wanted it to be nice." Laura sat on the loveseat.

Reid sank to the plush cushions beside her. He rested his arm along the back, his fingers just barely brushing her shoulder. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble for me. I've slept in far worse places." He remembered a cross-country trip with his parents when he and Kade were small. It occurred right before the Sorcerer Wars, and they'd stayed in seedy little mom and pop motels and the cheapest places. But they'd seen Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert, all those things that families were supposed to do together. He cherished the memory and wondered where Kade was now.

Laura turned to face him. She rested her hand on his thigh. Though her touch was innocent enough, heat burned from her hand through the denim of his jeans. He imagined her fingers moving just a few inches higher. Her gaze dropped to her fingers, and to the growing bulge behind his fly, and a soft smile curled her lips.

"That's why I wanted a nice room. Just a couple of days to try things without the *lussor* getting in the way," she said.

Reid wrapped his arm around her and tucked her against his side. "You don't have to impress me, honey. I'm just glad for a respite before we pull into Brazos Conclave." He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. That she thought she needed to explain herself touched him. "Though I'll admit this is nicer than the places I usually stay at."

A discreet knock sounded at the door.

"That's room service. I told him to bring up our dinner right away." Laura stood.

"Let me." His sense of chivalry came out whenever he was around her. Opening the door, he let the waiter set the tray on the table in front of the loveseat. Heavenly smells of rich steaks and roasted vegetables wafted up from the tray. A bottle of champagne chilled in a bucket of ice. Six roses sat in a vase, and he realized there was a small dish full of bath favors on the tray between the empty champagne flutes and goblets of water.

Laura signed for their meal and the waiter left. "It came with the room. I hope you don't mind," she said, taking the top of the plates.

"Don't mind?" Reid's stomach rumbled as she revealed the juicy medium-rare steaks, huge potatoes and steaming vegetables. "Not at all. Do we want to open the champagne now or later?"

"Later," Laura said. She unfolded her napkin and laid it across her lap. He watched as she bit into her steak.

They truly came from different worlds. A place like this, Reid knew this might be the only time in his life he stayed in something this fancy. Not because they couldn't afford it. Between Edwin's investments and the horses, StarMyst had plenty of assets in the bank. More because he didn't need to stay in a place this nice. That Laura had made the reservations for them touched him in places he didn't want to think about.

She closed her lips around the bite of steak and chewed. Eyes closed, she swallowed, her tongue darting out to catch a bit of juice. He could sit here and watch her eat all night.

"You have to try this." She held out her fork with a bite of steak.

Reid hadn't even cut into his yet. Leaning forward, he took the succulent morsel into his mouth. Swallowing, he grinned. "Delicious. Now, it's your turn." He gave her a first bite, passing it to her. Laura made a show of taking the bite from his fork, chewing and swallowing.

"Oops. You have a little bit right here." Reid cupped her chin and kissed off a droplet of juice.

Laura shivered. "We better eat before it gets cold."

"Honey, I think it's just starting to warm up." He tossed her a hungry, masculine grin then dove into his food. Moments later, the plates were empty, leaving only a few assorted chocolates, the champagne, and the bath favors. The latter he'd save for later.

He reached for her plate, stacking them on the tray, before grabbing the bottle of champagne. Removing the foil, he popped the cork. It fizzed, dripping over the edges. Reid swiped some of the foam with his finger and sucked it off.

"Glasses or bottle?" Personally, he'd love to watch her red lips wrap around the neck of the champagne bottle, her tongue caressing the end as if it were the tip of his cock. His body responded and he wondered how long it'd be before he could peel off her clothing and they could both be naked.

"Bottle. Let's live dangerously." She scooted to the edge of the loveseat and snagged the cup of bath items. "Really dangerously." Before he could say anything, she rose to her feet and hurried to the Jacuzzi. Stripping off her clothes, she leaned over the edge of the tub and stared the water.

Reid flicked open the button of his jeans. Just looking at her heart-shaped ass with its tantalizing glimpses of her pink folds, had his cock standing at attention. He toed off his shoes as he crossed the thick carpet. By the time he reached the tub, she had it filling with water and frothy bubbles crossing the surface. The fruity scent of piña colada perfumed the air.

Laura lifted one foot onto the step leading into the tub. "You're overdressed." She reached for his shirt, grabbing it and hauling him toward her. He stumbled, the champagne splashing over the edge of the bottle. This was a side of Laura he hadn't seen, the devil-may-care glint in her eyes promising him a night of sensual delights.

"So I am." With his free hand, he reached for his buttons, pulling them open. A couple pinged off, bouncing across the floor to land in the carpet. He shrugged his shirt from his shoulders, setting the bottle down on the edge of the tub, to remove it. Now this, he could deal with, a couple of secluded days in a fancy suite far away from either one of their Conclaves. Good thing it was him and not his brother. Damn, but he was a lucky bastard.

Laura stepped into the tub, activating the jets as she sat down. Water churned around her. Her breasts broke the surface of the water, the bubbles swirling around her. She closed her eyes and moaned. "This feels heavenly."

Reid stepped into the water. After the drive, he figured anything would feel good, but as the water swirled around his calves then higher. He crossed the tub, his cock pounding with the

prospect of taking her in the warm, bubbly water. Grabbing the champagne bottle in one hand, he cupped her breast in the other. He dribbled the sweet liquid over the slope. Then, he bent his head and lapped it off.

She moaned. "Again," she breathed, tangling her fingers in his hair.

He obliged, once more dripping the fizzy champagne over her flesh. He licked it off, lifting her breast enough to wrap his lips around her nipple. He drew it into his mouth, sucking and laving it with his tongue. Her moans escalated.

He released her nipple with a pop. "Sit on the edge of the tub. I want to taste you."

Laura hoisted herself onto the edge of the Jacuzzi. Water sluiced from her body, and he sat back on his heels simply marveling at the site. Wet strands of blonde hair hung around her face. Her skin flushed red with the heat from the tub. Droplets of water slid over her nipples and down her stomach. The neatly trimmed, wet curls between her thighs drew his gaze as did the pink flesh beneath. Wet, dry, no matter how he saw her, Laura was a beautiful woman.

Reid licked his suddenly dry lips. He held the champagne bottle above the churning water, the enormity of what they were about to do sank in. Setting the bottle on the edge of the tub, he cupped Laura's knees. His gaze caught, and held, hers. Lips parted, she stared at him and the depth of lust and need in her eyes shocked him to the core. She might be doing this to get free of her Conclave, and frankly, he didn't blame her, but she wanted him too. He parted her thighs.

"I bet you taste like honey," he said as he made room for his broad shoulders.

Her fingers curled around his muscled biceps. "You know what I taste like," she joked, though the trepidation was there too. Her voice wavered.

"Maybe I want to try you again, just to see if it's as good as I remember." He dipped his head closer.

"Reid." Her fingers slid to his shoulders and she squeezed.

"Yes, honey?" He stilled, his lips just inches from her labia. Her swollen, pink folds called to him. The musky scent of her arousal teased his nose. Inching his palms up to her thighs, he drew her closer to the edge of the tub.

"I don't feel the *lussor*."

Neither did he. The power of his magic remained at a low ebb, satiated from all the sex they'd had over the last few days. "Isn't this what you wanted? Just a chance for us to get to know each other without the magic in the way." He grinned, realizing this would be the first time he fucked her without their powers dictating what happened. His cock jerked rock-hard and it was all because of her.

"Yeah, but..." Her voice trailed off.

Reid drew his attention up her body, over her stomach, between her pert breasts to her face. "You scared?" He cupped her chin so she wouldn't look away.

"Yes," she admitted. "What if you don't want me?" Her question emerged as little more than a husky sigh.

"Don't want you?" He struggled not to laugh. Waist-deep in water with his cock aching to be inside her, he found it hard to believe that she thought he didn't want her. He rose to his feet, letting her see the full extent of his need. Taking her hand, he guided it to his shaft and curled her fingers around it. "Feel that and then tell me that I don't want you."

Laura drew a halting breath. Her tiny fingers stroked him from base to tip, curling over the head and then back down again. "That's just your body. What about your mind?" Her hands stilled.

"My mind doesn't figure into this." Reid grinned. "In fact, I think you're holding it in your hand. I want you. I'm not sure what I can do to convince you except make these next couple of days ones you never forget." *Please don't bring up the past.* Deep in his gut, he suspected that's where she was headed. That after finding her in bed with his brother, she wondered how he could even want to do this.

The past was the past. Edwin had always said things happened for a reason. Whether it was learning that Kade had fucked her or finding himself in an expensive hotel room with her now, it was, as Edwin used to say, as the Universe willed. Who was he to argue with something far greater than himself?

Laura resumed her stroking with gentle touches that tightened his balls.

Reid lowered himself back into the water, mostly to keep himself from coming in Laura's hand like some untried teenager. With his palms on the insides of her thighs, he focused his attention on her labia. "I still want to taste you." He blew a puff of air across her labia.

Shivers raced through her body, and beneath the water, she curled her toes.

Reid swiped his tongue along her folds, tasting her natural juices and the fruity fragrance of the bubble bath. Grinning, he dipped his head to her pussy, working his tongue between her labia, with slow, deliberate licks. Above his head, Laura whimpered. Her fingers curled into his skin, nails biting into his flesh.

Her plump clitoris tormented him. Swirling his tongue around it, he delighted in the tiny moans she made. The jets faded, the water going still and clear with just a few bubbles across the top. If she looked down, she'd see his head bent between her legs, her feet dangling in the water close to his erect cock. He paused a moment to savor the visual picture she made.

She shivered. Goosebumps rose on her skin.

"You're cold. Come back into the water." He slid his hands down her legs, grabbing her ankles.

She looked reluctant.

"Come on. Don't worry, I can still lick your pussy." Reid grinned, enjoying the view of her long, tanned legs, leading to her sex. A gentle tug had her sliding toward the edge of the tub.

Laura squealed. She grabbed the edge of the tub and slid into the water.

Reid pulled her ankles to his shoulders. "Hang on." He dove forward between her legs. Caressing the backs of her calves and thighs, he cupped her ass. Dipping his head, he nuzzled her folds. "Just lie back and relax," he said before focusing on the job of making Laura scream his name.

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Laura tried not to be freaked out by the fact that she and Reid were in the whirlpool tub without the *lussor* intervening. She had nothing to blame her reactions on except herself. Exhaling, she stared at his light brown head between her thighs. His tongue darted along her labia, catching her cream and lapping at it. Wrapping his lips around her clitoris, he drew it into his mouth.

Laura moaned. No matter how she tried to stay detached, how she tried to tell herself she was doing this to get away from her father's Conclave. She knew the truth. She cared for Reid far

more than she should. She'd fucked his brother. Though with his tongue sliding into her channel, his fingers tight against her buttocks, she thought only of him, never Kade.

She'd never really thought about Kade. Stifling a moan, she accepted the truth. The only reason why she'd ever slept with his brother was to get Reid to notice her. A pretty piss poor excuse and one she hoped she'd never have to tell him.

Oh God, she was going to come from his mouth alone. Buoyant in the water, she floated on a cloud of pure sensation. The warm, wet mouth at her sex, the water lapping at her breasts, Laura curled her fingers into the edge of the tub.

Reid deepened the trusts of his tongue. Curling it, he flicked it close to her G-spot with every stroke. Stifling her whimpers, Laura tried to hang onto some semblance of control. Water lapped around her breasts, her neck, holding her like a lover's strong arms. Reid must have hit the button for the jets, for they started swirling again.

He walked his fingers over her buttocks to press his palms on either side of her spine. She wriggled, half afraid she'd sink below the surface of the water. Her calves rested on his shoulders, his body beneath hers keeping her from falling, even as his caresses and licks drove her to the brink of madness.

She rocked her hips against his face. His palms curled over her breasts, her nipples jutting into his hands. He devoured her. Licks and nibbles, caresses and touches, each one driving her a little higher. Her womb tightened. An all-too familiar tingling started low in her spine.

"Please," she begged, though for more or for her release she couldn't have said.

He latched onto her clit. Leaving his left hand on her breast, he slipped his right beneath the water, two fingers pressing against her vaginal opening. One thrust, two, he stroked his fingers inside her in time with the flicks of his tongue. He was eating her inside out, each nibble making her breath catch. Her nipples pebbled, so hard they ached, and she knew, just knew, if she didn't reach orgasm soon, she'd explode.

And then he brought her to release. Flattening his tongue over her clit, he drove her over the edge. She screamed his name, her body spasming. The jets pummeling against the back of her shoulders, the water swirling around her back and buttocks, swept her away into a realm of pure sensation. Over and over again waves of pure, unadulterated pleasure surged through her. Reid held her, his lips and tongue still against her clit and labia.

She struggled to draw breath through the aftershocks darting through her. Her hand slipped on the edge of the tub, splashing in. She flailed, the sparks still zinging through her, making her actions rough, clumsy.

Her head dipped under for a split second.

"I got you," Reid said. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her above, moving forward so he pinned her against his body and the edge of the tub. His cock pressed against her stomach, full and hard. Her pussy tightened just thinking about the thick rod deep inside her, and surprisingly, she wanted him again. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she rose just enough to slide the head of his penis along her slick folds. She lowered herself, trying to savor the sensation of being impaled as much as for his sake as for hers.

When their bodies were flush together, Laura nestled her head against the crook of Reid's shoulder. His warm skin beneath her cheek soothed her, as did the hand at the small of her back. She dared not look into his eyes. Biting her lip, she knew, even if this shit with her father hadn't bit her in the ass, she'd probably still be right where she was...with Reid. Maybe not eight hours away,

but still, in his arms, in his bed. Maybe it was Edwin's death, and maybe, she finally decided she was a big girl who could go after what she wanted. Turning her head, she placed a kiss on his shoulder.

A groan rumbled from his chest. "Laura," he breathed. He started to move, long, slow strokes that spoke of far more control than she had. His cock twitched inside her, so big and hard she figured he must be ready to blow. He didn't. Instead, he fucked—no made love to her. Tears stung her eyes and she quickly blinked them away.

She rode the spiraling waves of desire, each thrust taking her higher. The water ceased to churn, even started to cool a bit and yet, it registered only in some distant part of her mind. She only knew Reid, filling her, loving her.

He nibbled along her neck, enticing her to turn her head and he kissed her. He held her head still so he could slip his tongue into her mouth and cherish her.

Laura moaned into his mouth, loving the way they swallowed each other's cries. Deep inside, Reid hit that place high inside that she loved to have stroked. The head of his cock slid over it, and she whimpered as her need ratcheted higher. Whatever happened once they got to Brazos, she knew, she'd never leave him again.

Reid stiffened as he came. Pulling his lips away, he cried out, a harsh, triumphant cry. The hot splash of his seed inside her, triggered her own release, and she followed him, tumbling, into sated bliss. Resting her head on his shoulder, she knew the truth. She loved him. Always had and always would.

Chapter Seven

Waking up with Laura's warm body snuggled against him brought a smile to Reid's face. He turned his head, nuzzling her hair. The silken strands caressed his face. In her sleep, Laura murmured and turned toward him. Her breasts crushed against his side, one slim leg thrown over his.

Though her slight weight hardly pinned him to the bed, Reid couldn't move. Closing his eyes, he savored the sensation of waking up with Laura. The *lussor* lay dormant. Even last night, the core of their magic never reared its head. No, what happened between them in the hot tub, and then later, had nothing to do with the fact that they were sorcerers and everything to do with the fact that he cared for Laura.

Probably more than was sane. He opened his eyes, knowing he'd have to face his feelings head on. Stroking strands of her hair, he watched her sleep. Her lashes fanned over her cheeks, her lips parted in sleep. Her deep, even breathing pushed her breasts against him, and next to her thigh, his cock stirred.

He loved her. Exhaling, Reid accepted the truth. What had happened with his brother was a fluke. A one-night stand that hadn't done any of them an ounce of good. He released her hair, his body making more physical demands known.

Reid slipped from the bed. A few moments later, he stared at himself in the mirror. Running his palm over his stubbled cheek, he thought he should probably clean up. Laura might not want to be awakened by whisker burn. He grinned and turned on the water.

Shaved, his teeth brushed, and his body reasonably behaving, Reid pulled on a pair of boxers from his suitcase. Standing in the middle of the room, he watched Laura sleep. Though this hotel room might be an oasis away from the world, they couldn't stay there forever. Still, he planned to savor these moments for as long as he could.

Because he loved her.

The air whooshed from his lungs and he took a step back. Watching her sleep, he knew it was the truth. He had loved Laura for a long time and he loved her now. Pressing his lips together, he curled his hand into a fist. His feet shuffled forward across the carpet, the need to touch her so great it physically hurt.

And he'd see this through the end. Whatever happened in Brazos, he'd be there, by Laura's side until it finished one way or the other.

Damn, maybe this was what Te had felt when he saw Jacy again. Reid remembered a spat where Te had nearly lost control of the *lussor*. Even in the house he'd felt it and thought then that Jacy had been a lucky woman to have someone love her that much. Even if it had been his foster brother who hadn't been seen around there in several years.

Laura murmured and stirred in her sleep. The covers slipped, revealing an edge of her breast. The nipple poked against the soft, cotton sheets, the fabric draping between her legs. Her fingers curled against the mattress. With her hair tumbled over her cheek and across her chest, she looked like a goddess sleeping in his bed.

He crossed the space to the low platform on which the bed sat. Stepping onto it, he gazed down at her. Yeah, whatever it took once they reached Brazos, he'd make her father see that Laura belonged to him. He loved her. He'd do whatever it took to make her happy and free her from her

father's influence. If her father wanted Laura to have little sorcerer babies then Reid knew he'd be the man to give them to her.

His cock twitched.

Protection. They hadn't used any. Though it was notoriously difficult for sorcerer females to conceive, it did happen and he and Laura hadn't used any sort of birth control. She might be on the pill. He hadn't rummaged through her luggage to find out, and frankly, he really didn't want to. His gaze slid over her breasts, down to her flat stomach. Even now, his seed could have joined with her and be forming a baby. His baby.

Pride swelled his chest. Sure, the thought terrified him, but he couldn't imagine it happening with anyone else. The head of his cock poked from the opening in the front of his boxers, almost as if it, too, wanted a look at its handiwork. He could be a father. Swallowing hard, Reid sat down on the edge of the bed. He rested his hand next to her, fingers aching to trace the contours of her breast. The diamond hard nipple tormented him with its presence, reminding him how good it felt to tongue her flesh.

"Reid," Laura murmured in her sleep. Her legs parted, limbs moving restlessly.

Did she dream about him? A grin crossed his face as he imagined Laura having steamy dreams about him. Yeah, he didn't mind at all if he starred as the leading man in all her fantasies. Reid grabbed the edge of the sheet. He dragged it over her body, using the edges to caress every inch of her body. Pooling the fabric at the foot of the bed, he moved the comforter and blankets out of the way, leaving nothing but the large expanse of the mattress and Laura.

Reid slid from the bed long enough to shed his boxers. His cock sprang free, hard enough that it nearly touched his navel. He cupped his balls, thinking about being buried deep inside Laura once again.

She murmured, but didn't awaken.

"I hope you're having a sweet dream," he whispered as he bent over her. He nibbled along the side of her neck, making her turn her head in sleep to grant him better access. Licking and kissing down to the slope of one breast, he drew the tight nipple into his mouth. He palmed her other breast, paying special attention to her turgid bead.

Beneath him, Laura moaned. She shifted on the bed, lips parting in a perfect oval that begged to be kissed. Looking over her body, Reid battled the emotions swelling inside him. He breathed deeply and dipped his head to her breast once more.

He worshipped her flesh. The blue vein just beneath the skin tantalized him, and he followed its trail with lips and tongue. He could lie here all morning, just kissing her flesh.

Laura parted her legs. Lifting her hips, she rubbed her mound against him. Tiny whimpering noises emerged from her throat. Her fingers clenched against the sheet.

Reid released her nipple with a pop. He nuzzled lower, finding the underside of her breast as succulent as the top. His hands roamed over her skin, down over her hips then back up to cup her breast and thumb the taut nipple. Surely, she must be awake, but if she was, she gave no sign.

He ventured lower. The musk of her arousal lured him just above her pussy. Pressing large, open-mouthed kisses against her lower abdomen, he left her with a red mark. His mark. His brand. Then he delved between her thighs.

Her fingers curled against the back of his head.

There, she had to be awake now. He didn't say anything, figured she had decided to remain quiet and let him think that she still slept. A bit kinky, but the idea of waking up with his tongue in

her pussy must have turned her on. He knew it did him, for his cock pounded with an incessant need to be inside her.

He tasted her cream. The flavors, almost like the fruity bubble bath last night, burst on his tongue, making him thrust it inside her to gather more. Her swollen clit brushed against his lips. Cupping the firm globes of her backside, he lifted her closer to his face.

Laura inhaled swiftly. Her fingers clenched on the back of his head, her other hand reaching down for his shoulders. "Ooh," she gasped as he flicked his tongue over the head of her clitoris.

Reid raised his head. He crawled back over her body, the verbal acknowledgement that she had awakened, enough to make him want to bury his cock inside her. He nudged her folds, teasing her with just the merest hints of his cock. Leaning down, he kissed her.

He knew she tasted herself on his lips. Her arms wound around him, her heels pressing into the back of his thighs. Unable to wait any longer, he sheathed himself inside her.

Reid groaned as his cock slipped inside her. The tight sheath of her pussy wrapped around him, holding him tighter than a glove. Contractions rippled along her muscles, stroking him like invisible fingers. Yeah, this was a hell of a good way to wake up. Slowly, he pulled out, the tip just inside her.

"You awake yet, sweetheart?" he asked.

"What do you think?" Laura reared up to meet him, her lips slanting across his. Drawing him back down to the bed, her actions told him exactly how awake she really was.

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Lying beneath Reid, his strong thrusts pinning her to the mattress, Laura couldn't think of a better way to wake up. She'd feigned sleep for as long as possible. The longer Reid's mouth moved over her flesh, the more she wanted to just lay there and soak up the attention. Then he'd speared her with his tongue, and she couldn't remain passive any longer. The silken texture of his hair through her fingers reminded her of it against her skin, and then, when he poised himself at her entrance, she'd wrapped her limbs around him and hung on for the ride.

The first thrust took her breath away. The second, she threatened to lose coherent thought. Not yet, she couldn't, not until she put words to this maelstrom of emotions churning deep inside. Clinging to him, she met his every stroke, willing him deeper. This was the Reid she cared for, the strong Sorcerer she wanted to bring home to her Conclave, and the reason why she wanted to stay with StarMyst. Leaving her father's influence meant nothing if it didn't mean she'd be with a male who would allow her to think for herself and not cling to antiquated notions of how a female Sorcerer would be. Other Conclaves would probably do the same for her, but not like StarMyst, and certainly not like Reid.

Her body tightened. Her orgasm neared, as hard and fast as any she'd had so early in the morning. With a cry, she shattered. Ripples surged through her body, her pussy tightening around his cock, her fingers digging into the muscles of his shoulders. She pressed her heels into his buttocks as if she could make him a part of her. She struggled to pull air into her lungs.

Reid surged forward. Another stroke, another impending climax. The flutters deep in her womb grew stronger. She'd never come like this first thing in the morning. It had to be Reid.

He stiffened above her. A guttural cry escaped his throat as he came. She joined him in release, her voice rising above his. Reid sank onto her, and she relished his weight. For long

moments, they clung to each other. He rolled to his side, and Laura found herself following him. Propped up on her elbow she stared at him.

"That was some way to wake up," she said, trailing her finger between his pectorals.

"Glad to help," he replied, rolling onto his back. Reid flung one arm over his eyes, the other still tucked beneath her neck.

"Glad to help?" She parroted his words back at him. "It makes it sound like you're doing a job or something. I certainly hope I'm not just a job."

Reid shook his head. "No! Why would you think that?" He sat up, taking the blankets with him.

Laura snatched back enough sheet to cover her breasts. "I was teasing," she admitted with a grin. "Kind of." On one hand, his vehemence in answering her question warmed her heart. On the other, she did wonder if perhaps he saw her as a job, a duty to discharge for Edwin. She pressed her lips together. Surely, he wouldn't have made love like that if she were just another chore Edwin had given him.

She swallowed hard.

"Oh. Sorry. I just didn't want you think that I was doing this out of a sense of duty or something." Reid leaned forward and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because I care for you." Reid curled his fingers over hers and gently tugged at the sheet. It slipped, baring her to his gaze. He caressed her nipple, drawing it into a peak.

"Oh," Laura breathed. She watched his finger swirl around her bud, her mouth going dry at the sight. "You know it won't be easy once we get to Brazos, don't you?"

"I believe you told me that." His finger stilled. Reluctantly, he pulled away, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and standing.

She watched as he pulled on his boxers. The sight of his naked body drew her, and for a moment, she regretted the conversation they were about to have. "I know, but I want to make sure you understand what you're walking into. This isn't going to be easy."

"If I had wanted easy, I would have stayed at StarMyst. I never said I wanted easy." Reid remained standing. He eyed his jeans, still lying by the hot tub from last night. "Let's order breakfast and you can tell me what I'm going to face. Might as well get it out of the way, and then maybe we can try out the hot tub again." He scooped up his clothes and carried them to the closet where they'd stowed their bags.

Laura sighed. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten breakfast yet. "What do you want for breakfast?" She thumbed through the flyer.

"Eggs, bacon, whatever. I'm going to take a shower." Reid shrugged and disappeared into the bathroom.

Laura stared at the closed door. Not exactly the heart-to-heart she wanted to have with him. And frankly, she needed a shower too. Her thighs were sticky from Reid's loving, not that she minded, but she did want to clean up. The water pattered against the wall as she ordered room service.

Not too much later Reid emerged from the bathroom wearing a pair of jeans, nearly unbuttoned and little else. He ran a towel over his hair and he looked freshly shaved. "Food should be here in about ten minutes. Did you leave me hot water?"

"Think so. Want me to sign for breakfast?"

She nodded and closed the door, their positions reversed. How easily they'd slipped into a domestic arrangement. She could get used to this. The steamy bathroom smelled like him, a woodsy scent that she realized must come from his after-shave. She stepped into the shower.

Just as she stepped out, she heard the door and smelled breakfast. Hastily drying off, she wrapped the hotel's robe around her, and emerged into the living room to see Reid setting the low table with breakfast. She sat.

They ate in silence, with her mulling over what she wanted to say and wondering if it was overkill. She'd told him what would happen if she went home. She had told him her father was a hard man. Did it matter that he knew what else? Sure, they could go in with a plan, but her father could blow it to pieces with a single command. She noticed Reid ate, lost in thought, and soon, the plates sat empty between them.

Reid leaned back in his chair. "So tell me how this is going to go down." He rested his hands behind his head and stretched out his bare feet.

Laura struggled to keep her attention above the unbuttoned waistband of his pants. She licked her lips, reaching for her empty glass of orange juice. Standing, she went to the alcove and started one of the complementary pots of coffee. "Something like this," she said as the coffee brewed. "I'm going to arrive. My father will chastise me for running away, will most likely segregate me in my old rooms, and you, well you'll be subject to the third degree and maybe no small amount of magical persuasion. You're not going to be good enough for me. Your Conclave isn't powerful enough. He may even offer you money to leave. He may not, if he decides that my being with you has compromised how much prestige my arranged marriage could bring him. Either way, I doubt we'll be allowed to see each other ever again."

She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down, painfully aware of Reid's stunned silence.

"That's harsh." He sucked in a breath. "So why go back?"

"Because if I don't, I'll be living under his shadow for the rest of my life. I have to do this if I want to be free. I want to be with you, Reid. This is the only way." She could tell he believed her, even as her news rocked him back on his proverbial heels. "If you want, you don't have to go through with this. I can go back to Brazos by myself."

"And what would happen then?" He spoke calmly, evenly, though she saw the storm brewing in his blue eyes.

"Pretty much the same, except I'd probably be immediately married off to whoever my father believes would make a good match. And, I'd never be allowed out of his or my husband's sight ever again." Her chin dropped to her chest.

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Reid stared at Laura. Though he knew the truth. She hadn't sugar-coated it when she had convinced Te and Jacy to offer StarMyst's protection and him to accompany her. Hearing it in those blunt words shifted something inside him. She sat in the chair across from the couch where he lounged and he wanted her there, with him. He patted the cushion beside him.

Laura looked longingly at the place. She scooted to the edge of her chair, then with a heavy sigh, stood and crossed the space between them. Sitting next to him, she appeared careful to keep to her side of the couch. Reid moved closer, but as she moved away, he realized she wanted, no probably needed, the space between them. He knew he did. This close, her warmth tempted him.

The scent of her shampoo and soap called to him, reminding him of what it had been like to nestle his face against her pussy.

Reid swallowed hard. "You can't scare me away, you know?" No matter how many times he needed to say it, he would. Over and over again until she understood that he was in this for long the haul, not fame or glory. He doubted he'd receive either once they arrived at Brazos.

"I'm not trying to scare you away. I'm trying to be honest," she whispered. Rubbing her palms over her eyes, she shook her head.

Reid reached for her, curling his fingers into a fist when he realized that she probably didn't want to be held. Not since she sat so far away from him on the couch. Letting his hand drop into his lap, he stared at it. "Honesty is good."

"I just..." Her words trailed off as she turned to face him. "I'm scared. I had thought Edwin could protect me from my father forever. Even when I knew how serious Edwin's cancer was, I lived in denial. He'd live forever. I'd never have to return to Brazos. Now, I am, and it's not how I imagined it being."

Reid rested his hand on her knee, yearning for greater contact. "How did you imagine it?"

"Not like this. Oh, I don't know how I imagined it. Forget I said anything about it."

"No." Reid curled his fingers into her thighs, feeling her stiffen beneath his touch. "I'm not going to forget about it. You're trying to scare me off for a reason. Do you, or don't you, want me to go to Brazos with you? I said I'd go. I think, before we arrive, we should be of one mind about this. Don't you?"

"You have a point. I'm sorry. But now that we've finally put our past behind us and decided to move on, I'd hate to have my father tear us apart." She reached for him, tangling her fingers with his. Squeezing his hand, she brought it to her chest.

Reid snuggled closer to her. He wrapped his arm around her, tucking her against his side. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he closed his eyes. "It'll be all right."

"How can you say that?" Tears threatened in her voice.

Because I love you. Because I've seen what the power of love can do through Jacy and Te. He pressed his lips together, not wanting to give away too much too soon. "Because I know."

Laura laughed. "I really like that about you. Your optimism. My father isn't going to make this easy."

Reid leaned back and tilted her chin, forcing her gaze to meet his. "If I had a prize like you, I wouldn't want to give you up so easily either. My birth parents may be dead, but Edwin was as much a father to us as they were. Even though Te was his own foster son, it hurt, I think, for him to relinquish Jacy into his care. I think the only thing that made it easier was that Edwin was so sick, he needed Te to come back and take his place in the Conclave, and he knew Jacy needed Te too. We don't have that in these dealings with your father. He may not expect you to take over Brazos, but he's going to expect you to make a match that strengthens it. I believe this does. We'll just have to convince him of that."

"You sound awfully confident."

"It's because I am." Reid grinned. "No more talk about what may, or may not happen. To be honest, we're not going to know until we show up. So, let's take advantage of this beautiful room. I'd like to head down to the workout center for a while, but I think this afternoon, we need to worry only about ourselves. Deal?"

"Deal." Laura slid away from him. "Why don't we meet back here in a couple of hours?"

“Sounds good.” Reid stood and went to his suitcases. He grabbed a pair of gym shorts, a pair of trainers, and a t-shirt and changed into them. He emerged a few moments later, tucked the room key in his pocket and hurried from the room. Though he could think of a better form of physical exercise, spending time working in the weight room promised to soothe his mind. He meant what he said. They’d deal with whatever they found in Brazos when they got there and not a moment sooner.

The room door closed behind him and he headed down the long, narrow hall. He didn’t even know where the workout room was. Figured it was downstairs, maybe next to the pool. Well, it wasn’t like he had a schedule to keep and really, he figured Laura could use some time alone to figure out what she really wanted. Push him away. Pull him close. He was getting tired of the yo-yo effect. Once they arrived in Brazos, she’d have to make her decision, and he knew, by simply being with her, that he’d put himself in the cross hairs.

Chapter Eight

Two hours gave Laura a chance to go shopping and meander around the hotel and the surrounding area. Back in the room, she waited for Reid. She'd seen him on the treadmill as she had passed the workout area. Sweat plastered his shirt to his chest and back. He ran at a fast clip, and she wondered if it was his determination to get a good workout or demons that were chasing him.

Back in the room, she stared at the Jacuzzi tub. The naughty part of her wanted to strip and wait for him amid frothy bubbles. After watching him in the gym, she had no idea when, or if, he'd return to the hotel room and the thought of turning into a prune all alone in the hot tub didn't sound appealing.

The hotel room door clicked.

Laura held her breath, almost half-afraid to peer around the corner and see if it really was Reid. No discreet knock with the announcement of "housekeeping" had come before the door opened. It had to be Reid.

"Reid?" she called in a tremulous voice.

"It's me." His gruff reply didn't bode well, though just the sound of his voice sent a burst of warmth through her core.

Laura stepped around the corner to find him standing in the entryway. Sweat plastered his hair to his head and his T-shirt to his chest. A tiny droplet slid down the side of his neck to disappear into the shoulder of his shirt. His gym shorts rode low in his hips.

Her mouth watered. Her pussy flooded with moisture as it tightened and all thoughts about the hot tub fled. She wanted him here and *now*. Striding forward, she kept her gaze firmly on his face. She searched it for any signs that whatever drove him was gone and found none.

Each step brushed her panties against her swollen and throbbing clit. Her bra teased her distended nipples, and she swore every hair on her arms stood up with the electricity generated by the intense hunger in his stare. "I'm glad you're back." She hoped her words lightened the mood.

He grunted something noncommittal.

"Everything okay?"

"No. Because when you look at me like that I can't think straight." He dragged his fingers through his hair and water sprayed from the soaked strands.

A few droplets landed near her lips, and she swiped her tongue across them. She allowed her attention to waver down to his gym shorts where his erection pressed against the silky fabric. Unable to resist, she closed the space between them. Pressing her palm against the center of his chest, she rose on tiptoe and licked the sweat from his chin. A moan, not unlike the kind she made when devouring rich, expensive chocolate ice cream, erupted from her throat.

Reid cupped her ass and drew her against his hard body. Spinning her, he pressed her against the closet door, angling so that one of his hard thighs thrust between hers. "You make me so hot. Surely your father will sense the *lussor* sparking between us and know that we were meant to be."

Laura grinned, though the thought of her father sensing her *lussor* kind of crept her out. He was a Sorcerer and any Sorcerer could sense the power of the *lussor*. She shoved such thoughts out of her mind. They'd stopped here to get away from the shadow of her father, to regroup and bond before they headed deep into Brazos territory. With Reid pressing her against the wall, right now she thought of nothing else but the raw lust coursing through her veins.

She rose on her toes, cupping the back of his head to bring their mouths together. She kissed him, pouring all her fears, all her need into the movement of her lips across his. Stroking his lower lip with her tongue, she asked for, and was granted entrance. She claimed him, thrusting her tongue into his mouth, tasting the tang of salt and a sports drink on his lips. His wet skin soaked her clothing. She didn't care. Not when she rode his thigh, the incremental thrusts of her hips rubbing her clit across his hardness.

Laura sank into him. Curling her fingers into the back of his head, she wrapped herself around his body. The need to meld with him, to become one, thrummed in her veins.

Reid scooped his hands beneath her rear, holding her to him. Instinctively, Laura wrapped her legs around his lean hips, and as soon as her ankles locked behind his back, he turned to the bathroom. His long strides carried them inside, where he broke off their kiss. "You'll have to stand for a moment," he rasped.

She did, unhooking her ankles and lowering her shaky legs to the floor. No sooner had she stood on her own, than he toed off his sneakers and stripped off his clothes. The sodden garments landed on the floor. She followed pursuit and quickly shed her clothes.

Laura drank in the sight of his muscled body as he leaned past her to turn on the tap. He adjusted the water and activated the shower. "In you go." Grabbing her by the waist, he helped her into the huge shower stall. Following her, he drew the curtain closed. "Much better, isn't this?"

"Yes," she purred as once again he backed her against the wall. Reid's body shielded her from the spray, and as her back connected with the tile, she shivered at the coolness. She burrowed closer against his chest. His eager cock thrust against her stomach.

Reid rubbed soapy hands across her ribs. He slid his fingers between them to reach the undersides of her breast. He moved away long enough for the water to sprinkle over her skin then he resumed his sensual assault with his sudsy touch.

Reid dropped to his knees before her. Starting at her ankles, with long, sure strokes he massaged her legs and calves. He paid special attention to her knees, lifting them so the massaging spray could remove the soap. Kissing the backs, he straightened her knees in turn then set his sights a little higher. His teasing strokes feathered up her thighs with wide, sweeping caresses of his hands. Watching him, knowing he came ever closer to her pussy had Laura's breath coming in hard, fast pants.

She was wet, far wetter than she'd ever been before. She felt her cream trickle down her thighs. Felt the throbbing in her swollen clit, the ache in her labia that begged for a single touch. His dark head bowed in front of her, reminded her of a picture she'd seen once of a supplicant in front of an altar shrine. He worshipped her body, his fingertips blazing a trail over her soapy, wet skin.

Laura spread her legs. God, he was magnificent. A lump nestled itself in her throat. Right now, looking at his broad shoulders, watching his fingers creep ever closer to her folds, she knew, if she took him back to Brazos and she lost him, it would kill her. Maybe not literally, but if her father sent her off to some other Sorceress like one of StarMyst's prized broodmares...She shuddered.

"Easy," Reid crooned, and the similarities between his reaction to her and how he would calm a mare startled her.

"It's too much." She bent over and curled her fingers around his shoulders, intending to push him away. The motion dangled her breasts in his face.

Tilting his face, Reid captured one of her nipples in his mouth.

Laura closed her eyes. The spray pattered against her back and head. Letting her chin fall to rest against his head, she struggled to keep her equilibrium. The bathroom spun.

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He'd run until he realized there was no way in hell he could get away from his thoughts. Now, kneeling between Laura's spread legs, he believed he'd come as close to heaven as he could probably get on this earthly plane. He ignored the patter of the shower on his back and focused exclusively on the rich aroma of Laura's arousal. He'd never get enough of her.

Nuzzling her folds, he swiped his tongue across her labia. A quick foray into her channel had her whimpering, and when he tongued just above her clitoris, her sharp cry echoed in the bathroom. Sliding his thumbs higher to part her folds, he devoured her in earnest. Reid suckled her clitoris, pausing only to thrust his tongue into her waiting pussy, he alternated attacks until her fingers dug into his shoulders and the muscles in her thighs trembled on either side of his face.

Come for me, baby. His dick pounded with the need to thrust inside her. Not until she came. There were no doubts Laura already knew he was a generous lover. The countless times he'd brought her to her orgasm before taking his pleasure should have told her that, if his very nature hadn't. Still, he loved it when Laura came, the whimpering cries, the rippling contractions along the length of her channel as it milked his cock. Damn, nothing ever got better than that.

With his fingers, he stroked the hood of her clitoris, using the skin to gently caress the organ. Laura's shuddered. Steam filled the bathroom, the clean fragrance of hotel soap around them. One more flick of his fingers, a slide of his tongue inside her hungry sex, and there...Laura screamed as she came. Her muscles tightened, fingers digging so hard into his shoulders he figured that she'd leave marks. Cream filled her channel, dripped over his face and down his chin. Every tiny quake of her body only made him want her that much more. Leaning his forehead against her knees, he felt the tremors snaking through her body.

"I need you inside me." Her husky plea wrapped around his cock and tightened. He stood, his balls full between his legs, his body aching with the need to possess her.

"Hang on," he growled as he slid a hand beneath her thigh. She leapt into his arms, making him stagger on the wet shower floor. "Easy there," he crooned again as he backed her once more against the tile. He slid his cock along her pussy, her slick folds drawing him inside. A single thrust of his hips and she moaned, low and deep, as he penetrated her.

Now. Forever. Always. Did Laura really think that he'd walk away from what they had? Driving into her, he bent his head to nuzzle her cheek and chin.

She tilted her face to his, her hands sliding down to wrap around his ribs and pull him close to her. Each stroke brought them closer together. There was no way her father could separate them now. The *lussor* hummed and Reid enjoyed the satiated feeling it produced for the first time in his life.

Together, he and Laura danced beneath the spray. The water didn't cool. Instead, it slid warm over their heated skin. Billows of steam filled the room, making it seem as if they were in their own private little world. Reid cared only for the woman pressed next to him. She clutched at him, feeding him her whimpering cries. Tearing her lips away, she screamed as she came again. "Reid!" His name echoed around the bathroom, fueling his own need.

He was so fucking close. A familiar pressure built behind his balls. Grinding his hips into hers, he thrust hard and deep as his release erupted. His cock twitched as he spilled himself inside

her. A low, feral growl rumbled through his chest. Pressing his forehead against hers, he plunged one more time into her body. Panting, they clung together.

“I think we better finish our shower,” she rasped against his chest.

He nodded, not having the strength to do much more. Reluctantly, they pulled apart. There’d be time enough for more lovemaking before they entered enemy territory.

~* * *~

Reid knew Laura was scared as they pulled into the circular drive in front of the Brazos Conclave mansion. He didn’t blame her, not when his stomach churned worse than a pen of trapped mustangs. He’d seen them once on a trip to Nevada that Edwin had taken them on as a child. Horses, caught in pipe corrals, running back and forth, always yearning for the freedom they’d never have again.

The house sat back from the street, surrounded by a high privacy fence with a manual gate. Someone must have seen them coming, and recognized Laura, for the black wrought iron gate had slid open soundlessly. He’d driven for what seemed like a mile before parking behind a huge, ornate fountain. Lush greenery surrounded the four-story house. The main building boasted a large center structure with two wings. Drawing a deep breath, Reid turned off the engine.

“We’re here,” he announced in a sober voice. “Is there a valet or something or do we just go on up?” It seemed awkward to leave the car parked in the center of the circular driveway, though it was wide enough for more than one vehicle to pass. He had no doubts they were being watched.

“Let’s just get this over with.” Laura smoothed her palms over the cream business suit she wore. The pencil skirt reached modestly to her knees, her legs appearing to go on forever in matching hose and sedate pumps. He didn’t know she’d ever owned anything so elegant. Wearing the only suit he had, he felt out of place.

“Let me get your door,” he said as he opened his. Walking around the car, he helped her out, even taking her hand. He doubted those watching would notice its’ slight tremble.

Reid held his head high, his shoulders square as he ascended the seven steps to the front door. A heavy brass knocker hung in the center and he raised his fingers.

The mahogany doors swung open. A uniformed butler, his gray hair cut short on his balding head, looked down over his hawk-like nose at them. A thin man, his lips pressed into a terminal frown, he barely softened when he saw them. “Miss Ingress, how good to have you home. If you’ll follow me, your father is waiting in his study.” Turning on his heel, the butler efficiently ignored Reid.

Laura cast Reid a wary glance. He smiled and nodded at her, wanting to reassure her that it was okay. To these people, he was the cur trying to mate with their prize bitch. He might not see it that way, but they did.

The expensive artwork adorning the walls combined with hardwood paneling and Berber carpet so plush his feet sank into it, displayed the Brazos Conclave’s wealth. Reid thought about his family’s modest farmhouse. Compared to this, it looked like a hovel.

Think positive. You have every right to be here. You’re a Sorcerer. His mental pep talk did him little good. The building was full of energy, the subtle hum of power enough to raise the hairs on his arms beneath his suit coat.

The butler opened a large dark wood door. “Miss Ingress and her companion are here to see you, sir.” With a low bow, the butler left, but not before Reid saw him sneer.

A stout man sat behind the desk. Though he looked as if he had a large girth, he was a solidly built man with a full head of salt and pepper hair. When he looked up from his work, his dark brown eyes, so much like Laura’s, narrowed. Pulling his lips into a frown, he raked his daughter from head to toe with a disappointed stare, before turning his attention on Reid.

“Father, I’m here.” Laura stepped forward, her hand in Reid’s dragging him along behind her. “This is my mate, Reid Montano of StarMyst Conclave. I’m bringing him to you so you can see I’ve joined with another Sorcerer and let us return to his Conclave.”

“Sir.” Reid extended his hand. “I promise you that I’ll take care of your daughter. She’ll want for nothing.”

The head of Brazos Conclave dismissed Reid’s outstretched hand with a snort. “I trust you know your way to your rooms,” he said to his daughter, dismissing her like an unruly child.

“I do, but I’ll stay. Anything you discuss with Reid applies to me too.” Laura released his hand and crossed her arms over her chest.

Reid stood there, unsure what to do. Father and daughter stared at each other. Laura’s gaze held bold defiance, her father’s anger. “I’ll be all right,” he said, laying a hand on her arm. “I’m sure I can handle whatever your father has to say to me.”

“Can you, boy?” Laura’s father rose from his chair. He strode around his desk. “I am Xavier Alexander Davis Rogers Ingress and I lead one of the most powerful Conclaves in America. Are you sure you can handle what I have to say to you?”

“Yes, sir. Let’s be honest. Your daughter is a very powerful woman in her own right. As a member of your Conclave, she’s priceless. I know how rare females are. If my foster sister hadn’t agreed to marry the head of our Conclave, I’m sure StarMyst would be in much the same position you’re in right now, Mr. Ingress. I may not be the match you envisioned for your daughter, but I’m the one she wants. I suggest we both work together to make her happy.” Reid didn’t relax his guard.

“Laura. Go to your room,” Xavier said with a narrow glare. “Mr. Montano and I have things to discuss.”

“Only if you do it civilly, Father. I am tired. If Hettie is still here, I’ll have her send one of the boys to bring our luggage up to my rooms.” Spinning on her heel, Laura started to walk away.

“Mr. Montano will be staying in the guest wing.” Her father’s voice stopped her just a few feet from the door.

She looked over her shoulder, a few strands of her blonde hair coming loose from her coif. She gave her father a mischievous smile and chuckled. “With your room between us? I don’t think so. If you’re so concerned about us, why don’t you kick out one of the guards? I’m sure Reid would find one of their rooms acceptable.” With that parting comment, Laura left the room. The door closed with a resounding slam behind her.

“Laura always was a difficult child. Sit.” Xavier waved his hand in the direction of the chair opposite of his desk. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he returned to his leather chair. Opening a drawer, he pulled out a ledger. “Now how much do you want?”

“Sir?” Reid eyed the checkbook with distrust. “I don’t want your money.”

“Of course you do. Now come on. Stop playing games. How much?” Xavier tapped his pen on the desk.

"I don't want your money," Reid repeated. "I love your daughter. She'll be returning to StarMyst with me. What I want is for you to no longer interfere with her life. Sending your men to Edwin's funeral was a gross breach of etiquette. In fact, I'm appalled that none of the Conclaves sent representatives to the funeral."

"Don't you talk about etiquette to me, boy. Your leader should have sent Laura back here as soon as Edwin died. I was simply doing my duty as the leader of Brazos Conclave, and if your leader wants to keep his position, I suggest he do the same." Xavier's mouth narrowed into a thin line.

Reid bit back to the retort springing back to his lips. Getting into a pissing match with the leader of the strongest Conclave wasn't in anyone's best interest, least of all his and Laura's. To hear him openly threaten StarMyst's position sent shudders down Reid's spine, which he quickly suppressed. Did the man want to start a new Sorcerer War? Wasn't that how the last one started? One Conclave got too greedy and started taking over lesser ones.

"I don't know how your Conclave operates. Maybe you people can get by talking about joining for love. Maybe that's why you people never gained in strength. However, down here we do things differently. I already have several willing suitors for Laura's hand. She will join with an acceptable mate before the month ends." Xavier sat back in the chair, looking rather pleased with himself.

Reid struggled not to be offended at Xavier's use of the words "you people." He spoke about StarMyst as if it were some backwoods Conclave. Just because Edwin never sought power like some of the others, instead he used his abilities to create a haven for orphans of the Sorcerer War. Forcing his emotions deep, he projected a calm demeanor.

"I don't know how your Conclave operates, either Mr. Ingress. However, Laura is an adult and quite capable of making her own decisions. I support whatever decisions she makes. I think, before you marry her off as if this were the Victorian times, that you consult your daughter. I'm sure you'll find she's an intelligent, capable woman and has quite a few views of her own." Reid rested his hands on his knees.

"Look Mr. Montano, I'm sure you believe that you know what you're doing and that you're doing the right thing, riding to the rescue of some damsel who needs rescuing. But that damsel is my daughter, and I can take care of her. I'll make sure you have tickets for the first flight back to Chicago. I'm sure your *leader* can pick you up there and discipline you appropriately for interfering with another Conclave's business." Xavier leaned forward, the tiniest hint of power surrounding him.

Reid felt the magic creep along his skin. The hairs on the nape of his neck rose, the subtle push of power against his senses just enough to test him. Reid focused on keeping the *lussor* quiet. Though he'd cultivated a substantial well of power from what he and Laura had done over the last few days, Xavier's magic dwarfed his.

He had to do something. Sitting here, staring at Xavier like a cornered animal wouldn't do any good. Reid stood. Relaxing his arms at his sides, he stared at Xavier. Taking a step forward, he leaned on Xavier's large oak desk. Reid refused to be intimidated by the head of the Brazos Conclave. Sure, the man's magical power was strong enough to crush him like an insect, and frankly, under Conclave law, he had the right. Reid held Xavier's gaze, determined to let him know that he couldn't bully around StarMyst.

"I think you'll find Laura is a good daughter, to me, and to Brazos. Have your fun. You'll have plane tickets back to Illinois within twenty-four hours. Tell StarMyst's new leader I'll be lenient this once. But if you interfere with Brazos again, I shall not be so forgiving. Now *go*!" Xavier punctuated his words with a bolt of power.

Reid staggered backwards. He quickly straightened, half-afraid he'd already showed too much weakness. Edwin had never trained him for battle like this. Drawing a deep breath, he straightened his shoulders and left the den. He had no doubts someone would be more than willing to show him to his rooms.

Twenty-four hours seemed like such a short amount of time. He had to call Te and apprise him of the situation. Perhaps his friend, and Conclave leader, would have a better idea.

Chapter Nine

Beneath the table, Laura reached for Reid's hand. She entwined her fingers with his, pulling his hand over to press it against her thigh. The subtle sign of ownership didn't go unnoticed by the others at the table. Laura's father arched an eyebrow at her. She merely smiled and inclined her head toward him.

Reid had returned to their room after his meeting with her father. He'd told her the grim news. Her father had given him less than a day before he was to fly back to Chicago. He'd already called Te, and the two men had quite the detailed conversation. Most of it had occurred in the adjoining living room to her bedroom. Hettie had said nothing as the men had brought both hers and Reid's luggage to her room. Thank goodness for small favors.

We can do this. She sent the reassurance at him, hoping that he sensed her firm resolve. They'd talked for nearly an hour before she had dressed for lunch in one of her outfits she'd left behind. The ivory blouse and black slacks looked suited to a business dinner rather than a family meal. She and Reid sat in the middle of the huge dining table large enough to seat sixteen, her father sat at the head. No one else joined them.

"Have you given thought to the list of names I presented you with?" Xavier asked, setting his fork down beside his plate.

As usual, they ate with the fine china and the sterling silver silverware. Laura wondered who her father thought he was impressing with the show of wealth or if he used it every night. When she still lived here, they had dined on the lesser china and saved this set only for parties. Laura released Reid's hand and dabbed at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "It's the same list that you gave me before, except it's lost a few names. And I've given it the same thought now as I did then and I respectfully decline. I've chosen my partner. I'm sorry if you don't approve."

"So why did you come back, Laura? To rub your rebelliousness in my face?" Xavier's face reddened.

Laura glanced toward the kitchen, seeing a discreet swish of a gray skirt as one of the servants hurried back to tell the others that the Masters were fighting again. It'd happened often enough when she'd lived here before.

"I came back in the hopes that you would see that I've made my choice." Laura resisted the urge to look at Reid. She knew Te and Jacy had been having issues with the Bonding Ritual, especially that part of it. In place of the woman's father, another, well-respected older male Sorcerer could perform the ceremony. However, with StarMyst so isolated they really didn't have anyone else to ask.

"*Traditionally*, the daughter submits to her father's wishes when it comes to the matter of bonding. You haven't done that, so why should I abide by your wishes now? You've not chosen an acceptable match." Xavier speared a piece of his tilapia.

"Acceptable to me. Just not to you," Laura countered. "Eat," she whispered to Reid.

He did, though she sensed his reluctance. Reaching beneath the table, she patted his hand.

"See, you order him around. He isn't strong enough for you." Xavier sneered.

Reid's fork clattered to the plate.

"If you have something to say, *Father*, then say it. I'm tired of your innuendos, your deal making, your power plays. You've run your Conclave like this for years, and you've tried to run this

family the same way. Especially after mom died. I'm sorry I'm not the son you wanted to carry on your name. And I'm damn sorry that all of the rich, well-bred Sorcerers you've thrown at me over the years aren't making me happy. Reid makes me happy, Father." She tossed her napkin to the table and shoved back her chair. She gathered her power around her, preparing for an all-out war.

She'd had it with her father's strong-arm tactics. It'd been a mistake coming here. Though if she hadn't, then her father's men would have forcibly returned her. Staring at her father's impassible expression, she knew she was truly damned if she did and damned if she didn't. She could leave the table. No one would stop her from returning to her rooms. But then Reid would be left in an unfamiliar environment at the whim of her father's tyrannical moods. She wouldn't do that to him.

Xavier stood. He leveled a stern gaze at his daughter, completely ignoring the man sitting next to her. "I have quite a bit to say, *daughter*. You've dishonored the Conclave by not returning as soon as your services were no longer needed. I'm sorry that StarMyst's leader has passed away. You should have returned the day after he passed. You didn't, and I had to send my men to bring you back. You never had any intention of returning to Brazos and completing your duties. Now, you show up with a mongrel and expect my blessing?"

Reid pushed his chair back. "I am not a mongrel. I know who my parents were. Just because the Sorcerer War destroyed my birth Conclave doesn't give you, or anyone, the right to call me a mongrel."

"Don't talk to me like that, boy. You have no idea where you came from. I do. I did research on all of Edwin's little strays. He probably hasn't told you, but I will."

"Then tell me." Reid raised his chin and stared at Xavier defiantly. "Tell me the truth."

"You never had a Conclave. The orphans Edwin took in were only the ones he could find of the outcast Sorcerers. The Sorcerer War wasn't about one Conclave taking over another, no matter what you might believe. Brazos. Sonora Rising. We were trying to keep the outcasts from ruining our complete way of life. Your parents were rebels." Xavier pushed his plate away and steepled his fingers. "So you see, you really are mongrels. No way to trace your breeding, your Conclave. It's amazing Edwin took you in at all."

"Why did he then?" Reid asked.

Laura noted the tense set of his jaw. She suppressed her own gasp of surprise. In all her months of working with Edwin, he never said anything about his Conclave's checkered past. "What happened to Edwin's prior Conclave?"

"The outcasts killed them. Unable to protect his Conclave, Edwin had two choices. Start a new one or join an existing one. He didn't want to join the ones who would have him, and in a last-ditch effort to stop the war, took in the orphans he could find from the outcasts and rebuilt his Conclave. If Edwin couldn't protect his Conclave then, he surely can't protect them now. I'm sure you see, Laura, why we need to get you married to someone suitable, someone who is able to keep you safe." His lips drew into a tight smile that did not reach his eyes.

"But who would attack us now?" Reid countered. If her father's information shocked him, he gave no sign. "And surely, joining Brazos to StarMyst through our union would lend strength and credence to Edwin's efforts."

"I'll not put my stamp of approval on Edwin's actions," Xavier shoved his chair back from the table. His words made it clear that Brazos hadn't been one of the Conclaves to offer Edwin sanctuary. "This meal is over."

"No it isn't!" Laura bolted to her feet. "The Sorcerer War has been over for as long as I've been alive. But isn't it time we quit fighting amongst ourselves. It doesn't matter which Conclave is stronger than all the others. We are all Sorcerers. And this is a chance to mend fences between two

Conclaves. Surely if we do this then others will follow. There aren't very many of us left. We need to save what we have, not divide it even farther."

She pressed her hands into fists, resisting the urge to stride around the table and shake some sense into her father. He held to his old-world ideals, his belief in what the Conclaves were. They weren't the bastions of power that they once were, and maybe, that was a good thing. She drew a deep breath and felt Reid's steadying hand close around her arm.

"Your daughter has a point, Mr. Ingress. I'll be the first to admit that Edwin has kept his Conclave sheltered from political intrigue, but the time for that has passed. StarMyst is a Conclave, one with great strengths. I think a union between our two Conclaves would bring much to the Sorcerer community." Reid added his voice to Laura's.

"You would think that, coming from the weaker position. I've made my point clear. You will fly back to your Conclave. Laura will be married to someone suited to her station. I've said all I will say on the matter. You're damn lucky I'm not killing you for defiling my daughter." Tossing his napkin on his plate, Xavier turned and left.

Laura stared at her father's back, battling the seething rage churning deep inside. He always did this, always tried to rule her life with an iron fist. She was an adult and she was damn tired of his behavior. "Come on!" She yanked on Reid's hand, pulling him behind her. She led him through the halls to their shared room.

"Let me make a phone call back to Te," he said. "I'm not sure if he knows of the information your father told us tonight."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. It matters. Edwin never told us our history. We knew he'd taken us in, but I don't know about the outcast stuff." Reid sighed as she closed the door to her bedroom behind him. "I need to call him."

"Okay." Laura directed him to one of the couches in the small living area in her suite of rooms. "I'll be at my desk." She wondered if telling Te what they'd discovered would do any good, and if Reid really would be flying back to Chicago tomorrow morning.

~* * *~

When Laura sat down behind her desk, Reid went to the living area and sat on one of the pale couches with a light rose pattern. The room, decorated in shades of pink and yellows, looked like a purely feminine domain. Laura had showed him the phone, and welcomed him to use it. Paying for a long distance call was the least Xavier could do.

He dialed the number back home and waited for Te to answer. When he did, Reid gave him a brief explanation of how the evening went and the information Xavier had told them.

"I'll admit that I haven't had a chance yet to peer through Edwin's journals. But that sounds plausible. I can see Edwin doing that. I have done some research on your situation. I know you went to Brazos intending on just getting approval, but have you thought about a binding?" On the other end of the line the creak of leather told Reid that Te had leaned back in the big chair in Edwin's office.

"A binding? How is that different?" Reid glanced through the open door to where Laura poured over a book or journal of some sort. He deliberately kept his voice down, not wanting Laura to overhear.

"It's something Jacy and I are considering since we don't have anyone to officiate over our Bonding Ceremony. I'm not sure if you and Laura have talked about something that official, but if her father won't consent then this might be an option. A binding is a ritual done between two people. It binds you together magically so even if you're separated you still *feel* as if you're one couple. It may be something to think about," Te offered.

"Can you send us the details? I bet Laura has her own email or fax line here." He rose from his seat to step into her study. A fax machine sat next to her desk, and he gave Te the number.

"I'll fax over info in an hour or so, including Jacy's and my notes. The binding ceremony supersedes any Bonding ceremony. If Laura is bound to you, she can't join with another Sorcerer. Be careful."

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, Te disconnected the call.

Reid rested his hand against the back of Laura's chair. The fall of her silken blonde hair across the nape of her neck drew his attention to the slump of her shoulders. Reaching down, he brushed aside her hair to massage her neck.

She leaned into his touch. "Did Te have any information for you?" The fax chirped and started printing.

"It's coming through. He mentioned a binding ritual. It will bind us together, so even if your father wins and you go to another Sorcerer your powers will already be bound to mine. You can't go through a Bonding ritual then. Usually it's something done after the Bonding ritual, but Jacy and Te are thinking about doing it since they can't complete the Bonding Ceremony. I know I haven't asked you to Bond with me. I would in a heartbeat, though your father would never consent, especially after what happened tonight. It may be our only option. What do you think?" Reid's heart leapt into his throat as he waited for her answer. Since Te had mentioned the ritual, Reid thought they had a hope. If nothing else, it would foil her father's plans.

"Yes!" Laura reached over her shoulder and closed her hand around Reid's arm. She pulled him down to her, tilting her head so she could kiss him. "Even if it wouldn't prove to my father that I am an adult and can make my own decisions, I'd do it anyway."

She grinned but then quickly sobered. "I don't mean to sound like a spoiled child. I suppose, to some extent, I am spoiled, but frankly, I am just tired of him running my life. And I know, until he realizes that I am a grown woman, which coming back here was supposed to do, that I'm stuck. So yes, I want to do this ritual." She turned in the chair and slid her hand over his cheek. "Even more so since I know if you do have to return to Illinois tomorrow, I'll still have a part of you inside me."

Reid leaned into her touch, not liking the lump forming in his throat. "The fax is done," he managed to croak and reached for the pages. "Let's see what we have." He sank to the floor beside her chair, allowing her the time to work on whatever she was doing at her desk. He leafed through the papers, her words haunting him. *Part of you inside me.*

He looked up at her, watching her tuck an errant strand of hair behind her ear as she studied the journal. He longed to ask her what she was doing, figured if it had any bearing on them, she'd say something. Laura could be carrying his child. He swallowed hard, his chest filling with pride.

"I think we have everything we need," Reid said about twenty minutes later. "It appears we just need the two of us and a bit of ribbon."

"I have that." Laura slid from her chair. She disappeared into her bedroom, returning a moment later with a bit of pink ribbon. "This belonged to my mother. I think she'd like the fact that I'm defying my father." She placed the ribbon in his palm and closed his fingers around it. "Are you ready?"

“Yeah.” Reid refused to fight the smile that spread over his face. “Where do you want to do it?”

“The living room. If we’re in the bedroom I might get too...distracted.” Laura’s gaze drifted to the view of her bed visible through the doorway.

Reid’s followed and he rose to his feet. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her behind him to the living room. According to Te’s notes, they needed to be standing, hands clasped with the ribbon around it. It was awkward, but together, they managed to tie the ribbon holding her right hand to his left. They clasped their free hands.

“Ready?” Laura asked in a breathy voice.

“Always,” Reid said. Standing here, staring into the deep brown eyes of the woman he loved, he had no regrets, no remorse, and no worries. Taking a deep breath, he found the seat of his power, the well of *lussor* deep inside him. He imaged the power as something he could cup in his hand. It shone like a miniature sun and next to him, he sensed Laura’s power.

In his mind, he handed her his power. He felt the shiver that raced through her frame. Then she did the same. Her energy filled him with a sense of wholeness that not even being buried deep inside her could claim. As if she caressed his naked flesh, his cock stirred to life, and he relished the primal, carnal force of their power.

“All that I have is yours. All that I am is yours. All that I wish to be is yours. Forever and always. May our powers bind together like two strands of a rope, making the whole stronger than we could ever be alone,” Laura spoke. From where the words came, he didn’t know, though something deep inside told him they were correct. Te’s papers hadn’t mentioned words, anything to be said, just that the two people would know how to bind themselves together.

Lussor flashed.

Reid had no doubt any gifted person in the house knew what was happening up here in Laura’s rooms.

He breathed deeply and searched her eyes for the missing part of himself that he’d given her. He found it, and suddenly, he knew what to say. “From the first moment I saw you, I knew I had found my other half. You ignite the *lussor* and feed my soul. Everything I have is yours, and everything I am is yours, just as you are everything to me. Divided we fall, but together we stand and have the strength to face any obstacles that may come our way.”

Lussor flared between them.

Reid dipped his lips to Laura’s. “I love you. I think I have from the first moment I saw you and no matter what happens, I want my magic, my power, my life to be bound to yours. Forever and always.”

“Forever and always,” she whispered back then like two magnets drawn together, their lips met.

A clap of power rattled the room. With her hand still tied to Reid’s, Laura jumped closer to him. She burrowed into his arms, sighing as she pressed against his chest. The *lussor* surrounded them. Almost like chains, it bound them together. Reid nestled his cheek against the top of Laura’s head, feeling her energies meld with his. His cock hardened, the need to possess her roaring to life in his veins. Joining with her would be like completing the lost half of his soul, and with his free hand, he caressed her ribs. A shudder wound its way through her veins.

“I think it worked,” Laura said against his chest.

His hand dipped across her lower back. “Yeah, I think it did.”

The door flew open.

Laura whirled to face it, the tender moment shattered as Xavier burst through the opening.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing in my house?” He raised his hand.

“Joining with the man I love.” Laura stepped forward.

Reid leapt in front of her in order to protect her from the man who threatened to ruin their happiness. The ribbon pulled free, fluttering to the floor.

Laura stopped him. “No, I have to do this myself.” She made Reid meet her gaze, and staring into her determined, brown eyes, he knew he couldn’t protect her. Not from this.

“I’m right here, honey,” he said as he stepped aside. Reluctantly, he slid his fingers from her arm, but stayed within reach.

Laura raised her hand.

“Get out of the way!” Xavier strode forward.

“No!” Power, pure and brilliant in its intensity, shot from her hand.

Xavier’s eyes grew wide. The orb of energy, visible only as a shimmer in the air, slammed into the center of his chest. He stumbled backward, catching the doorframe before he fell. He stood there, half bent over.

“Father?” Laura stepped forward.

Xavier coughed and shook his head. “I’m okay.” He straightened. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

Laura stepped closer to him. “I am, father. I love Reid. I think he’ll make a good match. And if you love me, you’ll support me. Quit throwing men at me. I can make a choice. I’ve made my choice.” Power coiled in the palm of her hand.

Reid stared at her, proud of the strong woman he loved. She stared at her father, determined not to let him interfere. It may have taken the binding ritual to bring him to her side, but at the moment, it looked like Xavier would finally cede to his daughter’s wishes. Reid held his breath.

He moved to stand behind her and rested his left hand on her shoulder. His power joined hers, a co-mingling of energies that sucked the breath from his lungs. His woman. His mate. He looked at her, noting her stern countenance. If she needed to fight her father for him, she would, and Reid had no doubts that she’d win.

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Seeing her father burst through the door snapped something inside Laura. Feeling the magic in her palm and more than prepared to use it against him, she faced him down. He had moved from the doorway, into the room. He hadn’t answered her, and his silence scared her. She struggled to keep the fear bottled down deep inside. When Reid moved behind her, his presence lent her strength. She drew from it. Their past faded away, any errors, any mistakes, and it was the two of them standing there.

“So what will it be?” Laura asked her father when he didn’t answer. She needed to hear him say that he would be giving up on the idea of forcing her to marry someone of his choosing.

“I don’t like this, Laura.”

“You don’t have to like it.” She gathered more energy, prepared to launch another volley at her father if he didn’t back off. “All I want is your assurance that you won’t interfere in my life any

longer. Call your goons off. Let me go back to Illinois and leave me the hell alone.” In the back of her mind, she figured someday she might regret this schism with her father. Right now, she knew, there wasn’t any good way to get him to let her live her life. Once she got back to Illinois, she’d worry about it. But if it took alienating her whole family to get her to stay with StarMyst and Reid, she’d do it in a heartbeat.

“You’re my only daughter. I want what’s best for you.”

“No you don’t!” Laura yelled at him. “You want what’s best for the Conclave. If I were the son you wanted then you wouldn’t be doing this. Just leave me alone. Let me go back to Illinois and get the hell out of my life.” She stepped forward and lobbed another volley of magic at him.

“Laura! Wait!” Xavier held his hands out to his sides. “You’re making a mistake.”

“If I am then it’s my mistake to make.” Staring across the few feet separating them, Laura struggled with the knowledge that what she was about to do would irrevocably sever her and her father’s relationship, no matter how screwed up it might be. “Let me live my own life.” With her power, she gently pushed her father out of the room and closed the door.

Chapter Ten

As soon as the door closed, Laura slumped against Reid. Unexpected tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them away. She'd made her choice. Now she had to live with the consequences.

"You okay?" Reid asked, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"I am now." She swallowed hard and managed to paste a smile on her face. "I suggest we leave in the morning.

"So that's it. We come down here, you throw a little magic at your father, and this is over? As much as I'd like to believe it is, I don't think it'll end that easily."

Laura's phone rang.

She stared at it, wondering if it was her father or someone else. Knowing she'd have to face the music sooner, rather than later, she stepped toward it, and answered. "Hello," she said.

"So the ritual is done?" Te's voice floated over the phone line. "Everything okay there?"

Laura held her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's Te," she said. "Yes, the ritual is done."

"Felt like it from here. Everything okay? You need anything."

Laura appreciated Te's sincere concern. After her father's icy demeanor, it felt good, no more than good, it felt like coming home. Brazos had never felt like home. Now, with her power bound to Reid's, she was part of StarMyst Conclave, and Te's warmth only made it feel more right. "I'm fine. I think Reid and I will be coming back soon."

"We look forward to having you back. Welcome to the Conclave, Laura."

Her cheeks heated, and she ducked her head in the hopes that Reid hadn't seen. "Thank you. Do you need to talk to Reid?"

"Not unless he needs to."

Laura pointed to the phone, but Reid shook his head. "I think he's okay. Thanks for calling."

"If you need anything, you know where I am. You're a member of StarMyst now. Jacy's resting, but I'm sure if she were awake, she'd be giving you her welcome too. And, I suggest you take it easy too. If you haven't told Reid, you might want to, especially if you decide to throw any more magic at your father. He might not like you getting into battles in your condition."

Laura stood, dumbfounded by Te's words. "O...okay," she stammered.

"Shit. You didn't know did you? Jacy tells me I'm always blundering into delicate subjects. I'm sorry. Tell Reid I'm very happy for him. Have a good night, Laura."

"You too," Laura replied, her stomach churning. Her hand dropped to cover it, and she wondered if Te might be right. She hung up the phone.

"Everything okay?" Reid asked, his gaze dropping to her hand.

"I, um, think so." She went to the couch and sat down.

Reid sank to the cushion beside her. "You don't look all right. Laura you're scaring me." He reached for the hand she still held protectively over her stomach. "You're cold. Come here." He gathered her into his arms, tucking her against his chest. "I know I shouldn't have let you face your father alone."

“No, it’s not that. Give me a minute.” Laura closed her eyes, searching through her body for the confirmation that Te was right. “Te sensed something in the ritual. I just want to see if he’s right.”

Reid stilled next to her, his suspicions making his breath catch. “Are you?”

Laura held up her hand, silencing him. “Give me a minute.” Her heart hammered. She ignored her sweaty palms. Drawing a deep breath, she worked on centering herself. The *lussor* newly bonded to Reid leapt to do her bidding. Slowly, she focused on her body, drawing her senses inward until she felt a tiny spark of power deep inside her womb. It fluttered, hardly large enough to be noticed. But it was there.

She was pregnant.

“Oh God,” she breathed. Her gaze rose, colliding with Reid’s. “Te was right.” She reached for him, circling her fingers around his wrist and pulling his palm to her abdomen. “Do you feel that?”

Reid pressed his hand flat against her stomach. She watched him concentrate, his eyes closing so he could focus better. The slash of his cheekbones, his determined chin, his sensuous mouth that she’d kissed not that long ago, something fluttered deep inside and it wasn’t her baby. His lips parted and when he opened his eyes, his surprised gaze met hers. “You’re pregnant?”

Laura nodded, half-afraid to talk.

“That changes everything.”

“It does?” As far as she was concerned, it changed nothing. Even if she weren’t carrying Reid’s child, she’d still love him and she’d still stand up to her father. Now, knowing she was pregnant only made it imperative she get out of Brazos. But not before she told her father. Surely he, in his old fashioned ways, might admit that with the bidding ritual completed—or at least she thought it was completed— and pregnant with Reid’s child he couldn’t stand in the way of her happiness.

“Yeah,” Reid sounded reverent. He kept his palm on her stomach, his attention dropping to it before returning to her face. “If I had known, I wouldn’t have let you face your father like that.”

“What would you have done? Wrapped me in cotton and kept me safe?” Though the words sounded harsh, she smiled.

“Yeah, I would have. Got a problem with that?” He moved his hand long enough to pull her against his chest. Leaning back, he tugged her on top of him until they sprawled on the couch. “Have I told you lately that I love you?”

“Not recently enough.” She said, lowering her lips to his. They met with a joining of flesh, hearts, and souls. Reaching up, she threaded her fingers through his sandy hair. His tongue stroked her lower lip, and willingly, she opened for him. Deep inside her *lussor* flared, reaching out to wrap around him in a magical joining so profound, she had no doubts everyone in the house felt it.

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Sitting at the end of the table in the large boardroom her father used for Conclave business, made Laura feel like a naughty child. Her father occupied his usual place at the other end of the table, the long sides taken up by her father’s goons. She pretended as if she didn’t recognize them, especially since she knew at least a few were on her father’s short list of marriageable partners.

No one said anything about last night. With dawn's light, Laura knew she was free to leave. Sure, Hettie still invited her down for breakfast, though she and Reid had eaten alone. She'd pointed him in the direction of the workout room, figuring he needed to work off some tension. Plus, if her plans went well, they'd be back on the road by mid-afternoon.

Dressed in a dark suit, a perpetual scowl on his face, Xavier Ingress created an imposing figure. "I don't have to tell you that I'm not pleased with your little stunt last night. Binding yourself to someone—"

Laura held out her hand. "Will you knock it off, father? What's done is done. Furthermore, if you'd paid any attention to the energy signature last night you'd realize something else. I'm pregnant." She threw the words onto the table, wanting him to know exactly where she and Reid stood with regards to the Conclave. Being pregnant gave her the power.

Her father visibly flinched. He waved his hand, dismissing the men along each side of the table. "This is between my daughter and me," he said in a low, tight voice.

Chairs scraped as the men fled the room like wisps of smoke. The door closed behind them with a click.

Xavier stood. He circled the table, coming to one of the chairs next to her. Pulling it out, he sat down. Taking her hand, he cupped it in his. "Is it true?" His eyes shone glassy.

Laura nodded. In her dreams, she never planned that this would be how she'd tell her father that she carried the next generation of Sorcerers. Deep in her heart, she always imagined a Bonding Ceremony with the man she loved, her father standing there by her side. "Yes," she confirmed. "I'm carrying Reid's child."

"And you're sure it's his?"

Laura yanked her hands away. "Father!" Shoving her chair away, she rose to her feet. "How can you think that?"

He leaned back, clearly offended by her outburst. "How could I not? I know nothing of your life Laura. You shoved me out of it."

"Because you wanted to dictate my life." She drew a deep breath, mindful that her life suddenly held the spark of another. Taking another shaky inhalation, she steadied her nerves. "I'm sorry I'm not the son you wanted. But I'm sick and tired of hashing this out. Reid and I are returning to StarMyst and if you want anything to do with your grandchild's life then I suggest you let us go back."

"Your mother would be very proud of you." Xavier's soft words hung in the air between them.

Laura stared at her father. Though he tried to be the hard-assed patriarch of the Brazos Conclave, deep inside she saw he was walking wounded. Her mother's death, something Laura suspected he always blamed her for, weighed heavily on him. That she hadn't given him a son, but a disobedient daughter, must have made the hurt all the worse. "I hope she would be," Laura admitted.

For the first time, a soft, sad smile curved Xavier's lips. "I see a lot of her in you. She was a proud woman who didn't like to be told what to do either." He sighed, and suddenly looked aged.

Laura stepped forward. Could it be her father wanted to reconcile? She took another step then another, until she had returned to her chair. Instead of sitting, she knelt down beside him. "Why didn't you tell me this before?" Her heart ached with the words. *Baby, I promise that we'll be better parents to you than he was to me.* "All you did was push me away."

"I know." He reached for her then curled his fingers into a fist and stopped. "Even now, I feel that boy's *lussor* on you and I know he's not good enough for you." Xavier shook his head and pulled away, returning to his position at the head of the table. "Go back to Illinois. I won't try to bring you back to Brazos. As to who will take over when I'm gone, it won't be you or your lover. Good bye, Laura."

Laura stood, realizing that this meeting with her father was over. Squaring her shoulders, she went to the door. "I never wanted your Conclave father. All I ever wanted was your love." With those parting words, she opened the door and left. The heavy wooden door closed behind her. She leaned against it, realizing that she'd just had an anti-climatic end to her battle with her father. She was free.

She wished she could be happier about it. Thankful she didn't meet anyone in the halls, she went back to her rooms. They were empty. She stood in the center of the room, looking at the trappings of her childhood. The suite hadn't been redecorated since she was in high school. Making slow circles around the room, pausing to pick up knickknacks and replace them on the shelf. There was the small porcelain unicorn her father had bought her when she was six, because he told her she was his fairy tale princess. There was a Japanese fish statue one of her father's guards had bought her in high school. He'd been her first crush. A mishmash of styles and décor and at one time she'd loved it. No longer.

In the bedroom, the large bed drew her. Last night she and Reid had snuggled, her in a lace nightgown, he in his boxers. Snuggling had been nice, something she and Reid hadn't done enough of in her opinion.

She went to the closet and retrieved her suitcase and his bag and started to pack. Once that was done, she'd figure out what she wanted to take with her and what she was willing to leave behind. Because once she drove away from Brazos, she suspected she'd never see this place again.

Five hours later, Laura was ready to tear her hair out. She hadn't seen any sign of Reid. She'd even gone down to the workout room once she'd finished loading a few things in boxes. Hattie had even brought her the packing materials, dabbing at her eyes when Laura had told her she'd be leaving. The two women had embraced and promised to keep in touch with letters. Hattie didn't have a computer.

When she didn't find Reid in the workout room, she wondered where he might be. A part of her feared her father had stayed true to his word and sent him back to Chicago on the first plane. But Hattie told her no cars had left and her young man had been called into a meeting with her father. At the news, Laura's heart leapt into her throat. She returned to her suite, determined to stay as calm as possible.

That had been an hour ago.

The door opened. Laura jerked awake from where she'd been sitting, half-dozing on the couch thinking about last night when she'd discovered she was pregnant. Her mind swirled in circles. Her indiscretion with Reid's brother haunted her, and now, she carried Reid's child. He showed no signs of remorse, no signs that her past actions still hurt him, though she suspected they did. He was a completely remarkable man.

Reid stepped into the living room.

Laura rose from the couch, racing across the living room and throwing herself into his arms. "You're back!"

He embraced her, drawing her against his body like a starving man. Breathing deeply, he kissed her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, and finally, her lips.

She melded into him, letting her worries dissipate into nothing. Opening her mouth, she invited him deeper. His tongue stroked hers, kindling a fire deep inside. Her pussy tightened, her womb hungering for the thrust of his cock. She arched into him. The ridge of his arousal pressed against her stomach, and he walked her backwards to the couch.

"I need you," he groaned against her mouth when they parted for air.

Laura didn't answer with words. Instead, she reached for his shirt, tugging it free from his jeans. She fumbled with his belt, opening it then sliding his jeans down to reveal his briefs. She pulled him toward the couch and they tumbled to the soft cushions together.

His hands slid beneath her shirt, caressing her skin. He unlatched the front catch of her bra and palmed her breast. Her nipple beaded instantly into his hand. The flutters of his fingers across the swell of her breast, tugged at something deep inside. Though she'd been pregnant for less than a week, she swore already her breasts were becoming more sensitive, more tender. He rubbed his thumb around her areole, drawing a shudder from her.

She moved restlessly between him. Parting her legs, she worked to wrap them around her waist, pressing her stockinged heels into the backs of his thighs. The metal teeth of his zipper edged into the front of her linen pants. The tiny bite of pain only fed her pleasure, made her think of the long length of his cock trapped behind the cotton of his briefs. She whimpered, clenching her fingers on his shoulders, sliding them down to the waist of his pants. Yanking up his shirt, she flattened her hands on his back.

His heated skin burned her. She traced the ridges of his muscles, following his spine to his shoulder blades then back down to find every rib and oblique muscle.

Reid reared back. He released her long enough to sweep his shirt over his head. He slid his foot to the floor and quickly shed his pants, shoes, socks, and underwear. Naked, he stood next to the couch.

Laura spun, pulling her knees back so she could straddle his legs. His erect cock hovered inches from her mouth. Leaning forward, she wrapped her lips around the tip and gave him a long, slow lick.

"Laura," Reid groaned. He reached for her, but her playful hands batted his away. She pinned his arms at his sides, her fingers curling around his wrists. Holding them against his hips, she dipped her head forward to take more of him into her mouth.

He filled her mouth, the head of his shaft bumping against the opening of her throat. Relaxing her muscles, she took him deeper until her nose nestled against his wiry hair and she could lave his entire length with her tongue. Slowly, she released his hands, reaching around to cup his ass. He thrust against her lips, and she welcomed it, spreading her legs as warm heat pooled between her thighs. So hot, so wet, she wanted him fucking her now.

She was way overdressed, yet reluctant to take her hands from him to do anything about it. She caressed the indentations of his hips, loving the sleek valleys his muscles created. She loved all of him, from the salty taste blossoming on her tongue to the husky moans he made as she sucked him.

Laura hollowed her cheeks. She gave him one, long hard suck before she released him enough to shed her own clothes. Shimmying out of them, she grabbed his hands and pulled her back down to him, bare flesh to bare flesh.

"Much better," she murmured against his collar bone as her legs wound around his hips. Her slick folds welcomed the head of his cock.

Laura moaned at the exquisite slide of flesh against flesh as the head of his shaft found the place high and deep inside her. For long moments, they lay unmoving, joined together. Winding her

arms around him, she squeezed him to her, half-afraid if she let go she'd lose this moment forever. She turned her head, her lips colliding with his collarbone, his neck. She peppered him with tiny kisses.

The *lussor* bound them together now, more than just bodies. Heart and soul, she belonged to him, and as he began to move, she realized that just as she had what she wanted—a chance to return to StarMyst and be with Reid—the prospect scared her too. Drawing a quick breath, she closed her eyes, trying to block the swirling thoughts from her mind.

Reid. She focused on his cock, the way he tilted his hips to find her sweet spot. The hard muscles in the back of his thighs clenched and released with each thrust. Bracing his hands on either side of her on the couch, he loomed above her, a port in the storm that her Conclave had created. She drew his scent into her lungs, savored his skin brushing against hers. And God help her, she couldn't imagine a life, a single day, without him.

Deep in her womb, the *lussor* grew. It centered there, a pulsing thing that surged in time with his movements. She directed it around them, wrapping them in a cocoon of power so great she doubted any sorcerer could break it. She hugged it to her, to them, a symbol of their union. Above her, Reid groaned. His pace increased and she opened her eyes to watch the cords in his neck stand out with the effort.

He was absolutely, utterly beautiful and she couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight. Her nipples tingled where they brushed against his chest. A subtle shift of her hips rubbed her clit against him and her heels inched higher to press into his buttocks. *Please. Please.* She mentally chanted, willing her body to explode, willing him to come deep inside her.

With a low moan, he dipped his head. Finding her lips, he kissed her, hard and hungry. His tongue plunged into her mouth. She accepted the dual claiming, his cock, his tongue, and with hips and mouth urged him deeper inside her. Tiny contractions, the start of her orgasm, rippled along her sheath, and she clung to him with a whimpering cry.

Reid thrust again. His deep penetration made her come with a ragged cry. Tearing her lips from his, she struggled to draw air into her lungs as her release exploded through her with the force of a freight train. So hard, so fast, her body tightening more and more, until even the tiny shifts of his body became too sensitive, too much to bear.

Her fingers clawed at his back. Her heels dug into him as he stilled deep inside her.

"God, you're beautiful," he whispered in her ear. Nuzzling her, he drew the fleshy pad of her ear lobe into his mouth and sucked.

Laura moaned, lost in a haze of pleasure as he began to move once more. Her pleasure built, and when she came again, Reid was flying with her. His cock twitched, his hot seed splashing her insides with an intimacy that underscored the fact that she already carried his child. He dropped onto her, pressing her into the couch and she relished the contact. Their panting breaths mingled. Sweat cooled on overheated skin. And deep inside her, Reid's cock stirred to life once more.

"I love you," Reid said. He touched his forehead to hers and kissed her lightly. "You know that, don't you?"

Laura nodded, her throat suddenly tight. Taking a deep breath because he hadn't just said anything she didn't already feel, she released it and forced her eyes open. "I know."

"Even with all of this, the binding ritual, your father's acquiescence, I still want to do the Bonding Ritual. I want to stand in front of my Conclave and announce my love for you. I want us to be tied together in the eyes of our people and in the eyes of a government." Reid eased his weight from her. "I think we can find a way to make it work."

Laura exhaled. "One step at a time, okay?" She debated about wriggling from underneath him. With so much naked male flesh pressed against hers, she really couldn't think straight. Reaching up, she brushed a lock of hair away from his forehead.

Reid paused. He looked down at her for a moment, his face an unreadable mask. He moved to the side, one leg sliding to the floor.

She took the opportunity to pull her legs to the side, swiveling so she sat on the couch. Her nudity didn't bother her, though she glanced at her clothing lying on the floor. He never made any move to dress, so she didn't either.

"You okay with everything?" Reid asked. Reaching out, he toyed with strands of her hair.

Laura leaned into the touch, her eyelids fluttering closed. It'd be so easy to simply savor the moment. She couldn't. "I don't know." Bolting to her feet, she snagged her panties and slipped into them. "I guess I came down here with guns blazing looking to defy my father. Now, I find out that I'm pregnant and he's relented and allowed me to return to Illinois. This has all happened so fast." She drew a shaky breath. "And where were you for five hours?"

Reid grinned. "Wondered if you'd ask me that. I spent an hour or so in the gym, and then went outside and walked the grounds. This is a hell of a place you have here, and I wondered if StarMyst would ever be enough. But I also I know I love you and you love me. That, and our child, is a lot more than a fancy house. Besides, I think we have more acres."

"I see," Laura replied. "Even if you didn't have a Conclave, you'd still be enough for me. Let's head back to StarMyst and take it from there, okay?"

Reid nodded.

Laura knew her reluctance to commit to a Bonding Ceremony hurt him, yet she cared for him enough to tell him the truth. They'd progress, hopefully toward a Bonding Ceremony, but right now, she just wanted to savor the fact that she could be with him without her father's interference. Everything else could come later.

Looking at Reid, she hoped he felt the same way.

Chapter Eleven

After leaving Brazos, they'd driven as far as Little Rock before finding a hotel and calling it a night. The steak house across the street had still been open and they'd been able to eat a hearty meal before turning in. Laura had handed him the key. He'd opened it to find a spacious room dominated by a large king-sized bed. A recliner sat in one corner next to a small table, the vanity taking up one wall leading into a small room for the toilet and bathtub. While not as elaborate as the suite they'd stayed at in Memphis, it promised a clean, cozy place to sleep. Right now, that was all Reid wanted.

Sitting across from Laura in the steak house, hearing her words about taking things one-day at a time, he had to admit she had a point. Sure, her reluctance to go through with the Bonding Ceremony chafed at him. Now that he had her free of Brazos, Reid wanted to shout his possession to the world. Laura was his! She carried his child! In the world of Sorcerers that might as well been a marriage complete with the chapel, the tuxes, and the white dress.

An image of Laura standing beside him in a white dress with a long train, holding a bouquet of flowers filled his mind. Behind her veil, her deep brown eyes held love. Dressed in a tux, he couldn't have been prouder to declare this woman his. Beside him stood Te and Cord. In his dreams, Kade would be there too, but even here, Reid admitted he probably wouldn't be seeing his brother anytime soon. If it weren't for Laura agreeing to be with him, fighting for him, he figured he wouldn't be able to forgive Kade for anything that he'd done. Now, well, he may not *want* to see his brother, but if he did, he probably wouldn't punch him either.

"You're awfully quiet." Laura plopped onto the bed, kicking off her shoes and stretching out.

He watched her yawn, watched her stretch, imagining the play of muscles and skin beneath her shirt and jeans. Shortly after making love, they'd headed out and driven like bats out of hell, almost as if now that they'd been given a reprieve, they wanted to take full advantage of it. Reid stretched out beside her. "Just thinking."

"About what?" Laura rolled to her side and smoothed her fingers down his shirt.

He watched her slender digits caressing the fabric. "You. Me. Us."

"You're upset that I'm not jumping for joy at the prospect of a Bonding Ritual, aren't you?" Laura flopped onto her back and covered her eyes with her forearm. She lay silent for long moments.

"Upset is a bit strong. I'm disappointed. I thought that once we got past your father's issues everything would be fine. I guess I was wrong." Reid swallowed hard. On one hand, he didn't want to put undue pressure on her. On the other, he wanted this done and over with so he and Laura could live their lives. "I won't push you though. Whatever you want. You're calling the shots."

He sensed her relaxing as he spoke the words and the tension in his gut eased. To come this far to lose her—that would kill him. He sat up with the need to do something, even if it was to pace the room back and forth. "I'm going to go take a shower."

He paused, half-expecting Laura to follow him. When she didn't, he turned around to watch her spread out on the bed.

"I'm going to sleep. It's been a long day."

He nodded, knowing the changes, both emotionally and magically, would be taking a toll on her. "Okay," he said, and wondered if he were giving in more than he ought to.

Twenty minutes and a hot shower later, Reid was no closer to feeling comfortable with the situation than he had been when he'd stepped into the bathroom. He could go out there and have some big discussion with Laura. Right now, sleep sounded best. They could deal with the relationship stuff in the morning, probably on the long drive back to Illinois.

He stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist to find Laura sleeping on the bed. He watched her as he crossed the carpet, his toes sinking into the plush pile. She laid there, one arm outstretched almost as if she reached for him. Dark circles formed almost-bruises under her eyes, her lashes fluttered against her pale skin. She couldn't be comfortable still dressed in her traveling clothes, but he hated to wake her enough to slip her beneath the covers.

He pulled back the covers and tugged the towel free. It fell to the floor.

In her sleep, Laura murmured. Her fingers clenched around the comforter, her lips parting.

Reid couldn't look away. The sight of her held him mesmerized. His cock stirred to life, though he ignored its summons for now. Reaching out, he caressed her cheek. "Laura, honey," he said in a low voice.

"Huh?" Her sleepy lids lifted and she blinked at him.

"You might be more comfortable if you got undressed," he offered. "Want me to get your night shirt out of the suitcase?"

Laura shook her head. She sat up and peeled off her shirt then reached behind her and unhooked her bra. As the garments fell away, Reid's attention dropped to her breasts. Her nipples were already hard, the tight beads drawing his gaze. He reached for her, his hand dropping to his side as she stood and peeled off her jeans and panties. Naked, she crawled back to bed.

"You know we should probably talk," she said with a grin. Her gaze never lifted above his erection, though she did pull a sheet up to her shoulders.

He followed suit, sliding beneath the blankets and making sure the sheet was tucked tightly around his waist. "About what?" He tried to sound casual, though anytime a woman said that they "needed to talk" it usually was anything but. Deep inside he feared he'd pushed her too far with his insistence that they go through the Bonding Ceremony. Perhaps here was where she gave him the boot, told him that she'd return to Illinois with him, and then their relationship was over. No, that was irrational, but the longer she remained silent, the more he feared.

"It's probably silly that I don't want to do the Bonding Ritual. We've done the more intimate one, the binding one, and I do love you. It's just, I guess, for so long I've had to deal with what my father wants me to do that to take this one day at a time feels refreshing. It's like I suddenly have freedom that I never had before?" Laura curled her fingers into the edge of the comforter. "You know?"

She sounded so hesitant, her voice so pleading that Reid knew he couldn't be worried, or mad. In a way, he knew exactly what she meant. For so long they'd lived waiting for Te to return to StarMyst. When Te returned... If Te returned... Edwin hadn't spoken like that, but behind all of his actions, all of his words, the truth had remained. When Te did return, even though Edwin was in the last months of his life, it was like a weight had lifted and the Conclave had returned to some sort of normalcy. So he knew exactly what Laura was talking about. "I know."

Laura sagged into the pillow with a relieved sigh. "Thank goodness." She rolled toward him and cupped his stubbled cheek.

Reid closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, hungry for some sort of connection. His cock hardened with the thought of rolling her onto her back and taking her in a long, slow bout of lovemaking. Turning his head, he pressed his lips to the center of her palm. He flicked her skin with his tongue, and heard her swiftly indrawn breath.

“Reid.” She pulled her hand away as if burned.

Her gentle chastisement didn’t sting. Instead, it fanned his desire more. He summoned the will to remain there, not touching her, not palming her breast or sliding his fingers through the curls he knew were damp with need.

“I love you.” Her gaze found his and bored into him with the intensity of twin laser beams. “I want you to know that. And my backing away from the Bonding Ritual has nothing to do with that. Even if we never completed the ritual, I’d still love you and still be by your side. You have to understand that.”

“I do,” he said, aware that were they in a Bonding Ritual those words would have a very different meaning. And he did. After being told what to do for so long, his coming and telling her that she had to bond with him, not just because he loved her, but because she was pregnant was no different from her father telling her who she could, and couldn’t mate with. He nodded his head, sensing she might not believe him. “I believe that, Laura. And I love you. I love your beauty, your strength, your caring nature. I love everything about you. I don’t need a ritual to make that happen.”

“Really?” Her fingers slid from his cheek, down his neck to rest the palm of her hand between his pectorals. Moving closer to him, her legs tangled with his. Her smooth, soft skin slid across his hair-roughed thighs. Her floral scent mingled with the musk of her arousal and deep inside the *lussor* awakened.

“Really.” Reid grinned. “Come on.” He held out his hands in a defenseless gesture. “There’s no way in hell you can get me to go away now. Okay, so I’ll admit I’m a bit disappointed that you don’t want to complete the Bonding Ritual *right now*. I want to stand in front of my Conclave and anyone who cares to attend and proclaim that you’re mine. I want them to know that we belong together and nothing and no one will separate us.”

Laura giggled. “I think our Binding Ritual kind of told my Conclave that.”

“Yeah, I do too.” He rolled toward her, sweeping her beneath him. Bracing his weight on his elbows, his legs tangling with hers, he unabashedly swept his gaze over the parts of her naked body he could see. He dipped his head and swiped his tongue across both her nipples, one right after the other, then buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled. “God, you smell good.”

Beneath him, Laura welcomed him with parted thighs.

His cock nudged her slick folds. Reid ignored the temptation for now. He sensed Laura’s need to be reassured, that her decision not to go forward with the Bonding Ceremony wouldn’t affect their relationship. Just as in Memphis, he wanted this overnight stay to be a respite from the world. Drawing a deep breath of her scent into his lungs, he nuzzled her shoulder.

Reid peppered her chin and jaw with kisses. Working his way to her earlobe, he nibbled on it before drawing into his mouth.

Laura’s back bowed off the bed. Her thighs rose on either side of his hips, squeezing him.

He held back a groan. His dick throbbed with the need to be deep inside her, fucking her until they both lay sweaty and sated. No, this was for her. It had to be. Releasing her ear lobe, he found her lips and kissed her, hard and deep. His tongue plunged into her mouth, and she welcomed him, wrapping her arms around him. Her fingertips curled into the skin by his spine, her thighs falling open even wider. He felt her heels walking up the backs of his legs, knew she wanted him inside her. He shifted his hips so his cock nestled against her inner thigh.

Laura whimpered. Her tongue tangled with his, her hands roaming over his back, his buttocks, caressing everywhere that she could reach. He loved that about her, the unabashed way

she made love, reveling in his body and hers. She arched her back, crushing her breasts against his chest. The points of her nipples branded him. Deep inside, the *lussor* unfurled, waking, quietly, gently, to drink in the energy created by their passion. And Reid vowed to give it all the fuel it could stand.

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Laura wanted to press her cheek against his chest and weep with relief. Though they'd completed the binding ceremony and frankly, that was as close as two sorcerers could get, she still expected him to balk at her reluctance to do the formal Bonding Ceremony, a sorcerer wedding. Then again, he was a guy, and most men weren't willing to jump into marriage. She molded her body to his, the ridge of his cock pressing into her thigh telling her that no matter what, Reid still wanted her. His *lussor* rose, coaxing hers to life deep inside her.

Laura pulled her attention from the tongue plunging in and out of her mouth like a miniature cock and away from the heat generated by Reid's body above her. She focused on her *lussor*, feeling it unfurl like a serpent living at the base of her spine. Her power, her source, her energy, it sinuously rose along the length of her spine. Tiny tendrils unfurled in her breasts, her pussy, all the hidden and secret places inside her.

Reid rolled to his side. "I want you to see something." He grabbed her hand and pulled her into a seated position.

She waited, unsure of what he wanted as he placed a couple of pillows on the bed in front of her.

"On your knees."

She complied, driven as much by the desire wetting her pussy as the husky rasp of his voice. He knelt behind her then cupped her chin and lifted her gaze. In the mirror at the end of the bed, she stared at hers and Reid's reflection. Her lips parted. Her heart hammered, looking at the woman, her mouth open, her breasts swaying freely, and the muscled form of Reid behind her. He caressed her flank, and she watched as his big hand made the sweep from her hip to her knee.

"Don't look away."

As if she could. The woman in the mirror held her transfixed with her eyes glassy with desire. Reid's hands parted her thighs, giving him access to her clit and labia. He reached between her legs and stroked her with a single finger that sent fireworks all the way through her body.

They didn't need a Bonding Ritual, not when they could feed the *lussor* like this. He bent over her back, cupping her breasts in his hands and pressed kisses along the nape of her neck.

Laura watched the sweep of his light brown hair against her pale skin. She smelled her arousal, could still taste him on her lips. The silken caresses of each strand contrasted with his crisp chest hairs against her breasts and stomach. His hands, so masterful, against her, spread her thighs even wider. He gently pinched her nipples, drawing a moan from her.

"Watch," he ordered.

"I am," she all but moaned in reply. "I need you to—"

"Not yet. Enjoy." He swiped his tongue between the twin dimples at the base of her spine, and to have him so close to her aching sex and yet so far away burned torment through her.

She wanted to rear back and stick her fingers between her legs to work the edge off of her frustration. Instead, she waited for what Reid would do next.

Reid's fingers tightened on her nipples. A bolt of pleasure-pain shot through her, and she moaned aloud.

The sound erupted through her. Keeping her attention on the mirror, she watched as he flattened one hand against her stomach then worked his fingers lower, until she saw only shadows and felt the sweep of his digits across her slick labia.

"Yes," she moaned. "More."

"I'm calling the shots."

She heard the smile, and the arousal, in his voice that stroked like a rough tongue across her skin. She shivered.

Reid dipped his fingers into her pussy, finding her swollen and wet clit and circling it with the tip of his index finger. He avoided the organ, barely grazing across the hood, and that gentle, teasing touch, held the power to send her over the edge. She bit her lip, trying to stifle her whimpers. She had no idea how thin the motel's walls might be and she didn't want to give her neighbors an audio show.

"You like this? You want me to fuck your sweet pussy?"

"Yes," she answered, not knowing what had gotten into him, but damn it felt and sounded so good.

He pinched her nipple then stroked two fingers inside her channel.

Laura cried out. The *lussor* flared, her body tightening around it with an impending orgasm that was certain to rock her world.

Reid dipped his fingers in to the second knuckle. Two fingers then three, as he finger fucked her. Through the mirror, his gaze locked with hers. "I love watching you come apart like this." He held up her breast, deliberately rubbing his thumb back and forth across the nipple. "Yeah, just like this. Can you come for me baby?"

Could she? If she didn't, Laura figured she'd die right here on this bed. A quick brush of his thumb across her clit, his fingers buried deep inside her vagina, and hell yeah, she could orgasm for him. His actions coaxed her release from her.

Laura struggled to keep her eyes open as her pussy tightened around Reid's fingers. Her nipples tingled, her breathing hitched. He kept his thumb moving in a steady rhythm across her nipple and he rotated his hand so he could stroke her clit at the same time. Her whimpers grew, turned into long moans, and her knees threatened to give out. Still, she refused to look away from the woman in the mirror who was her, and yet wasn't. A flush covered her cheeks, Reid's hands cupped her breasts, and his body hovered behind hers. Yet, this woman held a freedom that Laura hadn't often felt. The damp curls testified to needs she hadn't sated until now, and with her golden blonde hair tumbling around her shoulders, she looked like some kind of goddess, not a doctor who also happened to be a Sorcerer.

When she came back to herself, she found Reid waiting, patiently. The head of his cock nudged her opening. "You ready?"

She nodded, unable to say anything. She needed this. Oh hell, how she needed this. Just the two of them with no other worries.

"I want you to say you're ready. I want you to say that you need my cock inside you." Reid punctuated his words with an incremental thrust of his hips.

“Yes, dammit!” Laura answered, not carrying if her shout could be heard in another room. “Yes, I want you. Fuck me, Reid. Fuck me!”

“With pleasure.” Reid entered her with a long, slow thrust that seated him balls-deep inside her.

Laura moaned. Every ridge and vein on his cock bumped against her sheath, the deliberate penetration forcing her to feel every nuance on his entire length. When at last the tip of his cock brushed against her cervix, she closed her eyes and slumped down on the pillows.

“Watch!” Reid repeated.

She dragged her eyelids open, wanting just to lay there and savor every pump of his hips. Laura found herself face-to-face with her image in the mirror. The woman reflected there enjoyed being fucked. Her face contorted with passion, her eyes wide, her mouth open in a perfect oval. Watching the man’s big hands caress the woman’s hips, his cock plunge in and out, it was like watching a really good adult video, the kind where the participants looked as if they were having fun and enjoying putting on a show.

Laura gasped. She liked putting on a show. Even if it was just for her, the idea of being on display intensified her arousal. She dipped her back, jutting her breasts toward the mirror and watching Reid reach up to cover one with his hand. Her cream dripped down her thighs.

She’d never imagined herself as a wanton woman, but the image in the mirror told another tale. A story that would never be told if she hadn’t moved to StarMyst and met Reid. She glanced over her shoulder to watch him, wanting to see the actual man, not just his reflection.

Reid’s face was a study in masculine pleasure. Muscles drawn tight, eyes closed, lips parted, he pumped into her.

Laura tried to focus on the image, tried to hold off on her release, but Reid’s strokes were too good, too sure. He shifted his angle, sliding deeper into her, and Laura couldn’t hold on any longer. Letting her chin drop to her chest, she released the pent up moans building inside her. A long, low cry erupted from her throat and vibrated through her entire body as her orgasm overtook her.

The ripples tore through her body, stole her breath, and transported her to some dimension where she didn’t exist. Not her, nor him. Just sensation, pure, unadulterated bliss coursing through her veins. The flutters in her channel teased the length of Reid’s cock. Her nipples tightened even further, each stroke, each inch of her body so sensitive that she swore she’d fly apart from it.

And then, Reid was there, following her off the cliff. Both hands tightened around her hips and his fingers dug into her flesh. She relished his possession. The need driving him to spill himself deep inside her. He cried out, a guttural sound of pure, male satisfaction, and the hot splash of his come triggered more tremors deep inside.

Panting, they collapsed together, him against her back, her on her elbows, her knees still bent propping her ass into the air and against his hips. After long moments, he rolled them to their sides and in the motion, his half-hard cock slipped from her. She mewled at the loss.

The mirror was forgotten. Laura thought only of the man snuggling at her back. His warmth seeped into her skin, his breath caressing her shoulders. The heavy weight of his arm lay across her stomach, and she curled her fingers into it. Tangling her legs with his, she turned just enough to look over his shoulder.

“I love you,” she whispered. She brushed a soft kiss across his lips.

He grinned. “I love you too and I can’t wait to get back to StarMyst.”

Suddenly, neither could she.

Chapter Twelve

Sometime between when they'd made love and fallen asleep, Reid had moved them so they lay under the covers. Laura lay in the half-fuzzy area between full sleep and wakefulness. Outside the windows, the hum of the interstate permeated the building. The sounds of semis, of patrons coming and going from the diner next to the hotel, even a few birds announced the arrival of morning, though the light slanting through the crack in the curtains was still tinged with the pink of dawn. Laura smiled and stretched well-used muscles.

Rolling on her side, she reached across the bed for Reid. He lay sprawled on his stomach, his face turned toward her, one hand outstretched onto her pillow as if even in sleep he needed to touch her. She propped her head on her elbow and looked down at him. Times like these, when it was just the two of them, she could forget all about Conclaves and Sorcerers and believe they were just a man and a woman falling in love.

Laura smiled. It'd been a long road to get to this point, and she vowed to stay on this course. Snuggling beneath the blankets, she reached across the space separating them to lightly trace patterns on his chest with her finger. She'd done the right thing.

Beneath the covers, she tangled her fingers with his. She lifted his hand and brushed kisses across the back of his knuckles. As the colors of dawn faded away outside the window, she knew she should get up, shower, and face the day. They had a long drive back to Illinois ahead of them. And yet, the warmth of Reid's body, the time spent watching him sleep, kept her beneath the covers as surely as his body had pinned hers to the bed last night in lovemaking. Just remembering each plunge of his cock, the tiny endearments that had fallen from his lips between kisses, had her pussy growing wet and her nipples hardening. Her breathing hitched. She feared she might wake him and deliberately struggled to keep quiet.

On the nightstand, her cell phone vibrated.

"Damn," she muttered. She fumbled for it, sending it spinning across the nightstand. Half-afraid she'd wake Reid, though from what she'd seen he slept like the dead, she lunged for it.

The caller id showed her father's number and her heart stopped for a moment with the horrible thought that perhaps this had all been a ruse. Drawing a deep breath, she flipped the phone open. "Hello," she said, trying not to growl at whoever was on the other line.

"Good morning, Laura." Her father sounded strained, almost as if someone had put him up to making this call.

"Good morning." She would have laughed at his tone, except no one made Xavier Ingress, leader of the Brazos Conclave, do anything. She nibbled on her lower lip as silence stretched as long as the miles between them. "Um, is everything okay?"

"I suppose it has to be," Xavier said. "The Conclave had a meeting last night. It appears that your mate has won them over. I'm told it's a good match. I'm told that by letting you follow your heart eventually it will help heal our strained relationship. I'm told many things, Laura, and I'm not sure I like them."

It was, Laura realized, as close to an acceptance as she was going to get from her father. The air whooshed out of her lungs. She sank to the bed then quickly shoved the blankets aside. She slid from the comfort of the plush mattress and thick blankets, padding naked into the bathroom. She didn't want to wake Reid.

"Can I ask what brought about this call?" Laura asked warily. Though her father had as much admitted that she could return to Illinois with Reid, she wondered what kind of tricks he was pulling. "You're not changing your mind are you?"

"No." Xavier sighed. "Look, I haven't probably been the father you wanted or needed, but I am your father. Everything I've done has been because I love you and want the best for you. If Reid makes you happy, I've been told it's not my place to interfere."

Laura sagged against the edge of the tub. She stifled a yelp at the chilly material against the backs of her thighs and jerked to her feet. "Sounds like you've been told a lot of things. What do you feel, father?" Laura grabbed a towel and draped it over the edge of the tub before sitting back down. She'd just done the verbal equivalent of pulling the pin on a grenade and throwing it at her father. She needed to be seated for the consequences.

Xavier sighed again. He'd been doing that a lot, and Laura couldn't remember a time when he'd sounded so unsure, so hesitant. Not her powerful father, one of the strongest Sorcerers in the country. Her heart fluttered. Her stomach churned, and she thought about pouring herself a glass of water to try and ease the growing ache. Beyond the door slept the man she loved.

"It doesn't matter what you feel," she said in an attempt to diffuse the situation. "What matters is that you've called. From your words it sounds as if you won't be calling me back to Brazos?"

"No, I won't be calling you back. I meant what I said. I may not agree with this, but I won't stand in the way." Xavier sounded like his old self again.

"So why are you calling, father? You've said all of this to me when we left Brazos."

"No, I didn't." His stern rebuke vibrated through the phone lines. Xavier cleared his throat.

Laura waited. Clearly her father was uncomfortable with this conversation. A part of her wanted to put him out of his misery. Just let things go as they were. "You don't have to say anything else, father," she offered.

"Yes. I do." His vehement response startled her. "I'm sorry, but I should have said something very important while you were here. Yes, you remind me of your mother and I loved her very much. But I love you too. Things may never be right between us. I suspect most father-daughter relationships are strained in some way. I can't grant you the universal acceptance you deserve. But I can tell you that I won't interfere. And I hope, someday, you decide to include me in your life once more."

Laura sagged on the edge of the tub, all the wind knocked out of her sails. Every time it came to her father, she struggled against railing against him like some spoiled child. He never let her have any fun. He always kept her confined, away from others her age. And now, his words touched her. He did care. Though he told her he did, now, for the first time, she believed it.

"I see," she said, because she really didn't know what else to say. A lump formed in her throat. Straightening, she looked at herself in the mirror, her hair still mussed with sleep, her lips puffy from Reid's kisses. Squaring her shoulders, she watched as her reflection did the same. "Thank you." She may not know her father and he probably didn't know her. When he looked at her, no doubt he saw the gangly-limbed coltish girl who defied his every order and made his life as the leader of Brazos difficult. She couldn't complain. She saw him in the same light, the over-bearing father who crushed her very spirit.

"I think we can start fresh, can't we?" Xavier's words held hope, a hope that Laura shared. Maybe, as adults, they could start fresh.

"Sure. I think I'd like that." Laura cracked open the bedroom door and poked her head outside. Reid still slept sprawled across the bed. Growing up in a house with four boys must have

given him the ability to sleep undisturbed. She envied that. In Brazos' mansion, she had a whole wing to herself and that made it easy to sleep without any noises. Now, the slightest hint, like the traffic outside their window, kept her from sleeping as soundly as she liked. Having Reid in the bed would take some getting used to, but as he rolled onto his back, one arm flung above his head, the sheet tangled around his waist, she didn't think she'd mind.

"...a while and then maybe we can talk," Xavier said.

Laura blinked, aware her musings about her lover had made her miss her father's words entirely. "Talking would be good. Reid seems to think we should do a formal Bonding Ceremony. I'm not ready for it, and I suspect neither are you, but maybe, we have something to work toward."

Silence filled the other end of the line, and Laura feared she might have pushed her father too much.

"Let's start with talking and see what happens," Xavier said, ever the stubborn Conclave leader.

"Okay. I'll call you once I get back to Illinois, okay?" She didn't say Reid's Conclave's name, half fearing that any mention of StarMyst might drive her father back into his shell. Whatever had prompted this change, and she suspected it was probably some stern words from Hattie, she liked it.

"That would be fine. I look forward to it." She heard muffled noises and realized that as usual, he'd risen early and was already working on Conclave business. "Have a good day, daughter."

"You too, father," she replied and a moment later the phone disconnected.

Laura closed the cell phone and stared at it. Her father meant well. He always had, but now, hearing him on the phone taking the tenuous step of calling her even at—she glanced at the cell phone's display—barely seven in the morning, proved he loved her. Maybe it just took until now to believe it. A grin covering her face, she strolled back into the room. Rebuilding a relationship with her father, getting to choose the man she loved, her world didn't get much better than this.

She laid the phone on the nightstand and slid beneath the covers. Her hands felt cool, and she warmed them under the blankets for a bit before snuggling against Reid's side. His arm curled around her, though his eyes were still closed. She listened to his deep, even breathing. He had to still be asleep.

She knew just how to wake him up.

Covering his legs with hers, she grinned as his morning erection brushed against her thigh. She swirled her fingers in circles around his left nipple, rearing up enough to draw the right one into her mouth. His cock twitched.

She grinned as she laved his nipple with her tongue. Sliding over his hips to straddle him, she swept one hand between them to circle his shaft. She stroked him gently from base to tip then down again.

He gave a low moan.

She loved him like this, spread out on the bed at her mercy. Her arousal dampened her pussy, the urge to stroke his length along her slick labia nearly more than she could resist. Instead, she gave his pectoral a gentle love nip then switched her attention to her other nipple.

His hand curled around her back. Fingers stroked her flesh, sliding down to her buttocks and squeezing. His other hand blindly reached up, found her arm, her ribs, until he slid those talented fingers high enough to graze the underside of her breast.

"Good morning," she whispered, half to test whether he was awake.

His lashes lifted and she found herself staring into his blue eyes. "Good morning indeed," he rumbled. Fully awake now, he palmed her breast. "Back for more?"

"How could I resist when you looked so tempting?" She slid down his legs. Turning her head, she trailed her hair over his torso, down to his cock. She swung her blonde strands over it, teasing, watching as Reid's eyes darkened. She reached between his legs and fondled his balls.

The musky aroma of his arousal drew her lips down to his shaft. She licked the tip, tasting the salt of his pre-cum. She found the sensitive place just behind his crown and tongued it, pausing to trace the vein that ran along his entire length.

Reid groaned. He reached for her, his fingers tangling in her hair. She wrapped her lips around his rod, driven by the need to give him as much pleasure as he gave her. At this very moment, she had it all, and she wanted to savor it.

She worked her lips along his length, taking him as deep as she could. She gently rolled his balls in her palm, pausing to stroke the skin not covered by her mouth. With every lick and nibble, his cock twitched. Laura listened to his sighs and groans as intently as if he were a virtuoso at a symphony. She grazed his shaft with her teeth, a gentle love nip that had him fisting a hand in the comforter.

At the moment, things couldn't get much better than this. She rode the high caused by desire and adrenaline. She was free...free... so free she had half a mind to book another night on her credit card and stay in bed with Reid for an entire day. She tongued the tip of his shaft, coaxing another drop of fluid from the tip. Then again, there was something to be said about being home and in her own bed.

Her pussy ached. Hunched down on his legs, she couldn't do anything to ease her need. She released his penis then swiveled so her ass faced him. Instantly, Reid sat up enough to cup her thighs and haul her toward his face. Laura went onto all fours.

The tip of Reid's tongue touched her clitoris and she nearly screamed from the intense burst of pleasure. Her toes curled. Her eyes crossed for a moment, and she lowered her mouth back to his shaft, determined to make him feel as good as he made her. She could stay here all day, straddling his legs, sucking his cock. She found his balls, gently teasing the skin between with the tip of her finger. This was the man she loved. Every inch of him.

Laura closed her eyes and allowed herself to sink into the sensation of loving Reid and being loved in return. She struggled to wrap her mind around the images of waking up every morning like this. She tried to picture herself at StarMyst and failed. A shudder wound through her body at Reid's expert use of lips and tongue. She loved him so fucking much, and yet, even now, with his cock in her mouth and his fingers on her pussy, she doubted.

No. She refused to think that this could be anything other than what it was. Maybe her father's phone call spooked her. And maybe, just maybe, she thought too damn much. Her overly-analytical nature was what got her into medical school. She shoved the thoughts from her mind. The only thing she wanted to think about would be the heavenly feel of Reid's cock sliding inside her.

Laura relaxed the muscles in her throat, taking her lover deeper. His salty taste rolled down the back of her throat. She relished it, wanting more. Gently, she squeezed his balls, curling her fingers around the top of them and pulling slightly.

Reid blew a puff of air over her sex and groaned. A single digit explored the outer folds of her sex, tracing along the length of each labia. He gathered her moisture on the tip of his finger and dragged it up toward her anus.

Laura stilled as he circled her puckered flesh. "You're not..." Her heart hammered. He was too big. He'd never fit back there, though she'd heard it felt wonderful.

"This morning, I think I will." His finger stilled. "If that's all right with you."

He rested his hands on her hips, one on either side. So patient, so gentle, and yet, as she drew her tongue along the length of his cock his body vibrated with the force of his arousal. "Yes," she acquiesced.

"Good, stay right there." He wriggled free, his motions making her release him. Sliding his legs back, he shifted into a kneeling position, all the while, keeping at least one hand on her hips.

Though the mirror hung in front of the bed, Laura ignored it. She didn't need to watch herself, she could feel it. His big hands splayed across her hips, a part of her she had always deemed unsightly. Not when Reid touched her. His fingers caressed her smooth skin, stroking the length of her thigh. Down and back, the sweeps of his fingers were gentle caresses.

"We don't have any lube." He leaned over her back, nuzzling the tender skin on the back of her neck. He smoothed his hands down her arms until his fingers covered hers. He stroked each digit in turn, being careful not to rest his weight on his arms. Then, he reached beneath her to fondle her breasts. "I'll have to take you twice." He brushed his thumbs over her nipples, punctuating his words.

Twice would never be enough. Groaning, she leaned her buttocks against his hips. His erection nestled between the globes of her ass, stroking against the nerves there. Cream flooded her channel, dripping down her thighs. A hundred times might just begin to sate her desire for him. The *lussor* bounced between them, sated, yet hungering for more. With their magic joined in the binding ritual, she felt his acute need as clearly as her own.

"Please," she breathed, barely able to force the single syllable from her lips.

"As you wish." His lips trailed across her neck and the top of her spine, his tongue licking tiny paths of flame along her flesh. With each taste, his *lussor* grew, plunging into her heart and soul as clearly as his cock would dip into her body. Magic bound them far stronger than any mundane bonds.

Palming her breasts, he stroked into her.

Laura cried out at the sheer pleasure of being filled by him. Seated balls-deep inside her, the head of his cock brushed against the sensitive place just beside her cervix. His weight rested on her back, his body draped over hers. She loved him like that, loved his heavy weight, loved the possessive nature of his pose.

"Are you ready?" he whispered a moment before he pulled out.

"Yes!" She'd been ready for this all her life.

He surged forward, the motion at once a promise of the future and a sealing of their fates. Each stroke brought them closer and closer to the joyous tumbling into release that would feed the *lussor*. Laura tried to make it last. Her muscles clenched around him. In his hands, her nipples were painfully hard, so much so that every caress seemed too much on her overheated skin.

He surrounded her. His touch consumed her, drawing her into a world where passion consumed her. She thought of the first time the *lussor* woke, a hungry beast gnawing from her soul. Hattie had taught her exercises to still it, ways to keep it under control so she wouldn't disgrace the Conclave with her power. Fucking Reid was like that, all hard and fast, sensation and emotion. Her hungry mewls echoed in her ears. Above her, Reid's low moans and growls added an animalistic nature to their coupling. And between them, the *lussor* flared to life.

Like a third participant, it twined between them, drawing on her needs and tangling with his. It pulled at both of them, knotting them together far more intimately than any physical actions could do. The *lussor* raced along her skin. It poured into her blood, trailing along her legs, her arms, pooling in her womb and making her nipples tingle. It penetrated her as surely as Reid's cock, and with each stroke, he fanned not only her desire, but also the *lussor*.

Magic welled deep inside her. She cried out as he pulled back, his cock hovering at her entrance. He shifted behind her, and suddenly, his shaft rubbed along her slit. He worked it closer to her back door, and she held her breath as first one then a second finger circled her opening.

Laura whimpered.

And then, he was there, the blunt width of his cock breaching her back entrance. She released a breath and relaxed her muscles.

He entered her in a slow, steady thrust. The slight pain faded away, leaving her awash in pure bliss. One hand stroked her clit. He circled the swollen organ with the tip of his finger. Gathering her moisture, he brought it back toward his cock, pausing to plunge his finger into her.

Laura basked in the pleasure coursing through her veins. Her channel tightened, muscles rippling as if trying to hold onto the cock that wasn't there. Finally, Reid was fully seated inside her, and she moaned with the sheer fullness of it.

He retreated. As his cock left her, he plunged two fingers into her pussy.

Laura screamed. Pleasure built, higher and higher, until her awareness dissolved into pure sensation. Her muscles clenched. Her body went rigid, elbows locked in a futile attempt to hold her upright.

Behind her, Reid thrust forward once more.

Spots of light burst behind her closed eyelids. Her awareness dimmed, the pleasure so intense she feared she might black out from it. A third finger joined his two, and she screamed again as he curled his fingers past her G-spot.

She rode the pleasure. Deep inside the *lussor* growled as it drank in the sexual frenzy created by the thrust of his body and the stroke of his fingers. Laura sagged against Reid's arm that clamped around her waist, holding her still for his movements.

"So tight," he growled as he pressed forward once more. With a low roar, he came. His cock jerked, growing even larger inside her before spilling its seed. The hot rush of liquid triggered another orgasm and she whimpered a second release rolled through her.

Reid's hands tightened to the point of pain. It fueled the *lussor* with the reminder of the raw nature of their power.

Laura released any sense of self she may have held onto. Now, it was just the *lussor*, just the energy roaring through her veins. Inside her, Reid's cock softened, but didn't leave. He pulled her to him, both of them toppling over on the mattress. The sounds of their heavy breathing echoed around them and she relished it. She used the feel of slick skin against skin to bring herself back into her body. Her arms and legs tingled from supporting her weight. Struggling to open her heavy eyelids, she looked over her shoulder at Reid.

He laid there, one arm thrown casually across the bed, the other pulling her against him. Lips parted, eyes closed, he looked like a sated God.

"What a way to wake up," he said after long moments of silence. His voice rasped.

"Yeah," she admitted, her throat too raw to say anything else.

He shifted and his cock slid from her tender passage. He cuddled her to him even tighter, curling his other arm around her. "I love you," he whispered against her hair.

"I love you too." She battled sleep, knowing they needed to check out. "Shall we shower and go home?"

"Home. I like the sound of that." He released her and stood. Then, reaching down, he scooped her into his arms.

She squealed as Reid carried her into the bathroom. He gently set her down and started the shower. Soon, they both stood beneath the pounding spray. She let him wash her hair then scrub her entire body. He moved carefully, as if he were aware she would be tender from their morning lovemaking. When they both had finished, he turned off the water and wrapped her in a towel. His careful drying led to another round of sex, and a little before noon, they finally got into the car.

Laura eased into the seat, her backside tender. She let Reid drive. Home. It sounded good, except, her tiny bungalow didn't seem like home anymore. She wanted to live at StarMyst, surrounded by Te and Jacy and the power of Sorcerers. Closing her eyes, she relished the sun pouring in through the window. At the moment, she had no idea what the future held for her and Reid, and yet, it didn't bother her. Once they arrived in Illinois, they could start talking arrangements. Until then, she'd simply enjoy.

Chapter Thirteen

Reid wasn't happy to see the outskirts of the small town on the horizon. Though the drive had been comfortable, they hadn't talked about what would happen next. Laura had slept most of the way, worn out no doubt by their physical activities and the emotional battle with her father. He let her sleep knowing she'd needed the rest. She'd awakened less than half an hour ago and now, they rode in silence toward her house.

Since they'd left, it seemed like someone had taken the world and titled it on its axis. Everything had changed, and yet, looking down this street, nothing had changed. He snuck a glance at the woman sitting next to him. If she shared his feelings, she gave no sign.

Her house loomed on the block, a tiny, dark bungalow where there was the distinct possibility that their fates would be decided. He pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. The car faded into silence.

They sat there. The gentlemanly part of Reid wanted to get out and open the door for her, even carry her luggage into the house. If he did that then decisions would have to be made. He lived only a few miles away. They had said they loved each other. Surely such an insignificant distance wouldn't stand between them.

"I'd really like you to come out to StarMyst." There, he'd said it. Thrown the words out between them. "There's plenty of room."

Laura drew her lower lip between her teeth. "I don't know. Let's go inside and figure this out, okay?" She turned and smiled at him.

The hope sparkling in her eyes convinced him to curl his fingers around the door handle. "All right." He stepped out, circled the car, and opened her door. "Would you like me to get your bags?"

Laura shrugged. "Later." She grabbed her purse and fished out her keys.

He glanced through the back windows at her suitcase nestled next to his. A garment bag containing her fancy clothing lay slung over them both. He rather liked having his bag draped in her clothing and hoped the fact that it remained in the car was an omen.

He followed her to the house, silently closing the door behind them. She paused in the foyer and glanced around. He watched as she went to a shelf filled with pictures and knickknacks. Picking up a small statue, she turned it in her hands then frowned and put it back. She strode into the living room, her explorations continuing. She traced a finger over the mantle, stared at the couch where they'd made love. She sat down on it and rested her chin in her hands.

"This place isn't big enough for both of us." She looked up at him, still standing in the entryway. "My things are here. I could move them, put some in storage, but I doubt there'd still be enough room. You're used to that huge farm house." She shook her head.

"So?" Reid's large strides carried him to the couch. He sat down, automatically wrapping his arm around Laura.

She burrowed against his side.

"I live in a room. Sure, I have things scattered throughout StarMyst. We all do. But I don't need a lot of space. If you want to stay here, and want me with you then I'll stay here." His gut twisted at the thought of leaving StarMyst. Little steps. Maybe, if he stayed here for a while, they'd eventually move back to the Conclave.

Laura shook her head. “No, that won’t do. You would have to commute out there every day to take care of Jazz and the horses. You’re used to living there and just stepping outside to work. I won’t take that from you.” She rested her palm on his knee.

Warmth radiated from her touch. “You sure? Because I can commute. And if we all live under the same roof, it’ll be tough. Especially with all the *lussor* going around.” He grinned, thinking about what the energy in the house would be like if he and Laura moved in. Thankfully, Cord was gone all the time, and his brother...well, he doubted Kade would return to the Conclave anytime soon.

“Will there be room for me?” She glanced around at her pictures and decorations.

Reid tried to see it from her eyes. The house, a jumble of furnishings, most if it old and loved. “We can make room.” He felt certain Te would agree to that.

Laura shook her head. “I don’t want to put you out. I think we’re at an impasse. I don’t want to take you away from the farm and someone will have to put things in storage.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “People work this out every day.”

Reid thought about a large meadow not far from the house and barns. Cleared of trees, he always thought it would make a great place for a home. “How would you like to build a house together?” Just saying the words out loud filled him with warmth.

Laura’s eyes sparkled. “Really? I’ve always wanted to build my own home. Where? And do you think Te will agree to it?”

“I don’t see why not, but let’s go out there and talk to him right now. There’s a meadow not far from the farmhouse. It’s not being used for anything, and I bet it’ll make a great homestead. I have some money saved up, we’re all part owners in StarMyst Farms. That way, I can be on the Conclave, and you can have a place to make your own.”

Laura squeezed his hand. “A home of my own. I like it! I’m just renting this place. I guess I always figured my father would pull me back to Brazos someday.” She jumped to her feet. “Let me pack a fresh change of clothing, just in case.” A mischievous glint in her eyes made him think that once they arrived at StarMyst they wouldn’t be leaving any time soon. He went out to the car and brought her bags in.

An hour later, they sat in the living room of the StarMyst Conclave. Jacy was exercising one of the broodmares. Te sat in the chair Edwin always occupied. Laura and Reid sat on the couch.

“Glad to hear you’re back. I received a call from your father. He’s assured me that he’ll do nothing to interfere with StarMyst operations. I’m glad it all worked out,” Te said.

“Me too,” Laura agreed. She’d tangled her fingers with Reid’s for support before the conversation started, and now, she gave his hand a squeeze.

“We’d like permission to build a house on the open field across from the paddocks. We’ve been talking about it, and in order for me to remain close to the farm, and for Laura to have a place of her own, it sounds like the best option. I’m not sure what two couples actively feeding the *lussor* would do if we were under the same roof.” Reid said.

Te chuckled. “You probably have a point. I’m sure Jacy and I provided enough disturbance.”

The door opened.

“In here,” Te called.

Moments later, Jacy stepped into the room. Her toe poked through a hole in her sock—she’d left her dirty boots by the back door—and her jeans were worn and dusty. She had a sweatshirt on

and her ponytail held back her hair, though a few strands escaped as if she'd just yanked off her riding helmet. She sat down on the edge of the couch and gave Te a kiss on the cheek. "You guys are back!" Jacy's too-knowing gaze shifted between him and Laura.

Reid smiled back at his elder foster sibling. "We are and, if Te gives us the go ahead, we're going to be building a house."

"I didn't hear of a Bonding Ceremony." Though her words were stern, merriment danced in her eyes. "Not sure if you can move in together." She mock-punched Te in the arm. "Right, honey."

Te laughed. "Let's see, agree with my mate and piss off my Conclave brother, or agree with him and piss off my woman. Sorry Reid."

Everyone shared a chuckle, and Reid relaxed at the warmth in the room. The energy in the house hadn't felt this good since before Edwin had gotten sick. Things were returning to normal, if slowly.

"I think that's a great idea. The meadow gives a beautiful view of the woods, and I'd been wondering what would happen once you guys returned."

The front door slammed, halting the conversation.

"Cord?" Te called. "We're all in the living room."

The thud of a bag hitting the floor echoed down the short hallway leading from the front door, and Cord's tall frame appeared. He took the only empty chair in the room and stretched out his long legs. Dust and mud clung to him, and he looked as if he'd driven for several hours. "You're back." He nodded his head, his tone giving no clue as to the thoughts behind.

"Yeah. Just arrived back this afternoon. You missed a lot."

"I can tell." Cord glanced between Laura and him, a knowing smile on his face. "Congratulations. About damn time." He reached over and clapped Reid on the shoulder.

"Thanks. I'll fill in the details later. We were talking about possibly building a house for Laura and I on the meadow. Glad you're here though. We can get everyone's opinions." In his heart, Reid really wanted his brother to be here, too. But, he doubted Kade would return anytime soon. And frankly, with what he knew about their origins and Edwin's actions, he figured maybe Kade was better off on his own.

Cord shrugged. "Sounds like a good plan."

Reid didn't know what he'd expected, but Cord's easy acceptance caught him off guard. Reid wondered if his brother would share in his joy. He didn't know, and he realized he probably didn't know what his brother would think. Kade had attacked Jacy, proving that maybe no one knew him after all.

"Okay then," Te said, pulling the conversation back to the here and now. "Why don't you guys go talk to some local builders? I'd like to make sure that Jacy and I approve any designs, but really, unless you're planning on putting a pyramid or something crazy there, I don't see why we wouldn't accept whatever you want. Sound good?" He looked to Jacy for approval.

"Sounds great. I could see a cute little ranch house, or maybe another two-story home. I'm sure you guys will come up with the perfect place." She hopped from the arm of the chair. Crossing the living room, she bent down and hugged Reid. "I'm really happy for you." She brushed a quick kiss across his cheek then hurried from the room, presumably to return to the barn.

Cord stood. "I better go get cleaned up." With a nod and a tip of his cowboy hat to Laura, he left the room.

"So are you going to stay at her place or here?" Te asked.

Reid looked at Laura. His old room was still available, though he figured she'd be more comfortable at her house.

"We're going to time share. Probably spend tonight here then I'll have to check in with my patients. I'm sure we'll work something out."

Laura sounded so happy, so proud that he couldn't help but grin. "Yeah, it may mean I'll commute, but it's not foaling season. I don't plan on shirking my duties. You guys covered for me while I was gone. Figured I'd return the favor in case you and Jacy wanted to get away."

Te stood. "Good. I need to talk to her about that Bonding Ceremony."

"Be careful. Women can be kind of stubborn about that," Reid said. He glanced over at Laura and winked.

"Yeah, they can. I'll be in the barn if you need me. Better go keep Jacy out of trouble."

Reid watched them go. The *lussor* wound around Te, pulling him toward the barn, and he figured Te would be getting *into* some trouble here very shortly. Good for him. It was good to see the couple working things out after coming together during Edwin's illness. He clasped Laura's hand. "Shall we?" He stood, pulling her up beside him.

~* * *~

Hearing Reid receive approval for their plans, listening to his banter with Jacy and Te, Laura realized the family she had always wanted was right before her eyes. Even the enigmatic Cord, who seemed to come and go on his own schedule, if not outright approved of her, certainly didn't object to Reid's plan to build them a house. She grinned as he tugged her by his side, wrapping his arm around her. They snuggled together as they ascended the stairs to Reid's room.

Her stomach fluttered. Her mouth went dry, and she leaned into his broad shoulders for strength. She'd never seen his room. While tending Edwin, she'd gone up and down this hall numerous times, but as his doctor, she'd never ventured beyond his room. The door where the former Conclave leader used to stay stood closed at the end of the hall. Reid led her to the first door on the left and opened it. She stepped inside a very masculine domain.

The double bed held a rumpled worn, green blanket and dark green pillowcases and sheets. Apparently, he hadn't taken the time to make his bed the last time he was here. Given that had been the morning of Edwin's funeral—had things really gone that quickly?—she didn't mind a messy bed. Some handmade pine shelves held a variety of equestrian trophies, books, and various pictures. An open closet door revealed hangers full of jeans and western shirts. A few pairs of boots sat on the floor beneath them. No supermodel posters hung on the wall, just a few well-placed framed equestrian art prints, and one large family photograph of the Conclave taken at least ten years ago.

"What do you think?" Reid closed the door behind them.

"I think it looks like you." Her attention stayed on the bed.

"You know..." Reid stepped closer. He looped his arms around her waist, splaying his hands across the top of her buttocks and pulling her closer. "If we stay here, there are only two bathrooms. You'll have to share."

Laura flattened her palm on his chest and tilted her head back. "I'm okay with the bathrooms. But I want to know if you are you okay with the situation with your brother." She blew out a sigh. This close to Reid the *lussor* unfurled, the binding ritual they'd gone through making

their connection stronger. She had no idea if this constant need drove Te and Jacy, or perhaps it was enhanced by her pregnancy. She tamped it down. A lot had happened in the last few days. A lot.

Reid's eyelids drifted closed, shuttering his thoughts from her.

Laura waited him out. Their relationship had healed, improved beyond measure. She didn't want to come between Reid and his brother, though from the fights she'd witnessed in the last few weeks of Edwin's life, the bad blood ran deeper than woman trouble. She kept her breathing even, her heart calm. Reid's woodsy aroma teased her nose, a smell uniquely him though it was no doubt a department store brand.

He released her.

Laura stared at him as he crossed the room and sat on the bed. He slumped, started to balance his chin in his palm then let his hands fall to his sides. "I wish I was a strong enough man to forgive my brother." His soft voice cut the silence.

She went to him and dropped on one knee so she could look him in the eye. "What happened between us was as much my fault—"

"No. Not that. I'm over that. You're a desirable woman and I wasn't giving you what you needed. Kade, well that's his personality, to swoop in and take what he wants. I just had the bad luck of walking in on it." Reid shrugged. "He was the only family I had left, besides StarMyst, and his stubbornness stole that from me. I love Jacy and Te. They're my Conclave, but they're not my brother by blood. We formed this family here, grew up together..." His gaze lifted to stare at the picture of them together, a family, that hung on the wall. "Kade threw that all away."

Laura didn't know what to say. Having no siblings of her own, she could only image what Reid was facing, and frankly, it probably paled to the reality. She'd already given up her Conclave, her family, as a lost cause years ago.

"I don't know if I can forgive him, not yet. It's just too new and raw. Maybe in a few months, maybe later. But that doesn't affect us. You understand that, right?"

Laura smiled. This question, she could answer. "I do. It's okay. Maybe I had it easier. I knew I had to write off my family. You were so close. It was hard to watch. I can't imagine what it was like to live it."

He nodded. "Maybe coming back here was a bad idea. Maybe we should just stay at your place. You'll be the only woman using the bathroom then."

"Will you stop with the bathrooms?" She mock-punched him in the arm. "If you want to go back to my place, we can. If you want to stay here, we can. I'm okay with whatever you decide, and I'd hate to have you commute back and forth from town when we could be just fine here. I'm the one who has to drive to her job. You don't."

Reid lifted his gaze to meet hers. He looked at her, really looked at her, and without the *lussor* to fog things up between them, she had the sense that he was really seeing the situation as it was.

Her mouth went dry. She licked her lips, hoping now wasn't the moment that he'd flee. Rising onto her knees, she cupped his cheek and drew his face down to hers. "I love you, Reid. I won't let something like this stand in our way. Even if you only had an outhouse." Without waiting for a reply, she slanted her lips across his.

The sated *lussor* barely flickered to the challenge. Laura grinned against Reid's mouth, wanting this to be just about them, not their Sorcerer powers or their binding. Her mouth moved over his seeking an opening to his mouth. He raised his hand and skimmed it along her arm, but made no other move to touch her.

Laura deepened the kiss. Her tongue slid across the seal of his lips, asking for entrance. He gave it, opening his mouth to her. She slid inside, wishing she could crawl inside him and let him know exactly how much he meant to her. No matter what happened with his brother, she loved him. She always would.

She slid her hand between them, flattening it against his chest. A gentle shove sent him tumbling back on the bed and she quickly crawled over him to straddle his hips. The springs creaked beneath them. She could only imagine the fun that the guys must have had here trying to keep some things quiet. She wriggled a bit more, listening to the musical springs and tried not to giggle.

Beneath her, she sensed Reid giving in to the kiss. First one hand cupped her ass, the other sliding along the length of her back. His cock hardened, pressing against her sex. She relished the pressure, grinding down on it until it bumped against her clit. She moaned into his mouth, making him swallow her pleasurable cry.

His hips bucked. The springs sounded again and even sated, the *lussor* flared. Whatever emotional demons had been haunting him seemed to have fled. At least for the time being.

A part of Laura screamed at her to stop and analyze what had just happened. If Reid wasn't one hundred percent sure of his decisions...well she wanted to know right now. But straddling him, the *lussor* rising, knowing that once again she'd had a home, a family, she couldn't stop now if her life depended on it. She tore her lips from his long enough to gulp air and tear open the snaps on his shirt. With his chest bare to her touch, she let her fingers roam.

"Believe me now that I don't mind commuting from here?" She bent down and pressed a kiss to his nipple. Drawing the tight bead into her mouth, she sucked it hard and deep. "How about now? Or now?" She punctuated each question with tiny kisses.

"Yeah, I guess I do." Wrapping his arms around her, Reid wrestled with her, flipping her over on her back. He slid her onto the bed, the mattress and springs creaking.

A knock sounded on the door. "Be quiet in there, some of us are trying to work." Te's highly amused voice filtered through the wall.

Laura burst out laughing.

"I thought you were *working* in the barn," Reid called.

Te muttered something that sounded like 'smart ass' on his way down the hall. "Still want to stay here?" Reid propped himself up on one elbow.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." She dragged his lips back down to hers. Somewhere below them, the front door slammed. She figured Cord had left again. Everything was as it should be. And she figured somehow, somewhere, Edwin knew, and he approved. After all, when it came to her, Reid had offered all his forgiveness, and his love. And that was something to seal with a kiss.

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Mary commutes between her dream home near the Mark Twain national forest in Missouri and her current residence in Iowa. She lives with a menagerie of animals including an opinionated horse and a cat that was a dog in past life. When not writing spicy tales of erotic romance, she enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy, spending time with her horse, and enjoying the outdoors. Lucky for her, her partner (hero) shares these same passions, and usually both of them can be found in their respective dens writing.

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StarMyst: Prodigal Son

By Mary Winter

Te's breath caught in his throat. Jacy leaned against the fence, a cowboy hat jauntily sitting on her head. Her long dark red hair fell in a ponytail nearly to her waist. He stepped forward, using his powers to conceal his approach. Of course, if Jacy were any sort of mage she would sense his presence. He moved slowly, taking in the length of her legs encased in formfitting denim. Her ankles were crossed. His gaze riveted to her heart-shaped ass and his mouth went dry. The *lussor* roared like a hungry beast, making his cock harden. His fingers itched to caress every curve on her body. Seeing her stripped away the years until he was a horny young man lusting after something he shouldn't have. The bay horse in the arena snorted. Te stopped. He waited, but when she only reached into her pocket to feed the horse some treats, he moved forward again. The mare licked Jacy's palm. He envied that horse. The memory of her earthy musk scent filled his nostrils, and suddenly, he stood close enough to smell it. The *lussor* reminded him of his neglected duties.

He tamped it down as he stopped behind Jacy. His palms burned to touch her, to see if her hair was still as silky as he remembered. Jacy scratched the mare underneath the chin, laughing as the horse snorted in her face. The musical notes of her laughter rolled over him like a tidal wave and broke the dam of his control.

Te laid his hands on her shoulders. He hadn't meant to touch her. Didn't even know his hands were moving until he felt the heat from her body rising into his palms. He curled his fingers around her muscles and began to knead. Jacy relaxed into his touch.

She had to know he stood behind her. Mages sensed the presence of another mage. Yet she said nothing as his hands slid down her arms, then up again. He rubbed the tender place at the base of her neck, his thumbs hitting the exact spot he knew she liked.

His cock jerked at her soft moan of approval, and the *lussor* demanded he take her now. His body clenched, balls drawn tight, wanting to be inside her slick heat once more. Leaning forward, Te smelled her. She smelled of dust, horses and pure woman. Te inhaled as if he might never smell the heady elixir ever again. The need to take her right there against the fence rode him. The *lussor* growled in satisfaction as Te slid his hands over her sides.

"Mmm," Jacy said, leaning back into his touch. "That's nice." Strong fingers massaged her neck and shoulders, finding the tense places in her muscles. The figure behind her stood close, a bit too close, but sometimes Reid did that. The flash of power identified the man as a member of her Conclave, probably Reid wanting to apologize for his brother, the ass.

His hands slid over the edge of her breasts, making her nipples harden in anticipation. Worried about Edwin's health and the bombshell he dropped on her, she leaned into the man massaging her back. She heard a swift inhalation, and for a moment wondered if it wasn't someone else behind her. The body felt too solid, too hard to be her younger foster-brother. A frown worried her features.

The man nuzzled her, his lips caressing her neck. A groan rumbled from deep within his chest. He kissed the column of her neck until his tongue delved into the sensitive place behind her ear. Jacy gasped at the pulse of arousal deep within her. Hastily, she cleared her throat and tried to step away. "You're getting a little friendly there, aren't you, Reid?" She tried to convince herself it

was only Reid, and not the man who filled her dreams.

Her words must have startled the man because he released her and stepped back. “Reid better not touch you like this.”

Good Medicine

by Mary Winter

Available now at Pink Petal Books

When Sadie thought about her perfect Friday night, she didn't imagine herself covered with manure and blood. She should have been used to it by now. Working as a vet in a small town just outside of Kansas City meant she would tend to a child's hamster on one appointment and the very next one would send her out to vaccinate cattle. Or as in this case, stitch up a badly wounded calf.

Sadie unlocked the door and slipped inside the veterinary office, ignoring the sign out front that had Dr. Devon Markier III, DVM listed as the owner. The banking gods had frowned on her purchasing this clinic, never mind that Devon and she were the same age. Being from a wealthy family had its perks in this town.

She closed the door behind her, wishing she could just as easily shut out her uncharitable thoughts about her boss. Humming equipment provided the only sounds in the dark office, illuminated only by the soft glow of safety lights over the exits. From memory, she made her way to the locker room. Her shoes squished across the linoleum. For a moment, she debated about going home, but she wanted to document the call and leave notes for Devon since he'd be working tomorrow. And she really didn't want to bring the mess clinging to her coveralls home with her.

That calf had been tangled in barbed wire, and Sadie didn't even want to contemplate the number of stitches she'd put in the wounded animal's body. She'd administered fluids and antibiotics, finally proclaiming the creature stable enough for her to leave. Had the calf been anything but a 4-H project, she probably would have just put it down, but looking into the tear-filled brown eyes of the creature's eight-year-old owner had made that impossible. She hoped the tiny thing made it through the night.

A small light shone through the open bathroom door. *Devon must have left it on for her.* She tried not to be thankful he had, nor contemplate the thoughtfulness the gesture. It was much easier to dwell on the fact that she hadn't been able to muster the funds to buy out Dr. Kirkpatrick's half of the vet practice when he had retired. Devon and his thoughtful gestures could go straight to hell. But damn, he'd look good going.

Sadie headed for the light like a beacon, dragging her tired body along with her. Turning the corner, she stopped. Devon stood in front of the sink, rinsing off a razor. His sable hair still dripped water where it curled along the back of his neck. She followed a drop along the long line of his naked back, tanned and muscled, to where the blue waistband of his designer underwear soaked up the bit of moisture.

Sadie's mouth went dry.

Dressed, Devon Markier III looked like he stepped off a male fashion show runway. which was why she probably was angrier at him for buying out the vet practice than she should have been. Wearing only a pair of very high-cut briefs, he looked like a dream come to life. And she hated herself for having those dreams.

"I'm sorry." Sadie backed away from the door, her breath whooshing from her lungs.

He turned his piercing blue stare on her and smiled. "Sadie, you're back. I thought you would probably head back to your place since it's so late. I'll be out of here in a minute. Had a guinea pig with an abscess that came in at the last minute, and I wanted to clean up before heading out."

Sadie pressed her back against the wall, fiercely staring anywhere but toward the door from which Devon's voice emerged. She sucked in gulps of air. With each breath, she reminded herself that she worked for Devon. The fact she lusted after his body didn't change a thing. Not their employer-employee relationship and certainly not the fact that his family money had obtained the vet practice for him. She heard rustling from the small bathroom, and a few moments later, Devon emerged wearing only a worn pair of jeans and carrying the rest of his clothing.

He glanced over her dirty coveralls. The heat of his gaze burned through her, and even reeking of cow and covered with blood and fluids, Devon's focused held the power to make her breath catch in her throat. *Water over the bridge, under the bridge. It doesn't really matter. We're from two different worlds. I put myself*

through vet school, and he was born with the platinum spoon in his mouth. I've been through that once and won't do it again. "Thanks," she muttered, racing into the room and closing the door behind her.

Juli's Choice

By Mary Winter

Available Now from Pink Petal Books

The birth of a foal never failed to move Juli. She watched as Lacey gave two more pushes, then the baby slid to the ground. Instantly, Juli moved to its side.

She finished ripping the sac from its head, and then used a cloth to wipe the foal's nostrils. It took its first breath of fresh air and raised its head. Juli smiled down into its eyes.

"A colt," Riley said, kneeling by the foal's side and beginning to briskly rub him down with towels. "Windfree's first son," he breathed, the awe more than apparent in his voice.

Juli finished tying off the umbilical cord. She watched Riley stare at the colt, all his hopes and dreams visible on his face. She'd seen it before with other owners and their foals. Watching the tiny foal take in his surroundings, she had a feeling this one would surpass all expectations.

Behind them, the mare lumbered to her feet, and Riley and Juli backed off to allow the new mother to greet her baby. Lacey sniffed the colt before licking it.

Juli backed out of the stall. "I want to stay until he passes the meconium, and to make sure that all is well with mother and baby."

The colt lurched to his feet, standing and falling in a comical splay of limbs. He shook his head, looking disgusted with himself, and then tried to stand again.

Juli stepped just outside the stall door, followed by Riley. He stood just behind her, his body heat radiating into her back. Watching the foal struggle to his feet, finally getting his spindly limbs beneath him, made her smile. She loved this part of the deliveries. Seeing a healthy foal nurse from its attentive mother made the eleven months of waiting and her own efforts worthwhile. She looked up at Riley and saw him starting at the foal. Love shone from his eyes.

"Is this Lacey's first foal?" Juli had heard of the mare's retirement two years ago.

Riley nodded. "We thought we had her bred last year, but it didn't take. Windfree had a pretty heavy competition schedule, so we couldn't get her settled."

Juli nodded. The foal nudged his mother with his skinny head. The two touched noses, then on wobbly legs, the foal stepped back. Ducking its head beneath Lacey's belly, it grabbed onto a teat and began to nurse.

Lacey lifted a leg, and Juli tensed, afraid the mare might try and hurt the foal. The first nursing always hurt, and some mares took it better than others. Lacey turned her head, stared at her baby, then snorted, but stood completely still.

Riley rested his arm around her shoulder. "You did it," he said, giving her a tiny squeeze. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your first name."

"Juli. And thanks. I just helped the little guy into the world. You're the one who cared for Lacey for eleven months. That's the hard part."

She stood there, her heart hammering in her chest. Juli tried to chalk it up to the adrenaline of delivering a healthy foal. She couldn't quite. All of Harris' inadequacies came to mind, how he wouldn't be caught dead out in the barn anytime, let alone in the early hours of the morning. Feeling Riley's body pressed next to hers, she felt as if the two of them were in synch, both wishing for a healthy mare and foal. Comparing her relationship with Harris to her and Riley at this moment was like watching a horse fighting the bit and a beautiful high-level dressage performance. There was nothing remotely similar between the two.

Aware she stood next to him, her coveralls covered in bodily fluids, she stepped away. "Is there somewhere I can wash up?"

Riley looked down at her. His eyes widened when he saw the extent of the damage on her coveralls. “I have a shower just off my back porch if you want to clean up? Otherwise, there’s a utility sink next to the tack room.”

Juli plucked at the sodden fabric. A change of clothes waited in her truck. Riley’s gaze followed the motion. His gaze lingered on her curves beneath the heavy fabric. Birth moved people different ways, and watching his eyes darken, she suspected how it affected Riley. He raised his hand, and then rested it on the stall door.

“A shower would be great.” She realized her voice was huskier than usual. Looking at him for a moment longer, she wished her eyes weren’t drawn to his full lips. She turned and fled for the safety of the dark night.

Ghost Redeemed

By Mary Winter

Available Now from Pink Petal Books

Shay's stomach flip-flopped. Looking at Kyle standing just outside her bathroom door, a boyish grin on his face, made her wonder what would happen if she invited him to join her. She'd planned on taking a shower, figuring that would be the easiest way to wash the wound on her back. But with Kyle there, she wouldn't need to go to such lengths. Then again, maybe she would anyway.

She stepped back and opened the door, suddenly nervous about her plan. "I guess you're right," she said, trying not to sound too eager. "I will need some help." Turning from him, she pulled her shirt over her head. She swore she heard Kyle's swiftly indrawn breath. She glanced into the mirror and saw the angry red gash start just below her shoulder blade to disappear beneath her bra clasp. She reached around her and unfastened the hooks. Her peach lace bra hung loosely on her shoulders, and she noticed Kyle trying hard not to look at her breasts in the mirror.

She slipped the lingerie from her shoulders. "The peroxide and some antibiotic ointment are in the medicine cabinet."

Kyle opened the mirrored panel. She watched, noticing the light glow surrounding his skin. If it weren't for that, he'd look completely normal standing in her bathroom, reaching for the brown plastic bottle of peroxide. He grabbed several cotton balls and turned his attention to her back. His movements seemed slow, as if he had to think about each action.

"This is going to sting a little. There's not much I can do about that." He unscrewed the lid of the peroxide bottle and doused a cotton ball. "Are you ready?"

"I'll be fine," she said. His fingers brushed her skin, and tiny shivers darted from the touch. Her nipples pebbled, and she resisted the urge to cover her breasts with her hands. A soft fizzing sound filled the bathroom, and then the wound stung. Shay sucked in a quick breath and gritted her teeth.

"I'm sorry." Kyle continued to dab the cotton ball on the wound.

"It's okay," Shay ground out. She reached in front of her and wrapped her fingers around the towel rod on her shower door. Clenching her fingers around it, she focused on breathing in and out to distance herself from the sting of disinfectant on her wound.

His motions slowed, and she heard the soft clunk of the bottle on the counter. The trash bag rustled as he tossed the cotton ball into it. The room closed in. She became aware of Kyle standing behind her, his body just inches from her. The thudding of her heart sounded loud in her ears. She longed to turn around and see him, but didn't, afraid of the desire she would see in his gaze. Keeping her eyes down, she waited.

He touched her. His fingers slid across her shoulder, a feather light touch against her skin. Tiny sparks danced at the contact. Telling herself he was a ghost did little good, as heavy warmth filled her limbs. His hand skimmed her side, barely touching the side of her breast. She wanted more. Him. His cock. Her lips parted.

"Kyle," she breathed.

"Shay." His other hand reached around to palm her breast, a light touch that soon had him standing against her. The ridge of his cock pressed against her buttocks.

Her knees went weak. She leaned against his strength, not wanting to get used to his warmth surrounding her. The fact he was a ghost mattered little. Some part of her mind rebelled, but she refused to listen. Right now, still aching from the fight and heart-sore from her best friend's death, she wanted his warmth, his strength surrounding her.

She shifted her weight. Her ankle protested, and she quickly moved her weight to her good foot.

"Let me help you." His hand slid down her back, to her hip. "Turn around and wrap your legs around me."

Shay started to turn. “But you’re a gh—” Words died when she saw the naked hunger in his eyes. He wanted her, his gaze sweeping over her bared breasts.

“Perfect,” he whispered, covering one with his hand. He brushed a thumb across a distended nipple, and Shay closed her eyes. His free hand slid over her back, down to her ass. Pulling her against him, he urged her to wrap her leg around his waist.

She complied. The first touch of his hard cock against her coaxed a low moan from her throat. She wrapped her arms around him and brought her other leg around his waist. He easily lifted her, carrying her out of the bathroom.

“Where’s your bedroom?” He glanced down the hall, before looking back into the living room.

The Purrfect Man

By Mary Winter

Available Now from Pink Petal Books

"I'm sorry."

The masculine words sounded truly remorseful, and it took Althea a moment to realize she was dreaming. "It's okay," she automatically replied, though she knew not who this man was or why he apologized to her. In fact, she couldn't really see him. Instead, it seemed as if she still lay in bed, though the edges of the room seemed fuzzy. An effect of the sinus medication, she wondered, but she'd never had dreams like this before.

Gradually, her surroundings became visible. A man sat on the foot of her bed. Though he didn't move, she sensed an inherent lithe grace in his form.

"Wha--?" she asked, coming out of a medicine-induced fog. "Who are you?"

Tawny hair crowned his head and feathered over his shoulders. His brilliant blue eyes held warmth. A straight nose divided his face, leading to the fullest, most sensuous pair of lips she'd ever seen on a man. He wore no shirt, and the view of his chest nearly took Althea's breath away. Matching tawny hair dusted his pectorals, and then arched over a work-hardened set of abs and disappeared beneath the waistband of a gray pair of sweat pants. His feet were bare.

She blinked at the sweat pants. Until that modern piece of clothing, she expected him to be dressed in historical clothing. She didn't know why. She saw only his body; he hadn't even spoken yet. Still, something about his manner, the way he sat with his hands resting on his muscled thighs brought back images from a bygone era. She chalked it up to the timelessness of the dream state.

He moved closer, the efficiency in the way he inched toward her pillow reaffirming her belief that this was a man unlike any she'd met. After settling himself next to her hip, he trailed his fingers over her arm. The caress, so light, reminded her of the way she'd petted the cat on her porch.

"I'm Dante," he said. Reaching out, he brushed his thumb against her lips. "So beautiful. So warm." He bent over, replacing his thumb with his lips. Gently he kissed her, drawing her deeper into the dream, into him. His lips coaxed, nibbled, ate as daintily as a cat enjoying a tasty morsel. With his tongue, he traced her lower lip.

Althea parted her lips to allow him entrance. Dante's answering moan sent warm shivers darting through her body. She wrapped her arm around him, tangling her fingers in his silky soft hair. His hard body pressed against hers, and arousal drew her nipples into tight beads. She wanted to be devoured by him, to feel his lips on every inch of her flesh. Allergies forgotten, she clung to him and slid her other hand down over his muscled back to his buttocks. This was a dream, after all.

And thank goodness it *was* a dream. Her body hungered for the touch of flesh against flesh. Reaching for him, curling her fingers around his biceps, something awakened deep inside. She'd ignored the months of celibacy, hadn't really thought about them, but now, the need to make up for lost time drove her. She moaned as he deepened the kiss. Passion flared in her blood. She wanted him—her dream man. *Now*.

A quick tug pulled her shirt free of her jeans. His hand splayed across her abdomen. His touch branded her. He laid her back on the bed, tugging at her T-shirt. She released him long enough for him to pull it over her head. He unfastened her bra and slid it off her shoulders.

Althea reached for him once more. She wrapped her fingers around his hard biceps and pulled him to her.

Dante lowered his head and nibbled along her collarbone. He laved each kiss, each love bite, with a long sweep of his tongue that had her shuddering to her toes. The crisp whorls of his chest hair tickled her nipples and stomach.

She arched beneath him, her breasts begging for his touch. "Please," she whispered, unaware she voiced her plea.