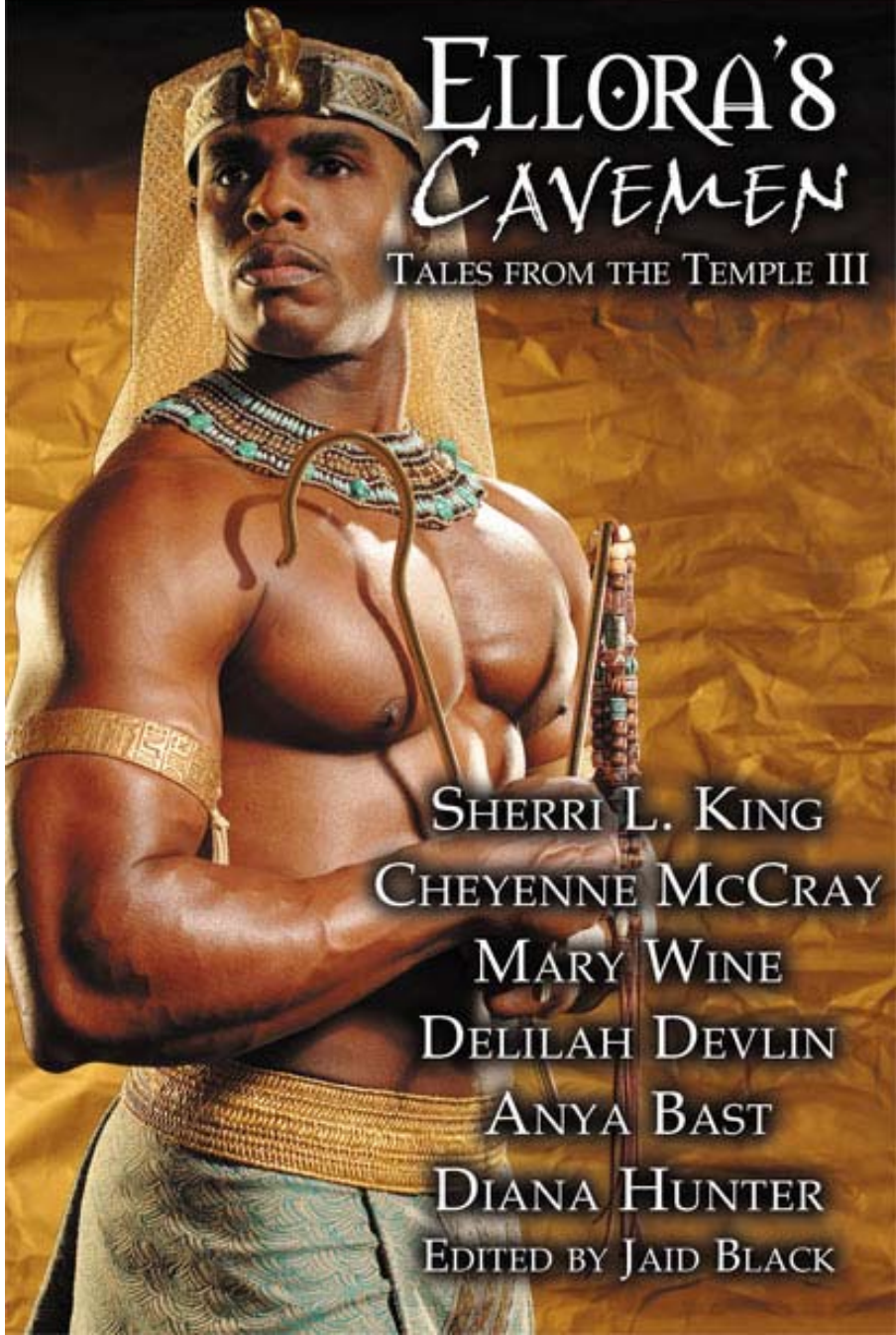


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVEMEN

TALES FROM THE TEMPLE III



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VOYEURS: OVEREXPOSED

Sherri L. King

Thanks to Joyce Schopmeyer for her incredible fudge and infectious laughter. Keep the oil lamps burning and your home as warm as your heart.

For D.

Prologue

"Hi. I am a human." Agate scrunched and then reschooled her features, affecting what she hoped was a flirtatious look of nonchalance, and tried again. This time using a breathy voice instead of her normal one. "Hello. I am a human." She beat her chest and scowled fiercely. "Human, I be."

No, that wasn't it, either. She glared at her reflection in the mirror, took a deep breath, and tried it again in a much deeper voice. "Greetings. I am a human."

An amused burst of laughter sounded from behind her as Cady, wife to the great Shikar Warrior Obsidian, glided into the room.

Glided? Cady Swann never glided. She marched everywhere she went. Agate was being fanciful again. It was from all those romance novels she smuggled down from the human world. They called to something soft and dreamy in her soul...and The Elder would have a fit if he knew about the stash she kept hidden in her room.

"You sound like a science fiction alien," Cady snickered, handing her a bundle of clothing.

"I'm trying to perfect my human voice," Agate defended, and immediately turned back to the mirror, practicing what she believed were human gestures and expressions.

"And you look like you're constipated," Cady pointed out. "Or drunk off your gourd. Look," she turned Agate around to face her, "you don't need to affect any kind of persona. Just be yourself and no one will ever guess that you're not human."

"But I don't look like a human," Agate insisted, looking into her friend's Shikar-yellow eyes. Eyes that were the same vibrant color as her own.

Large, dark pupils surrounded by starburst irises in hues of gold, orange and yellow fire – this was the trademark characteristic of all Shikars. Except for those of the Traveler Caste. Travelers' eyes were black as the shadows they walked in...but that was neither here nor there.

Agate would be wearing brown contacts for her trip up to the surface world, the *human* world. Her eyes would not be the trait to give her away tonight, so long as the contact lenses stayed put.

"You look just like a human with those contact lenses covering your pretty eyes." Cady's words echoed Agate's thoughts. "And I should know. I was a human once," she winked reassuringly.

Agate sighed and rolled her shoulders, trying to relieve some of the tension that had gathered during her ablutions. "I'm just nervous about tonight," she said unnecessarily.

"If you don't want to go and meet this man, then Steffy is willing to go."

“No,” she protested immediately. “Steffy needs to spend more time on her music album. You can’t go either,” she hurried when she saw Cady begin to form the words, “you need to spend more time with Obsidian. He’s been downright surly this week since you’ve been spending so much time with the Watchers—I mean, the Voyeurs.” She grinned. “I want to go. I really do. But I want to make a good impression all the same.”

“Obsidian is always surly.” Cady snorted, but it was clear by the softening in her eyes that she dearly loved the man and all his quirks. “I don’t see why you care that much about this. You’re just going to wipe this photographer’s memory clean anyway. Who cares if he doesn’t find you convincingly human? It’s not like he can do or say anything about it. And I doubt he’ll be that observant—he’ll be too busy staring at your boobs.”

Agate frowned. “Do you think so?” She reached up and palmed her full, round breasts. “Should I wear a minimizer?”

“Are you serious?” Cady laughed then, a full and throaty sound, throwing her head back. “Oh lordy, girl. You are too much. The human world doesn’t know what it’s in for with you,” she teased.

Agate smiled, liking the sound of her friend’s mirth. When Cady had first come to them, a human orphan with powers beyond her understanding or control, she had hardly ever laughed or even smiled. But now she was a Shikar, mated to one of the Warrior males and was even a Warrior in her own right. She was also mother to a son, Armand. Whom she’d lovingly named after her dead brother.

When Cady was only a child, her younger brother had been eaten by Daemons—monsters that fed on flesh and on life. Cady had seen it all and it had changed her, hardened her. It had made her a fighter and a hunter, as fierce and deadly as any Shikar Warrior. She’d been fighting the Daemon threat, protecting both humans and Shikars from their rage, ever since.

“What clothing did you bring for me?” Agate asked, already looking through the pile of garments to see for herself. Her eyes widened at the dark navy skirt and matching buttoned jacket. It was made out of a blend of cotton and silk, an airy material that Agate favored. The blouse was silk as well, finely spun, a creamy ivory color.

She often used similar materials to cotton or silk when she fashioned serviceable undergarments for the Warriors. For the women, especially the wives, she used even silkier, decadent fabrics—no human material could compare. It was a hobby of hers, making clothes, and one she enjoyed. She also made sexual toys in her spare time for any Shikar who wanted them, and was well loved for her unique, stimulating designs. These things she did for fun, for relaxation.

When the time came for seriousness, for business instead of pleasure, she was a Voyeur. It was her greatest pride and her deepest secret. No one in their world of Shikars knew about the Voyeurs—a tongue-in-cheek, but appropriate sobriquet provided by the impish Steffy, another human turned Shikar. No one, that is, except for

the Council and the other Shikar women who comprised the team of a dozen or so members.

Watchers or Voyeurs, whatever their group was called, it didn't matter. They were information gatherers for the Shikar Council. Spies, to put it bluntly. They kept their eyes on the human world, looking for any sign of Daemon activity so that the Warriors could go into battle on the surface with plenty of warning about the terrain and native people they might encounter.

Where it was the Shikar males' duty to protect the human world from the Daemon threat, it was in turn the Shikar females' duty to protect their men from the human world and its pitfalls. If there was a dip in the terrain, a stone, or a building, the Voyeurs noted it and reported it to the Council. The Council saw to it that the men received all the pertinent information. It had been this way for many years, ever since the Daemon Horde had first begun to invade the human world.

Agate was fascinated with humans. She tried not to let it show, she really did, but it was an impossible task. She was enthusiastic to a fault about the things that interested her. Steffy called her "bubbly".

Agate thought that sounded too much like soap, and while she liked the scent of soap, she didn't like her personality to be compared to it.

Speaking of the devil...

"I found some dressy shoes that should go with that outfit," Steffy said, breezing into the room.

Her hair was purple today. "Where did you get these?" Agate asked, holding the smart suit aloft, knowing that they hadn't procured the garments from the surface world. There hadn't been time. The email had only arrived the day before.

"Believe it or not, I unearthed them from one of my trunks," Steffy said, handing over the cute, black half-boots with their dainty heels.

Agate loved all human shoes! She almost snatched them, so eager was she to try them on.

"Along with these," Steffy waved a beige, diaphanous swatch of material wadded in her hands.

Agate knew that Steffy had over twenty trunks full of clothing—the former human and German DJ was obsessed with clothes. Agate had seen them herself when Steffy first moved in with her mate, Cinder. No one needed that many clothes, but Steffy had been emphatic that she keep each and every scrap of cloth.

"You never know when you might need a pair of vinyl pants," she'd said with much asperity when Cinder had threatened to burn half her trunks just to avoid having to transport them from her apartment.

And Steffy was right. At least in this instance, it seemed.

"I didn't know you had normal clothes," Cady raised an eyebrow dubiously. "I thought everything you owned was either skintight or black and shiny."

“Ha, ha.” Steffy stuck her tongue out at Cady and the three women laughed at her comical, childish expression. “Actually, these are really old. I hope the styles aren’t outdated. I wore these when I applied for a job as a bank teller once. That was at least three years ago. Damn,” she mused. “Maybe I should go through those trunks after all. It’s been ages since I saw what I had stashed away in them.” She shrugged, letting the subject drop as quickly as she’d brought it up. “So, what’s the plan?”

Agate grinned and started to disrobe, uncaring that she had an audience. “I am to finish my toilette, dress in these clothes that you have brought me, and go to find Grimm.”

“I still don’t like to involve Grimm,” Cady pursed her lips. “I like to keep the Voyeurs business between us girls.”

“Well I cannot Travel both ways. I am just not powerful enough. I have only enough strength to go one way, and I think it would be better if I got there with Grimm’s help, so that if I run late I can just come back on my own...”

“You won’t run late,” Cady said emphatically.

“What if she finds a cute guy up there?” Steffy quipped suggestively. “If she took a little longer than normal to strike up a conversation, maybe go back to his place for a drink...”

“She won’t,” Cady sent Steffy a stern glare, “run late.”

“Spoilsport.”

Agate ignored them, putting on her clothes, reveling in the thought of the adventure that loomed ahead of her, even as she slightly dreaded it. She wasn’t used to talking to strangers, especially human male strangers, but tonight she’d have to, at great length. “I will get Grimm to help me. And I will come back,” she eyed her two friends, “*on time*. After I record Mr. Aleksandr Fromin’s story, I will ask to see all his photos and documentation. For authentication purposes, I will tell him. And then I shall take his memory of me and anything to do with the Shikars and Daemons so that he remembers nothing that might hold value to any tabloid or newspaper that might find his story of interest. Also, so that he has no bad memories or nightmares because he was unlucky enough to stumble into an aspect of our world.”

“Good. If you run into any problems—” Cady started.

“I won’t,” Agate assured her. She wasn’t a child, for all so many of her friends seemed to treat her like one most of the time. “I do what I must, for the good of Shikars and humans. For the good of Mr. Fromin, too.”

She wondered what he’d be like. She’d never spoken to a human man before. Unless one counted the...what had Cady called him? Ah, yes. Wino. The *wino* Agate had spoken to a few months ago had been an interesting fellow, if a bit smelly. He had told her a fascinating story about racing horses and crooked loan sharks. He’d been most grateful when she’d handed him a wad of green paper—American money—but Cady had given her a stern lecture when Agate had told her of the encounter.

Agate hated being treated like a child.

She was older than Cady anyway. At least fifty years older, for all they looked to be of the same age. Well, Agate had to admit that she did look a little younger than Cady – Shikars had much longer life spans than humans after all – and she wasn't happy about it. She wanted to look older, more mature; she thought it was sexier and more respectable.

At least she looked older than Steffy, who was quite a lot younger than either her or Cady. That was something, wasn't it?

Her mind was wandering again. It did that a lot. Because she was what Steffy called a Gemini. Whatever that meant. Maybe it was a human illness? She hadn't thought to ask at the time Steffy had told her the word.

"Here, put these on," Steffy handed her the wad of beige material.

Agate smoothed it out, frowning. "This looks like nearly invisible leggings or something."

"Pantyhose," Cady winced. "I'm impressed, Steffy. Your wardrobe is extensive. But are you sure Agate deserves that torture?"

"Here, I'll show you how to put them on."

After much labor, Agate finally managed to squeeze into the horribly uncomfortable garment. She didn't really see the need for such trappings, they were almost undetectable to the eye as they stretched over and around the length of her legs.

"Gorgeous," Steffy said, then laughed at the uncomfortable expression on Agate's face. "You'll get used to them."

"Not bloody likely," Cady muttered. "I never could."

"Me neither," Steffy admitted. "But it goes well with the suit doesn't it?"

Agate didn't think so, but she wisely kept her mouth shut. She didn't want to protest too much, she was afraid that her friends might change their minds about letting her do this thing. Cady already teetered towards doing so, and Agate daren't chance pushing her further.

"Time to go," she said breathlessly. More than a little excited now that the time to leave was upon her.

"Are you sure?" This from Steffy.

Agate nodded, smiling in what she hoped was a confident sort of way. "I am."

"Let's go find Grimm, then," Cady said, and Agate was relieved to hear the acceptance in her voice.

She couldn't wait to meet Mr. Aleksandr Fromin. Maybe he could tell her about these strange crooked shark creatures she'd heard about from the wino – after she wiped his memory clean of Daemons and Shikar and damning photographs, of course.

Chapter One

Aleksandr – Alek – Fromin felt his stomach do a wild somersault when he first caught sight of the woman.

Her wild red hair was so bright it nearly glowed under the dim lamplight of the Paris street. Alek had never known he was a man partial to redheads – he'd certainly never been before – but he felt himself grow hard just from looking at her long, waving locks.

She was young, a college student she'd said in her emails – though how any college student could afford to fly out here and meet him on such short notice boggled his mind. He'd nearly starved during his own college years, and probably would have if not for his scholarships and grants. Her clothes were neat and smart, quite flattering on her tall, delicate frame. The navy blue messenger bag slung over her shoulder matched the clothes well. But the color, so chic and serious, did nothing to flatter her delicious golden skin.

He hardened further, his cock straining at the fastening of his jeans. Shifting to ease the pressure, he casually lowered the newspaper he'd been perusing into his lap. He didn't read French all that well anyway.

Her emailed description of herself hadn't done her justice. She'd mentioned the red hair, of course, and her height. And her weight, a tidbit of information that had surprised and amused him. In his experience, women did just about everything they could to avoid the mere mention of their weight.

She hadn't said anything about how her full and round breasts were, or how her legs seemed to stretch for miles and miles in their sheen of silken stockings. He raised his hand in greeting, eager to capture the attention of her dark brown eyes, and wasn't at all surprised to note that even her hands were lovely, as she returned his gesture.

Agate Jones approached the small round café table where he sat and smiled brightly. "I am Agate," she said, unnecessarily. "You are Mr. Aleksandr Fromin."

She had a voice to make any grown man weep with lust.

"Please, call me Alek." He offered his hand and she looked at it without taking it, frowning slightly.

"Alek," she said, and his name sounded like thick molasses on her tongue.

A long, uncomfortable silence reigned between them. He was about to withdraw his hand when she seemed to start, shook her head almost imperceptibly, then quickly reached for his hand with her own. She shook it almost violently, smiling even wider.

"I forgot," she said, and laughed almost giddily.

Alek wondered if she might be a little drunk. He breathed deeply, fully expecting to catch a whiff of spirits on her breath. Instead it was he who now felt drunk—on her wonderful scent. It was like nothing he'd ever smelled before, floral and sweet and spicy all at once, and he liked it very much. He shifted in his seat again. Agate was still shaking his hand and he was forced to disengage from her before she pulled his arm out of its socket. After a brief struggle—she had quite a grip—he had control of his hand again.

“You forgot what?” He prodded her, looking at her strange, ethereal beauty. He wondered what she looked like naked.

She sat down in the seat opposite him. “Nothing.”

“Would you like a coffee?” he offered, at a loss for the first time in recent memory. He had no idea how to start this conversation with her, how to speak of this strange and unbelievable event that had brought them together. Emailing the details of his encounter to her and her group of fellow students was one thing, mentioning them aloud was quite another.

He was crazy to have come here. And this gorgeous piece of jailbait was just as crazy to have flown all the way out here from the States simply to talk to him. He'd told her to wait, that he was only on assignment here in Paris for a few days, that he would return to New York and tell her everything then. But she had insisted on meeting him, here, tonight.

It was odd. But then these past several days had been odd. This past week or so of wondering and waiting and second-guessing had his usually neat and methodical mind racing in circles of wonder and doubt and denial. His world had gone completely insane all around him.

Alek wondered dispassionately if he had gone insane too.

“Is it good?” she asked, cocking her head to one side. He couldn't help but notice how intense her eyes were, so focused and alert. Her lashes were long as hell and dark, but tipped with reddish gold. His stiff dick noticed it too, and liked it very much. Damn. He must be feeling the effects of all this recent stress more than he'd guessed; his libido had never been this out of control.

“I guess, if you like that sort of thing. There's tea if you'd prefer,” he added.

“Do you like coffee?” The word sounded exotic coming from her somehow, though her accent had no inflection to give him a clue as to where she might originally be from. And he was something of an expert on accents and the people who possessed them. “Or do you like tea?”

“I suppose if I had to choose, I'd choose the coffee. Black with no sugar.”

“Then I shall have coffee-black-with-no-sugar,” she said the words so fast they nearly hummed together.

He motioned for a passing waiter and ordered for her, eyeing her all the while. She was looking about the place with wonder and awe, drinking in every sight as if to save it for later recollection. And then he knew. Knew why she was acting so strange and so

jittery. She seemed so young to him then, and he felt almost guilty for wanting her as much as he did. Well, no, he didn't feel guilty at all. She was too damn appealing.

"You've never been to Paris," he said knowingly.

Her eyes were wide on his. "Yes, I have. For a few minutes only, but I have been here."

"Ah. You changed flights at the airport then?"

The look on her face was a study of puzzlement, consternation, and excitement. He couldn't read her, not at all, and it unsettled him. He was very good at reading people, he had to be in his line of work as a photojournalist, but he had no idea what the hell was going on behind Agate's wide, dark eyes.

The arrival of her cup of coffee diverted her attention then. She grabbed the cup in her long, elegant fingers and brought it to her lips. Alek gritted his teeth as he saw her lick her lips in anticipation, before taking a healthy swallow of the brew.

She sprayed the table with it as she promptly spat it back out.

"Ack, *by Grimm*, what is this vile drink!" She gasped violently, waving her hand before her mouth as if she might faint.

Alek winced, though her voice was beautiful even when she shouted, and watched the waiter hurry back to their table with a feeling of helplessness. Agate was still causing a lot of noise as she sloshed the cup back onto the table and coughed dramatically. Heads turned at every table to look at them.

"What is wrong, Mademoiselle?" The concerned waiter asked in English.

Agate surprised both Alek and the waiter when she responded in flawless French. "This coffee drink is awful. I need some water, please. Do you have water?"

"*Oui*. Of course we do," the stiff-backed server scurried off to fetch a glass.

"I think you insulted him," Alek murmured, studying her. "Most people love French coffee, you know."

"Do they? I must remember that. And *people* may love it but I do not. I hate coffee," she said with a look of distaste.

"You didn't have to order it, then." What was wrong with this strange woman? Was she a simpleton or something? No, she couldn't be, she was a college student at a very demanding and academic school – perhaps she was just something of a flake.

But she was a damned sexy flake. He wondered how easy it would be to get her wet and ready in his bed. And he wondered if he could get her that way tonight.

"I wanted to try it," she sounded forlorn.

Her water arrived, and the waiter thumped it rudely onto the table so that it splashed over the rim of the glass. He was French, and he was miffed, and Alek found the stiff man's attitude quite amusing.

Agate, apparently, did not. As the waiter turned away, huffing, she caught at his hand.

"Please do not be insulted, sir," she pleaded in her perfect, almost textbook French. "I did not mean to offend. I did not know I would dislike the coffee so and I apologize."

The man softened at once, and Alek found himself jealous. He'd have given a lot to have Agate look at him that way, her eyes pleading, soft limpid pools of brown light.

The waiter patted Agate's hand. "Of course Mademoiselle does not like coffee. It is perhaps too strong a drink for one so delicate as you. I am not offended, please don't apologize on my account."

Alek rolled his eyes.

"Thank you," she sighed then pulled away from the waiter, and reached for her water. She took a huge gulp, sighed, then took another.

She was so animated...why couldn't he read her? It bothered him.

"Do you have your photos with you?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," he reached into a black portfolio case at his feet, removed the pictures, and handed them across to her. "Tell me you've seen stuff like this before and I won't believe you."

Agate studied the pictures, sharp photos of strange monstrous creatures and men throwing fire from their fingertips, pursing her lips in concentration.

He wanted to lick those lips. To suck on them. He shifted again in his seat, but it was no use, his cock felt full to bursting in his pants. It was nearly painful.

Her gaze locked with his, jolting him. She had such a powerful stare, such deep eyes.

He realized suddenly that she was wearing colored contacts. He wondered what color her eyes really were and became quite obsessed with how he might go about finding that out for himself. He supposed it would be easier just to ask her, but it sure as hell wouldn't be half as fun.

"These are all the photographs you have?"

He blinked. And remembered again why they were here. Damn but this woman wreaked havoc on his strict self-possession. He tore his eyes away from her face, looking at the photos instead. "Yes. What do you think? Do you know what those things are? What they were doing in a New York City park?"

"Where are the..." she seemed to search for the word, "...the negatives?" She blatantly ignored his questions.

Alek felt a little shadow of doubt, a small frisson of caution, and frowned. His instincts never led him astray and something about this woman didn't sit right with him. Well, a lot of things about her didn't sit right, but now it seemed important that he pay more attention to that instead of her luscious breasts.

"They're at my apartment in New York," he lied easily. Actually, they were in his portfolio, but she didn't need to know that.

"We asked that you bring them," she frowned. "When we emailed you."

"I was already here in Paris when I received your email. You don't need the negatives anyway," he pointed out, "the photographs show everything. I developed them myself."

She blinked. "I need them for authentication purposes." The words were well practiced.

She sounded like an automaton when she said them.

His curiosity and his caution escalated at once. "I can assure you that they are authentic."

"But I need the negatives," she exclaimed. "You'll have to go home and get them."

He choked on an incredulous laugh. "I don't have to do anything. What are you so bent out of shape about anyway? Those photos aren't doctored, they're real. What I saw was real," he started to get angry. "I'm not lying about this."

"Bent out of shape?" Her eyes rolled as if she were swamped with confusion and rising panic. "Doctored? Cady didn't explain these phrases, I don't know what this means—" she groaned and tears filled her eyes.

Alek felt like a heel. Even though he had no cause to—this woman was a nutter and he'd probably be better off getting up right now and leaving—he felt like he'd just kicked a puppy.

"Look, I might have the negatives back at my hotel here," he offered smoothly.

She jumped on the possibility, her eyes dried instantly and her smile was brilliant. "Let's go look."

His mind reeled with her mercurial changes of mood. But she'd actually offered to go with him, back to his room. Alek had never felt so lucky. He felt certain he'd have her in bed in no time once he got her into his room. Maybe once he'd had a taste of her, his mind would clear long enough for him to study her. To find out what it was about her that had him wanting to look over his shoulder every few seconds, as if he feared an ambush. Once he'd had her a couple of times, he felt sure he could read her better. Actually, it might take more than a couple of times...

God, she was so damn sexy he almost lost it, almost creamed his jeans merely looking forward to the night's promise.

He ignored his misgivings about her, of course. She was that hot.

The photographs disappeared into the messenger bag. She slung it over her shoulder, jumped up from her seat, threw a large bill note on the table, paused, then added another to it.

And then he had it. Again he felt sure he knew what it was about her. This woman was rich. So rich she was eccentric, flighty, and careless about leaving exorbitant tips behind for mediocre service. It made perfect sense now.

At least she wasn't snobby, her effusive apologies to the waiter had proven that beyond a doubt. He couldn't stand snobby, self-centered women.

Alek picked up his portfolio, well aware that the negatives to his photographs were inside it. Well aware too, that he was luring this eccentric, animated young lady to his lair with the full intent of fucking her brains out. And he didn't feel at all guilty about it.

She grabbed at his hand, tangling her fingers with his. It was an almost innocent gesture. But she was an adult – for all she looked so close to being jailbait – and so was he. Holding hands wasn't all they'd do tonight. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Chapter Two

Alek Fromin was extremely appealing. His hair was brown with bright blond highlights, hanging down to his shoulders in negligent waves. His skin was dark from the sun—oh how she longed to one day see the sun!—and his intelligent eyes were so pale a blue they looked like ice.

But they were too hot for ice. They fairly burned into her. She knew he was attracted to her. Knew, too, that he wanted to “get in her pants”, as Cady might have said. She wanted him in her pants—skirt—as well, but she knew it was an impossibility. He was a human and she was a Shikar. A Shikar sent to steal this human’s memory.

She felt so guilty.

But not *that* guilty.

She liked holding hands with him as they walked back to his hotel. Of course she knew what a hotel was—she’d been studying the human culture for years—but she hadn’t seen one up close before. More than anything, Agate hoped it had an elevator—and that she would get a chance to ride in it.

The streets of Paris were teeming with people, even though it was night. Lamps illuminated their way and beckoned from the dozens of shops they passed. Agate felt the energy and purpose in the people around her, felt their enthusiasm—their joy of life.

She knew that her people were needed here, to help protect these humans from the threat they were so innocently oblivious to. It made her feel both sad and proud. Sad that Shikars must always keep themselves secret from humans who were known for fearing things they did not understand. And proud because her people would not hold such prejudices against the humans, the Shikars would always keep the world safe from the monsters that roamed the night. It was a Shikar’s duty and privilege to protect those weaker than themselves.

And humans were, generally, much weaker than Shikars. But Aleksandr Fromin... Agate wasn’t so sure about him. She sensed a core of steel underneath his brooding, handsome exterior. There was something about his eyes that warned her he was not a man to be underestimated, nor taken lightly. He’d seen much in his life—Agate could clearly see the jaded cynicism in him—he’d suffered much.

At least she could take some of his suffering away from him. He would not be haunted or dogged by the nightmarish memory of the Daemons or the Shikar Warriors he’d witnessed battling with each other, not after tonight. She would make sure of it.

“Have you ever seen these monsters?” He was obviously thinking along similar lines as she.

Agate nodded. It would do no harm to be open and truthful with him now—he wouldn't remember it later anyway. "Many times. There are more than you might think, far more."

Alek paused under the yellow glow of a streetlight and looked at her pensively for a long moment. "I've been trying to convince myself that this has all been some hallucination brought on from stress. I might have believed it eventually if not for the photographs."

"I know." She would help him with that, at least.

He shook his head, his lips twisting in a self-deprecating smile. "How can you know? Monsters do not exist. Seven-foot men who throw fire from their fingertips do not exist. They can't. If they did, everyone would know about it."

"Oh, you would be very surprised about that. Humans prefer to look the other way when something supernatural is going on. Not very many people have seen these Daemons. And even fewer have seen the Shikar Warriors. They refuse to see the truth that is staring them in the face."

"And what is that?" he asked, looking bored, but Agate knew better. The wheels of his mind were spinning. He was both fascinated and skeptical about their topic of conversation.

Agate felt her heart soften for him. He was so stoic, so reserved. Even when facing what must be a terrifying ordeal such as this.

"The truth of it is that these monsters, we call them Daemons, roam the Earth with increasing frequency and violence. They care for nothing and no one. Their one drive is to feed on humans with strong spiritual and psychic gifts, to feast on their life force to fuel their own horrible existence. The men you saw—the ones in your photos—they are Shikars. A species not too dissimilar from humans—though they live in secret underneath the surface of the Earth's crust—who are sworn to protect humans from the Daemons' violent hunger."

Alek laughed darkly, clearly not believing her story. "You must be joking. You don't really believe any of this crap, do you?"

Crap? Cady used the word often, and though Agate had never asked what it meant, she knew it was a derogatory word all the same. "You have seen this for yourself. You were caught in one of their battles, your pictures are proof that what I say is true."

He was silent for a long while, lost in deep thought. His eyes were hard as flint rock when they swept her from head to toe, and Agate was sure they held no small amount of suspicion. "If all of this were true," he said at last, "then these Shikars would hate for these pictures to get out."

Agate was shocked at his cunning, but determined to give nothing away. He was watching her closely now. If she faltered, this human—whom she now understood was quite dangerous when cornered, as he must no doubt feel in his present situation—would not allow her further opportunity to recover the proof he possessed, nor would he bother hanging around long enough for her to rob him of his memory.

Now was the time when all her cunning would be needed and though some might underestimate this in her, she had plenty of it when the situation called for such a thing. Agate simply chose, in most cases, not to flaunt it.

“You are absolutely right,” she said truthfully, knowing full well that this man would see it if she lied.

Unable to resist the urge that had been growing inside her since she’d first heard his sexy bedroom voice, she leaned into him, rising on her tiptoes. He was taller than she’d first thought, even with her borrowed heels. She lifted her face and pressed her lips to his. Her hands came up to his shoulders to steady herself as the world reeled about her. He seemed to allow her the upper hand in this intimacy for but a moment. Then he took total control, dominating the kiss, and Agate was lost.

His hands came about her waist, lifting her hard against him. She felt his erection pressed tight to her belly, so hot and hard, as if there were no clothes separating them. She gasped, parting her lips, and his tongue filled her mouth. He tasted like hot, hard, demanding male and a swirling flame of lust licked at her womb. Visions danced in her head, swamping her, coming faster and faster –

And she could see inside of him. Images of war and battle and tragedy, graphic pictures of human suffering, of violence and famine and death – they flowed like raging whitewater from his mind to hers. Her empathic traits – dull and weak until now – flared as hot and bright as their kiss, and she could *see* into him. See his every secret, every thought, every memory.

The Daemons were there, as were the Shikars. The memory of the battle he’d witnessed haunted him, but not as she’d imagined it might. He was not so devastated by the possibility that such things existed, but that he had somehow misinterpreted them. That he didn’t understand them and that these beings had been in his world all along without his knowledge aggravated and angered him.

And the memory of war was there also, human war. Agate had only seen pictures of such violence before – but now she was reliving the horror through his memories. He had been in the middle of the gunfire and the explosions, taking his pictures, documenting the events with a cool and detached ruthlessness. More than anything, he believed in recording the events that shaped his world, in documenting reality with as much detail as possible.

He was no different than she in this respect. The both studied the world around them, at times separate and alienated from all they must witness and record, even as they were caught up in the middle of it.

He’d been hit by bullets, cut with blades, burned and bruised and torn. He’d known such pain, physical and mental, but through it all he’d taken his pictures. Alek had been born in the midst of war, in the Ukraine, and his family’s flight to America had done nothing to help him forget it. He understood war, even as he hated it. He could not sit back and do nothing as parts of the world lived in chaos.

Alek and his camera held witness as the world rumbled its discontent.

Agate saw everything, shared in his pains and his triumphs, lost in the wonder of his kiss.

His mouth ate at hers. His tongue uncovered and conquered every secret, tasting her, discovering her. The strength of his arms encircled and imprisoned her. A strong hand anchored atop the rising curve of her buttocks. The other swept up her back and tangled into the hair at her nape. He held her so tight she could have wept, her heart full to bursting with need and love and empathic understanding.

She could not take his memory from him. Not now. Not after touching his mind like this. Not after knowing his heart so well and so dear.

Alek sucked her lower lip, using his teeth to nibble erotically. His hand came around to cup her breast, nearly burning her through her clothing. Agate moaned. Then, with a gasp, she pulled away, nearly stumbling on her shaking legs. Too much longer in his arms and she would have willingly made love to him there on the street, with the whole world passing by unnoticed. She wanted him that much.

Their eyes met. And Agate saw that he had felt much the same as she.

“We’ll finish this,” he said roughly, gaze burning into hers.

Weakly, she nodded. “Yes,” she breathed unsteadily.

His jaw clenched. Agate heard his teeth grit with his resolve. He took her hand this time, holding her fast and strong, as if he’d drag her along should she prove unwilling. She wasn’t—unwilling, that is. Not at all.

With breathless anticipation, she walked alongside him, nearly skipping to keep up with his long strides. She smiled to herself. Cady was going to be so pissed.

It seemed she would be late getting back after all.

Chapter Three

A small shop caught his attention, dragging him out of his erotic thoughts—each involving his escort’s naked body, long legs, and sugar-sweet lips. Her mouth fascinated him beyond all reason.

He wanted to fuck that mouth.

Wanted her on her knees in front of him, eager and willing, as she wet her lips with that wicked tongue of hers and opened for him.

Get it together, man. If he weren’t careful, he’d lose all control, take her to a darkened side street and be done with any romance or softness. She made him that crazy.

But first he needed to buy a box of condoms. He only had one or two in his overnight bag—they’d been there for weeks now, he’d just been too busy and preoccupied to use them—and he knew he’d need more than that tonight. Making a detour in this shop would only cost a few precious moments.

He ignored the devilish urge to just forget about the extra protection, that time was too precious, he shouldn’t squander it, even the few seconds it would take to make a quick purchase. But he’d never neglected to use a condom before and he wasn’t about to make an exception now, no matter how hot he was to have the mercurial minx at his side.

Agate nearly tripped as he made the swift detour into the storefront door. He was loath to release her hand—he wasn’t sure if he feared she might bolt or if he just liked the feel of their tangled fingers—but he did, allowing her to enter the door before him, an ingrained gentlemanly gesture he hadn’t even given second thought to.

It amused him, as well as puzzled him, when Agate bounced excitedly over to a display of chocolate bars and candies. She seemed so childlike in her enthusiasm, but there were moments when he saw a seriously adult mentality behind her eyes. She was more than she seemed on the surface, he was certain of that.

There had been a moment, when he’d kissed her, when he’d almost felt as if he knew her far more intimately than he should have. As if they’d already shared many secrets about their lives, their pasts, their hopes and dreams with each other. But it was fleeting, and just as he noticed the incredible feeling of discovery—of the elemental and soulful *knowledge* of her—she had pulled away from him.

It was a good thing she’d done that, too. Alek wasn’t sure, even now, that he would have had the strength to pull away himself. The tight need in him was stronger than any he’d ever experienced. He’d held onto his self-control by a thread, and it was a wonder he hadn’t taken her there on the street.

"I love chocolate," she exclaimed with a bright smile, grabbing a generous handful of assorted sweets. She plunked them down on the counter before the bemused-looking cashier, and added several more to it. "These too," she added one of each of the local newspapers and two glossy magazines.

Alek dragged his gaze away—she fascinated him more than anybody he'd ever met—and made his way down the aisle he felt sure would lead him to what he was looking for. He grabbed a small box of three condoms—a French brand he wasn't familiar with, but it was latex and that was what he wanted—then decided to add two more boxes. Just in case.

He didn't pay much attention to the bell ringing over the door as it opened to admit another person into the small shop. Didn't notice the nervous, agitated young man until it was too late.

"Get over here, put your hands up," the man commanded in French, pulling a handgun from the pocket of his jacket and pointing it first at the shopkeeper, then at Agate, and finally leveling it upon Alek. "Get over here," he barked again.

Alek raised the hand that wasn't holding his portfolio case and slowly moved to the front of the aisle where the man stood with his weapon. He wasn't afraid, merely pissed off at the inconvenience, as he patiently waited for the opportunity to diffuse the situation.

The man turned to the cashier and demanded that she hand over the money in the till. Quickly, as if he knew Alek was the more dangerous of the store's inhabitants, the thief brought his attention back around. His eyes, darting around in such a way that Alek suspected he was pepped up on more than just adrenaline, settled on the portfolio and lingered.

"Hand it over, mister."

Alek shook his head, smiling a little. "No." He really didn't want to hurt this petty criminal if he didn't have to. He didn't want to scare Agate with any show of violence. But he wasn't going to give up his portfolio bag—it held several rolls of film he'd yet to develop, not to mention the negatives that seemed so important to his soon-to-be lover.

Besides, it was his. He held on to what belonged to him.

The man, growing ever more agitated and impatient, waved the gun threateningly. "I'll shoot you dead. Hand it over, your wallet and your watch too."

His watch wasn't worth more than a few bucks, and the crystal face was cracked from a brush with a car bomb explosion he'd gotten to close too only a few days ago. Placing his portfolio at his feet, he removed his watch and held it aloft for the thief to take.

After he'd snatched it away, the man growled over at Agate—who strangely enough looked calm and unconcerned. "Come on over here, pretty girl, and give me your purse." He turned back to Alek. "And I'll have that bag," he insisted.

"No you won't," Alek said dispassionately, watching Agate come forward out of the corner of his eye. She seemed so unconcerned, so calm and casual...it didn't agree

with the excitable, overly animated persona she'd shown until this point. He would wonder at that later, after he'd found a way to keep possession of his portfolio without resorting to killing the damned punk in front of him.

The man was angry now and swung back his arm to hit Alek across the face.

Three things happened all at once.

The cashier ducked behind the counter with a groan. Alek gathered himself, ready to make his move. And Agate seemed to disappear into thin air.

The thief's arm swung down and Alek easily dogged the blow. Grabbing his assailant's arm he wrenched it brutally, threw his fist into the man's throat, and swept his foot against the man's ankles, tripping him to the ground. Agate instantly appeared at his side and removed the gun from the thief's hand, easily, even as he struggled to bring it around to fire it at one of them.

"You shouldn't do things like this," she murmured, as if she were admonishing a recalcitrant child instead of a violent criminal. "Someone could get hurt."

It was so fast, taking no more than a couple of seconds, and then it was over. Alek was just grateful that no one had been hurt.

The man was on the ground now, clutching at his throat and choking, and Alek put a foot on his chest to keep him there—just in case he recovered and tried something else.

He frowned at Agate. She had put the gun on the counter, where the cashier was only just rising again, and gone straight back to studying the magazine rack. As if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

Who the hell was this woman? And, if his eyes hadn't deceived him in what he'd just witnessed, how the hell had she managed the disappearing trick?

Suspicious gathered in his mind and he determined to get her back to his hotel room as soon as possible for more reasons than the obvious one of making love to her until she screamed her head off. Something was going on with her, something big, and he did *not* like being kept in the dark about it.

As the cashier made to call the authorities, Alek grabbed his portfolio case again and paid for his condoms, as well as Agate's mountain of sweets and reading material. He threw everything into the case, grabbed her hand in his once more and marched with her out into the street. And he didn't slow their pace until they'd safely reached his hotel.

* * * * *

Elevators were every bit as exciting as she'd dreamed they might be.

Agate was having a hell of a time resisting the urge to press every single button on the control console of the elevator. She knew Alek already had his suspicions about her – he'd seen her Travel, even if he didn't understand what it meant.

There'd been no help for it. She'd had to use her Traveling ability to reach the would-be thief's side quickly enough to disarm him. Or so she'd thought at the time. How could she have foreseen that Alek was a Warrior and that he would defuse the situation before she could get close enough to even try?

Agate found herself even more attracted to him after such a heroic display of strength and courage. She wanted him. Perhaps more than was wise, given their circumstances, but she couldn't have fought the attraction even if she'd a mind to. Which she didn't.

He hadn't spoken to her for the past few blocks, nor when they'd entered the hotel. It was a little disconcerting, his somber silence, but she persevered. How could she not, while in the wondrous glass elevator as it rose through the floors of the towering building?

Her fingers fairly itched with the need to press the sleek, shiny buttons.

The doors opened to their floor. Alek ushered her forth ahead of him, but she managed to reach out at the last second and press one of the buttons. She almost giggled; it glowed in response to her touch. The doors closed behind them and she let Alek take her elbow and guide her to the door of his room.

It was dim in the room when she entered. When Alek closed the door, sealing them off alone from any intruders, she couldn't resist looking at him in the shadows. All Shikars were sensitive to sunlight; evolution had forced them to live in darkness but in losing the light the Shikars had gained much to make up for it. They possessed exceptional night vision, for one thing. It was because of this gift that she could see him so well in the dark, as clearly as she could when they were outside under the warm glow of the street lamps.

But now the teasing hollows of his face were traced by the darkness, giving him an even more dangerous appearance. His hair looked darker and softer, his face looked rugged and strong.

Agate shuddered delicately.

Alek's strong, square jaw clenched. His gaze swept over her hungrily. And then he reached for her.

"Who are you?" he rasped before slamming his lips onto hers.

The kiss was wet and hot and hard. Agate clutched at him, swept up in the vortex of passion. She wanted to crawl up his body, wanted to wrap herself around him and swallow him inside.

His teeth scraped against her lower lip and she moaned. The wide breadth of his hands held the sides of her head, directing the angle and depth of their kiss. His tongue filled her mouth, thrusting deep inside. Agate opened her eyes and was stunned to see his gaze staring deeply into hers, as if he'd waited for her to look at him.

With a rough curse he broke the kiss. Her mouth felt swollen and bruised and she licked her lips to gather his taste that lingered there.

The pale blue fire of his eyes flared hot, watching her mouth intently.

“Who are you?” he asked again.

“I do not know what you mean...”

She already knew it was useless to lie to him. He could see so much, was remarkably astute. “You know what I mean. You’re strange, too strange for words. Elevators, chocolate bars, magazines, and coffee—they’re so commonplace but you act as if you’ve never seen any of them before.”

Her spine stiffened, affronted. “But of course I have seen these things—”

“You speak English without using contractions, yet you command the language as if born to it. You speak French like a native, but use it with textbook accuracy and precision. I can’t place your accent—and I’ve studied accent and speech patterns for years in my work—and your gestures give nothing away. Except that you are uncomfortable with everyday conveniences, such as the elevator. So what the hell is going on with you, Agate—if that is your real name?”

“It *is* my real name.” She scowled, at a loss for any explanation she could give him besides the truthful one—and that she could not do without permission from the Council or The Elder himself. Her mouth tingled, her breasts ached...she could hardly think beyond her simmering passion for this man.

Therein lay an answer, or at least a temporary one.

“Do you really want to talk,” she looked at him from beneath her lashes, almost daring him to make a move, “or do you want to make love?”

Alek’s eyes burned hotter than ever.

He pushed her back against the wall, lifting her up with easy strength to rest against the hard rise of his cock. Agate sighed into his mouth, parting her lips for the invasion of his tongue.

The kiss shook both their worlds.

Chapter Four

Those images again, bombarding her, filling her up with every secret he possessed so that she knew him. Knew him like she knew herself. His life, his memories, fed straight to her mind and heart through their kiss.

And she was lost in the wonder of...of love. Pure and uncompromising, it was there in her heart. She wanted him, with her body and with her mind. But she also wanted him with her heart. It was foolish madness. It would eventually tear her apart. He was a human; she knew she could not have him because of that.

But she could have this.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, locking her ankles at his back, she held on to him for dear life.

His mouth was so hot. It scalded a path from her mouth to her chin to her neck and she leaned her head back to allow him his sinful exploration. His hands came up to cup and mold her breasts, pressing and squeezing them until they ached and the nipples swelling to tight points.

“I wanted to fuck you raw the first second I saw you,” he growled into her ear, biting her earlobe delicately.

Agate moaned. He rocked his hips in erotic circles between her legs, bouncing her back softly against the wall with his efforts.

“I’m going to tear this shirt of yours off and suck your nipples until you scream,” he promised.

Her jacket disappeared. He removed it with efficient, practiced skill. The buttons of her shirt were no impediment to his desire. The strength of his hands tore at the fragile material, sending buttons and threads flying. She wore no bra, a fact that—from his lusty growl—pleased him greatly.

The tips of his fingers plucked at her stabbing nipples and she gasped. His head dipped, his hair tickled over her face, and he slurped one nipple greedily into his lips. His tongue stabbed at her, licked over her, while his lips and teeth drew at the delicate flesh. Such a sweet and gentle torture was beyond anything Agate had ever experienced—she of the hundreds of sex toys, which she both designed and tested out regularly.

No mere sex toy could have prepared her for the reality of this man.

His mouth savored first one nipple, then the other, feeding on her with moist, audible sucking noises that enflamed her senses and made her rock against him with need. One of his hands came around her, plumping and squeezing her ass, moving her

on him so that her cunt ground against his erection deliciously. The other held her breast captive for his hungry kisses.

Agate held him tight, her hands moving to rake through the cool silk of his bright hair. "Please," she moaned.

"Please what?" he asked darkly, knowing full well what she wanted. What she needed. "Please suck you harder?" He did, teeth scraping against her until she shuddered and cried out. "Please get you naked?"

He lowered her to the floor, unzipped the side of her skirt and jerked it down to her ankles. The wall was the only thing keeping her standing, her knees had gone weak and her head was spinning with desire. His gaze burned into hers as he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her pantyhose and jerked them down to her ankles as well. Kneeling at her feet now, his hands swept up to feel her naked legs, leaving goose pimples in their wake.

Then his gaze lingered, caught and held captive, on the bright white gauze of her panties. A lacy confection of her own design, it was sheer and completely scandalous, revealing the tightly trimmed fur of her cunt.

As if entranced, he stared at her, at the stain of her gathering dampness and the shadow of her red hair. With a small, lusty sigh of male appreciation he lowered to her. His mouth pressed into her through the veil of her panties, teeth and tongue stabbing her through the fabric, wetting her with his moist breath.

Agate cried out, shaking, her hands moving to his head to help steady herself.

His fingers sought her, slipping underneath the fragile material to tease and tickle her. The tips of those fingers fondled her slit, delving into her wet need, spreading the lips wide. Her clit was swollen and throbbing, and when he unerringly found it, pressed it like a secret button, she keened wildly and pulled at his hair as stars exploded behind her eyes.

Alek jerked back from her grasp, tearing her panties with his teeth. His hands made quick work of removing that last barrier and then he rose before her again. His hands roughly opened the fastening of his jeans and his erection sprang free. Heavy and thick, it bobbed and stabbed towards her, a work of such beauty she could have wept. And then he was taking her up in his arm.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, spreading herself eagerly for him.

"Hold on, baby," he warned, licking and nibbling at her gasping mouth.

One long, deep shove and he slid home. Stretching her so tight and so full that she shrieked with the surprise and pleasure. He only had to rock against her once, sending himself deeper, and she was undone. Her climax rocked her, so swift and so hard that it shook her entire being.

Alek's fingers sought her out, moving between their bodies to stroke and tease her clit, making her come even harder around him.

"Let it go, yes. God, you're so fucking ripe." He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and made short, gentle thrusts with his hips. "Milk me, just like that, come on. So tight. So wet. *Shit,*" he gritted his teeth and abruptly stilled against her.

Agate's body pulsed and shook with the wet eruption of pleasure that spilled from deep within her. The climax eased, but her desire and need did not. If anything, the force her release had rejuvenated her passion. She wanted more.

Using the strength of her legs she bounced herself upon him, impaling herself on his thick cock over and over again. The width and breadth of his penetration stretched her, burned her, and the friction of skin against skin was so exquisite. She was gasping and keening her ecstasy in his mouth, kissing him feverishly, deeply, offering herself completely.

Alek's hands moved to her hips to steady her, and he slammed deeper, harder in her. Filling her over and over again. Reaching nearly to her womb.

"Shit," he said again and stopped, holding still.

"Please," she tried to move on him, but his hands held her firmly, preventing it.

"I forgot to protect you," he kissed the corner of her mouth.

She frowned and tried move against him again.

"I didn't use a condom," he laughed darkly, pressing his forehead against hers. His gaze met hers directly, searing her with the passion that simmered in their depths. "Don't move or I'll spill."

Agate smiled and bit at his bottom lip playfully. Her arms looped around his neck, holding him close. "Spill all you want, I want to be messy with your seed."

He shuddered violently against her. "No. I've never..." he gasped harshly and moved in her once, hard.

"Please," she begged, arching up against him so that her breasts brushed his chest through the shirt he still wore.

"Oh shit," he gritted out and seemed to let go of his rigid self-control, slamming his hips fast and deep into her. "I can't help it." He seemed to be saying his thoughts aloud, unable to hold back. "You make me want to come all over you, inside your pussy, inside your mouth," he groaned.

"I want to taste your come," she goaded, knowing he danced along the razor edge of an explosive release.

His mouth slanted across hers in a bruising kiss.

Her back bumped over and over against the wall, her breasts bobbed heavily. Every gasp he wrung from her, every moan, he captured with his lips, drinking the sounds into his mouth like a man dying of thirst.

Her body tightened, bowing against him like a reed. Pleasure burst forth over her, like liquid starlight. It seemed her very fingertips sang with ecstasy. Agate screamed into his mouth and held on tight, her cunt squeezing him mercilessly like a swallowing mouth.

"*Fuck,*" he exclaimed and slammed into her hard enough to rattle her very bones. His cock pulsed like a heartbeat. The hot scalding wash of his come filled her, wet her, and burned her.

The skin of her thighs would bear the faint marks of his fingertips for days. They dug into her soft flesh, kneading and squeezing as he lost himself in the power of his release.

Long moments passed as they caught their breath. He continued to rock softly against her, small thrusts that kept the embers of her spent pleasure glowing hot. Their bodies were wet with each other, their scents mingled into one delicious perfume of passion and sex.

Alek kissed her again as if he couldn't resist, his lips parting hers, his tongue sliding deep and wet. Like his cock, so deep and hard inside her pussy even now, so soon after their explosion.

He never let her feet touch the ground. One minute her back was pressed tight against the wall, the next he was carrying her to the bed and laying her down on the mattress.

She rose up on her elbows, eyeing him.

"Keep your legs spread wide, baby," he urged softly. "Let me see that pretty pussy of yours."

With a smile, she did, glorying in the bright flame of approval in his eyes. Feeling shameless, daring, she lowered her fingers to herself, spreading the lips of her sex open like the petals of a flower.

Alek's hands were impatient and rough as he divested himself of his clothing. His eyes never left her, watching her fingers play over her clit and thrust into her hole.

Agate raised one of her damp, glistening fingers to her mouth. Her tongue licked out, tasting the honey and cream of their mixed fluids. Their eyes were locked now, their souls and hearts laid bare and open.

"Who are you?" he asked, so softly she almost didn't hear him.

"Your lover," she murmured.

"Yes. Mine," he said as if to himself. "All mine..."

Nude now, glorious and golden, he palmed his cock and stroked himself slowly, letting her see him. Agate felt her breath catch. He was so thick, so long. Still wet from her body, still hard. Perfect in every way.

"Spread wider for me, baby. Let me see you," his husky voice was a caress all its own. "Yes. Just like that."

He came down on the bed, on her, grabbing an ankle with one hand and the base of his cock with another. Pushing her ankle up high, almost to her shoulder, he positioned the head of his thickness at her slit. Rubbed her with it, smearing himself in her wetness.

"So beautiful," he breathed.

Agate sighed, feeling his heat and his touch throughout.

Slowly and gently, he pressed into her. He released her ankle and reached up to smooth away an errant lock of her hair that had fallen across her face. "I don't know what it is about you," he mused. "You make me feel...so much. Too much."

Their lips met. His cock filled her completely, one sure stroke to the hilt. His hands swept over her body, petting her, soothing and easing her beneath his weight.

"Alek," she sighed his name, feeling the echo of it sing in her heart.

"Say it again," he pressed light kisses to her eyes, nose and chin.

"Alek, Alek, Alek," she breathed it over and over again like a mantra.

"Lovely lips," he praised, licking and sucking at them. And he began to move on her, to rock into her body with his. Where before their passion had been a firestorm, it was now a warm and gentle wave that flowed sweetly. It took them deeper into something soft and dreamy that was somehow far more explosive than anything they had ever experienced.

Their bodies rolled, mussing the bed. Their limbs entwined, their hair tangled and their sweat dampened each other's skin. The sounds of their sighs and moans and gasps had the mysterious rhythm of primal music.

Alek's big toe skimmed her instep and she giggled. He smiled and nuzzled the side of her throat, nipping her just beneath her ear so that she gasped. When his lips moved down and drew on her tight, hard nipple, she cried out and bucked beneath him.

Her hands stroked down his back, feeling his muscles gather and roll beneath her fingers. The delineated muscles of his buttock fascinated her as they tightened and loosened with his thrusts. She couldn't resist trailing a finger into the crease of his ass, rejoicing when he moaned his response.

The push and pull of his cock came faster now. Alek pulled her legs up around his waist, and moved harder into her wet body.

"Mine," he gritted out. "All mine. Say it."

Agate could only moan and thrash her head, lost in the pleasure of their joined bodies.

"Say it," he barked through gritted teeth.

A drop of his sweat fell from his face onto her mouth. She tasted its saltiness with her tongue.

"Say you're mine." He ground down against her and she saw stars.

"Yes," she moaned.

"Say it."

"I *am* yours," she gasped.

His thumb rubbed against her clit, his cock stretched her to bursting. "You're mine. *Only* mine."

“Yes. Only yours. All yours.” Agate screamed as he slammed into her, hard and fast, rocking the bed beneath them. Unbelievably, another climax crashed through her, taking her by surprise so that she screamed again.

“You’re so fucking wet, so tight, so hot,” he moaned his sex words into her ear. “Come on, squeeze me with your sweet little pussy. This is only the beginning. I’m not letting you leave tonight. I’m going to come in your mouth, and in your ass. Even between your gorgeous tits.” He palmed them, still thrusting, still impaling her. “I’m going to fill you up with my cum until you’re dripping with it.”

She already was dripping with it. He slid in and out of her creamy wetness, an easy glide, and her body sang with delirious pleasure.

He thrust one last time, throwing back his head with a shout, coming deep. The release that took him, shook him, flooded into her like sweet, hot lightning.

The weight of his body collapsed on hers. His breath was harsh and deep and unsteady, and the thunder of his heartbeat pounded against her chest. They both lay there, stunned, as their bodies cooled.

Long moments passed. Agate stroked his hair, his head pillowed on her breasts. His mouth still pressing tiny, soft kisses against her. She sighed, smiling. Content.

Alek stilled, his body hard and unforgiving, like stone. He shoved off her, stood by the bed and looked at her with a wild stare. Raking his hands through his already disheveled hair, he seemed to be gripped by a strong and volatile emotion.

Agate frowned and reached for him. He swore, stepped back, turned and went into the bathroom. The door shut hard behind him.

It was a harsh withdrawal. Agate’s eyes stung. He’d turned from her, denied her, in every way. She could see it—in his eyes and in his face—that he had pulled completely away from her. After what she had believed was an emotional bonding, a spiritual release shared between them, he had left her. For him to retreat this way must mean that he had not felt the same as she. It wrenched her heart, cutting like a blade.

She put her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter Five

What the hell had just happened? Alek splashed his face with cold water, gulping at it with parched lips.

He didn't know this woman. Clearly, she was hiding something—a lot of somethings—from him. He had no reason to trust her. But never in his life, never in his wildest dreams, had he experienced anything like what had just happened between him and Agate.

He smelled her on his fingers, tasted her on his tongue, felt the imprint of her body wrapped around him still. She lingered in his mind and his heart as no woman ever had.

No. He couldn't let this happen. Wouldn't. It was crazy. He knew nothing about her but what she'd told him in email and what he'd observed for himself throughout the past few hours. What had just happened back there, in that bed, was sex.

Just sex.

Then why did he still think of her as his? In an elemental way, he wanted it to be true. Intellectually, he shied away from it with a panic.

There was no room in his life for a woman—any woman—especially not one who acted as if she'd never tasted coffee, never seen an elevator. He no longer believed she was simply some rich, eccentric young woman. There was so much more to it than that, so many more questions that couldn't be answered by so simple an explanation.

He couldn't want this mysterious woman as badly as he did. It was insane. Totally unlike him. And he sure as hell hadn't just made love to her. He'd never made love a woman—he'd only fucked them. Fucking was enough, sex was not meant to mingle with love or tenderness. Not for him.

It had been so sweet...he wanted her again. His cock was hard again. His balls were tight, as if he hadn't just shot himself dry twice already. Oh sweet shit, he'd actually had her without using protection. After all the trouble of seeing that he had enough, he'd neglected to use the damn condoms.

He'd never taken a woman naked like that before. Their skin slipping wet and raw against each other, no barriers between to keep them apart. So many things he'd never done before tonight, and they had seemed so easy—so *right*—with Agate.

The water was cold on his face, but it did nothing to cool his fever. He wanted her again. He had to have her again—a thousand times more—before he could think clearly, before he could sort through this. Now, he needed her now.

His hand hovered over the doorknob. His heart teetered with uncertainty...

* * * * *

Agate pulled her contacts out—before tonight she'd been fascinated with the very idea of wearing them—and threw them to the floor. It didn't matter if Alek saw her Shikar eyes glowing now. She wanted him to see, wanted him to know their true color. She wanted him to know everything.

With a sob, she wondered how she could face the rest of the night. Her duty to her people was to ensure that Alek remembered nothing of this. But her heart cried out that she let him remember, that she win his heart in return and keep him.

But she couldn't. So many times she'd already said this to herself, that she just couldn't keep him. They were so different from each other, indeed they were different species entirely. He still regarded her as a stranger, as an odd human woman at best. A life with him would be nearly impossible.

Thinking on the choices that faced her made her cry all the harder. Must she see her duty as a Voyeur done, or could she follow the dictates of her heart and soul?

The choice was taken from her. And no worse outcome could she have imagined.

"Where is he?" The Traveler—Grimm, a Shikar Traveler Caste of blackest eyes and most dangerous past—appeared at her side, his voice like midnight. "I'll kill the bastard and be done with it."

Unfortunately Alek chose that moment to return from his sojourn in the bathroom. He froze, catching sight of the ebony-cloaked man who towered over her.

"What the fuck...?"

Seeing an imminent showdown between the two men, Agate rose from the bed and grabbed at Grimm's arm. "Do not—"

His eyes swept down over her nude form, but she was not embarrassed nor was she intimidated. This was her lover's life on the line—she could see the truth of that in Grimm's eyes—and she would show no weakness.

"Do not what?" The words flowed like wine, smooth and rich. "Do not protect your honor? Do not see to it that this stupid human pays for making you weep?"

"He did not—" she protested, tugging at him when he would have flung her off.

"Do not lie to me, woman. I can see he has been with you, I can smell his touch all over you. He stole your purity, in every way, and must be punished."

Alek scowled. "Now wait just a minute. She wanted it just as much as me, and she was no spring flower, I can assure you. Now who the hell are you and what are you doing in my room?"

Agate felt his words cut her like a knife and gasped.

Grimm disentangled himself from her and approached Alek like the predator he was. "She was pure. No man's hand has touched her before yours. You take and you take, but you see nothing of the worth of what you have stolen."

“Grimm! There was no theft! I gave myself to him,” Agate marched to his side, deliberately avoiding Alek’s gaze. “Willingly. And I would do it again. He is my first and last lover.”

Grimm’s anger blazed with waves of heat. “You dare to claim him? A human male?”

“I do,” she heard Alek’s teeth grit and wondered if he understood any of the byplay between her and her Shikar protector. She glanced at him and remembered her eyes, how strange they must seem to him, but there was only a miniscule twitch at his lips to prove that he had even noticed them. “Let it go, Grimm. Please.”

“Get away from him, Agate,” Alek’s command surprised her. “Come here.”

She moved to his side immediately. His hand came up to her chin, tilting her face, his eyes studying hers. “I am sorry,” she said.

“You have a lot to tell me,” he murmured. “But not yet. Later.”

“You’ll be lucky if there is a later, pup,” Grimm intoned. “Tryton can deal with you.” He came forward, laid his hands on their shoulders, and the world disappeared.

Chapter Six

Four days passed. Long, lonely days in which Agate was confined to her home, ordered by Tryton—The Elder himself—to stay put and obey until further notice. She didn't see or hear from Alek, but she knew he was still here. Still in her world, so far beneath the surface of his own that no human could have ever found their way to it. She could feel him, close by. And her heart ached from the separation.

She wondered what he felt, if he was too consumed with the uncertainty of his surroundings and situation to think of her. Or if he thought of her with every waking moment, as she did him.

It was no surprise to her that Grimm had known of her innocence that night in the hotel. He seemed to know everything about everyone; it was just like him to know something so personal and secret.

It had, at first, surprised her that he'd made an issue of it. And she had tried to divert him with the bold claim that she meant to keep Alek, to mate with him. It had been a foolish claim and it had done nothing to save her lover. It may have, in fact, sealed his fate.

Unmated Shikar women took lovers if they wished, it was not taboo. But she had never done so, she'd always had her toys to keep her occupied. Sensuality and self-love were delicious pleasures to be enjoyed and explored by all. Every Shikar knew that, man or woman. She was no virgin, but neither had she taken a lover before Alek. She hadn't wanted to. Agate had always seen Shikar men as brooding, arrogant beasts, so she'd never felt lonely without one to call her own. Alek, a human, had been the most perfect man she'd ever encountered and she'd wanted him as she'd never wanted another.

But she feared now that she might have gone too far beyond the boundaries of what could be accepted when she had taken a human to be her first lover. She feared for Alek and what Tryton might do to him.

The hours stretched on and she waited...longing for her love.

* * * * *

"I am continually surprised by humans," Tryton told him, clapping him so soundly on the back that it nearly sent him tumbling.

Alek looked about his new home with a satisfied eye. All of his things had been fetched from his room in Paris and his apartment in New York City. His pictures, his camera equipment, his books, everything was here in its right place.

But Agate wasn't. She was still in her rooms, where Tryton had confined her while drilling him and testing him to see if he deserved her. A Shikar woman.

His mind still reeled from the whirlwind of events that had so drastically reshaped his life over the past few days. He could hardly believe all that had happened. And so quickly.

"You hardly know her. Yet you're willing to give up your life above just to be with her. Are you sure this is what you want?" Tryton gave him one last choice. "You could stay here, live here and fight with us, even if you didn't want her."

Alek had made his decision. And he knew it was the only decision that had been worth making. Four days without her had been hell, despite the hospitality Tryton and the other Shikars had shown him. He missed her. Knowing her one night had been enough to know that this was the right choice to make. "I need her." And it was as simple as that. "Staying here, becoming a photographer for the Shikar Voyeurs, that's just a perk. But it doesn't mean a damn thing without her."

He was incomplete without Agate. The time he'd spent with her, seeing her joy of life, holding her in his arms...had been the time of his life.

Tryton nodded, as if he'd expected that response. "You are a good man, Alek. Shaped by war and by human suffering; hardened. But still good. You will take proper care of her."

"I will."

"Grimm still wants to kill you. Or at least bloody you a little."

Alek fingered his jaw, wincing at the memory of The Traveler's fist hitting it like a battering ram. He had enough sense to know that the man had held back to keep from breaking the bone... He didn't want to find himself in another skirmish with the shadowy man in black. But for Agate, he'd risk any danger. "He can try."

Tryton chuckled. "You will do just fine here. Now to fetch the recalcitrant Watcher," he sighed. "I mean *Voyeur*. Damn Steffy and her cute little puns anyway," the seven-foot, blond Adonis left the room while still muttering to himself.

Alek smiled and waited for his Shikar mate, hoping that she would be as happy to see him as he would be her.

Chapter Seven

She raced into his room, not even bothering to knock. "You bastard! How could you keep me waiting like that?"

Alek laughed. "It's good to see you too, baby."

With a sob and a laugh, she launched herself into his arms, raining his face with wet kisses. "I was so scared that I would never see you again."

"I wouldn't have let that happen."

"How could I know that?"

"You looked into me. You saw me. You know me." He kissed her long and deep.

"How did you know about that—?"

He grinned. "Tryton told me a lot of things. I admit, I wasn't sure at first what I wanted to do. But after learning about you and your people, I know this is right."

"You'll stay with us? Work with the Voyeurs?"

"Only if you'll be part of that." He searched her eyes, noting how much more lovely they were without the dark lenses covering them. "Do you still feel so strongly about me, after so short a time?"

"I feel like I've been waiting for you forever," she exclaimed. "Of course I still want you."

"You're mine—say it," he smiled.

"I'm yours. Now your turn," she prodded.

"You're right, it is." He had her naked before him in seconds, her head almost spun with his determined efficiency. "I'm going to use that great big new bed of mine to its full advantage tonight," he promised. "You're wet," his fingers cupped her scarlet curls, "and hot. And tight."

She sighed as he lifted her and carried her to his bed.

His hands spread her knees and his head came down between them. His breath scorched her, as did his gaze. Alek pressed a wet, open-mouthed kiss onto her sex, licking her slit up and down like he might an ice cream cone. He sucked on her clit and probed her with his finger, thrusting it deep into her pussy like a cock.

Minutes later and she was bent over him, taking his cock so deep into her mouth she almost choked. He was velvet over steel in her mouth, hot and hard and heavy. The twin weights of his testicles were tight in her hands, and his scent was drugging and delicious in her lungs as she sucked and licked him to a creamy, jettisoning orgasm.

"*Shit*, baby, swallow it. Yes, oh god, your mouth is so good," he moaned, caught and lost in the spell of pleasure she wove about him.

Certain she had never tasted anything sweeter, she swallowed every last creamy drop of him. And found herself wanting more.

Then she was on her knees before him, feeling him sink balls deep into her slick, drenched cunt.

“So tight,” he panted, riding her like a stallion covering a mare.

He licked a finger and probed it into the moue of her anus and she screamed her release aloud, uncaring that someone might hear.

“I love it up my ass,” she panted. She’d often used toys there before.

“Then I’ll give it to you,” he promised and moved to fulfill it immediately.

She’d never been stretched so full. His cock buried to the hilt in her rear made her see stars. Her fingers rubbed her clit and his hands came around her to cup her breasts, to tease and pull at her nipples.

When she came, Alek joined her, his release so intense it almost hurt. He filled her ass with his cream, smearing it between their bodies. It was the most amazing orgasm he’d ever known.

He pushed her back onto the bed, spread her legs, pushing his mouth hard against her juicy pussy. Licking her, he tasted himself there too and found that he liked it. Agate bumped against his face, grinding her clit against his lips and mewling like a cat in mating season.

“I could eat you out all night and half the day,” he said the words against her, knowing she would feel the vibration of his voice. “You smell so damn sweet. You taste so damn good, baby.”

He watched the tiny contractions in her pussy as soft orgasms racked her. He knew he’d never get enough of her. He was already hard again, aching and full of enough juice to drown them both in it.

There was a convenient carafe of water on his bedside table, put there just for this purpose. He splashed it all over them as he prepared himself for her again. It fairly sizzled and turned to steam as it fell on their hot flesh.

The hot, wet core of her welcomed him like a mouth. Better than a mouth, it swallowed every inch he had to give. And he was soaring.

Agate nearly swooned, and it was as if she could feel the head of his cock bumping her heart, he was so deeply joined with her. Alek was stretching and filling up all her empty places with his love and with his passion. The bed creaked and protested as they galloped towards oblivion.

“I nearly went crazy without you,” he panted.

“Me too,” she moaned. “Let us never part again, please.”

“No. Never. I don’t know what’s happened. Fuck it, I don’t care. I just know I can’t be without you,” he slammed his cock deep, his balls slapping against her skin loudly. “I need you, baby. Just like this. Always like this.”

Her orgasm ripped through her, nearly knocking her unconscious it was so unexpectedly violent. The bright hot explosion of him, so deep in her, burned and scalded her most tender flesh and she cried out. Their mouths met, each tasting of the other's release, and their cries echoed out into the night.

Hours later, they were both so spent they could barely move. And still their bodies were joined together, tight and hot and deep.

"I want to try some tea," she murmured sleepily.

Alek groaned, and moved his cock inside her wet heat with as much strength as he could muster. It was enough to make her moan.

"Remind me to wear a raincoat when you do."

Agate swatted him playfully. They laughed together until the morning sun rose high over the lands of the world so far above their new home. And they loved again and again and again.