

Loose Id

NINJA

RACY LI



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LooseId®

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Dedication

To Mr. Racy, whose amazing powers of extraordinary support and putting up with my evil demands of “read this now,” made this book possible. You are my own personal superhero.

To my awesome editor, Barbara, who helped me ninja this story into shape; this would book would not have been Ninja without her.

Prologue

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and the Jorans attacked.

The armies of Earth fell before the advanced technology of the Jorans.

In an attempt to halt the invaders, magic, long locked away, was released back into the world. But it wasn't enough, until another mysterious alien race, known simply as the Blue, reluctantly came to Earth's aid. With their help, Earth found among humanity her champions once more.

Once the Jorans were defeated, the question was raised of what to do with these "champions," individuals who were god-like in their abilities. The people saw them as heroes; the governments of Earth saw them as another threat.

The Planetary Protection Agency, or PPA, was established to monitor the whereabouts of all of Earth's champions, ostensibly to better organize Earth's defenses.

Twenty years on, the PPA licenses numerous "independent agents," who assist in dealing with dangers alien, alchemical, and earthly.

Chapter One

A ninja never reveals his existence. If you have a name, you are not a ninja. If you have been seen, you are not a ninja. If people are aware of you, you are not a ninja.

Which is why Ninja knew his teacher would've smacked both him and his sister upside their heads if she knew what they were up to now.

Joy stood next to him, radio in hand, FBI badge hanging from her neck. In the night around them, they could hear cricket chirps mixed with the squawk of radios; embedded in the woods around the school were multiple FBI teams who waited for her signal.

Joy's walkie-talkie buzzed, and a masculine voice crackled over the static. "Ready, Teapot?"

Ninja cocked his head, his smirk just slightly shifting his mask.

She punched him in the arm. "Shut up. Are you ready?"

He nodded.

Joy clicked her radio. "I need fifteen more minutes, Hawk."

"Roger that, Teapot."

Joy brushed a leaf out of her dark hair and glared at her radio. "You heard the man. You have fifteen minutes before they try waltzing in the front door."

That was all he would need.

Terrorists, with guns bought from the Snakehead Triad and funded by the de la Quinta cartel, had taken an elementary school hostage. No one knew what they wanted, yet the whole thing must have been planned extensively for weeks. Tripwires, landmines, and magical fields surrounded the suburban school that was situated just outside of Ninja's home in Metrocity.

He stepped behind a tree and into the shadows, crossing the threshold between dark and reality. Opening his mind to feel with his senses, Ninja thought of the school map Joy had shown him. Each entrance, and each child, had been booby-trapped with explosives. All of the children were linked to a dead man's trigger; should any of the terrorists die, bombs would go off. If agents attempted to use force, speed, or alchemy to get into the school, bombs would go off.

Heck, if anyone even tried to fly over the school grounds, bombs would go off. Technological and magickal testing by bureau agents had shown that whoever the terrorists were, they had prepared contingencies for every independent agent licensed by the PPA.

But Ninja wasn't a superhero. He was nameless, unbound by red tape, and external to the system. He followed no rules but his own.

When it came right down to it, the very fact that he was an unknown entity made him useful here. The terrorists couldn't anticipate what they didn't know about.

He opened his mind and realized that the terrorists had turned off all the lights in the school, save for those in one room. It was an old tactic, designed not to give intruders any hints as to where their targets might be.

Ninja smiled as he reached forward and found exactly what he was looking for.

* * * * *

Dani was cold.

The bad men had told everyone to close their eyes, but she wasn't good at closing her eyes, except when she was sleeping. Instead, she kept her eyes slightly open, so that it would look like her lids were shut. Where was Señora Rivera? She hoped that the bad men hadn't hurt her.

She could hear Anton and Gilberto crying. Marta was asleep, and Jessica was just sitting there, not even trying to pretend her eyes were closed. But Dani wasn't going to cry. Impulsa was going to save them, just like she had saved *abuela* and *papi* from the aliens before Dani had been born. When Dani grew up, she wanted to be a PPA agent and fight aliens just like Impulsa.

The two men spoke in English, too fast for her to understand. She was trying so hard to learn English; *abuela* said it was very important for her to learn the language of their new home so she could be a diplomat like *papi*. There was a loud noise in the hall, and the men rushed to the door.

A black ghost!

The ghost pushed the bad men into the wall where they vanished.

She couldn't move as the ghost walked toward her. Suddenly she felt a hand on her wrist, where the bad men had made her wear a heavy, ugly bracelet. She screamed, the sound muffled by the bandanna gagging her.

"Shhh. Soy un amigo."

He took his hand away, and when he did, the bracelet was gone. He had made the bracelet disappear, just by covering it with his hand! He took the bandanna off too, and then took away everyone else's bracelets and bandannas.

The ghost turned and knelt before her. Gently, he took her arms and wrapped them around his neck. *"Agarate fuerte"* She held on to him as tightly as she could while he scooped up Jessica and Marta in one arm and picked up Anton and Gilberto in his other.

“Cierran los ojos y agárraten fuerte a mí.” This time she shut her eyes. She was suddenly very cold, and then warm again.

She felt her legs touch the ground. *“Abierten los ojos.”* Dani did as he said. She saw Anton, Gilberto, Marta and Jessica sitting on the ground, looking at the ghost with big eyes. She looked around and suddenly saw a man with “FBI” in big, yellow letters on his back stood before them. FBI! They were the good police!

A hand prompted her forward. She ran and tugged on the FBI man’s pant leg. He jumped in surprise, nearly knocking her over. “How did you get out here?”

“Un fantasma!” She turned and pointed at the woods, but the ghost was already gone.

* * * * *

It had taken him a few trips into the shadows, but all of the children were now out. The school was empty, save for a teacher and a single remaining terrorist in the well-lit room in the center of the school.

He was saving the best for last.

As he crawled along the ceiling of the dark hallway, he heard ... chickens.

There were several squawks, a *thunk*, and then silence.

Ninja let out a sigh of resignation. Of course alchemy would be involved.

One door, one entrance.

Oh, that was too easy.

He merged into the darkness, searching a final time for shadows in the room.

There. It was small, maybe three feet by three feet. It was barely dark enough to be a true shadow through which he could pass.

He spread his hands, creating an opening into the room. Drops of blood fell into his hands.

As did several colored wires.

He forced himself to stay still, listening for the sounds of the living. One heartbeat. The teacher was dead, then.

He reached forward and took the bomb in his hands gently, bringing it into the shadows with him. He pried apart another pocket in the dark and dropped it into the void, where it would vanish into infinity. He closed his hands.

The hole into the room was still there, just underneath a table in a dark corner. More blood dripped on his fists.

His work was done. He could remain in the shadows, leaving Joy and her agents to clean up the mess, and take in the last terrorist.

That's what a superhero would do.

Ninja leapt from the shadow, kicking the table away from him. It hit the ceiling with a crash.

A tall man, bare-chested and covered with alchemical tattoos, froze Ninja in the air with a single sound, but it was too late. Ninja had already thrown his stars. A few of the stars shattered the lights to Ninja's left. Others embedded themselves in the man's hands.

Staggering back, the alchemist recognized Ninja for what he was. "Shadow Walker!"

Ninja unsheathed his katana and rushed forward.

His opponent laughed, putting up a hand. Two cafeteria tables levitated, flying straight at Ninja.

Ninja leapt on to a shadow and held his ground, sword outstretched.

Light moves. Dark is.

The tables flew through him, crashing into the wall behind him.

Just as he solidified, there was a flash of light.

So the alchemist knew. The way to eliminate a shadow walker was to engulf him in light when he became shadow. The shade would vanish, and thus, so would the shadow walker.

Ninja pressed forward, leaping across the cafeteria tables.

The alchemist thickened the air to slow Ninja's attack, and then pointed at the camera above the door.

"The Triad knows." The man's tattoos glowed red, the color of a blood alchemist. His voice gurgled with blood as he yanked the stars out of his hand. "They see you, Shadow Walker. You cannot hide anymore! They know!"

Ninja raised his sword.

Joy suddenly appeared in the doorway. "*Stop!*"

Ninja hesitated; in the next moment, a fiery burst knocked him and Joy to the ground.

The tattooed man was gone, as was the body of teacher, the dead chickens, and all the blood.

He lowered his sword, his eyes never leaving his sister's steady gaze.

Joy had her hands on her hips. "Killing him wouldn't have answered any of our questions."

"He's not going to answer any of your questions now." Ninja looked at the floor, realizing that an intricate pattern remained carved in the linoleum.

He pointed at the ground with his sword. "You do realize that blood through which a shadow walker has passed is one of the rarest and most valuable ingredients in alchemy, right?"

Joy made a sound of frustration. "It was a fucking setup!"

* * * * *

He shouldn't be here, hanging upside down from the ceiling of her balcony. It was close to midnight, but twenty-three stories below, the traffic still snarled with life. In the distance, the spire of the fourth tallest building in the world sparkled with glittering lights.

He really shouldn't be here. But he needed something. Just an image to keep him warm, especially with what had happened.

How could he have been so stupid?

It had been a brilliantly orchestrated trap. They had saved the children, but the Triad had gotten what they wanted; confirmation that a shadow walker existed, and blood that a shadow walker had splashed through. Not only would the blood bring in millions on the black market, but there was the possibility that a skillful alchemist would eventually be able to use the blood to track him. Even so, it wouldn't be soon. Complicated alchemy like that took time, time that the Triad didn't have much of anymore.

Still, he waited.

The bedroom door opened. Padding on the carpet with bare feet, she ignored the wall switch and reached over to click on a small nightlight. Removing her jacket, she reached into the closet for a hanger.

His breath stopped as she unbuttoned her blouse. She had porcelain skin, green eyes that seemed brighter at night, and hair like bright red copper. For almost six months he had watched her, torturing himself with thoughts and visions of her. He couldn't keep away from her.

She reached behind her back and unzipped her skirt. As she slipped it off, his stiffening cock instantly went rigid. He knew she hated wearing hose, but how the fuck could he have known that she was walking around the office all day without her underwear?

The redhead flung her blouse into a corner, and then turned around, giving him a full view of her nearly nude body. Except for her necklace -- a single silver pendant, inset with an emerald -- and a scrap of purple lace that could barely be called a bra, she wore nothing.

Her breasts were full, pointed, and pert, and he ached to feel those long legs wrapped around him. Shadows embraced her, enveloping her hourglass curves like a teasing lingerie of darkness and light.

He inhaled slowly, taking in her scent of lavender and sandalwood. For a shadow walker like him, shadows and darkness were pathways, conveying sounds and scents, among other things.

He imagined ripping off her purple bra, exposing her breasts to his mouth, and sucking those sweet nipples. He could practically hear her moan, as his hands mapped and memorized every arc and bend of her body.

What would she feel like? What would it be like to have her white body underneath his own? Who would be shuddering more when he thrust his cock into her juicy, wet cunt? How would it be to have her clawing at him as he teased her slowly? What expression would she have riding him, her perfectly formed tits swaying as she arched her head back, eyes closed, mouth open?

He shuddered.

And he hadn't even gotten to the good part yet.

She began to walk toward his hiding place.

He stayed as still as the darkness around him.

No matter how hot it was, she never slept with the air conditioning on. Every evening, as she did now, she opened her balcony doors to the night air. For a moment she stood, naked to the dark, surrounded by the jeweled skyscrapers of the sparkling city. Her long red hair blew back, away from her face as the night breeze caressed her body.

Nope. No way could he ever stop watching her.

She went back to her bed, her ass swaying with ethereal grace. Just watching her walk was one of the sexiest, most cock-stirring things he had ever seen.

She slid open the drawer of the nightstand next to her, pulling out her favorite toy. She lay down. The crisp white sheets were the perfect backdrop to every curve of that luscious body.

If only that was him, stroking her pussy, making her wet. He envisioned being the one to slide that double dildo vibrator inside her pussy and ass. He would press it against her pussy lips, alternating the vibrations, while he sucked on her pointed nipples.

Even from the shadows he could smell her arousal as she lubed up the toy.

He imagined those hands caressing his cock, teasing his balls, her palm swirling over his tip. What expression would she have on her face as she lowered her lips to take him into her mouth?

She grabbed a body pillow and placed it between her knees. His attention was riveted as she slid her hands down her stomach to the tuft of red curls between her legs. Then she angled the double dildo first into her pussy, and then into her ass. She switched it on.

That glazed, glassy-eyed, fucked look was immediately apparent. Her face grew increasingly pink and she panted, her red mouth open as she clenched the oversized pillow with her legs, riding it, rocking back and forth. God, yes, she would ride him like that, her long red hair flying around her face, her moans in his ear, her hot scent in his nose, her long legs wrapped around his thighs.

He would press her body into the bed, covering her, possessing her, making her his, feeling her scratch his back as she tried to stop his relentless, merciless determination to fuck her until neither of them could speak.

He watched as she kicked her blankets into disarray. She moaned with abandon. He wanted to be the cause of noises like that, to make her thrash in his hands as he pressed his face between her legs. He wanted to taste her desire, inhale her scent, and surround himself with her juices.

With his extraordinary hearing, the sirens of fire engines were suddenly noticeable. Years of training forced him to tear his focus from her. He gazed off into the distance and saw signs of a building fire. Worthington Gardens, one of the worst, most crime-ridden areas of the city. A child's cries filtered through the shadows. He gritted his teeth.

He still wasn't a superhero.

Chapter Two

Her secretary was perfect, even if he was a geek.

Liz pressed a button on the intercom. “Kent, will you please come here for a moment? My computer is doing that weird thing again.”

The intercom gave his Australian accent a metallic twang. “I’ll be right there, luv.”

Moments later, the door opened. A tall man in an ill-fitting suit shuffled into her office.

Half Asian, with messy, unruly black hair tied behind him with a rubber band, Kent peered at her through the thick black plastic frames of his glasses, which made him look a bit like a bug.

She pushed her chair away from her desk. “You would think, here at one of the top law firms in the world, we would actually have computers that function.”

He laughed nervously. “Computers are supposed to challenge you; otherwise they would make your job too easy.”

Liz sighed. “Right, because we just don’t have enough to do.”

Kent was her paralegal/secretary, assigned to assist her on a business deal involving international companies across seven foreign jurisdictions. He was also a former dot-commer, which explained his horrendous sense of fashion. It wasn’t that he had bad clothes, though

he could have chosen more flattering cuts. In any case, Kent was the perfect cover for her; he helped her cast doubt on her abilities with computers.

Liz got up and moved around her desk to allow him access to her laptop. In the background, an Italian tenor sang from a small stereo.

“Isn’t it crazy about that school hostage thing?” she asked, referring to the hottest blog topic. In the post Invasion world, most people went to blogs for information; everyone knew that the government-censored newspapers were useless. “A bunch of bloggers are claiming that the FBI called in a rogue independent agent to help them.”

He tapped at a few keys. “There are no rogue superheroes. And if there were, don’t you think Impulsa and Centurion, not to mention the PPA, might have forced them to get their license by now?”

“Tsk, tsk. The politically correct term is independent agent,” she joked. She shook her head. “You’re probably right.”

He tapped a couple more keys. “Umm, I think it’s fixed now.”

She stood up, attempting to look him in the eye, despite his height advantage over her. “Thanks, Kent.”

He looked away, avoiding her gaze. “Uh, no problem, Liz.”

He made her feel like the wicked witch. She interposed herself in his way. Cocking her head at him, she eyed him critically. “You know, I think you’d look so much better if you cut your hair.”

“Uh, really?” He seemed at loss for words.

“Yeah.” She reached up to stroke his black hair. “It’s not that professional. And no offense, yours is starting to look like a mullet. Not really the image you want for a big Metrocity office.”

“Thanks for the tip.” He moved toward the door.

She placed her hand against his arm and stopped him.

“Wait. There’s something I’ve been meaning to discuss with you.”

He stopped. “Yeah?”

“You know that series of meetings I have to attend in Hong Kong in a week? Nick and I are going to need some help there with the files and organizing for the presentation. His assistant, Maia, is too new to the firm to know much about the deal with Nalo. I know this is last minute, but would you mind if I asked you to come along? It’ll take about five days.”

“Umm, I, uhh ...”

“Come on, how often do you get a free trip to Hong Kong?” She tried to squeeze his arm, but it was surprisingly firm. “Whoa, you’ve been lifting some weights, huh?”

He froze.

Liz held on to him, fluttering her eyelashes at him. “Pretty please? I promise I’ll make it fun. Well, for you at least. I probably will have a schedule full of meetings to go to, but you can go play and explore.”

He shook his head. “You are such a liar. You know I’ll have to do three times as much work while you go wine and dine.”

“Trust me, I’d rather be shuffling papers with you than kissing executive ass.”

“I suppose ...”

She released him. “Thanks so much! I really appreciate it! In fact, if you want, you can leave early. I’m heading out now, so there’s really no need for you to be here.”

“You sure? Where are you going?”

“I do some volunteer work over at a women’s shelter on the East Side.”

“That -- that’s a dangerous area. You should be careful.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will be.” She flashed a smile at him. “I grew up around there.”

* * * * *

The yellow, incandescent, bare bulb lit the windowless room, casting odd shadows in the plaster cracks. Liz swore she heard a cockroach skitter underneath a nearby file cabinet.

“Ah, the old neighborhood,” she muttered. And yet, there was a vase full of fresh roses on her desk.

There was nothing more she hated than seeing a vase full of roses at the desk where she “advised” battered women on filing for divorce. Not only did it attract cockroaches, it meant that there was a problem. A big, fast food-calories-sized problem.

The Bureau only sent her roses when it meant she was not going to have a life for the next few months.

Liz sat down, examining a few papers that had been left on the desk for her perusal. Of course, none of specs would be there, but one had to go through the motions. Some time passed before a petite black woman walked in and closed the door behind her.

The two exchanged warm greetings for the benefit of any bugs listening in. Caution wasn’t just a way of life in this business. It *was* life.

Liz blew a stray strand of hair away from her reading glasses and folded her hands on the desk. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Chandra” slid a blue folder across her desk, the beads in her black dreads clinking in her hair. Her soft Caribbean lilt did not match the hard look in her eyes.

“So, I know this is going to be a bit difficult, but I really need your help.”

Liz opened the folder, picking out the secret codes as she scanned the legal forms, deciphering the message hidden within.

Shipment. This week. Need info. ASAP.

Wonderful. Just frickin’ wonderful. She was never, ever going to have a life again.

* * * * *

Liz sighed as she left the building. Really, it had been way too long since she had spent any time with anyone other than co-workers and clients. Last month, she had turned the big three-O. And in the past year, the only real “date” she had had was with Nick. Not that that was bad, but there was something very cold and calculating about her boss. Nick was definitely eye candy, she admitted, but knowing what she knew about Nick’s Triad connections ...

Liz shuddered.

What the heck was a busy working woman supposed to do? Years spent working in college, paying off loans, going to law school, more paying off loans, etcetera. Not to mention what her FBI handler, Vy, called her “little hobby” on top of full-time lawyering. There was no time for dating. Sure, a couple of “friends-with-benefits” here and there, but she had no one that she felt any real connection with.

She walked towards the main strip to find a cab, the wail of police sirens echoing in the distance. Several streetlights had gone out, leaving one lonely lamp to stand sentry against the darkness. She picked her way carefully around the scattered debris. Boarded storefronts and tenement buildings surrounded the street. Funnily enough, it was one of the few places that had remained unchanged since the Joran invasion, and the desolate atmosphere had the same sense of hopelessness that pervaded her childhood memories.

Nope. No regrets about the choices she had made.

Even so, it would be nice to have someone to come home to. He would have a lovely bubble bath waiting in the large tub she never used. The bath would be all hot and ready for her, just like he’d be. She could just imagine his strong hands sliding around her waist amongst the suds, his skin slippery and wet against hers. He would rub all the stress of the work day away.

As she headed down to the main strip, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck begin to stand up.

Were those footsteps behind her?

She turned around, her red braid swinging around her shoulder.

No one was there.

Damn, it was hot. She wiped her forehead. "Calm down, girl, this is your home neighborhood. Just the same as it used to be. Stop hearing things that aren't there."

She suddenly found her path blocked by four men. Three held guns. The other, with intricate tattoos on his face, simply stood there with a calculating gaze.

The few dollars in her purse weren't worth her life. Instantly, she thrust her purse at them. "Take it."

The man with a red hat laughed. "I don't want your purse, lady."

She threw the bag at them as she turned and tried to run. The world spun in slow motion.

Not fast enough.

They grabbed her. She tried to scream, but one of them shoved a dirty rag in her mouth.

She struggled, trying desperately to remember any move from the sole self-defense class she had taken years back. Her heel came down sharply on one man's foot. He let go of her. She tried to run again, only to be jerked back by a second man. A cold barrel pressed up against the back of her neck.

"Try it again, and you got a bullet through yo' head." She could feel the gun trembling in the man's hands.

She spat the rag out and opened her mouth again to scream, but to her dismay, no sound came out.

The sleeve pulled back from the hand holding the gun, revealing a tattoo of a coiled snake with an open mouth.

A chill rippled through her. Triad. They were Triad!

Her hands shook. Sure she worked for the FBI, but she wasn't a trained agent, just an unofficial freelance informant who got her job just because she happened to be in the right place. Well, now she was definitely the wrong place and the wrong time.

The unarmed man -- short, balding, and wearing a tweed jacket -- had a hand turned upward, a pipe dangling from his mouth. He might have been mistaken for a college professor, save for the intricate tattoo on the right side of his face. Something dark swirled in his palm, and if darkness could be said to glow, this malevolent pulsing thing was glowing.

The bizarre sight froze her. Was this the end?

As she thought of her freelancing work for the Bureau, she hoped and prayed that this was just another random mugging. There were far worse fates at the hands of the Triad than becoming a statistic.

The men dragged her into an alley.

Holy crap, she could die here, alone. No way was she going to be taken down like this.

Deliberately, Liz tripped and shifted her weight forward, entangling one of the men with her feet. She rolled, expecting him to fall on top of her. Just as she did, she heard a loud crash.

The man who had been holding her crumpled to the ground. The other two had their backs to her.

She ran for her life, not caring enough to search for the weird tattoo guy.

"Hey! She's gettin' away!"

Heart pounding and legs pumping, she sprinted down the alley, dodging scattered debris and frightening a stray cat, only to slam up against a chain link fence. In frustration, she kicked it.

Liz could still hear them coming. Looking up, she saw curved wires pointed downward to prevent people from climbing over.

She wet her lips and turned to meet her pursuers.

The two men reached her quickly. The man in the red cap rolled up his sleeves, exposing green Snakehead Triad tattoo that spiraled up his arm.

“Well, well, well.”

“You’ve caused us a lot of trouble, lady,” said the other.

She swallowed and clenched her fists, took a deep breath, and got ready to scream, kick, bite and do whatever she had to. If this was the way it was going to end, there was no way she would make it easy for them.

And then, he came.

Like a dark angel, he leapt from the shadows above, knocking one man to the ground. The other was taken out by a single punch went sent him flying into a wall.

The man with the tattooed face ran up and made an odd gesture. Before her eyes, a dumpster was dropped on top of the black-clad rescuer.

As unexpectedly as it arrived, her hope vanished with him.

She opened her mouth to scream, but her throat had tightened so much from fear and adrenaline, she couldn’t even squeak.

The dumpster slid back across the alley, pushed by an invisible force, revealing the tattooed man. He smiled at her, a bizarre Santa Claus smile. “No one is going to come between you and me, my dear.”

She heard the whisper of something in the air. A surprised, then enraged look appeared on the tattooed man’s face as he looked at the black eight-pointed star embedded in his hand.

“A few karate classes and this fool thinks he’s a ninja,” he said.

The ninja materialized from the shadows. In a fluid motion, he grabbed her and slung her over his back. She soon found herself on a graveled rooftop.

“Stay here.”

He jumped back into the shadows again. Who was he? A ninja? She couldn't remember seeing a ninja on the list of the licensed superheroes that the Bureau had forced her to memorize.

A black ball of flame shot up into the sky; Liz ran over to the edge of the roof. In the alley below, the tattooed man shot fists of black flame at the ninja. But the ninja evaded each shot, darting off the walls of the alley, inexorably moving toward the tattooed man. Even with his magical powers, the Triad alchemist was completely outmatched.

In a blur of motion, a katana whistled through the air, almost too fast to be seen.

Slowly, the tattooed man's knees buckled, and his headless body fell to the ground.

Liz leaned back; her stomach churned.

The Triad was hiring alchemists. And they were sending them after her. Her mind whirled as she tried to figure out what this meant.

A black blur leapt onto the rooftop, and Liz got her first good look at her rescuer. From his crouched stance, legs wide apart, he eased into a standing position facing her. A sleek black mask covered his face. The city lights behind her reflected off of the dark lenses that concealed his eyes. He was so tall. Black body armor hugged his solidly masculine body, and a sword hung across his back.

Holy crap. There really was a rogue agent out there.

He wasn't even breathing hard. She swallowed.

"How -- how did you do that?"

He approached her with silent, measured paces. She staggered backward.

He extended a black-gloved hand to her, as if asking her to dance.

"This is so strange," she murmured. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

He said nothing, his arm outstretched in invitation.

Her heart thudded in confusion, adrenaline still racing through her veins as she tentatively stepped forward and took his hand.

In a single movement, he whisked her close. She found herself crushed up against his chest. She saw herself reflected in the lens of his mask, disbelief at what had just happened, written on her face. Her heart was pounding so strongly she could almost hear it. Though her fear did not disappear, it was gradually replaced with something else, something illogical and primal -- a heat that didn't just beckon, but insisted.

"What do you want with me?" she whispered.

He brought his free hand across her eyes, closing them. He smelled of leather and a lemon-like wood scent. She breathed it in, inhaling it as if it were the most desirable fragrance in the world. Dual forces warred within her. She was afraid, not only to move and break the spell, but also to remain still, not knowing if he was truly friend or foe.

Her world shifted as he picked her up. "What the --?" she cried out, opening her eyes.

He stopped and looked down at her.

"You want me to keep my eyes shut?"

His nod was almost imperceptible.

She examined him, searching for a reason to trust him. The black mask covered his head, face, and mouth, giving nothing away. Through the body armor, she could feel his heat radiating like a small sun.

This was so stupid.

She squeezed her eyes closed.

* * * * *

She clutched his neck as he carried her. Strange, cold currents of air caressed her as he walked.

Wherever she was, it was not that rooftop.

He stopped and gently set her down. Brushing his hand over her eyes, he indicated to her that she could open them.

He had brought her to her bedroom.

“What the -- How did you do that?” She looked around. She staggered back. “Wait, how did you know I live here?”

He handed her the wallet she had dropped, her driver’s license and address showing through the clear plastic back. She gingerly took it from him.

He nodded at her and started to leave.

She hooked onto his bicep. God, he felt like steel! “Wait!”

He paused. “I never thanked you for saving me,” she whispered.

He turned.

Her heart pounded. Tentatively, she reached up and lifted the bottom of his mask.

Full, sensual lips turned upward in a slight smile above a strong cleft chin. He began to pull away, and she knew she’d gone as far as he would allow. She stood on her tiptoes and cupped his face, then brushed her lips against his, meaning only to steal a tender, gentle kiss.

But at the first touch of their lips, heat surged.

He seized her, wrapping his powerful arms around her. She could taste his desire for her as his mouth devoured her, his tongue plunging into her like a thirsty man seeking relief from a drought. He tasted so deliciously dark and masculine. Fire sparked in her lower body, roaring through her veins and making her weak in the knees. She tried to grab onto his shoulders, but her hand could hardly grip even the width of his bicep. His tongue danced with hers while his gloved hands seemed to be everywhere all at once as he pressed her against him.

She kissed him back, telegraphing her own desire, trying to make the kiss last as long as possible. She ran her hands along his body, feeling the hard contours of muscle, desperately seeking an opening so that she could feel his skin.

Her hips pressed into him. Below the bulletproof vest he wore over his clothes, he was hard and hot against her stomach. It drove her wild to think she could arouse him like that. She pulled away slightly, drawing her fingers down his abdomen, to the bulge below. She began to trace circles around his rapidly growing cock, stroking the firm outline.

He drew away from her kiss, his breathing heavy. She stared at the reflection of her desire in his opaque lenses. She couldn't see his expression, but she could feel his surprise.

To her own astonishment, she heard a sultry voice come from her throat. "Don't go, dark warrior. Stay with me tonight." She moved in closer, running her hands along his butt, molding her hips against his. The thought of this mystery man taking her, owning her, possessing her was driving her crazy.

The sensible part of her mind nagged at her madness, insisted against seducing this stranger. Rationally, she knew it was adrenaline, the aftermath of experiencing and surviving near death that was causing this overwhelming primal need. But the rest of her didn't care. Something female howled in her, and she craved for this man to fuck her senseless.

He went still.

She couldn't help herself. She danced, grinding against him, making sure his hands slipped to feel her ass. "Please. The mask can stay on. I just want you. I'll do anything you want."

He turned away from her.

Outwardly, she remained composed. Inwardly, she threw a fit in frustration. She should have known better. Women, likely much better looking than she, probably threw themselves all over a man like him. Who the hell did she think she was? She was just another freckle-faced girl who needed to work out more often. Nothing was going to happen tonight. That was the way it worked. Hero saves girl. Girl kisses hero. Hero leaves girl hot and bothered.

She looked up at him, and when his eyes met hers, she realized that he had taken off the opaque lenses. In the dim light, she could see that he had brown eyes, filled with an expression she didn't recognize.

As she lost herself in his gaze, she heard his gloves and armor fall to the floor. A few more straps unfastened and he stood before her, still clothed, but unarmed.

She was the one who stood still this time, stunned.

Her last thought before he kissed her again was that this man moved *fast*. He seized her, the feel of his bare hands sliding beneath her shirt reigniting her desire into an inferno.

His hands, his touch, she wanted to feel him everywhere. He made her feel wondrously alive. This was life, not death, and here she was, her real-life superhero caressing her. His muscular male body was hard and solid, just what she needed to hold onto and fill her with life and warmth. Her senses felt heightened, every touch a caress as her body vibrated with desire. His hands gripped her butt as his tongue danced with hers. She sought entry to his black ninja garb, but she was interrupted as he ripped open her blouse.

Buttons scattered across the carpet, and her head flew back as he drew her body against his.

She let out another gasp as a hand went up her skirt. His mouth was on hers, taking advantage of her surprise. She could feel him circling her clit through her soaked panties.

He pushed the fabric aside. At the first touch of his fingers, the hunger within her burst forward in a gasp. She tore her mouth away and arched into his hand.

He stopped. Slowly, she watched him remove his hand from her wet pussy and bring it to his mouth. She watched in rapt fascination as he leisurely licked the quivering droplet of her slickness off his finger.

"Yes," she breathed. "I want you."

His gaze captured hers, offering pleasure, challenging her boldness and stoking her lust for him.

This wasn't really happening.

She ran her hands down his chest. His body free of the Kevlar, she could feel the hard planes of his chest through the thin black cloth. He took her in his arms, his mouth on her neck as he slid his hands down her back and around the curve of her ass.

She found herself pressed up against the wall as he pulled down her bra and lowered his mouth to a bare nipple. His tongue circled that hard nub, drawing sensations that thrummed from her core. She felt light-headed and tried to steady herself by grabbing his arms, but they were too big.

His hand moved up her skirt again, and his fingers teased the cloth of her panties aside. She gasped at the stroke of his finger from her clit to her cunt.

She couldn't help but thrust her mound against his palm.

"Please," she begged, even as she was unsure of what he would do. She had never fucked a ninja before. How would he fuck her? What would he do to her?

His response was to kiss her, a surprisingly sweet and tender kiss.

And then he stroked her again. And again.

She sucked his lower lip, desperate to have more of him, more of his touch, more of his kisses. Her hands flew around his large body, but only felt covered muscle. Her hands settled on the one thing she was sure of; the strong outlines of a very erect cock.

He dipped another finger into her wetness, and she cried out, thrusting against his hand. She grasped his shoulders and tried to ride his finger, but it was useless. One large hand had a firm grip on her hip and part of her ass, taunting her efforts to achieve satisfaction, pulling away each time she tried to take him deeper.

"I need more."

He unzipped her skirt, and it fell to the floor, revealing her lacy thigh-high stockings and red underwear.

Her back was flat against the wall, the solid outline of his cock hard against her wetness. She cried out, arching against the hard friction he was building. She wanted all their clothes gone; wanted his naked skin against hers.

“Please. Let me touch you. Let me feel you.”

His mouth curved upward in a small smile. With a speed that seemed inhuman, he picked her up and rushed over to her bed, suckling and teasing her ear as he gently laid her down on the soft white sheets. Her heart thudded as his searing gaze swept over her.

He turned away.

An unwelcome sensibility popped into her thoughts. She knew she shouldn't be doing this. He was a complete stranger, a rogue vigilante who didn't even have his superhero license. But she couldn't ignore the electricity that rushed through her when he touched her.

With her heart pounding, she clutched his arm. “You can't mean to leave me like this.”

He gave her that sexy, mysterious smile again, and it sent shivers through her body.

He removed something from his waist and approached her slowly, as if trying not to frighten her. She watched as he lifted the strip of cloth to her eyes, then blindfolded her.

Beside her, she heard the rustling of cloth as he took off his shirt, and then the sounds of him removing his boots and unfastening his belt buckle.

His breath quickened audibly as she felt him standing over her. And then he was in bed next to her.

His chest hair tickled her as he lowered himself on top of her. He trailed hot, tantalizing kisses across her collarbone and down her chest. She couldn't see him, but she could feel the hard contours of his very large and powerful body. He took her nipple in his mouth as his fingers strummed her clit. She moaned, arching her breast into his mouth, her dripping cunt into his palm. Her hands were entangled in his thick hair.

“Please fuck me now.”

He ignored her, blowing his warm breath over her stomach, pausing to lick her navel. He continued downwards, then held her thighs open as he flicked her clit with his tongue.

Her head spun and she gasped for air. Rapture seized her as he suckled and licked the folds of her labia.

.She heard a growl of satisfaction as he buried his face into her pussy. Somehow through the pulsing waves sweeping her away, she managed to exclaim, "So you do make sounds!"

He growled again at her words and thrust two fingers into her slick, wet cunt.

She entwined her fingers in his hair, her pussy clenching around his fingers as they thrust in and out of her in a rhythm that pulled, teased, and unraveled the knots of her self-control. Long, smooth strokes of his tongue across her clit and labia made her cry out. He moved up to suckle her nipple as he pumped her quivering flesh relentlessly. The heat, the fire, the pressure was building ... building ...

"Omigod," she sputtered. "I'm going to --"

His fingers thrust deeply, pressing against her sweet spot, and she bit into her pillow, barely stifling a scream.

The orgasm surged, swelling with heat and warmth. She lay there in his arms, trying to catch her breath, feeling the aftermath of all-consuming pleasure. Dazed, she couldn't remember the last time she had felt so incredibly relaxed.

"Wow."

She heard him chuckle. She reached to take off her blindfold, but he held onto her hand.

"You want me to stay blindfolded? Oh, I get it, the whole secret identity thing." She felt him kiss her forehead and then get up. She listened to him put on his clothes and wondered what it would be like to see those rippling muscles she had just felt.

"Wait, where are you going?"

He remained silent.

“You’re just going to leave without fucking me? Without any sort of, um, release?”

She suddenly felt him, pulling her close. His hands were so large, his arms so thickly muscled. She felt his breath near her ear. “Next time.” She could hear the promise in his voice. God, even his whisper was sexy. Already, she could feel herself getting wet for him again.

He finished getting dressed too quickly and took off her blindfold.

Tall, dark, and mysterious as ever, he stood before her, masked once again and wearing black Kevlar body armor, his katana at his back.

“Will I see you again?” she whispered.

He inclined his head once, a farewell more than reply, then stepped into a shadow, and vanished.

Chapter Three

Liz knew she had an odd life when she hoped the motivation for an attack was the selfish inclination of a cannibalistic serial killer.

She walked to the printer, trying to remember what she had just been doing. She had been feeling scattered all day. This morning she had mistyped a line of code in the spyware she had set up in the firm's computer network, and now, all the printers on her floor wouldn't work.

She flipped through the papers, finding her briefs before heading back up to her own floor. Thank god she had had the forethought to build her program as a modified extraterrestrial computer virus. Dangerous Joran technological viruses had become as common as a cold; and if left unchecked, would eventually destroy a network. Once the network administrators saw the Joran signature, they would forget about searching for the source and focus on fixing the problem.

One of the new secretaries smiled cheerfully at her. "Hey, Liz, are you feelin' all right? You seem to be a little out of it."

“I’m okay.” Liz forced herself to smile back. “Just feeling a little under the weather.” But how could she be all right when last night she’d nearly died and then had some of the most amazing oral sex of her life?

Liz walked back toward the elevator.

After the ninja had left her, she had been up all night, talking to her handler about the attack with the Triad and implications for her work. So far, it looked like she had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was the best explanation she could hope for, because if the Triad had sent him after her, she was really in deep shit.

An ID check on the body of her tattooed attacker, Sam Falino, revealed him to be a recent Triad hire, who had long been on Interpol’s most wanted list. Falino was a serial killer who specialized in slicing up and eating redheads. Somehow he had obtained alchemical power. The other men had been under his control and had squealed on him as soon as the police had picked them up, giving up the exact locations of where three other red-haired victims could be found.

But how could the FBI be sure that the tattooed man’s attack was random when the Bureau had so little information on the ninja, other than the fact that he existed? And if they and the other agencies were aware of him, why hadn’t they hauled the ninja’s ass in and forced him to become licensed?

The elevator beeped her floor, and she got off, heading straight for her office. The wheels of her chair squeaked as she pushed it aside and sat down.

So, she was at work, playing clueless as to the source of the attack. Correction, she wasn’t just playing clueless; she was clueless.

How could everything feel so normal? Last night her world had shifted, and yet everything around her had not. For instance, she couldn’t stop feeling ridiculously horny.

It was all that ninja’s fault that she couldn’t keep lecherous images out of her mind. As she sat through hours of pie charts and presentations, she found herself fantasizing about

fucking her masked lover on the conference table, wondering what it would feel like to have his cock slip into her warm wet pussy and --

“Liz?”

“Huh?”

Kent dropped a manila folder on her desk. “Here are the files you were looking for.” He had a new haircut, and looked like an entirely different man.

She caught him looking down the front of her blouse; she smiled at him, and he blushed. Today, she wanted men to look at her. They could even gawk at her.

She could have died last night; her life would have ended right there, back in the old dingy, crime-ridden streets of her neighborhood. She was not going to go to any more sketchy areas of the city on her own for a bit.

Liz turned to her computer and clicked onto the web once more. The ninja was going to be difficult to find information on. So far, her Internet searches hadn’t turned up anything. Unsure of what she was looking for, she surfed aimlessly. There were more unexplained things that prowled the night than there were explanations.

Well, duh, she should know that.

Finally, googling a keyword search combination of “ninja,” “darkness,” “shadows,” and “night” turned up something on a site that hadn’t been updated in years. Legends said that practicing certain martial arts with concentration and discipline could help one obtain powers that were supernatural. Some practitioners had the strength of twenty men; others could fly.

And some could even walk through the darkness.

Liz clicked on another section of the webpage.

Shadowmen, or nightwalkers, they were called. “Hmmm, something to do with physics,” she muttered. She skimmed the brief description, parts of it in computer gibberish. “Light, time, and space. These are the elements that define our dimension. In the absence of

light, one can slip sideways in space. To shadowmen, darkness is but an open doorway.” A couple more searches turned up zilch.

So, that could be who or what he was.

She went back to work on the assignments Vy had given her. A few keystrokes and she was into the Triad database, hooked up to the mainframe in Hong Kong. She typed in a code to alert her when no one was in the system. Once she got the signal, she could get into that little locked and secured directory to see what the Triad was hiding.

Now, on to other matters. She walked to the cubicle in front of her office.

“Having a good day, Liz?” asked Kent with a strange smile. She remembered that he had been working out, which seemed have done wonders for his self-confidence. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

She shook her head. Couldn’t she stop thinking about sex for two seconds?

She leaned over his cubicle. He was such a diligent worker, concentrating on his computer, ignoring the fact that she was trying to flaunt her breasts in his face.

How bizarre was this? All day she had been in meetings with her GQ-handsome boss Nick Dais, lead attorney, and handsome heartthrob of the office. And yet she couldn’t even find it in herself to fake-flirt with him. It was amazing how knowing about Triad connections could just dampen all attraction.

And here she was, attempting to flirt with her secretary.

“Terrible day, actually. But I had an interesting night before.”

He seemed more confident than he usually was. Maybe he was finally beginning to loosen up. His voice was nonchalant as he concentrated on a spreadsheet in front of him. “Did you now?”

“Yeah. I was attacked by an alchemist.”

He looked up quickly, concern in his brown eyes. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Liz frowned. It sounded so ridiculous out loud. “Of all things, a ninja saved me. I left the women’s shelter pretty late, and three guys attacked me. I really thought I was going to die, until he showed up.”

For the first time she could remember, he didn’t flinch from her gaze. “Wow. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah. You know, it’s funny. That whole experience has given me a whole new look on life.” She picked up a stack of papers lying in her in-box, flipping through them, yet not really reading them. Her voice dropped as she muttered as if to herself, “One minute you’re here, the next minute you’re gone.”

“Yeah.” His tone matched hers. “I know what you mean.”

She turned back to him. “After last night, I was thinking that I really should start taking some sort of self-defense classes again.”

His eyebrows rose. “You were?”

“Yeah. And I thought, wait, don’t you dabble in some kind of aikido or something? Maybe you could recommend a place where I could go to learn some stuff.”

”Well, I might know someone who could help you if you’re serious.”

She nodded. “If you can get me a lesson tonight, I would take it. I don’t want to be caught in a situation like that again.”

He snatched a Post-it note and scribbled down an address. “Hiro’s Dojo. Show up after eight-thirty tonight and you’ll get your lesson.”

She took the note from his hand, her fingertips brushing against his. His eyes met hers, surprising her with the depth in his gaze.

She blinked, strangely unsure of herself. “You know this guy that well that you can just tell him he’s taking a new student tonight?”

He smiled, the odd moment passing. “I know him pretty well. And yes, he’s flexible.”

* * * * *

She was late. Thankful that she had changed into workout clothes back at the office, Liz ran a couple blocks to the address on the Post-it note. Bamboo-screened partitions blocked the glass storefront.

She pushed the door inward. Bells jangled against glass. "Hello?"

A teenage boy appeared. "Good evening, ma'am," he said with a Puerto Rican accent. "Do you need some help?"

"Oh, I was told to come by tonight and see Hiro about taking lessons. The boy raised an eyebrow at her. "A mutual friend said he would have time for me."

The teen scratched his head. "Master Hiro is in California now, but if you were told to come tonight, then you must be taking lessons from Master A. Follow me." He led her to the back.

"Master A? Is there a Master B and C too?"

The teen rolled his eyes and gave her a look that made her realize just how old she was.

"Take this hallway down to the end. He's in the next-to-last room on the left. And good luck. You're going to need it."

She stared at the retreating boy. What was that about?

When she reached the room, she found the entrance blocked by another bamboo screen. Inside, she could hear the exertions of a man going through a furious routine. It didn't sound like Kent at all. The boy must have been mistaken. She looked around, but he had disappeared.

Oh, well. She would just ask this guy. She peeked around the screen.

And stopped.

The man had the most beautifully muscled back she had ever seen. He was shirtless and barefoot, wearing loose, black cotton pants. The routine was smooth, deadly, yet beautiful all

the same. She couldn't help but watch. Through each leap, kick, and punch, he kept his back to her. A couple times he spun to deal with imaginary attackers behind him, but he was so fast she couldn't see his face.

Finally, he stopped and walked toward the other end of the room, his breathing heavy. He reached for a towel and a water bottle.

"Umm, excuse me," she began. "Sorry to bother you, but do you know where I could find Kent Alistair?" The man turned around.

"Kent?" She dropped her gym bag on the floor in surprise. My God, talk about being buff! And he didn't have the plastic gym-rat look of so many muscled men; his muscles looked as if they had been soldered on with years of training.

How could she not have recognized him? Was she really that blind? But he looked like another man without his glasses and the oversized suit.

"Hey, Liz," he said casually. "I'm glad you found the place."

"Kent! You look ... so ... *different*. Wait --" She looked around seeing no one else in the empty room. "Are you --?"

He grinned, setting his water bottle down. "I teach classes here a few days a week."

"I didn't know you did this kind of stuff. How long have you been doing this?"

"My father was an aikido master. I've been doing this since I was five." He eyed the black yoga pants and gray tank top she wore. She couldn't help but blush at his frank, appraising gaze.

She really should not have skipped the gym earlier this week.

"All right, take off your shoes. Eventually, we'll have to get you your own *gi*-- that's a proper uniform," he added, seeing her quizzical look. "But for now, what you're wearing will do."

She removed her shoes and stepped onto the mat.

Suddenly she caught a whiff off something lemon and wood-like, almost like ... the ninja.

Kent was in the other corner of the room, lighting a few sticks of incense.

“What is that smell?”

“Oh, just some incense. It keeps the sweat odor down.”

“Is that a common brand of incense?”

He looked at the box. “Pretty common. Every place I’ve trained and taught in has used it. Best thing to keep the dojo from being too stinky.”

Oh. So much for that.

Kent stepped toward her. “Before we begin, I want to lay down a few ground rules. You may be my boss outside this place, but when we are in the dojo, I am the master and you are the student. I will not tolerate anything else. Is that clear?”

She nodded dumbly. *This* was Kent? He was so ... different than when he was in the office. So authoritative.

So sexy.

* * * * *

For the umpteenth time that hour, she was on her back, her legs splayed wide open. He stood above her, grinning.

She wanted to kick his stupid smile off his face.

All of her muscles were screaming at her. Everything hurt. Just breathing hurt. It hadn’t been so bad in the beginning, when they’d started out with a few stretches, some positioning.

She moaned as she sat up, and he helped her rise.

“Oh, come now, it can’t be that bad,” he teased her. “Don’t you go to the gym regularly?”

She bent over, panting, trying to catch her breath. "Three times a week ... usually! Apparently, it's not enough!" She snagged her water bottle and began drinking down deep gulps.

He laughed.

She glared at him. The stupid bastard hadn't even broken a sweat, and here she was, soaked. She finished a gulp and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Seriously, though, thanks for the lesson. That was great."

He leaned against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. It only served to emphasize the muscularity of his biceps. "You're welcome. I had fun."

She arched an eyebrow at him as she took another sip of water. "You're a big fat liar, you know that?" Why had she never noticed what a great smile he had?

"No, really, I did. I think you're a natural. You should keep coming."

"I will." She paused. "Say, are you doing anything after this?"

"Well, I have some things I have to do tonight, but --"

"Oh, come on. Let's go out together and grab a quick bite?" Hastily, not wanting to feel obligated, she added, "Of course, you don't have to, but I figure it's Friday night and all."

"Sure. Why don't we hit the showers first? I'll meet you out front in ten?"

"How about forty? A girl's gotta take her time."

He slung a towel over his shoulder. "Thirty minutes." He winked at her. "Remember, in the dojo, I'm the master."

* * * * *

They sat in a sushi place, aiming their chopsticks at the wide array of rolls on the platters shared between them.

"You know, Kent, there's something different about you."

He scratched his head, tousling his hair. "I got a haircut?"

“And why are you wearing those glasses again?” She reached forward, and began to pull them off. “You just showed me in the dojo that you don’t need them.”

His warm hand closed around her wrist. His gaze caught hers.

Warmth began to spread up her arm.

Brushing the feeling off, Liz tried again for his glasses, but he held her back. “Really, Kent. What are you trying to hide?”

His only response was to lean back.

“Come on. You don’t have to put up some kind of front.”

He released his grip on her. She reached forward and slid off his glasses.

“There now, much better.”

He gave her a smile.

Why hadn’t she realized what a great smile he had before?

“You know, your office persona is so different from the one you have at the dojo.”

His tight white t-shirt emphasized his muscular chest and biceps, so different from those awful suits she usually saw him in. He seized a salmon roll with his chopsticks and dipped it in a pool of soy sauce.

“It’s part of being a teacher. And I tend to be more awake at night.”

“Are you looking forward to going to Hong Kong?”

He shrugged. “I guess. I expect it to be more business than pleasure.”

She jabbed him with a chopstick. “Oh, come on. At least it will be interesting to work in a new setting. Besides, don’t you have family there?”

“Yes, but we’re not close.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I found out I have a whole slew of cousins when I googled my mom’s maiden name. Actually, it was sort of amusing. There’s some old legend that my family is descended from banshees.”

“Banshees?”

“It’s like a wailing fairy-woman spirit or something. Depending on who you talk to, a banshee is either a haggard old witch or a sad, beautiful lady. But no matter what she looks like, if you hear the cry of the banshee long enough, you’ll go insane.”

“Hmm. I always thought your voice was a little harsh on the ears.” He smiled.

Liz gave him a dirty look, then reached forward with her chopsticks. “That’s it. I’m taking the last tuna roll. What, you don’t have weird stories about your family?”

He drank some tea. “The only ability my family has is to disappear when people need them.”

“That’s kind of harsh.”

He poked at some pickled ginger. “My parents died when I was thirteen, and the rest of our family left us on our own. A friend of my father’s took us in.”

She put down her chopsticks and gently placed her hand over his. “I’m so sorry.”

He looked at her hand, his face tense. He shrugged. “I won’t get into the details.” He paused. “My younger sister works in law enforcement now, though.”

“If she has martial arts skills like you do, I’m sure she really kicks some ass.”

He gave her a strange smile.

The waitress reached for one of the empty sushi plates. “Everything all right?”

They both nodded.

Kent looked back over at Liz. “So, do you even understand any of that opera you’re listening to all the time?”

She shook her head. “Nope. But there’s so much feeling and emotion in Italian opera that I don’t think you really need to understand the words. You know, when I was little, I wanted to be an opera singer. Unfortunately, I have a voice that shatters glass.” Belatedly, she realized her hand was still on his. She took back her hand, feeling strangely bereft.

His voice was casual. "So, what's the scoop on your love life? Gossip in the office says you're involved."

She froze. "Who said that?" How did he know about the ninja?

"Maia, Nick's new secretary."

Huh? Oh. Right.

She poked at her wasabi. "Nick and I are *not* dating. Though I have met someone recently."

He popped a piece of tuna roll into his mouth. "Who is he? Anyone we know?"

"It's kind of a long story."

"Oh, come on, you can tell me the details."

"Well, I'm having a great time, but I don't think it will last."

He looked up at her immediately.

"Why do you say that?"

She reached forward and picked up an eel roll. "He doesn't kiss like he's looking for a long-term thing."

"He doesn't *kiss* like he's looking for a long-term thing?"

"He kisses too well." She blushed, remembering all the places that the ninja had kissed her. She swallowed. "He's just too good at pushing my buttons."

"You don't think he has long-term potential because he's too good at pushing your buttons," he repeated in disbelief.

"I can tell he's had tons of women throwing themselves at his feet. He's just too good at what he does." She shrugged. "I'm just a diversion for him at most."

He set his tea down. "You shouldn't let him use you like that."

"Honestly, I don't mind. I'm having fun. He's having fun. As long as we're all having fun, what's the harm?" She took a sip of her green tea, savoring the bitter flavor.

“So, what about you, Kent?”

“What about me?”

“Oh, come on! You were just asking me about my love life, now it’s your turn.”

“Don’t have much of one. Too busy at the dojo and work and all.”

“There isn’t anyone special that has caught your eye?” she teased.

He looked at her, his dark brown eyes filled with something she hadn’t seen before. It sent shivers down her spine.

It was crazy. Until that instant, she had never really known the meaning of a pregnant pause. One moment they were joking and laughing like old friends.

This moment was something completely different.

He held her gaze for several moments. Then he leaned forward. Suddenly, she was aware of just how close he was. She was amazed that the air was not crackling with electricity. His dark brown eyes were mesmerizing. She felt herself growing warm again.

“Liz ...” he began. His voice was warmly intimate. Soft. Seductive.

The waitress arrived with the bill. He snatched it from the plastic tray before Liz even had a glance. “Hey, I said this was my treat.”

“Nope. You get the next one.” Next one. There would be a next one. She rolled her eyes at him, then leaned back and sighed.

“Fine.”

He pulled out a credit card. “Do you need a ride home?”

“Umm, sure. Are you going up the West Side?”

He stood up, flashing a grin at her. “I am now.”

They left the restaurant and walked around the block. He stopped in front of a black motorcycle with sleek, streamlined curves.

Her eyes widened.

“I hope you’re not afraid of motorcycles,” he said with a smile.

She cocked her head at him, looked at the motorcycle, and then looked back at him. “Wow. This is one of those custom-made things, huh? You’re quite the well-paid secretary, aren’t you?”

“Actually, this is one of the few toys I have left from the dot-comming days.” He handed her a helmet. “Take this. It’s my sister’s and it should fit you.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You share a bike with your sister?”

“Joy’s been stealing my bike since we were little. This way at least she’s safe.”

He swung a leg over the seat. He strapped his helmet on and waited expectantly for her.

This was just a ride home. With Kent. Her secretary. Her friend.

She donned the helmet and climbed on.

He reached back, grabbed her hands, and pulled them around his waist until her breasts were pressed against his back. Her hands were splayed against his hard torso.

He felt so damn good.

“When I turn, I need you to lean into it. Now, hold on.” The motorcycle rushed forward. Every time they took a curve, she did as he had said, tightening her grip on him. She could feel the ridges of his well-defined stomach muscles through his shirt.

This was Kent? she thought once more in disbelief. Her secretary?

All too soon, they arrived at her apartment building. The motorcycle thrummed. She took off her helmet as he took off his.

“Hey, Kent. Thanks for tonight,” she said softly. “I had a really good time.”

“Me, too.”

She wanted to ask him to come up, but what if that ninja showed up? That was, if he ever showed up again. Really, though, they had made no promises to each other. What if he was some psycho? She couldn't put Kent in harm's way, even if he was an aikido master.

She leaned forward to give him a quick peck on the lips; as she leaned forward, she caught a whiff of the lemony wood incense of the dojo. She breathed it in as his lips touched hers and he traced her lips with his tongue. His warm, intoxicating taste ignited a fire in her core.

Liz opened her mouth to him, and somehow her fingers landed on the curve of his biceps. Vaguely, as pleasure and lust sparked in her body, she became aware that he held her, pressed up against his hard chest. She could feel the strength of his arousal as he pulled her astride a hard, muscular thigh. The knowledge that Kent wanted her as much as she wanted him burned into her body, fueling the flood of her desire. His tongue cajoled and teased her, darting in and out of her mouth as thoughts of his hard cock doing the same to her body imprinted themselves on her mind.

Liz pulled back. This was her secretary.

His eyes were deep brown, scorching with promise. Desire. He looked at her as if he wanted to haul her across his motorcycle and fuck her right there.

She felt dazed and confused. "I ... I didn't mean --"

He put a gentle finger on her lips. "Shhh, Liz. Don't say a thing." He put on his helmet.

She stepped back from the curb, even as she wanted to ask him to come upstairs with her. To fuck her with his masterful male body, to roll around with her, to dominate her with his desire.

"Good night, Kent."

"Good night, Liz."

The motorcycle roared off into the night.

Chapter Four

“Oh, shit!”

The AK-47 rattled in his hands as Ray fired into the shadows.

He couldn’t see anything. The lights had gone out. He couldn’t hear anything, either, except the popping of his gun, and the sound of shattering of car windshields. He was fuckin’ *fucked* if he stopped firing.

Agony sliced through his hands, forcing him to drop the gun. He looked at the sharp steel stars now embedded, one blade lodged against the gold ring on his right index finger.

He stumbled backwards, falling over. “*Shit!*”

His limbs wouldn’t stop shaking, even as he frantically scrabbled away. Behind him, guns went off, bullets ricocheted, and men screamed.

Holy fuck. The ninjas had come. Just like Bobby had said, the ninjas had come.

“Shitshitshitshit!”

It was that bitch teacher’s fault that he hadn’t finished his alchemical training. He could be getting paid his weight in platinum and killed all these fucking ninjas with a thought if he had. Instead, he was fucking running -- no -- crawling for his life. He fucking

knew this would happen the moment that he found out that same bitch alchemist had been hired by the Triad.

Of course, the ninjas were here, and the whore was nowhere to be found.

A limp body smashed into the concrete in front of him. "Shit!"

Light blinded him. It was bright everywhere. The unmistakable snap and crackle of alchemical power filled the air. Ray turned and saw his former teacher, the alchemist who had been assigned to their group. Her ratty, knotted hair stood on end as she held her shaking hands in front of her, fingers widespread, sending pulses of white light towards a solitary ninja.

The ninja's sword was a black blur as it sliced through the glowing balls of light. The ninja was unstoppable. Even the bullets from the men rapidly firing beside the alchemist simply passed through him as if he were nothing but a shadow.

Ray wanted to move; he wanted to run, but he couldn't. Fear and a curious awareness froze him. His death was here; it was time to die. The other ninjas were going to get him, but still, he couldn't tear his eyes from the alchemist and the ninja before him.

Already unsure of herself, the alchemist grew frantic at the ninja's slow, almost mocking progress toward her. She gave a cry, threw up a barrier of fire, and seized Donnie, who stood nearest to her.

And yanked his heart from his chest.

Shit.

She held the still-beating heart in front of her and screamed something just as the ninja breached the barrier.

Light flooded the garage.

Then darkness and silence.

Ray couldn't hear. He couldn't see.

The other ninjas were here.

He rubbed his eyes, trying to see, even as he attempted to crawl towards the door.

His vision began to adjust; there was the door! He could make it!

And then a sword flashed in front of him.

Ray closed his eyes. *Clang!* The sound thundered in his ears.

He opened his eyes.

A black, armored forearm blocked the ninja's sword.

Ray looked up.

Red eyes glowed at him from a dark, monstrous helm. Ray shook as he realized the thing's armor was inscribed with the symbols of the darkest magicks, characters so dangerous even *she* had not dared to depict them.

A demon.

Ray opened his mouth to scream, but no sound would come out.

The ninja faced the demon, his sword still in front of him and at the ready.

The demon growled something unintelligible at the ninja, and the ninja paused.

The demon snarled once more, and the dark clawed into Ray's consciousness.

The demon's voice regressed back into a normal human timbre as he assumed his human form, his words slightly accented with Russian. "I thought I'd find you here."

Ninja sheathed his katana slowly. "Never stop my blade again."

The demon-man, now dressed in a long black, mandarin-collared coat, poked at the crumpled form with his steel-booted toe. "I need this man alive. But there are things we must talk about."

Ninja pointed upwards.

Jasper looked at the man, and then looked at Ninja.

“Fine.” Jasper picked up the man and slung him over his shoulder. “I’ll carry him. Let’s go.”

Ninja took two steps and vanished into a shadowed wall.

He put a foot up on the edge of the building, and watched as Jasper flew up. There was a crunch in the gravel as Jasper landed and dropped the man at his feet.

Ninja pointed at the unconscious lump Jasper stepped over. “Why?”

Jasper reached into his coat pockets, pulling out a cigarette pack and a lighter. “He has information on the Philosopher’s Stone.”

Ninja examined his blade. “Eternal life is not much of a gift when you’re cut in pieces.”

Jasper stopped. “The Philosopher’s Stone is more than the promise of immortality. If that’s all you think, then you don’t know the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“I don’t ask questions. I just kick their ass.”

Jasper lit the cigarette. “Your sister is clearly the brains of this operation.”

The flag behind them snapped in the wind as cables clanged against a steel flagpole. “The secret is out, Ninja. The PPA knows about you.”

Ninja looked up at the break in the cloud cover, edging closer to the moon. A few more breezes and the clouds would part, putting moonlight back on the rooftops. It would lessen the number of shadows he could travel through.

He took out his rappelling gun and attached it to his wrist plate. “Yeah. Ninjas exist. Some secret. Ninjas aren’t superheroes.”

The man behind them emitted a low groan.

An oddly sweet smoke began to fill the air. “The tattooed guy who you took out the other night? And that alchemist tonight? Babies.”

Jasper exhaled. The smoke curled slowly upward as if the breeze blowing were nonexistent. "There is only one alchemist with power you must fear. You've already met him. But as much power as he has, the Triad master has acquired greater."

Jasper looked at Ninja. "Do you understand my meaning?"

Underneath the mask, Ninja frowned. There was no doubt in his mind that Jasper was talking about the head of the Triad. The man was obsessed with power. But where had the Triad head gotten the alchemical power, let alone the training to use it? Alchemical power was nothing if you couldn't bend it to your will, but the training alone required years of dedicated study.

Ninja's voice was low. "And so the game changes."

Jasper bent to pick up a large piece of gravel. He closed his hand around it. A yellow glow began to emanate from Jasper's fist.

"The Philosopher's Stone is an object of myth. Most think it simply turns inferior metals into gold and grants eternal life." Jasper opened his hand. Yellow light burst forth. "That's only part of the story."

He handed the glowing shard to Ninja. "This is a false Philosopher's Stone, to show you what one looks like. You need the energy of a nuclear explosion, paired with the finesse of one well-trained in the properties of this reality to create the stone."

"What does it do?"

"Anything you want it to. More than immortality, it is an object of primal power, a copy of the first dream that created the universe, made solid. In our reality, it can control people with nothing more than a word. Destroy a continent with little more than a thought. Open a doorway into the Demon Realm and merge our world with theirs. You think the Joran invasion was bad? It will be nothing compared to what will happen if a Philosopher's Stone falls into the wrong hands. The procedure for the Stone's creation, long closely held

secret, has some how been disseminated, and with the power of the atom, humans have finally achieved the ability to create one.”

“What idiots let that happen?”

Jasper looked up at the night sky. “That is what I am investigating. For Earth’s sake, I hope my hunches are not correct.” He looked back at Ninja. “There is no one who monitors the Triad as closely as you and Joy. The Paranormal Bureau needs your help. The Triad has concluded, quite rightly, that old Soviet nuclear materials will greatly aid in their quest for the Stone. I need you to be on the watch for documents, manuals, uranium, any other fission materials.”

Bureaucracies. Ninja hated them and wanted nothing to do with them. “I’m not a flunkie superhero, trying to be some kind of do-gooder. I have a mission, and that --”

His words were interrupted by gunshots below. They looked over the edge of the building. A woman staggered out the doors of a corner bodega in the street below and collapsed.

Jasper raised an eyebrow. “So you just going to let that happen?”

“Shut up, Cossack.” Ninja faded into the shadows.

Jasper looked back over the ledge. The bodega went dark, and two bodies came flying out of the door, smashing into the parked car in front of the store.

Jasper took the cigarette from his mouth. “He had better get his license soon.”

* * * * *

A table lamp provided the only light in her darkened living room. She lay on the couch asleep, her long red hair splayed out behind her. A book lay open and face-down on her chest.

He picked up the book.

Her eyes fluttered open. So green, like the necklace she always wore. She didn't seem surprised to see him standing above her. Yawning and stretching, she arched up; the tips of her breasts were taut and visible through the old, thin shirt that was emblazoned with her alma mater's name. Forget lingerie; she was wearing the sexiest thing he had ever seen.

"I thought I might see you again." She smiled lazily. "I just didn't expect so soon, or I might have put something more fun on."

He removed his gloves. Her gaze followed his hands. Was she getting turned on? God, he loved the way she looked at him, like he was sex incarnate.

He reached over her and turned off the light, then pulled out the black strip of cloth.

"Blindfolded again?" She sighed as he slipped it over her eyes. "I suppose there's no convincing you otherwise."

He couldn't risk her finding out who he was. He finished tying the knot around her head, unable to help himself from running his fingers through her hair. Like silken copper. He lifted the bottom of his mask and pressed the strands against his face, inhaling their lavender-sandalwood scent.

It was intoxicating to be so close to her, to smell her arousal at his presence. He could feel his cock swelling, demanding that he bury himself in her.

But he had not gotten to where he was without discipline.

He slipped his hands underneath her shirt.

"Aren't you at least going to strip so I can feel your lovely body?"

Slowly, he reached into the shadows and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

With the blindfold, her senses felt heightened. She could almost sense the air that he displaced with each movement. She could also smell a faint hint of gunpowder and that lemon-wood incense.

He whipped her shirt up over her head without displacing the cloth over her eyes; in that one quick motion she was naked. She hadn't even worn the slightest scrap of underwear, only to now find herself completely vulnerable before this masked stranger.

He reached for her wrists and brought them up over her head then flipped her over. Cold metal clasped her wrists. So he wanted her handcuffed, too. Her heart pounded as her rational mind suddenly screamed at her for being so foolish. What the hell was she doing? Letting a strange man blind her and bind her?

Fabric rustled. The sound of leather against leather. A bottle was uncorked. An exotic, musky scent of roses and sandalwood filled the room. It smelled like liquid desire and sex.

She heard the sound of two hands rubbing together. And then he placed a warm hand between her shoulder blades. His fingers, his palms were so large that they almost covered her back. Even with the oil, his calluses teased her skin as his fingers smoothed over her.

She shivered, feeling more vulnerable than ever. She was completely at his mercy, this large, unknown stranger. He could do anything he wanted with her.

The thought made her core clench in anticipation.

His touch, as it traveled down her legs and up again, was strangely gentle and reassuring. She savored the feel of his warm hands on her bare skin. His hands caressed her, showing her she would never have anything to fear from him.

She shivered as his fingertips played with the curve in the small of her back. His hands, so large and so warm, teased her, beckoning a heightened sensual awareness. She could feel the pads of his fingers as they drew her inner heat to the surface of her skin.

Never had she so completely released herself to any man. It felt amazing, to let herself go, to surrender, to submit. All remaining vestiges of soreness from her lesson with Kent were gone. Her muscles felt loose, and relaxed.

Ah, Kent. What would he do if he saw her here, naked, handcuffed, and beneath the masked man's touch?

The thought of the two men ministering to her made her tremble.

He traced the curve of her butt, down and around.

She heard his breathing change ever so slightly as he encountered her wetness. Even though the massage felt amazing, it teased her and she wanted more. She wanted bare skin, his body covering and possessing her, driving her down with his solidity, overwhelming her with the scent of his need.

He continued until the tip of a large finger barely petting her clit. She inhaled sharply. He circled her nub in a languorous continuous motion.

This rough warrior could be deft and delicate if he chose.

She clenched her legs, straddling his hand, feeling his fingers stroking her in long, leisurely movements between her dripping opening and her swollen clit. She pushed her mound against his hand, trying to take him inside her, desperate to have her desire fulfilled.

His fingers danced in tempo with her hips, always out of reach. She struggled with the cold metal handcuffs, thrusting her ass up for him.

She could barely speak. "Please."

To her dismay, he slid his hand away, traveling down the backs of her legs. The handcuffs rubbed and bumped against her wrists as she tried to bring him back up, but it was useless.

He paused at the back of her knees and blew a warm, gentle breath across her skin. She shivered as flames seemed to dance on her. Every sensation magnified her awareness of him. She breathed in his gunpowder-leather aroma, reveling in its masculinity. Her clit tingled, wired to every nerve. Desire pooled in the lower part of her stomach, spiraling upward, twisting her thoughts into a haze of lust.

Her voice trembled again. "Please."

There was the rustling of cloth and fabric, and then she felt one firm leg against the side of her ass and then another. She could almost see him straddling her, towering over her

bare body. His essence was mingled with desire; he wanted her, knowledge that made her revel in her power despite her submissive position.

And then she felt it. His long, hard cock. It was so thick and heavy, resting between the cheeks of her ass. He pushed forward, and his heated length slid along her oiled back. It was so firm and sleek. He shifted upward, until his cock tickled an ear, so close to her face that she could smell his musky arousal. The hairs of his heavy balls skimmed her shoulder

He was covering her with his scent, like a beast marking his mate.

She turned her face, trying to taste him, but his cock eluded her. He leaned over, one hand reaching underneath her to cup her breast. He hovered just above her, his nipples just brushing her back. His hand then fell between her legs, playing her opening once more.

The handcuffs rattled as she tried to feel more of him. She needed to feel him, to touch him.

She asked again. "Please."

He paused. Then swiftly tied a silk cloth around her mouth, gagging her.

She felt his arousal, nestled between her cheeks again. She tensed. Slick with the oil from her back, she felt him begin to slide between her legs. She thought he was going to fuck her but he passed her pussy, his cockhead rubbing against her clit. Back and forth, never entering in a maddening tease. She was dying to feel his chest against her back, to feel his weight burying her into the cushions.

With each stroke, both his cockhead and his fingers took turns rubbing her clit. Nothing entered her cunt, even as her body writhed and pleaded. In the silence of the room, her gagged whimpers seemed to echo. He picked up speed, his cock rocking against her ass, his fingers torturing her clit. And just as she began to hear his panting breath, and stars sparked behind her eyelids, he unexpectedly shoved something big and hard into her cunt.

She couldn't help but emit a muffled cry as her hips wriggled, trying to adjust, until she felt something else between her cheeks.

A shudder of carnal anticipation surged through her as she felt the object at her back opening. She gritted her teeth, reveling in the pain-filled pleasure as it eased inward. Just when she couldn't take any more, he stopped.

And switched it on.

The unexpected vibrations made her bite down hard on a scream, as surge after surge of pulsing pleasure took control of her body.

She writhed beneath him, a being of pure sexual energy, shuddering in ecstasy.

He'd thought that by taking control of this obsession with her, he would get rid of it. But as he looked at her, bound and blindfolded beneath him, her round ass riding the double dildo enthusiastically, her body covered in a glowing sheen of exertion, he wanted more of her. He wanted to lose himself in her, to be overcome with her, and have her cling to him.

But that wasn't possible. As the ninja, he couldn't trust anyone.

He switched on another button of the dildo, which allowed each dick to spin independently. Her muffled cries and squirming rewarded him. As his hand moved along his thick cock, pleasure exploded into his body. Each touch seemed to be magnified by the very contact with her skin. His balls tingled, feeling like they grew heavier and larger.

His hand moved along his hard, throbbing cock in quick strokes. His cock had a mind of its own. Never had he had such a desperate need to fuck in his life. And not just anyone, but Liz, of the red hair and green eyes, who was now at his mercy.

Damn.

He cursed himself for bringing the double dildo; even as he knew that it would be the only way that he could prevent himself from taking her into his arms and diving into her sweet cunt or tight ass.

His entire lower torso was tense and tight, so ready, so fucking ready. What was wrong with him? Here she was, perfect for the taking, ready, begging to be fucked by him.

Bare, slick feminine curves quivered beneath him, calling to him to claim her. She was his if only he would take her. Wasn't this what he wanted all along?

But if he fucked her now, would Liz and Kent ever have a chance?

Fuck. Damn it. He couldn't do this. It wasn't enough.

His hand encircled and pumped his cock. The combination of his fantasy, moaning just beneath him, and the feel of his hand stroking his erection only intensified his arousal. Oh, *yes.* That felt *good.*

But not as good as taking the woman beneath him would.

He left the double dildo in and used one hand to cup her breast, fingering an erect nipple.

His palm slid over his cock, moving from base to tip in a quickening rhythm. He clenched his teeth against a groan. How much more wonderful would it be to have Liz do this, to have Liz take his cock in her hands, mouth, and cunt?

To have her look at him, at Kent, and desire *him*. He was such a sentimental, stupid, horny fool.

Her muffled cries grew louder.

But he wanted her to want him for who he really was. He wanted her to want him because she thought him a good man, not just a good fuck. He squeezed his cock in an almost painful grip, feeling the blood pound in his head and in his cock. He wanted to hear her call his real name. He thrust his hips forward, pumping his hand.

No more secrets.

Faster.

No more masks.

Harder.

Just him and Liz.

He clenched his abdomen, shutting his eyes. The pleasure exploded in his head. A flood erupted onto her back even as she cried out. The slipperiness intensified his pleasure. He broke out into a sweat, his entire body tense, even as he continued gripping and stroking his cock.

Her cries became whimpers, and he shut the double dildo vibrator off.

He went to his supplies and pulled out some cleansing wipes to clean her off. Though she was quiet, her body still quivered at his touch.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, slowly withdrawing the dildo.

And put his armor back on.

Chapter Five

Sunlight streamed onto Liz's paper-covered desk. The whiteness of the papers would have been blinding had she actually been working on the Taiwanese steel contracts scattered in front of her.

Instead, she stared intently at her laptop screen. Waiting for her code to hack into the hidden network files was like watching water boil.

Her eyes glazed over. Was the ninja never going to fuck her? It wasn't that she hadn't enjoyed what had happened so far, but it wasn't enough.

Her pussy twitched as she shifted in her chair. She leaned to her side and opened the bottom drawer of her desk, grabbing a clean pair of underwear from her bag. She kept a change of clothes stashed in her office so that she could go straight to the gym after work. Never did she think she would be using them because she was so wet.

Liz stood up, slid the black lace underwear down her legs, and stepped out of it. She could still hear the rustle of fabric, the unfastening of his belt just before he had slid his hard, solid body against hers. She could almost feel the hot, hard planes and curves of muscle sliding against her skin. Somehow her hand made it to the cleft between her legs, touching herself as he had touched her. She closed her eyes as she remembered kissing him, his tongue

curling around hers, her hand resting against his hard bicep, breathing in that lemon-wood scent.

Her clit tingled as she realized just how much more wet she had become. What was the use of frickin' putting underwear on again if she was just going to soak it once more? This was ridiculous. If she got any hotter, she would set her chair on fire.

Still, she let her finger circle her clit as she replayed the memories of last night in her mind. She could nearly feel the sensation of his tongue as it slid against her inner lips. The only thing that would have made it perfect was if Ninja had wrapped himself around her and put his cock inside her. At least the kiss --

Her eyes flew open. Wait. That kiss wasn't Ninja. That was Kent.

She shook her head. What had the ninja done to her, to make her so filled with lust and desire?

Maybe it was the fact that through it all, she still hadn't felt him inside her. Surely coming on her was not as satisfying as coming inside her. She had never thought she would allow a man to play with her like that. Surely he wanted to fuck her. And after all that, he just disappeared back into the shadows. What kind of man was he?

The computer beeped, signaling successful decryption. Liz rolled her eyes and leaned over. She tapped a few keys and wrinkled her brow at what she saw.

This Triad stuff was just getting weirder and weirder. The ex-Soviet plutonium, sure, that made sense, but five hundred gallons of urea? That wasn't anything but synthesized pee. And what was it with the ancient Persian scrolls? This was what they were shipping in?

Maybe it was some other kind of code, a code within a code perhaps. Well, the FBI would have to put their professional cryptologists on this. She belatedly withdrew her hand from her skirt. She pulled a slender white MP3 player out of her drawer and plugged it into her laptop. It was actually an encryption machine and would allow her to carry the info without it being transferred to her laptop.

She stood up to turn and look out her floor to ceiling window. Across the way, another office tower stood. In daylight, the dark reflective glass didn't let her see anything in the offices. Late night was another matter, when she often saw couples go at it. For some reason, the frolickers forgot that just because they were fifty-six stories above the street that they could still be seen by others just as high up. Maybe they didn't really care.

There was a knock on the door.

"Hold on a second!" Liz quickly straightened her skirt and wiped her hand. She turned around, about to let Kent in, when she saw the MP3 player. She yanked it from her computer and quickly tossed it into her bag. On her computer, she quickly closed the program she had been using, brought up another screen, sat down in her chair, and tried to make it look like she had been working hard.

"Come in." Damn, even her voice sounded too breathy.

The door opened.

Belatedly, she saw her black lace underwear still lying on her desk. At once, she shoved a file on top of it.

"Here are the Nalo Corp files you're looking for." Kent's deep voice sent shivers down her spine. "I'll put them on your chair here."

She kept her eyes on her computer screen. "Thanks, Kent." She heard the door shut.

Liz leaned back, breathing a sigh of relief. Her hand slipped down to her crotch as her mind returned to Ninja. What would it be like to have him fuck her on her desk like all those couples in the office across the way? To have his hard cock possessing her, making her his? What would his body feel like, his chest against hers, pinning her down with his weight like Kent had done in the dojo?

She took a deep breath. She had to stop thinking about Ninja. She didn't know if he would ever return to her. But Kent ...

She remembered her lesson with him the other day. A month ago, heck, a few days ago, she would have never thought that he would linger so long in the back of her mind. He was so different out of the office.

That kiss. She brought her fingers to her mouth. Something danced around her head about that kiss.

Liz reached into her bag, took out her MP3 player, plugged it into her computer, and tapped a few keys to restart the downloading process.

She rested her elbow atop the many piles of papers on her desk and let out a sigh. Underneath that oversized suit, Kent was ripped and cut like a woman's dream. There wasn't an inch of his body that wasn't covered with corded muscle. And those hands. How had she never noticed what big, sexy hands he had? How would they feel gripping her ass as he slammed himself into her?

Why did her mind keep going back to Kent? All they had shared was a kiss or two.

Maybe she was fantasizing about him because he was attainable and available. Logical Lawyer Woman inside her knew that a relationship, if one could call it that, with Mr. Masked Man would never last.

They'd shared nothing but a couple of casual encounters between two willing adults.

Two fucktastic, mind-blowing, amazing encounters. But how long until Ninja got bored?

And then there was Kent.

Liz rolled her office chair away from the desk and walked back over to the window.

"When it rains, it pours," she muttered, watching pigeons walking along her windowsill. At the building kitty-corner to the right, a pair of window washers sat on rickety-looking planks, eating lunch. The anti-glare glass covering the building prevented them from seeing her.

Kent was her *secretary*, for chrissake! But plenty of people boinked their co-workers without hurting their careers. Besides, she reminded herself, the lawyering wasn't the main reason she had stayed on.

Even now, she could almost sense the touch of his lips on hers, the way his kiss had stirred something inside her that not even the ninja could quench. Liz folded an arm across her chest and brought a hand up to her lips. Shivers tickled her spine, leaping into her tingling core. It had been fantastic last night, but she hungered for more. She wanted Ninja's body pressed up against her, filling her with warmth. She needed to know that he craved *her* to satisfy his needs. Desire swelled in her once more, crying, demanding sweet release.

Liz leaned back against the tall bookshelf of legal manuals for support. She had to stop thinking in circles.

She pushed her chair aside, leaned over her laptop, unplugged her MP3 player, and tossed it into her drawer. She grabbed her chair again, sat down, and reached for the intercom button on her phone.

"Kent, do you have a moment? I need your help on something."

There was a faint static buzz. "I'll be right there."

The door opened. He stepped into her office, looking just as fashion challenged as he had the day before. But the difference was that now she knew what was underneath the oversized suit and horrible black glasses.

"Come in. And close the door behind you."

"What's going on?" His voice was too casual, as if he was trying to pretend that the flickering awareness between them didn't exist.

"I think my computer's acting up again." She got up from her chair. "Can you please take a look at it?"

He moved over to her, sitting down in her chair. She perched on the desk, in front of him, next to her laptop, and crossed her legs. He leaned over and clicked the mouse a couple times.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with your computer.”

She reached over and closed the laptop. “Oh. My mistake.” She watched him stiffen, his pupils dilating as a flash of surprise appeared in his dark eyes.

She leaned forward and took off his glasses. “Much better.”

He licked his lips before speaking. She watched, mesmerized by his tongue. Her heart pounded in anticipation.

His voice, to her surprise, was smooth and amused, and held no hint of the deference he normally displayed during office hours. “Daylight bothers my eyes sometimes,” he said, as if trying to justify the existence of his glasses.

She nodded sagely as she reached forward and slowly unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the tight white t-shirt stretched against his chest. She leaned back. “Take it off,” she demanded.

He slowly removed his shirt. The t-shirt underneath stretched tight across his shoulders and pecs, almost as snug as a second skin, highlighting every bulging curve of muscle. His nostrils flared. Was it in anger or excitement? Either way, the sight of him made her tingle all over. Part of her couldn’t believe she was actually doing this. This was crazy!

“You were the master in the dojo. At the office, I am your boss. Do you have a problem taking orders from me?”

He shook his head.

She smiled. “Good. I didn’t think so.” She reached back, pulled out her hair elastic, and shook out her hair. He sat back, watching her with a gaze that was so hot she could almost feel it against her skin. That look on his face, that very male look, made her feel as if she

were a dessert. It made her burn even more. She leaned away from him, so that her breasts strained against the buttons of her blouse, highlighting their fullness.

“I have a question for you, Kent. Do you find me attractive?”

“Yes, of course I --”

She raised a finger to his lips. “Shhh. One word answers.” Leaning forward, she breathed into his ear. “Do you want to fuck me?”

The expression on his face was a cocky, arrogant smile. Yes, indeed, this was her aikido master. He put his hands around her waist, pulled her to him and breathed against her chest. His hand rested on the outside of her skirt, his palm flush against her mound, his heat warming her through the thin fabric. His voice was low, the vibrations, the heat of his breath sending shivers skittering upward. “Are you offering?”

She drew back. Her hands gripped the edge of the desk. Long-ignored papers fell to the floor. “Perhaps. Stand up. Let me get a better look at you.”

He pushed the chair back, and drew up to his full height, looking down at her. His chest rose with every breath.

It occurred to her that she had never seen his legs. Heart pounding in anticipation, in fear, and, shocking herself, she stepped toward him, and began unfastening his pants. Never before had she felt so bold. Maybe it was that near-death experience.

He stepped out of his pants, his cock straining at his black silk boxers. Her semi-coherent thoughts vanished. If his interest could be measured by the size of his cock ... well, it was very large and evident, even against the muscular width of his thighs.

The phone rang. Liz cursed, and she scrambled over the towering stacks of files on her desk to glance at the caller ID. The mailroom. But that one little glance cost her control of the situation.

She tried to turn around, but he easily held her pinned, with his hips. Somehow, he had pushed her up against the desk so that he was nestled between her widespread legs. She

was bent so far over the desk, only her toes were on the floor. She shifted; he didn't move. She could feel the heat radiating from his cock, just inches away from her warm, wet opening.

She challenged him. "You can't keep me like this forever."

With a hand on her shoulder and one on her waist, he suddenly spun her around, crushing her against him. He kissed her, his tongue parting her lips, invading her mouth, a promise that his cock would do the exact same thing. Already she could feel herself pulsing in sweet, hungering anticipation. Inside, something seemed to sigh, release, and uncoil at his kiss, at his touch. She began to pull at his boxers, but he seized her wrists.

His eyes were brown and dark. "Not yet."

He was suddenly kneeling before her, pushing her office chair away. His warm breath traveled up her short skirt as he removed a high heel. A single touch, finger to foot, and she shuddered. She hadn't known that just the simple act of him touching her feet would send shivers right up to her wet pulsing core. She watched as he took off the other pump and bestowed searing kisses on her foot. And then he proceeded to do the same to the other.

She felt light-headed and yet alive. Her skin ached for his touch. "Slide your hand up my leg, please." The touch of his fingers against her bare legs as he slid them underneath her skirt left lingering trails of warmth. She watched his eyes widen as he reached the curve of her ass.

"No, I'm not wearing any underwear." She leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "And I've been so hot and wet all day." She moved away so that she could look directly in to his eyes again. She couldn't let herself fall to his control so easily. She had to remember who she was. "So tell me, my secretary. How does it make you feel? And just what are you going to do about it?"

She could almost see him contemplating the possibilities. More papers on her desk slid onto the floor.

“It makes me go rigid because you want me. It makes me so fucking hard.” His voice was deep, warm, and his admission made her quiver. Slowly he began tracing small circles, feeling the smooth, soft skin along her inner thigh.

He stopped.

“Go on,” she urged. “I don’t want silence, Kent. I want to hear your voice.”

“I’ve wanted to feel these long, lean legs of yours since the moment I saw you.” He placed his cheek against her calf. The tips of his fingers teased her clitoris. She felt warm all over.

“Wow.” He looked up at her, amazement in his eyes. “You *are* wet.” With a sudden motion, he thrust a finger inside her.

She gripped the edge of the desk as her eyes rolled back.

“Oh, yeah,” he groaned. His finger filled her, stretching her tightness. He slid another finger inside her. “You’re so hot and tight. And you’ve been wet like this all day?”

Her legs were splayed open as his fingers curved and pressed into her core. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to do something about that.” Slowly, with a twisting motion, he began to slide in and out of her slickness.

She tried to bite her lip to keep quiet, but she couldn’t help crying out with each thrust, rubbing herself against his hand. The pens in the cup on her desk rattled with her efforts. She flung her head back as the exquisite sensations built.

He licked a spot on her leg. “I love the way you look at me with that gaze of pure sex in your eyes.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. “I love feeling your hot pussy clench around my fingers; I know it’s going to clench the same way around my hard cock when I finally pump it into you.”

The thought of his hard pulsing cock in her cunt was just too much. With a shuddering cry, she grabbed on to his arm. Heat and fire charged through her, drenching her.

She panted and thrashed, running her fingers through his hair, feeling his solid shoulders. He brought her to climax two more times before she managed to string together the syllables to order him to stop. He withdrew, but her body wouldn't cease pulsing. As she tried to catch her breath, she caught sight of his smug smile.

She forced herself off her desk. One arm caught her around the waist, even as his fingers slipped back to her pussy, holding her up as she landed on wobbly legs.

She hung onto his thick shoulders, her mons in his palm. He shouldn't be in control; she should. But the thoughts were lost as another wave of pleasure wracked her shuddering body.

She fell limply against him for several moments, pulsing around the fingers still inside her, before she realized he had been in fact, holding her up with a single hand.

Liz moved to stand on her own two feet, even as she forced him away. Her cunt still throbbed; she could feel the warmth pounding in her veins.

Outwardly, Kent looked unruffled. But as she looked into his eyes, she could see a hunger that nearly outmatched her own.

Goddamn it. It wasn't fair that he could make her unravel so easily. She was going to be the one in control here. She straightened her shoulders and put on her best "I'm-the-boss" gaze.

"You're wearing too many clothes. I want to see what's underneath those boxers."

"Liz." His accent sounded more Australian than ever as the boxers fell to the floor. "I love it when you lose control and then try so hard to retake it."

Holy crap! He was *huge*.

There was no way that he was going to fit.

"You actually walk around with that monster in your pants?"

He laughed, a deep, sexy, and relaxed laugh.

She backed away. "I don't think we're going to be able to fit."

Something flashed in his brown eyes. In the blink of an eye, somehow, he had picked her up and laid her out on her desk on top of all those papers, legs open and wrapped around him. Pens scattered across the carpet as they fell with more papers.

He stood at the edge of the desk, nestled between her legs. She tried to get up, but all she managed to do was rub her clit against his tip. A condom seemed to magically appear in his hand.

“Oh, we’ll fit,” he said with a grin. “Just let me show you.”

Chapter Six

There was no way his cock was going to fit.

How had she lost control to her secretary, of all people so quickly? But as she looked up at the man who had her at his mercy, she was reminded of her lesson the previous night. She felt helpless to stop the man towering over her. His strength, his skill was greater than hers by far.

“Kent, please. You’re too big for me,” she gasped, even as she watched him sheath himself with the condom.

He growled, pulling her so that she sat up.

He teased her. “You’re falling a little behind on the contracts there, huh?” Before she could reply, he picked her up by the ass, and she had no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck. His hard length nestled in her cleft, his girth rubbing her clit as he slowly rocked back and forth. She rode his cock, between her legs, even as he stayed outside her body.

“Tell me you don’t want it, Liz. Tell me you don’t want to feel my hard cock throbbing inside you, and I’ll stop right now.”

The pressure against her clit was too much. The slow sensation of his thick, heavy cock sliding against her made her clench. She needed to feel him, all of him, inside her. It had been way too long.

The words came from her in a series of breaths. "Please, Kent, please."

"Please what?"

She buried her head in his shoulder. "Fuck me. Ride me."

He stopped moving. She opened her eyes and pulled back to see a man triumphant, his eyes heavy with need and desire. She felt the head of his cock press against her swollen, wet cunt. She let out a whimper that was part plea as he pushed into her slickness.

"Kent, you're too big."

He hushed her, trailing kisses along her collarbone. One large hand held onto her, his thumb teasing her erect nipples. She felt him flex his cock inside her, spreading her even wider, eliciting a cry of his name. He silenced her, covering her mouth with his. She felt lost, overwhelmed by this great big hunk of man, who possessed her so thoroughly. She was stretched and filled further than she had ever been before.

And then he pushed another inch into her. Her eyes opened wide. She gasped, even as her pussy gripped him with firm, pulsing quakes. He was so heavy and solid inside her, a monstrous weight stretching her. He completely filled her with his cock. Panic broke through and she tried to wiggle her way out, but it was like fighting against living marble. He suddenly seized her ass and buried himself completely in her cunt with a quick thrust.

He paused, breaking off the kiss and looking into her eyes. Her heart was thrumming so fast, it was amazing that it didn't just fly away. His forehead beaded with sweat as he tried to give her time to adjust, holding himself back.

His eyes were brown and dark.

“You are so very tight, Liz, so wet, so hot. I’ve wanted you for so long, Liz, wanted to feel your pussy wrapped around me.” Her wet inner core clenched on his cock, eliciting a moan from him.

“I’m going make you scream and holler my name.”

She took a deep breath, gathering the remnants of her scattered mind. “Not here. Not at work.”

“Yes. Here.” He flexed his cock inside her, bringing forth a gasp from her.

“Are you ready, luv?” Love, she thought for a brief sober moment. What a silly, Australian term of endearment. “I will not scream.”

“Oh, yes, you will.”

He slowly eased out. And then slammed back into her. He repeated this over and over, until she could think of nothing else but the glorious charge of pleasure that seemed to fill every fiber of her body. Never had she felt like this, as if she rode tide after tide of shattering, crashing ecstasy. It was all she could do to hold back as her whole body convulsed in a single instant.

Liz cried out, but it was not a scream.

Kent tightened his grip on her ass, picking her up as if she weighed nothing. She could hear the phone on her desk rattling in its cradle at the motion. She wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to maintain a precarious hold on this wild tiger. He groaned and alternately kissed and licked her ear, neck, and shoulder.

His muscles rippled with strength barely reined. She bit her lip first, then set her lips on his chest, barely holding back a cry.

“Release it, Liz,” he growled. “Let me hear you scream my name.”

His skin was taut, rippling with muscled strength barely held in check. The heat of his hands stroked her back, tangled in her hair. He pulled her head back, and with an angry

growl, plunged his tongue in her mouth, as if drinking her in. Heat fired into her as he let out his own cry. It barreled through her, knocking her down, consuming her.

They lay there for several moments, his length still hard inside her. She brought her hands up to his face, puzzling at the strange look in his eyes.

And then the phone began to ring. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the caller ID.

“Oh, fuck!”

Kent saw the number the same time and instantly got off of her, helping her to her feet.

How could she have forgotten?

She picked up the phone.

“Brian? Yes, of course I’m ready for the conference call. Can you give me three minutes to organize the papers? What? Of course I’m feeling okay.” She tried to button up her blouse while searching for her skirt. “Just ran up the stairs. You’ve been trying to reach my secretary for the past forty-five minutes?” She nodded to Kent gratefully as he handed her skirt to her. “Oh, he’s out on an errand for me. No, I definitely have the papers right here on my desk.” Kent handed her what was sure to be the exact pile of papers she needed for this conference call. He was always good. “Sure I’ll hold while you patch me in to the conference call.”

She covered the mouthpiece of the receiver, and turned back to Kent. She frowned.

“How’d you get dressed so quickly?”

He shrugged.

Now what? “Um, Kent, I, um --”

“I know. You’ll be on this call for the next two hours. I calendared it for you, remember?”

“You can go home if you need to.” She glanced at the clock. “I know it’s past the time you normally leave.”

“Will you be around tonight, Liz?”

Mentally she cursed. What if *he* showed up again tonight? She couldn’t do that to poor Kent. Shit! What the hell had she just done?

“Kent, I can’t. I’m really ... busy.” The excuse sounded weak even to her.

At those words, his face became unreadable.

The phone began to beep, alerting her that the conference call was ready for her. “Listen, can we talk later?”

“Sure. Don’t forget, I’m taking a couple personal days off this week. I’ll be back on Thursday. But if you want to stop by the dojo at eight-thirty for another lesson Wednesday ...”

“Got it. Eight-thirty, Wednesday. I’ll be there.”

Chapter Seven

“You’ve been sleeping with *who*?” Vy’s short dark bob fell perfectly around her face as she jerked her head back in surprise.

“Shhhh!” Liz looked around, but Vy’s exclamation went unnoticed in the busy diner. In the vinyl booth behind Liz, a loud conversation in French with occasional bursts of laughter overwhelmed the busy sounds of the diner. She leaned forward. “Vy, I told you, it’s just oral sex so far. He refuses to fuck me.”

“You don’t know where he’s been! He could have diseases or somethin’!” Vy reached for a napkin and laid it across her lap. Despite her education, and her professional appearance Vy proudly retained her Brooklyn accent. Vy or Parvati Radeshi, as her parents had named her, had been Liz’s college roommate at Smith. She now worked for the FBI, too, acting as Liz’s handler among her many duties.

Liz rolled her eyes and set down her cappuccino. She stared out the diner window. The rain poured down, hitting the cement. Even through the noise of the diner and the traffic outside, the distant roar of thunder could be heard. “Vy, for chrissake, it’s not like he’s carrying the plague.”

“He could be! You don’t even know his name. He could be a serial killer or a terrorist! There’s got to be a reason he’s not a licensed PPA agent.” Vy crossed her arms. “You are so lucky that we’ve been friends for so long, because on or off the record, I would have said something to someone.”

Liz met her friend’s eyes. “He saved my life, Vy.”

Vy picked up a curly fry from the basket between them. “That’s another thing I’m worried about. I’m not convinced that that mugging was random. I told you before; *the company* is not to be messed with.” Whenever they met in public places like this, the Snakehead Triad was always referred to as “the company.” It made them virtually indistinguishable from the hundreds of other suits talking about business.

Vy shook her head. “For all you know, they could have set up that attack, and he could be working for them.”

Liz picked up her spoon and stirred her cappuccino absentmindedly. “He’s not. I know he’s not.”

“Do you even hear what you sound like? What --”

“I know, I know.” Liz set her cappuccino spoon down on the plate with a clink. “You think I sound like some whiny woman making excuses for her man. Listen, I’m positive he’s not working for the company. I think he’s here because of the company. Trust me, the company is doing all it can to stop him.”

Vy arched an eyebrow. “Girl, you just called him your man.”

Liz exhaled in exasperation. “He’s not.”

Vy pointed a fry at her. “Exactly. What evidence do you have that he’s not working for the company?”

“The company communications I’ve found show that they see him as a threat.” Liz reached into the bag beside her and pulled out a CD jewel case that looked like a copy of one of the latest boy bands to hit the pop charts. The actual disc was a different matter, however.

“I brought the CD you wanted to borrow, Vy. You should check out tracks three and four. I think you’ll find them ... enlightening.”

The two sets of tracks contained data about all the weird things that were being smuggled in by the Triad. Triad dealings were getting more and more strange, with all sorts of old artifacts, but what was more interesting was the blueprints for what appeared to some sort of light ray, similar in appearance to the Joran DarkLight weapon, only built around an odd stone-like power source.

Vy picked up the case and tossed it into her bag. “You’re just trying to change the subject.” She sighed. “Look, you’ve gotta stop this now, with both of them.”

Thunder crackled, causing Liz to glance at the street. The rain was still coming down, drenching a young man who ran with a flimsy newspaper in an attempt to cover his turban. “I know.”

Vy wiped her fingers on her napkin. “Not to mention that this endangers you and your work with the company, but if either of these affairs get out, both your careers are over.”

A straw wrapper suddenly landed on their table. They looked over and saw a woman in a gray power suit, trying to chide and restrain her son even as she had an ear and shoulder pressed against a cell phone. The woman mouthed a “sorry” as she tried to clean him.

Liz nodded and looked back at Vy. “I really like Kent a lot, but Night Ninja, or whatever his name is --”

Vy sucked her teeth. “You don’t even know his name.”

Liz ignored her, reaching for a curly fry. “-- Just ... does something to me.” She closed her eyes, remembering the last time, when he had tied her up and used that skilled, if silent, tongue of his on her.

Vy took a sip of her Diet Coke. “Are you sure it’s not some leftover rescuer complex thing? Or the fact that he’s wearing a mask? As nice as oral sex is, I don’t know how satisfying it is to be with a man who refuses to fuck.”

"I can't even describe it, but he's got this crazy, addictive energy."

"I think you're attracted to the thrill of having a mysterious, masked superhero of a lover who is dangerous, dark, and scary." Vy leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. "But, Liz, it's not a real relationship; it's just a fling."

Liz knew Vy was right. Luckily she was saved from having to reply by the waiter, who set down a plate of buffalo wings. The two friends had long agreed that during the few times that they actually had space in their busy schedules to get together, they would pig out on all the bad foods they might not allow themselves to eat otherwise. Liz reached for a wing, while Vy dipped hers in bleu cheese.

"And what about poor Kent? That boy has been in love with you since the first day he started working for you."

Liz narrowed her eyes. "How the hell do you know? You've never even met him."

Vy paused just before she was to take a bite of the chicken wing. "I don't have to meet him to hear his voice lighten up every time he mentions you. I've had some interesting conversations with him when I've called your office and had to wait for you to get on the line."

Liz's head popped up in excitement. "Really? What does he say about me?"

"I don't know, but, gee, I'll ask him in sixth period gym class." Vy used her napkin to clean the sauce dripping down her hand before it contacted her shirt cuff. "Listen to yourself. I can't tell you to do anything except be careful. Speaking of which, you better be careful when you're in Hong Kong."

"I will, I will." Liz took a bite of her chicken wing.

The sound of another conversation, this one in Yiddish, between an elderly couple, could be heard from the table across from them. "Yeah, remember well that you're no James Bond. You're a computer geek, and if we weren't bound by lawyers, judges, and damn civil liberties --"

“Tsk, tsk, remember your good, liberal Smith education, Vy.” Liz tossed her hair back to prevent it from falling on her food. “Hmm, the rain seems to have stopped.”

“Summer storms.” Vy folded the used napkin back into a perfect square. “I know you can take care of yourself, but computer hackin’ and research is one thing. Actively doin’ pickups, that’s completely different.”

Liz crunched on a celery stick. “It’s the same damn thing. I’ll pick up the package from your guy and dump into the company mainframe when I’m in Hong Kong. Easy, simple, just like we planned, and Uncle Sam’s hands will be totally clean.”

Vy shook her head. “If you weren’t so damn good at what you do, if I didn’t have absolute faith in you ...” Vy picked up another chicken wing and began nibbling.

“You don’t have to worry about me.” Liz picked up a curly fry.

Vy stopped eating and looked at her friend. “No, really, if something happens, my hands are completely tied. We can’t do anything for you. We will completely disavow any connection with you. What you’re doing for us ain’t completely --”

“Vy, I know. That’s why you hire freelancers like me. We do the dirty work, and this goes on your expense account as --”

“Hiring a courier.”

Liz reached for a napkin. “Don’t worry. Besides, Nick’s coming with me. I really think this trip is going to yield some good info and contacts.”

Vy dropped the chicken bones on her plate. “Nick? There’s another one! You are just goin’ through all the guys you work with, aren’t you?”

“I told you, we went on one date. That was months ago. And that was it.”

Vy scoffed. “Like all those late nights working together and take-out don’t count.”

“They don’t.”

The waiter interrupted them. “Everything good, ladies?” Both nodded and the waiter left them.

"I like our waiter. He's cute," said Vy, watching the firm backside of the waiter as he departed.

"He's also gay." Liz finished another buffalo wing.

Vy sighed, snagging her Diet Coke. "I think you're right."

"About the waiter or about Nick?"

Vy glanced out the window. "Both."

Liz leaned forward. "I *know* Nick's neck-deep in Triad dealings. And I haven't had to resort to sex to do my work yet."

"I wouldn't mind tryin' it with him though." Vy had once met Nick during after-work drinks. Vy had been taken aback by his sexiness, which seemed to slide right off Liz.

Liz shrugged. "He's too much of a pretty boy for me."

Vy arched an eyebrow. "Yeah, you like them dark, mysterious, and possibly disease-carryin'."

Liz stuck her tongue out.

Vy sighed as she asked the question she always asked. "You should come work for us straight out --"

Liz took another sip of her cappuccino. "But that would mean you would lose me as a company source. And besides, it wouldn't be as much fun."

Vy leaned forward. "Yeah, I don't fuck my assistant." Her perfect hair bobbed in place.

Vy picked up one of the packets of moist towelettes the waiter had brought and handed the other to Liz. She ripped open the wipe.

"So I hear there's more than one Triad alchemist."

Vy finished cleaning her fingers and tossed the dirty wipe on her dish. "Not really. All the crime syndicates are hiring alchemists now, but usually just one to an organization. Alchemists are like pet lions; nice to have on a leash to scare your enemies, but just as likely

to turn around and eat you the way your enemy would. The one that attacked you was just a bottom feeder, in alchemical terms. A trainee.”

Liz brought her napkin up to her mouth. “I don’t know whether to be glad or frightened at that. That guy was really scary.”

Vy glanced at her watch. “I gotta run. Look, about the guys -- you can’t keep this up. You have to break it off. With both of them.”

Liz waved to the waiter and signaled that they needed the check. “With the two of them, strange as it is, I’ve never felt so complete before.”

Vy placed a twenty dollar bill on the table. “You take too many chances as is, girl. You gotta drop this dark crap. And let Kent go gently. He’s too nice to be your fuck toy.”

Chapter Eight

He had her completely pinned and at his mercy with her wrists stretched above her head. He lay on top of her, keeping her trapped. He felt so solid and warm on top of her. His eyes met hers as a curl of hair fell to his forehead.

“Now in the worst case situation, everything I showed you earlier didn’t work. And now you have someone on top of you. What do you do?”

Even now, with his bare, muscular chest pushing down against hers, his voice was as polite and professional as it had been throughout the lesson. As if what had taken place in her office had never happened.

And yet, there was something else, like the way he seemed to take every opportunity to pin her to the mat. The way he always seemed to be nestled between her legs, just so.

Like now.

Liz lay there, panting, sweaty, exhausted.

“Well? Are you just going to lie there all night?”

She brought her head up to butt him. “*Ow!*”

He stared at her as if nothing happened. “That was dumb.”

She tried to wriggle her hand free to feel her head, but he kept her pinned. Every movement only seemed to press his body closer to hers. “Man, you have a rock for a head.”

He eased back. His gaze dipped to her chest, and she realized the pointed tips of her breasts betrayed her thoughts. She began to blush.

Kent rolled off of her and jumped up, offering a hand to her. “Stand up.” She struggled to rise, her muscles screaming with the exertion.

And there it was again, just the barest hint of his palm on her lower back.

He circled her. There was something about the way he did that, standing just within the boundaries of her personal space, that made her feel his presence as strongly as if he were touching her.

“Okay, we don’t have much time left for tonight. I want you to try deflecting the rush that we started with earlier. Try shifting your weight to your left foot as you pivot this way.”

She did as he said and was able to avert his attack successfully for the first time. They practiced it a few more times until she could do it quickly.

He stood up. “All right. I think we’re done for tonight.” He turned his back on her and walked over to the bench.

Their interactions were so strange. Was she simply imagining there was something more to those little points of contact, like his palm at her elbow, sliding down her arm to her shoulder as he showed her the correct form for a block? Other than that, there had been no smoldering looks, no friendly banter or anything. It was as if she had dreamed the whole office interlude.

Maybe Vy had been mistaken. Maybe she had been mistaken.

Unsure, she found herself staring at his back and following him, the soft mat exhaling underneath her feet.

“Hey, Kent?”

He finished taking a swig from his water bottle but didn’t turn around.

His voice sounded neutral. “What’s up, Liz?”

“I was just wondering if everything is okay.” Her heart pounded. Had she so misread him?

“Everything’s fine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

So she was going to have to be the one to bring it up. Fine. She was a lawyer; it was her job to talk about difficult things.

She took a deep breath, and reached for his shoulder. He turned around, his expression a mask.

Under his gaze, her courage faltered. “I ... umm ... I’m sorry ... about the other day. I just ...”

He stopped her, his eyes sharp with something. “Are you really?”

She turned away, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

“Do you regret what happened?”

She couldn’t look up at him. “I’m sorry I took advantage of you --”

He reached for her chin, tilting her face up toward him. She forced herself to look at him.

“Do you really regret what happened? Because I don’t.”

His words had to weave through her mind for a few moments before she understood what he had said. The implications of his words seemed to follow slowly as well.

Exhausted just minutes ago, she felt a nervous energy thrum through her veins. “I don’t either.”

He smiled. “Good.” He lowered his mouth. The first touch of his tongue on her lips was startling in its intensity. He nibbled on her lower lip as his hands measured the curves of her body. She pressed into him, wrapping her arms around his neck, sinking her hands into his thick dark hair. His lips devoured her, a starving man on food. Her knees felt shaky, weak.

She slid her hands along his glistening bare torso. He always looked so good shirtless, and he felt even better than he looked. Her hands ran across the strong, firm ridges of muscle along his back and sides.

He nipped her ear. "You didn't write."

She gasped.

He flicked her neck with his tongue. "You didn't call."

He kissed her sports bra-exposed cleavage, following her collarbone. "I didn't know what to think."

She could feel her heart pounding as he moved lower. She tightened her hold on him. He brushed her hair aside and kissed her on the nape of her neck. It was a strangely intimate, almost loving gesture. Somehow it felt right.

"I ... didn't want to bother you on your days off."

He drew back and looked her in the eyes. "Liz, it wouldn't have been bothering me."

The intensity in his eyes jolted her. Maybe Vy had been right after all.

She suddenly felt shy and buried her face into his chest.

Without warning, he twisted them on to the mat. She landed on top of him. He cradled her and rolled them over so that he straddled her. He grinned, looking down at her. "You're not a very good student, you know. Didn't I tell you that you should always be prepared?" He reached for her hair and pulled out the band, watching as her red locks came loose.

"Well, then, I guess you'll just have to punish me," she murmured.

He helped her wriggle out of her sports bra, taking a pink nipple in his mouth and tugging on it. "Damn straight," he said from the corner of his mouth. "What was it I told you during your first lesson?"

"Here, you are the master, and I am the student." She sighed as his tongue curled around her other nipple, his hand sliding her pants down to her thighs. Then she tried to stop him. "Wait! What if someone comes?"

He ignored her and suckled on her nipple harder, eliciting a sharp, satisfying intake of breath from her.

“So what? Does that turn you on?” His hand skimmed the slight curve of her stomach before dipping between her legs. His fingers slid along her slick inner folds. She exhaled as delicious shiver running through her. “I think it does,” he teased. “Just think, anyone could walk right by and see me touching you like this.” He surged upward, whispering in her ear. “They would see us, Liz, you and me, and know that you are mine.”

She propped herself on her elbows and kissed him. His mouth was warm and hungry. She pulled him down on her, sliding her hands across hard bulges and contours. Here and there, thin scars crossed his torso, but it only made him seem more real, not some imaginary shadow of her dreams.

He grabbed her and rolled over, right next to the mirrored wall. She looked at their reflection and blushed, burying her face in his shoulder.

He lowered his mouth to her neck. He slid his hand between her legs and she bit her lip to avoid crying out.

“I like the mirror. I can see more of your gorgeous, luscious body.” He pulled her against him so that she could feel his hot, hard length. “I also love it when you’re wet, so slippery-soft and ready for me.” His eyes were sharp and piercing, as if he could see everything she had done.

Liz closed her eyes as guilt suddenly struck her again.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just felt ... vulnerable all of a sudden.”

His hands soothed her as they petted her. “It’s only me, Liz. Trust me.” He pressed his cock against her thigh. “Feel how swollen my cock is for you.” His fingers traced the delicate folds of her pussy. She shuddered. How could such little motions have such an effect on her?

His thumb began to rub against her clit. She couldn't move against his hand, needing deeper contact. He held her still. She opened her eyes and saw his response.

"Liz," he said huskily, his rough Australian accent rippling over her senses. "Arch for me, please."

Enchanted by him, she could do nothing else. She pushed her hips against him, craving his cock inside her. With a groan, he circled her hips with his hands.

"I'll tell you when, Liz. But don't worry." He reached over for a duffel bag that he had somehow maneuvered them toward. He quickly pulled out a condom and a bottle of lubricant.

"Kent --"

"Shhhh." He slid the condom over his erection. Then he pressed his large, hard penis against her. "I will not leave you wanting anyone else."

Whatever she had meant to say completely vanished. "Please, Kent," she begged. "Please fuck me."

He pinned her with his weight, mercilessly teasing her slickness with his tip. She struggled to take him in, but he was too strong for her.

"Say it again," he demanded. "Tell me what you want. Ask me to fuck you."

Her words were interspersed with her panting breaths. "I want you, Kent."

"Beg me."

"Please, Kent, fuck me hard." Her mind felt scrambled, her synapses firing rapidly, randomly; Liz was aware of nothing but how much she wanted this man.

He positioned himself at her entrance. "Look at us in the mirror, Liz," he ordered.

She opened her eyes.

His hand petted and squeezed the cheeks of her ass, smearing his fingertips in her sticky juices. "Watch me as I push my hard cock into you. I can already feel you throbbing." He began easing into her, the huge head and shaft stretching her.

She stared at the two of them. Kent's golden body was corded with muscle, gleaming with sweat. Her breasts were full, nipples hard and swaying with each movement. Her face was flushed as she watched him cover his fingers with lubricant.

Suddenly, with him still inside her, he shifted their positions, so that she sat astride his hips. Her green eyes widened as he thrust into her slowly, gripping her ass with his bare hands. A finger nudged into her tight anus, eliciting a moan.

She closed her eyes as she rocked against the thick cock inside her and the promise of his fingers. "Oh, yes."

He nudged his finger between her ass cheeks, sinking into her with circling motions. With every push inward, every thrust of his hips forward, she let out a whimper. Carnal sensations of pain and satisfaction, at being so filled and fucked ran through her, leaving her trembling and whimpering.

"You still haven't screamed for me, Liz," he said, hooking his digit deep inside her ass to press against something that unbelievably magnified the currents of desire.

"Not here," she gasped. "I can't."

"You will scream for me eventually." He punctuated his promise with a quickening thrust. His cock, huge and hard, surged into her as he continued to finger-fuck her ass. With each motion she made, she found herself impaled by him; his cock filled her one way, his finger, the other. Her body had a mind of its own as she thrashed on him, building the crest of trembling pleasure. His hard-muscled body curved around hers, bare skin on skin. The smell of sex and his own lemon and wood scent surrounded her. With a quick thrust and push, Kent simultaneously submerged his cock and his finger deep inside her, completely penetrating her.

Ecstasy crashed on her in a crescendo. It surged through her, tearing away at her barriers, flooding her with a sense of primal bliss.

He held her against him as he lowered her gently to the floor, keeping his hard cock inside her. She lay there, savoring his weight, his presence possessing her mind and body. He pressed ticklish kisses against her neck.

“Thank you, Liz.”

“I should be thanking you. Wow.”

Her eyes widened as he slowly began moving in her again. “You’re still so --” She closed her eyes as his cock hit a particularly sensitive spot inside her. “-- hard. You didn’t even --” She paused again, emitting a gasp of pleasure as he began teasing her clit. She tried to gather her thoughts, which all seemed to be scattered. “-- come. What are you --?”

“I did. But I’ve studied martial arts and physical discipline for so long --” He voiced his own groan of pleasure. “-- that I don’t need to ejaculate to have an orgasm.”

Liz’s eyes widened as the enormity of what he said sunk in. He grinned. He would remember that look for the rest of his life.

He wanted this to last as long as possible. He grinned again. He pulled out of her, and grabbed a condom from his bag.

“My God,” she said weakly as he sheathed his hard cock with another condom. “You’re insatiable. What am I going to do with you?”

He squeezed more lube into his hand and slicked his cock.

“You’re going to lie down and enjoy me fucking you.”

She tried to protest, but she couldn’t take her eyes away from the sight of his hand sliding up and down. She reached forward to touch him, but he only smirked and flipped her over.

“What --?”

She felt his wet finger slide into her butt once more. A shiver ran up her back; whether from the slight chill of the lube or his touch, she wasn't sure.

"Kent, no, I'm not ready."

He shifted so that his tip was against her anus. He grinned at her soft moan of pleasure.

"Relax. We'll go bit by bit, luv."

His hands covered her soft breasts as he spread her cheeks with the width of his cock. He could feel her still trembling from her last orgasm. Tiny shudders sent little shocks through his cock, making him flex as he eased himself between her cheeks. He watched her close her eyes and pant at the sensation.

"See it's not too fast, is it?" He began penetrating her slowly, with short pistoning motions. Her eyes flew open.

"Kent," she gasped, "I can't --" Liz arched her ass with a blissful cry.

"Yes, you can." Kent continued, steadily building the rhythm. He savored the lavender scent in her hair, her body underneath his and how tight she felt. Sweat gathered around his forehead. Despite his discipline, even he couldn't last much longer with this beautiful fairy princess clinging to him, shuddering in pleasure at his touch. He had struggled to keep from losing it the moment his cock touched her pussy, and now her ass. He watched her, cherishing her reactions, loving the way she closed her eyes and bit her lip each time before she came. He wanted to hold her there, on the edge of pleasure, impaled upon *him*, not the ninja, but *him*, and see that look of desire and ecstasy for him and him alone. He could orgasm without ejaculating, but something primal roared in him; he wanted his seed to fill her, to make her accept all of him.

His balls began to tingle as a surge of sweeping pleasure suddenly overtook him, rushing forth and exploding into an outburst of magnificent bliss. For moments, he lay there, collapsed beside her, still holding her close, savoring her warmth, her body, her scent.

He could stay like this all night. But now what? He wanted, needed this red-haired woman. He resisted the need to seize her and refuse to let her leave. It clawed up his insides that she would leave, possibly to meet someone else tonight.

Even if that someone else was him.

“My God, Kent,” she murmured. “You are so fucking amazing.” She watched him get up.

He reached a hand down to help her up, and then passed her her clothes. “And I’m even better in bed,” he said with a very satisfied male kind of smile. “What are you doing tonight?”

She threw on her t-shirt, suddenly thankful that she couldn’t see his face. “T-tonight? Oh I’m, um, I have plans.” The moment the words left her lips, she knew that it was exactly a flimsy excuse. She tried to think of something else to follow up, but she had to review a bunch of Triad files for Vy.

“I see.”

She pulled on her pants, still refusing to meet his eyes. “I’m meeting someone.”

“I see.”

“It’s not like that, Kent. Besides, we’re not even, like, dating.”

When she finally had no choice but to look at him, his face was expressionless. “Are we?” she suddenly added.

“I’m just your secretary.” He turned around and packed up his stuff, clearly dismissing her.

She didn’t know what else to do. “I’ll see you at wo -- around, I guess.”

Chapter Nine

The essence of a ninja was patience, shadow, and stealth; one could not be a ninja without those three qualities.

For hours, Ninja had been watching Harry Lo, a local Triad head, pace back and forth in his office. Meetings had been called, henchmen had been killed, all because Triad operations in Metrocity were going down the drain.

“Fucking *ninjas*! How the fuck are we supposed to run a business with these fucking ninjas running around?” Lo screamed into his phone. “Get this body cleaned up off the floor now!” Lo slammed the receiver down.

Poor Lo had a meeting tonight, a meeting of high importance, perhaps as nearly as high as the Triad master himself.

Lo was meeting with the head Triad alchemist, the very same alchemist who had planned that whole school setup.

Ninja cracked his knuckles.

It was only a matter of time before the alchemist showed up. Things were going so badly for Lo that it was time for him to bring in the big guns, which meant the lead alchemist.

He watched Lo pacing. A Beatles song began to play and Lo pulled out a cell phone. Lo hit a key, shutting off John Lennon in mid-song and began muttering in Cantonese. Everything had to be just right for the alchemist. The girls he had requested had to be ready, as did the champagne and a bowl containing only blue mints. Lo was treating the alchemist as if he were some kind of rock star, and in the underground world of alchemists, perhaps he was.

There was a knock on the outer door.

“What the hell do you want?”

The door swung open.

Lo suddenly stopped and looked at the door the color draining from his face as he staggered back and a figure stalked forward.

Of course. Jasper.

Ninja let out an aggravated sigh. All that patience for nothing. With the inevitable mess, the alchemist would not be showing up to night.

“*Díu nǚi*, motherfucker!” Lo cursed Jasper as he pulled his gun and fired rapidly at the demon. Lo turned and ran out a side door, and Ninja watched as Jasper gave chase, pursuing the man through dark streets.

Minutes passed, and Jasper was still following the man.

Enough.

Ninja walked into the shadows.

Jasper’s blood sang with the thrill of the hunt, the joy of pursuit. The little man ran barely ahead of him, sheer terror in his form.

His demonic side howled in rapture. As much as he hated it, he couldn’t deny that the hunt was one of the few times he felt truly alive.

He let the man advance just a bit away from him, enough to allow him some hope.

The way to break down a man was give him a taste of freedom, and then take it away, something Jasper knew all too well.

The man rounded a corner, and Jasper followed.

A human's vision wouldn't have caught it, but Jasper could see the line that shot out from the shadows as clear as day as it wrapped around the man's feet, and dragged him into the darkness.

Jasper stopped.

Ninja walked out of the shadows and dropped the unconscious man at Jasper's feet.

The demon in him quickened at the sharp end to its pleasure; it wanted to turn its anger on Ninja. Jasper wanted the rush that came whenever he hunted. He wanted a fight. The demon in him wondered what would happen if he attacked Ninja right there.

Ninja would probably simply vanish into the darkness and come for him later.

Still, a match could be interesting.

Jasper struggled as he forced himself back into human form. He growled, a dark, echoing tinge escaping into his voice. "I had him."

"Perhaps, but only after waking up the whole bloody neighborhood." Ninja shoved the unconscious man at him. "People are trying to work here."

Ninja had moved back into the shadows when Jasper called to him. "Wait. You need to be here for this."

Ninja pointed up to the rooftops and melted into the shadows.

"What is it with him and heights?" Jasper picked up the man and leapt toward the fire escape.

Ninja met him on the roof. "Why aren't you flying?"

"It's a long story."

“Lanthe finally catch up to you?”

“Like I said, long story.”

The man groaned.

Jasper sighed. “Showtime.” He picked up the man by the ankle and swung him over the ledge. He held the man above the building with a single arm. With his free hand, Jasper reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth.

“I have questions, and I’m only going to ask each question once. If I don’t like your answer, I will drop you. Is that clear?” Jasper pulled out a lighter and lit up.

The man frantically nodded.

“When is the plutonium shipment coming in?”

“To-tonight. At warehouse eight!”

Jasper cursed. “How close is the alchemist -- and you know which one I’m talking about -- to creating a Philosopher’s Stone?”

The man shook. “H-h-he needs the plutonium t-t-to finish.”

“Where is he going?”

The man didn’t reply.

Jasper abruptly released his grip on the man before catching him again. The man screamed.

“An Indian tomb! A tomb in Illinois.”

“Cahokia,” Jasper whispered. His grip tightened on the man’s ankle. There was a cracking sound and the man screamed, the sound echoing in the chasm between the buildings. “And you, you slimy *sí fuht lóu*. You sold your sister to the Triad. Placed her in one of the breeding farms, then sold your nieces to the highest bidders.”

“Not my sister. Not my father’s child.”

“But your mother’s.”

Jasper flicked his cigarette to the ground and crushed it with his boot. “Yes, I know about the deal you made with the demon Hak Mau; when you die, your soul is hers.”

“No, wait!”

“May your god grant you mercy.” Jasper opened his hand.

The man let out a scream as he fell. A *thud* echoed through the alley, and then silence.

Ninja’s voice was harsh. “Since when do Paranormal Bureau interrogations and executions take place on rooftops?”

Jasper took out a new cigarette and snapped open his lighter. “The PB has Triad moles.” He looked at Ninja. “Lo was dead the moment he made the deal with Hak Mau. You need to get to the warehouse tonight. I assume you know the one he’s talking about.”

“Asking me to do your job?”

“I have to go to Cahokia. It’s the Second Permanent Gate to the Demon Realm. The gates have to stay closed, especially with magic back on Earth. Keeping the gates closed was the reason magic was originally locked away.”

Jasper took a drag of his cigarette and exhaled. “Fucking alchemists,” he muttered. “They’ll destroy us all in their unnatural reach for power. If the gates are open long enough, it will pull this reality into theirs.”

Ninja didn’t move. Jasper glanced at him.

“That means, quite literally, hell on Earth.”

Ninja let out a resigned sigh. “Why is it always the-end-of-the-world shit with you, Cossack?” There was a click as Ninja adjusted something on his wrist. “It’s like you’re a bad omen or something,” he said before he melded into a black wall and disappeared.

Jasper regarded the empty rooftop, thinking of a woman with brown hair. He flicked his cigarette to the ground.

“I know.”

* * * * *

Liz couldn't stop tapping her pen against her oak desk. She sat in a small corner of her living room surrounded by piles of papers. A richly colored blue and gold Thai silk tapestry hung on the wall above her desk, a souvenir from her post-graduation backpacking travels. In the background, Nina Simone crooned a soft lament.

An elbow on her desk, her chin resting in the upturned palm of her hand, she sighed as she now tapped away at her keyboard. She would have loved to have been able to see Kent tonight, but duty called. She had to finish decoding these files before she sent them over to Vy.

She sighed. Sometimes duty really sucked.

What was making the job even more difficult was that the Triad had switched to a different, more complicated code. She couldn't wrap her head around this stupid thing.

She would much rather be wrapping herself around something else.

Okay, stop thinking about sex, Liz, focus!

The whistle of the teakettle broke into her thoughts. With a few keystrokes, she quickly activated a new decoding program and then pushed her chair away and got up. Her bare feet padded along the edges of the red Turkish rug as she made her way to the kitchen.

Liz hadn't been sure what was on this disk, but whatever it was, it had to be important for all the locks that encrypted it. She poured hot water into the mug that had already been prepared with a bag of chamomile and lavender tea.

Why couldn't she stop thinking about ... Kent?

She felt a tingle in her pussy at the very idea of his name. Kent, not only kind and thoughtful, with an amazing body to boot, but he still liked her, even after the many times

seeing her at her worst in the office. When he was inside her, she rode pure masculine power that throbbed and consumed her.

She shivered again.

The memory of watching him fuck her in the mirror, muscles flexing and trembling as he pushed his rigid cock into her ass, was not one she would forget anytime soon. How his massive arms had wrapped around her body, possessing her, claiming her. The look of pure fulfillment and joy when he'd finally emptied himself into her with a roar that was so savagely male. She'd loved hearing his voice, seeing him shudder, knowing that she affected him as much as he affected her.

She'd especially cherished the look that crossed his face when she was in his arms afterward, like she was the most precious thing in the world to him.

What she experienced with Kent was different from what she had with Ninja.

Liz shivered again, even as she cupped the mug of steaming hot tea.

With Ninja, she felt only a pure, animalistic meeting of the bodies. It had been magnificently wild, and even now, the thought made her breasts tingle. But she was getting to a point where she wanted more; more of a friend, a companion. More than just random, crazy sex.

Liz heard the computer beep in the other room. Holding her mug, she hurried over, dodging paper piles while trying not to spill a single drop of tea. She set it on an intricately beaded coaster, frowning as she looked at the screen. In the background, her MP3 player plugged into the stereo began playing David Bowie.

This was strange.

She typed a few more things.

Wow. Incredibly, she was looking at a corporate tree that listed all the front companies that had Triad money. Oil companies, movie studios, car companies, dot coms, et cetera.

Hmmm. And what was this?

Liz clicked on a few more keys. The beat of the music picked up.

Well, whaddya know. A family tree of the Snakehead leadership.

Liz scrolled through the tree. Each name featured a picture.

A familiar name caught her eye.

She frowned, and clicked on the name.

No. Fucking. Way.

He was about seventeen in the picture, but he had the same long, dark hair, deep brown eyes, and stubborn jaw.

There was no mistaking him.

Kent was the grandson of the head of the Snakehead Triad.

* * * * *

The old warehouse smelled of seawater, tar, and rotting wood with a faint hint of motor oil. Each sound echoed through the voluminous space muffled only slightly by the wooden crates stacked on one side. A rat skittered across the catwalk he was balanced on.

Thirty feet below him, the largest man of the group jumped. "What was that?"

A young man with blond dreadlocks looked around. "Man, just chill."

As the men waited for whoever they were supposed to be meeting, Ninja's mind began to wander. He had expected that by tasting Liz he would get rid of his infatuation. Nope. And then he actually fucked that soft, white body of hers, not just once, but twice. And it was all he could do to keep from thinking about fucking her again. He almost cringed at the plaintive way he asked to see her later, as if he were a little puppy dog. Of course she had turned him down. Who wouldn't turn down Kent, especially if she felt Ninja was going to show up and give her true pleasure?

He clenched his fists.

How could he be jealous of himself?

He looked down at the punks below. The dirty bomb stuff that Jasper had been talking about had arrived in the warehouse crates and was being guarded by them until the buyers came to pick them up.

He took a deep, silent breath, calling upon his discipline to channel his frustration into energy. In this mood, if frustration was power, then he was Centurion. In fact, he felt like doing something flashy, reckless, and very un-ninja-like.

Which might work, because if this shipment was as important as Jasper had said it would be, they would have alchemists on watch for any problems. An attack now might lure one out.

Maybe even the head Triad alchemist he had been waiting for before the Cossack showed up.

Good. He could really use a punching bag right now. Reaching into another shadow, he pulled out a long staff. Like martial arts styles, Ninja liked to vary his weapons; it kept him sharp.

He leapt from his height.

As he landed on top of the wooden table, he took down four men with his first sweep of the staff before they could even think of reaching for their guns. Six-pointed, star-shaped blades went flying, crashing into the few lights illuminating the empty, dirty warehouse.

But as he pressed the attack, Ninja couldn't help feeling disappointed that no alchemists showed up to challenge him. If they didn't reveal themselves, then he was just being a showy fuckwit, letting his anger control him.

Panicked screams and shots echoed in the dark. There were bursts of gunfire. Hot bullets passing through him. In the darkness, he was virtually invincible; he could blend his physical body with shadow letting all things pass through.

His mind wandered back to Liz again. It just figured, he thought, as he kicked a pipe-wielding guy in the chest, that she would be fucking Kent and Ninja at the same time.

He spun and did a forward flip onto the cement. It was always funny seeing guys scrambling around in the dark. More stars went flying, embedding themselves into gun-wielding hands.

He hadn't taken her for that kind of woman.

He crumpled an attacker's hand, broke another guy's foot, and knocked two more guys unconscious in his anger.

How could she be such a two-timer?

"You gonna die!" Bullets popped through his shoulder and down his right side as a man rushed him.

Ninja waited for the right moment, then grabbed his attacker's wrist and hit a pulse point. The gun clattered to the ground, and Ninja punched him in the solar plexus.

But he wasn't seeing her; he was just fucking her.

Where the hell were the alchemists?

"Aaaaaiieee!"

He crouched, then kicked upward, knocking down three more guys.

Which meant that he was just a fuck. Not a lover, not a boyfriend, not even someone she was "seeing." Just a fuck.

He dashed toward a confused group, wrenched the semi-automatics out of their hands, and delivered quick blows to their heads.

Fuck.

Though Liz hadn't seen the ninja since she started screwing Kent.

Bullets continued to be fired randomly and wildly, adding more smoke to the noise and confusion.

He took note of the directions they were coming from as he ducked a punch and used the momentum to throw his attacker against a set of crates.

He hadn't visited her as a ninja since she started fucking Kent.

Ninja grabbed another guy's wrist as he sidestepped a punch, taking a quick glance at the man's Rolex before slamming the thug into the floor.

Two-thirty a.m.

But then again, he thought, as he climbed back atop some wooden crates, if there was something that he had learned about Liz tonight, other than the fact that they had frickin' mind-blowing, cock-exploding, pussy-quivering sex, Liz didn't feel an ounce of anything else toward Kent.

There they were. He leapt down and with two quick blows, took out the last of the men.

Save for a few groans, silence reigned over the warehouse. It smelled like blood and smoke, with that weird, lingering motor oil reek.

He checked his own wristwatch. Seventeen guys in less than four minutes. A new personal best.

Not that he gave a shit right now.

He quickly surveyed the scene. There was enough illicit material from coke to plutonium to put these criminals away for awhile.

Maybe she was --

He almost let a laugh escape as he checked the recesses of the warehouse to make sure he hadn't missed anyone. All he heard was the echoing sound of a constant water drip.

Could Liz be trying to protect Kent? Afraid of the ninja?

Something seemed to relax inside him. That would be just like her.

He climbed up a metal chain ladder, back up to the rafters, but as he did, a tight coil of realism knotted back around him.

Dream on, Kent.

The metal railing squealed under his grip.

After all, Kent was nothing more than her secretary. God, he hated these damn lawyers.

He reached into the darkness and yanked out a small transmitter, pushed the black button, and stuck it against the wall.

At least Joy would be happy tonight.

* * * * *

The naked halogen tube seemed dim in the vast darkness of the cavern. In some places, the slate gray walls had been worn smooth, while others showed evidence of recent stress. In the middle of a large flat, circular surface, a work station sat, featuring several computers hooked up to a network, running code and monitoring certain areas. Not too far away, there was a series of filing cabinets next to a desk that was perfectly neat, save for a full folder that lay in the middle. In a different area, there were mats and mirrors for training, and in another, a series of weights.

The entire location was large, perhaps the size of a football field, but it was surrounded on three sides by a vast drop into a deeper abyss. One could drop a pebble into the depths and not hear its echo for several seconds. The fourth side was blocked off by solid rock; the only way in and out was through shadow.

Kent clung upside down to a suspended metal grate, engaged in reverse push-ups. "Some shadow walker," he said, pulling himself up to the grate. "You're so loud, you make police sirens seem quiet."

Joy emerged from the shadows. Her dark gray pants skimmed the floor, just revealing stiletto heels that sounded like they barely touched the ground with each step. Her matching jacket was slung over the shoulder of her red shirt. Her FBI badge still hung around her neck.

Joy stopped shadow walking and began striding toward him normally. The echoes of her tapping heels vibrated throughout the cavern. “Yeah, you try shadow walking in heels, then let’s see how quiet you are. You know, you’re really annoying.”

He unhooked his feet from the grate and lowered himself to the ground.

“I’m your brother. If I don’t annoy you, then I’m not doing my job.” He wrinkled his nose at the scent of mango. “Why are you wearing such an awful fruity smell?”

Joy examined her nails. There was a chip on the right index fingernail of her otherwise flawlessly French manicure. “To bother you like you bother me. So ’fess up. Who is she?”

He picked up the water bottle on the floor and took a gulp.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Joy rolled her eyes and hung her jacket on a hook. “Oh, come on. When you’re angry, you get showy. And when you get angry, there’s usually a woman involved. The warehouse bust tonight? Three years of planning, and you risk it all being a flashy movie ninja.”

“The Triad already knows about me. I was trying to draw out the alchemist.”

Joy folded her arms and sighed. “You took a big risk there. The PPA is starting to show a little too much interest in Metrocity, and I can’t keep coverin’ your ass if you’re being so Hollywood.”

“It’s done. The game’s been set. Nearly every major shipment the Triad was involved in passed through that warehouse. It’s your turn, *mui*.”

“Don’t worry about it. The ‘present’ is already being delivered as we speak.”

Kent paused. “So we did it, then.”

Joy leaned against the cold rock wall. “Yes. If all goes well, the Snakehead Triad should be finished in America by the end of this week.”

“Except for the alchemist.”

“Except for the alchemist,” she echoed. “I think you should get your damn license. We don’t know what this alchemist is capable of.”

“I don’t need the PPA. I can deal with the alchemist. I told Jasper that.”

“Jasper.” Her tone became sober. “How’s he doing without Lia?”

“He’s Jasper.”

Joy let out an exasperated sigh. “You boys. Always so close-mouthed.” She stood up. “You’re still not answering my question. Let me guess, is she that redhead attorney you work for?”

He ignored her and kept drinking the water.

Joy poked her brother in the bicep. “I knew it!”

He finished the water bottle with a sigh and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You’re pretty damn nosy.”

Joy put her hands on her hips. “I’m your *mui mui*, big bro. I have the right.”

He got up from the bench and walked toward the kitchen, a separate section partitioned off by a bamboo screen with the most up-to-date appliances. “Hey, I didn’t give you that much trouble when you were dating Mr. Blond-James-Bond-wannabe.”

Joy quickly took a few strides and caught up with him, her heels clacking. “That was totally professional. Bryce and I --”

“And who the hell has a name like ‘Bryce’ these days?” He pressed his water bottle against the dispenser on the outside of the fridge.

She glared at him. His kept his gaze resolutely fixed on the water filling the bottle.

Joy took a deep breath and folded her arms. “There’s something else I need to tell you.”

He pulled the bottle away and began walking toward his desk. “Don’t tell me you’re marrying that prick.”

“What?! *No!*” Heels tapped quickly behind him. “I’m leaving the FBI.”

He stopped and slowly turned around to face his sister.

"I got offered a covert position with the Strategic Intelligence Office, and I'm taking it. They need help immediately. I leave for Bangkok in the morning."

He was silent for a moment. Her working for the government had long been a source of disagreement between them. She knew where he stood. He didn't believe in the ability of bureaucracies or any system to do the right thing. One was best on their own, living by their own code of honor, rather than the arbitrary whims of rich and powerful men. Despite the government's numerous problems, Joy actually believed in the system's potential for good. "The best way to change a system," she had told him when she first joined the Bureau, "is from the inside."

"I see," he said carefully. He knew that if he pushed his dim, stubborn sister, she would push all the way back and do exactly what he didn't want her to do. He took a deep breath. "And do they know what you can do?"

"No. I haven't told them."

Kent shook his head. "But you're thinking of telling them."

"Kent, we could do so much good --"

"Joy, those organizations, once they find out what you can do, they won't let you go. You'll be used and you'll have to do things that aren't dictated by what's right and wrong, but by politics and bureaucrats."

Joy began pacing as she absentmindedly rubbed their mother's solid jade bracelet at her wrist. "I haven't made up my mind."

"Mom didn't leave us that letter about Teacher Sho and shadow walking for you to use your powers to work for politicians."

Joy stopped and gave him a look that reminded him just how formidable his younger sibling had become. "I know how hard she fought to keep that a secret from everyone, even our grandparents. But that was her decision. And if I decide to reveal *my* secret, I'll make

sure that it's a choice that doesn't affect you. And, furthermore, don't think that just because I'm going to the agency, that I'll slack off hunting snakes with you."

His voice was quiet. "I know you won't, Joy. I know you'll make the right decision."

Joy exhaled and blinked. Suddenly, she was his *mui* again.

Kent turned away. "I've got to get back to work."

Joy ran forward and tagged his shoulder. When he stopped to turn, he was surprised by a big hug. Almost just as quickly, she pushed him away.

"Ewwwww! I forgot you were still sweaty and nasty."

"That's your fault."

She brushed her arms as she began walking toward the darkest part of the cavern, where transition into shadow was easiest. "Yuck, your stink is all over me. Now I'm going to have to go shower again ..."

He turned back. "Oh, Joy?"

She stopped and turned sideways. "Yeah?"

"Mom and Dad would have been proud of you."

She gave him a smile. "I'm not the only one they would have been proud of, *gó*."

Chapter Ten

The tall blond man walked Liz down the plush carpeted hall. Nick Dais was the youngest partner ever to be named in the firm's history. He was considered one of their superstar attorneys. His cleft chin and vivid blue eyes left women swooning despite widespread speculation that Nick was actually deep in the closet.

"I think the negotiations will go quite well for us in Hong Kong." He adjusted the armload of thick, heavy manila folders as they rounded the corner. His voice had that upper-class, patrician New England accent.

Wobbling on her heels, Liz carried another stack of folders. As they reached Kent's desk, a cubicle with a lowered counter just outside her office, she set them down on the counter with a thump. "Yeah. I can't wait to be done with this deal. I don't think I can handle five-hour-long conference calls with Mr. Nakamura and the Nakamurettes anymore."

Nick set his stack next to hers. "You won't have to. You'll just have to deal with being expected to serve us all tea when we're in Hong Kong."

"I don't think so. You're just teasing me again. Hmph. Tea, my ass." Her glance briefly strayed to Kent, who was staring intently at his screen and clicking around with his mouse. Next to him, the huge laser printer was running at full speed, which was to say, not very fast.

Nick followed Liz's gaze to Kent. "Hey, looks like someone in HR finally taught you how to dress."

Kent opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a telephone ring.

Kent glared at Nick as he picked up the phone while Nick turned back to Liz. Nick glanced at his watch. "Let's go and grab a bite. I know this fantastic little Turkish place that's open all night. I'm going to be up tonight anyway so that I can sleep on the flight tomorrow."

Liz gently brushed Nick away from her, folding her arms across her chest, and backed away from him a little bit.

"Hey, you may be leaving tomorrow, but I'm not heading out until Sunday. I like my Saturdays in the city, thank you very much. So, thanks, but no. I'm exhausted. I think I'm just going to go home."

"You sure? We could pick up take-out and just relax at my place for a bit. It's Friday night, Liz. We should do something fun."

Liz busied herself with shuffling some folders. "Yeah, I know. But I'm too tired. Been busy too."

Nick closed in on her. "So relax."

A pile of papers fell on the floor between them.

"Oops. Sorry about that." Kent rushed around the desk to pick them up, interposing himself between the two attorneys.

Liz bent down, glad that she had chosen to wear pants that day. "Let me help you with that, Kent."

"Suit yourself, Liz. I suppose we'll have plenty of time in together later." Nick straightened up. "See you then."

In the background, the printer was still running. Papers shuffled as she and Kent tried to reorder them.

"So you're seeing him now, too?"

“What? Are you kidding me? Nick?” She shook her head. “The man is way too good-looking for me.”

Kent said nothing and stood up.

Liz belatedly realized what she had just said. She rose, brushing invisible specks of dirt from her pantsuit. “I mean, I don’t find pretty boys like that attractive. Thanks for cutting in, though. Saved me from a night of fending him off. My hero.”

He smiled, and she recognized it as the same smile from his picture included in the Triad family tree. She stepped back.

He straightened up his desk, getting ready for the weekend. “You want to get dinner?”

The photo flashed in her mind and she stiffened.

A tense expression settled on his face. “Oh, that’s right. We’re not even seeing each other.”

Liz backed away, alarmed at his intensity. “Kent ... I’ve been absorbed in work, prepping for Hong Kong.”

Immediately, his shoulders dropped and he turned around. “I know, I know. You’re busy.”

She took a deep breath. It came out a mix between a sigh and a shudder. “You should know better than anyone else how frantic I’ve been, Kent. You keep track of my schedule for me.”

He picked up his jacket and quickly put it on. “Yes. And you’ve also been avoiding me.”

She froze. She *had* been avoiding him as much as possible for the past day or so, working behind closed doors and communicating with him via e-mail. She was coping the only way she could, trying to come to terms with her feelings for the Triad head’s grandson while she tried to get in touch with Vy, who had been unavailable for the past couple of days.

“It’s complicated.” She fingered the emerald at her neck as she looked away. “Let me make that up to you.” Oh, crap. What was she saying?

He leaned over his computer, clicking options, shutting it down. “There’s nothing to make up, luv. We’re not seeing each other.”

Wait a minute. Maybe this could work. He didn’t know she knew who his family was. She needed more info. Who better to get it from?

She hooked her arm in his.

“Come with me to dinner tonight.”

He stopped, his brown eyes gazing into hers.

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

* * * * *

In the background, the sounds of a guitar strummed along to a soothing Spanish melody, and there was a gentle hum of conversation and the clinking of porcelain and silverware. Candlelight reflected off of the dark, shiny oak-paneled walls.

Women. He just didn’t get them. Martial arts. Sure. Scaling skyscrapers. No problem. Traveling through shadow. No sweat. But women?

Liz looked up from her menu and gave him a shy smile.

Particularly this woman.

Her locks were bound back in a ponytail. He wondered if her hair would still smell like lavender if she let it down. Just thinking about that flowery feminine scent made him hard.

“These sopapillas are amazing with honey,” she said, pushing the basket of warm, puffy bread toward him.

He picked one up, accidentally smooshing the round bread, which apparently had been filled with air. “What kind of food is this again? Mexican?”

“Nope. New Mexican, Santa Fe style. The best on the east coast.”

She ignored him one day and came on to him the next. And yet, she also waited up for the ninja each night. He knew she did, because she had been up much longer recently, ostensibly doing work. So far discipline had worked; he hadn't visited her as the ninja. If she wanted him, she would have to take Kent first.

She suddenly looked up at him. "Try the pork tamales with the green chile. You'll love them."

He nodded. Maybe it was this "knowing a person" stuff that women talked about so much. Maybe she wanted to get to know him. To talk to him. But then why hadn't she stayed around after sex? He'd much rather be talking to her in bed.

She closed her menu and set it down on the table. "So, how are you feeling about Hong Kong?"

But that would mean she was interested in him. He shrugged, watching the flame of the tea candle flicker. "It's a business trip."

For some reason, when it really mattered, he couldn't shake his fourteen-year-old geeky persona. He wasn't nervous around women anymore. It was just Liz.

She cocked her head at him. "No excitement about seeing old friends ... your relatives?"

"I lived there when I was very young; I grew up in Sydney. I do have some family in Hong Kong, but we're not close."

She fingered her wineglass. "No plans to see any of them at all?"

"No. I don't speak to that side of the family."

Kent sat back. Rarely did he speak of the events that had changed his life. But for the first time, he wanted to tell someone, to tell Liz about what had happened. To tell her everything.

It was such an odd feeling

"Something happen?" She held his gaze steadily. He looked down at his plate.

He tore off a small piece of sopapilla. "You ... could say that."

She leaned forward. A lock of hair had come loose and fell in front her eyes. “Why? What happened?”

He reached towards her to tuck the hair behind her ear.

“They killed my parents.”

She blinked. What did one say to something like that?

“Your own family did that? How awful.”

Kent picked up his wineglass. “My grandfather didn’t like the Australian man his daughter fell in love with so my mother ran off with my father, refusing to marry the man he chose.” He paused. “My grandfather wasn’t the most forgiving man. He was a criminal, and his enemies sought revenge by killing his daughter. But my grandfather didn’t care; as far as he was concerned, his daughter was already dead.”

He tossed back the glass of wine. When he looked at her again, whatever openness she had felt from him was now gone.

She put her hand, sticky with honey, on his. He looked at it, her small, white fingers barely covered his knuckles. .

“If it is too difficult for you to go to Hong Kong, you don’t have to go.”

He turned his hand around, holding hers.

“I’m not letting you go on a business trip halfway around the world without me and have you calling me up at three a.m. because you can’t access a file on your laptop.”

“Touché.” She smiled at him. “No, but really, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

He lifted her fingers to his lips. “I was hoping,” he said, kissing the honey-coated tips, “that you would make it worthwhile.”

Liz closed her eyes, a warm heat rising to her skin, reverberating down her back. No. She couldn't let herself be drawn in like that. Not yet. She withdrew her hand just as the waiter arrived.

As they placed their order, Liz tried to gather the remnants of her scattered mind. She was here on a mission -- not for sex, no matter how earth-shakingly satisfying it promised to be.

She had to find out more about him. From him. All of her computer searches had turned up nothing. The man had a completely clean record, save for a speeding ticket when he was in college.

"I'll have the blue corn chicken enchiladas with green chile," she told the waiter.

But how was she going to learn more about him without leading him on further? There was no other way. She considered her options while Kent placed his order. The waiter left.

"I admit it. I've been avoiding you. But that's because I'm ... afraid."

That admission elicited a raised eyebrow. "You? Afraid? The lawyer that isn't afraid to dress down partners and judges that everyone else quakes in their boots from?"

"I've been worried about how things might turn out between us." Her fingers fidgeted with her napkin. "Look, first of all, we work together, and this whole interoffice thing is totally wrong."

His eyes were intent upon her. "Does it feel wrong to you?"

"No." Her eyes dropped to the burning candle between them. "It feels right. And that's what scares me." She took a deep breath.

His eyes softened. "I see."

"So, yes, Kent, I'm a coward."

"What are you trying to say, Liz?"

Her chest rose as she breathed in deeply. “I like you, Kent. A lot. But everything is moving way too fast for me. I need to step back. Learn more about you. I mean, I’ve worked with you for six months, and I don’t feel like I really know you.”

He leaned forward. “What would you like to know?”

A hundred questions popped into her mind. *Are you a member of the Snakehead Triad? Do you know who I really work for? Is that why you’re sleeping with me? Seducing me to make me spill my secrets? Can you please fuck me now anyway?*

Instead, Liz smiled and took another sopapilla.

“Tell me about your childhood. About you and your sister.”

* * * * *

“And so, Joy is stuck on the roof, madder than a monkey in a barrel, hissing and spitting how much I’m going to pay when she gets down.”

At this point, Liz was laughing so hard that tears streaked down her cheeks.

He shook his head. “It’s hard to believe that my little sister, whose pigtails I used to pull and dunk in jam when she was asleep, is an FBI agent.”

“You told me she worked for the government, but the FBI. Wow.”

He shrugged. “It’s all the same bureaucracy.”

She raised an eyebrow. “So she’s in the FBI, and you’re my assistant?”

“It pays the bills.” He shrugged again. “This keeps me busy while recharging my creative batteries. When I’m home, I’m home, and I can mess around on the computer without the pressure.”

She took some honey and squeezed it on the puffy bread. “Yeah, because there’s no pressure at all working for a law firm.”

He set down his fork and knife, finished with his food. “Not the thirty million dollar venture capital kind of pressure.”

“How long do you think you’ll stay?” She took a bite.

“I don’t know. It depends.”

She made her voice sound deceptively bland. “Depends on what?”

His eyes were dark, unreadable as he lifted a glass of red wine to his lips. “On the options that come along.”

Despite her nervousness, she maintained her cool and pressed on. “Are you actively seeking them?”

He placed his glass back on the table and reached for her hand. His hand was callused but warm. “I’ve got a couple possibilities.”

Her face flushed warmly as heat spread throughout her body with each stroke of his fingers across the back of her hand. How could he do this with just one look and a few touches? His eyes hypnotized her, beckoning, promising.

The waiter began picking up their empty dishes. “Can I get you anything else?”

She pulled away, startled. Damn, Kent was way too good. It was so easy to trust him.

Kent didn’t take his eyes off of her. “No, we’re done. Just the check, please.”

Liz glanced at her watch. “I didn’t realize just how late it was.” The way he looked at her made her nervous. “I ... should probably be getting back home.”

She had to get out of here. Clear her mind. Get another opinion. Otherwise, she would find herself back in bed with him, being fucked out of her mind. A vision of his lovely, muscled, naked body easing into hers, stuffing her full with his thick cock, flashed into her mind.

She quivered.

No, that would be a bad thing. She had to go. And had to try calling Vy again.

“Are you sure?”

Fuck, no, she wasn't sure. She wanted to be somewhere private where she could be entangled with his big, hard, sweaty body, his naked skin on hers as he emptied himself into her.

The waiter dropped the check in front of him, and he snatched it up even as Liz tried to seize it.

"My treat."

She leaned forward, trying to grab the check from his hand. "No, wait --"

He simply held it behind him, taking advantage of his greater size and reach. "You can get it next time."

She knew it was hopeless, but that didn't stop her from trying to snatch the check. "This *is* next time, remember?"

"Rule number thirty-two of aikido: the person with more power pays."

She couldn't help but arch an eyebrow at his statement as she sat back down. "I'm your boss. I do have more power."

His voice was deep and husky. "Not here."

The words brought back the vivid, tingling memory of their last encounter on the mats of the dojo. She looked away, choosing to focus on a black and white photograph of an adobe village framed on the wall. She couldn't let herself fall into those brown eyes; if she did, there would be no hope.

Her cell phone rang, a simple jingle and vibration in her purse next to her. Liz fumbled through her bag until she found the phone, glancing at the number.

It was Vy.

"Sorry, I'll be right back."

She flipped the phone open and walked outside.

"Yo, you got what you asked for. You ready to do a pickup?"

Chapter Eleven

Liz kicked off her heels the moment she walked into her apartment and slammed the door shut behind her.

Goddamn. Had life always been this complicated and confusing? Kent. Ninja. Triad. The Triad was sucking in her entire life.

At least the pickup hadn't been that complicated. She'd gone to a party and hung out there for an hour or two, making sure to check her coat in when she'd first arrived. The affair was actually pretty lame, like one of those torturous corporate parties where everyone was kissing ass. She'd barely lasted the requisite two hours. But when she'd picked up her coat to leave, the thing was in her left pocket, just like Vy's associate had told her it would be.

She went to her refrigerator and opened up the freezer, looking for ice cream.

Nothing but a tray of ice cubes.

"Of course. It figures." She shut the freezer door. Sticking her hand in her pocket, she pulled out the pickup for the first time.

"What the hell is this?"

She'd expected a disk or a key drive, but this really was a key. Liz held it up to a lamp; the incandescent light filtered through the yellow crystalline substance, giving it an odd glow. The key was scratched up and dull, but if you looked at it sideways, it actually had a pretty iridescence. She shrugged and went to her bookcase.

She sang a few notes from an old banshee folk song; the melody activated a panel inside the wall that slid open, revealing a small square outline. Seemingly, it had no lock or handle; the safe had been designed by a cousin for their banshee-blooded family. Only those who sang the correct notes could open it. Of course, this wasn't foolproof, but not many burglars could sing banshee songs, including the notes beyond human hearing.

The door clicked open, and Liz threw the key into the safe, securing it.

She headed back over to the freezer and grabbed the ice cube tray. She opened the fridge, this time looking for something to drink, only to find half a jar of mustard, some ketchup packets, and last week's Chinese. She didn't even have any more bottles of water left.

She let out a defeated sigh. "So, ice it is."

Grabbing her ice cube tray, she headed straight for the couch and sank into it.

The remote was nowhere to be found.

She flopped over onto her side, burying her face in a brown and beige pillow as she let out a scream of aggravation. The picture frame next to the couch cracked.

She pulled back from the pillow, spitting out little bits of cotton, then looked at it and threw the pillow against the wall. Annoying little puffs fluttered in its wake.

This was what happened when you got exactly what you wanted.

The image of Kent's face tightening when she told him she was leaving clung to her mind. Even her excuse had been lame. "I, uh, have to go help a friend with something."

Some spy she was. No, she corrected herself. She was damn good at what she did; it was Kent, not to mention that ninja that totally scrambled her brains. Somehow, in the last few

days, her secretly studly secretary had snuck in under all her defenses. Just look at her. She should have been a raked with nerves, worrying about the Triad, worrying about the pickup. But, no, all she could think about was Kent.

Frustrated, she went over to her desk, opened her notebook, and began the process of logging into her various networks. Her fingers flew across the keyboard before she even realized what she was doing; bringing back up the relationship tree of the Snakehead Triad family she had found before. Too stunned the first time she had seen the tree, Liz realized that above Kent's photo was a picture of a woman with bright eyes, a shy smile, and the same dimples Kent had. She looked young, a white rose in her hair, as she gazed at the camera over her shoulder with a happy, albeit surprised, expression.

The caption next to the picture read, "Chou Ling-Jun, a.k.a. June Alistair."

Liz clicked on the photo. Another box popped open. "Resolved," it read, followed by a date about sixteen years ago.

So, maybe Kent was telling the truth.

She rested her elbows on her desk and placed her forehead in her hands. If she thought about this anymore, she was going to go crazy.

Work. There was always work.

She pushed her chair away from her desk and stood up. Looking around, Liz saw her briefcase, which was stuffed full of illicit copies of the hard files from Nick's office.

Liz took a stack and dragged it over to the couch, sinking into the plush cushions. "Let's see what we have here."

The first few folders contained more legal memos. But buried in those files, incriminating memos and e-mails detailed efforts to produce an alchemical test key.

"Hmmm, like the one I have?"

Liz read on. Alchemical keys were apparently the by-products of the successful creation of portable teleportation gates. The keys didn't last long dissolving into dust within

twenty-four hours. But the creation of an alchemical key meant that a gate also had to open within twenty-four hours in order to maintain an energy balance, else the key's creator would die.

"So, I wasted my time at that stupid party for nothing."

Liz kept reading. One memo speculated on the possibilities: New Chicago to Shanghai, from Earth to Moonbase, perhaps even the Joran home world, but so far only the Demon Realm had enough self-sustaining power floating around in their ether to keep a gate open. Summoners of the gates could hold them open, invite demons to Earth and use their aid in creating the Philosopher's Stone.

A chill ran down her spine. Everyone knew that even the Jorans feared the inhabitants of Earth's Demon Realm. Earth had barely been able to fend off the alien invaders, who claimed to have launched a pre-emptive strike on Earth to keep the Demon Realm from opening.

Liz threw down the folder and fumbled for her cell phone. She dashed off a special code, securing a locked satellite feed. The FBI didn't have a clue what was going on.

Liz fumbled for her cell phone. She dashed off a special code, securing a locked satellite feed.

"Vy. You need to call the PPA *now*."

* * * * *

Atop the skyscrapers, he ran. Ninja leapt, landed, ran, jumped, flipped, and slid into shadow, into darkness, out, in, around and about. He didn't know where he was going or what he was doing. He didn't care.

Joy had completed her part of their plan. Tonight, the local head of the Triad, a John Chang, had died -- killed by one of his very own trusted lieutenants, Joe Kip, who had

mysteriously received a package, detailing just how Chang had arranged for the murder of Kip's beloved first wife and two daughters.

Tonight the Triad organization in Metrocity, the center of their east coast operations, was in shambles. Lieutenants and factions were fighting for control.

And yet, on the eve of this triumph, the result of more than three years of careful planning, sabotage, and setup, Ninja felt nothing but empty inside.

He should feel vindicated, at least satisfied, he thought, as he dove headfirst into a shadow eleven stories below.

But he didn't. He felt nothing.

Ninja reemerged from a dark corner in another building across the street, just under a large neon cowgirl sign. He sprinted across a rooftop and ran straight into a dark wall, emerging from a steamy shadow in the next building over.

Inside, he felt tired and old. His body, on the other hand, seemed to have an abundance of strange, violent energy to spend. Tonight's triumph didn't matter because he never had Liz. He had been deluding himself the whole time. At the heart of it all, he deserved what he got. This whole situation, the double identities and lies, was all his fault.

He did a forward flip into another shadow and emerged on the ledge of a building thirty stories above where he had been. He balanced on the edge, jumped, and shot a swing line out, directly into the dark footprint of another office tower. He stood atop the building, looking down on the city.

From a nearby shadow, a scream emerged, echoing of magic and darkness.

Ninja knew that voice. That scream was meant to draw him out. It succeeded.

He dashed for the nearest shadow, all of his senses firing, on full alert. He heard another shout of horror and rushed toward it, emerging from behind the shadow of a tall tree.

An eerie violet light diffused everything.

Ninja saw a tall, dark man fighting what seemed to be an immense line of monster-sized serpents. But they were like no snakes he had ever seen. They were the size of bulldozers, with alligator-like jaws, eyes the size of dinner plates, and horns nearly as long as he was tall. By the fire erupting from the man's hands, he had to be the independent agent known as Magi, a relatively new PPA licensee.

Magi was even wearing blue spandex.

Behind Magi, smoke rose from a figure crumpled on the ground, wearing Ianthe's red leather jacket. To Magi's credit, he seemed to be holding his ground, but even he could not both advance and protect Ianthe.

Ninja jumped, then shimmied up to the top of a tree for a quick assessment of the situation. Beyond the serpent circle, the tall alchemist stood before a spinning circle of light, palms facing upward, as sparks of lightning arched into his ecstatic face.

The man's tattoos had healed over, but it was the same alchemist who had gotten away from him in the school raid.

Ninja glanced back at Magi and saw that he was injured.

Surprise would only work once. Ninja was no alchemist, but he'd had enough alchemical encounters to understand the most basic of magic principles: the center was everything, and here, the alchemist was the center.

Ninja unsheathed both of his swords and ran straight for the serpent line, his sudden attack allowing him to spear a line of entry through the serpent defenders surrounding the alchemist. Despite the element of surprise, the serpents reacted quickly, costing him both of his swords, which he left embedded in two of the monsters. In seconds, Ninja had reached the alchemist, who seemed unaware of his presence until Ninja kicked him in the head.

The alchemist crumpled to the ground, red blood gushing from his mouth. Before the other man could get his bearings, Ninja rushed forward and stomped down on the back of the man's right shoulder, channeling days of frustration and anger into his blow.

However, Ninja knew that the moment the alchemist regained his balance, he would be in trouble. So he would keep his opponent off-balance as long as he could.

Time to see if this new independent agent could keep the monsters off his back.

Ninja heard a crunch of bone as the man fell back. All around him, the hiss of serpents engulfed his hearing as Ninja brought his knee upwards into the alchemist's nose. He spun the man on the ground and pulled his arms back, twisting them. Then, with a quick jerk, Ninja dislocated the man's shoulders. Despite his injuries, the alchemist threw him with monstrous strength. Sharp star blades fell into Ninja's hands just between his knuckles as he jumped backward and then leapt forward fist-first, punching the man in his chest, severing the lines of his tattoo.

The imminent destruction of the tattoo awakened desperation in the alchemist's eyes. He kicked up and out, sending Ninja flying several feet.

"Idiot!" boomed the alchemist, power rolling in his voice. With a rolling motion, the alchemist popped his shoulders back in place. He put his hand out, freezing Ninja in a field of pressure. The air solidified around Ninja, so much so that he could no longer breathe. The man walked forward, yanking Ninja's stars from his chest; his skin and tattoo healed over the moment he did so. The tattoos crawled on the man's skin, up his neck, across his face, a thing alive, glowing with power absorbed from the ethereal plane.

"You're just a human." Contempt dripped from the alchemist's voice. "You have no alchemy!"

The world began to wobble. Ninja fought to keep from staggering toward him even as his head felt as if it were about to explode. His legs felt like pudding. The hardening air field pushed back against him as if he were walking underwater, slowing his movements. His lungs burned; his muscles ached, hungry for air. The hissing of the demon snakes and Magi's shouts faded away as the remaining air around him was sucked away.

Ninja forced his blurry eyes to focus. Behind the alchemist, the white circle still spun, though it wavered and no longer emitted sparks.

Ninja struggled against the hardening air, reaching for the pocket over his bicep. The alchemist had to be at the limit of his concentration; there were too many points for him to maintain focus on any one thing. Ninja gritted his teeth; even as the world began to go dark, images flew before his eyes.

Liz, with her red hair, kissing Kent timidly for the first time. The look in her eyes as she gave herself to him in her office. The way she smelled when she got angry during their aikido lessons.

He aimed the rappel gun, his arms feeling as if they were made of lead. His finger trembled on the trigger as his muscles began to twitch and spasm.

The alchemist narrowed his eyes and roared, pushing against the air with glowing hands.

Liz.

He fired. The burst of compressed air punched through the barrier as the hook embedded itself into the alchemist's shoulder.

There was a deafening boom of lightning, and Ninja fell to the ground, gasping and gulping the most wonderful crisp, burnt air he had ever breathed in his life. His limbs felt like Jell-O, but he forced himself up and rushed toward the alchemist. The tackle was effective, but sloppy. Regaining his strength rapidly, he whipped out the blade strapped to his calf. The alchemist struggled, but Ninja's knife moved closer and closer to his heart.

Only to be shoved back.

He rolled and leapt to his feet, to see Ianthe with her hand outstretched. Clearly, she had performed some kind of healing magic on herself for she looked whole, save for the dark blood smeared on her face and in her cornrows. Magi's black cloak was gone, one sleeve missing from his shirt as blood trickled down his brown arm.

Ninja staggered when he stood up.

A vast, blackened circle, the size of a city block circled the field. Dark lines indicated where the serpents had been incinerated; Ninja could only guess that one of the magickers had thrown up some kind of alchemical barrier to protect themselves and Ninja.

Ianthe walked over to the alchemist, who rolled, clutching his sides.

The lightning strike had been so loud, Ninja still couldn't hear. But he could read Ianthe's lips.

"Ninja does not need alchemy. But magic I have, and magic I use."

The alchemist's tattoos began to peel off him, leaving behind blood and torn skin. He opened his mouth, screaming, but Ninja still couldn't hear.

The alchemist put his palm down on the ground and uttered something.

The earth undulated, knocking everyone to the ground.

There was a burst of light, and when Ninja regained his vision, the alchemist was gone.

Ninja rose. Ianthe's voice, with her North African accent, echoed across the field. "You should have told me about the alchemist."

Ninja shrugged. *She* was the all-knowing ancient sorceress.

Magi staggered to his feet and nodded to Ninja. "Thanks." He gave Ninja another look. "You're not on the license list, are you?"

Ianthe's lips curled in a sneer as she surveyed the spot where the alchemist had lain. "Alchemists. Abominations against the natural order, seeking perverse power where they should not." She turned to Ninja. "The alchemist is a matter for the magickers, Ninja. You should watch out. The man who controls them has a vendetta against you."

Ninja shrugged again.

Ianthe arched an elegant eyebrow. "I know, you know. But he is coming for you. And he is more dangerous than you think." She made a brief gesture and his swords floated back to him.

He took them from the air with a fluid motion. "I know."

"He will come at you and strike you where and when you least expect it. Perhaps not as soon as you think, but it will come." Ianthe frowned, as if listening to an invisible voice. "Roles will change. The predator becomes the prey. The coin of love and hate will flip and flip again." Ianthe looked at Ninja. "This is what the future holds."

Magi stepped up, clutching his bleeding arm. "He's not licensed, Ianthe."

Ianthe glared at Magi. "He's a ninja. They've been around for thousands of years. Unlike you fool 'agents' who just got your powers a few years ago."

Ninja gave Ianthe a quick nod and faded back into the shadows.

* * * * *

Liz paced. She hated this waiting, hated this helpless feeling.

She'd done what she could, right? She'd done her job, and told the proper channels what was going on.

Her phone rang. She ran over and snapped it open.

Vy sounded tired. "It's done. The world has been saved. Now go to sleep."

Liz let out a breath. "Did they ask you how you knew all this crazy alchemical information?"

"There's always shit you gotta clean up."

"Vy. One more question. Did you know about Kent's connection to the Triad?"

Vy was silent. Then, "You're my friend. What do you think?"

Liz paused. "I think I need to sleep. Good night, Vy."

Liz clicked off the phone.

* * * * *

Adrenaline still pumped in his veins. His body screamed as he ran and rolled among the shadows of the city. Still he moved, from rooftop to alley, jumping from shadow to shadow. If he didn't shake out his muscles now, he would pay for it later.

Her long red hair filled his mind, blotting out any thought of the alchemist, or his success against the Triad.

Shit. He had nearly lost back there. And yet all he could think about was her enveloping lavender scent.

For Kent to have any chance, the Ninja had to end it with Liz. But if she did not want Kent after all ...

He pushed the thought from his mind and leapt into the shadows below.

* * * * *

A white sheet twisted around Liz's nude body as she tossed and turned in her sleep.

The voice echoed in her head.

"You have to choose."

It had to be a dream. There was no way it was ever this warm this high up on top of one of the city's tallest buildings. The lights sparkled like embedded iridescent jewels in pillars of darkness.

Looking down, she saw that she was wearing a gauzy summer shift, a light, sheer covering, that left nothing hidden.

Her gaze shifted to the figure beside her.

He still wore a mask across his eyes, but he was shirtless, exposing a magnificent torso and perfect six-pack abs. A lock of dark hair hung just above his brow. His eyes seemed to take everything in, all her nakedness and

imperfections. He saw everything, and yet to her, he was just as much of an enigma as his mask.

He moved toward her, and she stepped back, startled, gripping the railing behind her.

And then he was in front of her, his breath hot in her ear as he whispered, deliberately, "I am going to fuck you. Right here. Right now."

It was ridiculous how those words instantly set an ache low in her belly, warming her skin. Or was that the result of his hands roaming around her curves as if he couldn't get enough of her?

His voice was hoarse. "I've waited so long, Liz."

"Yes," she breathed, her heart pounding.

"Tell me what you want," he demanded.

"I want you."

"Tell me what you want me to do." He buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent.

She told him by unbuttoning his pants and sliding her fingers around his hard length.

His mouth trailed down her neck, even as her fingertips skimmed the rim of his head. It apparently surprised him, causing him to nip at her shoulder.

"Woman!" He seized her and, suddenly, she was on her back on a bed of silken sheets softer than anything she had felt before. The night sky was dusted with glittery, gleaming stars, far too radiant and vivid to be anything other than a dream. She could smell that lemony scent mixed with his lust. It was so exciting that he, this mystery masked man, so clearly returned her desire.

"Do you trust me?"

"What?"

"I want to fuck you, Liz." He nestled his cockhead at her entrance, possessing her, dominating her. "No more discipline. No more self-control. I don't want to be gentle. I want to make you mine. Not sex, just fucking. Can you handle that?"

She looked at him, those broad shoulders, magnificent pecs, and well-muscled arms. She thought about him pushing that long, hard cock that she had wanted for so long into her, thrusting, pistonning, so full of lust that he could do nothing but shove himself inside her.

She nodded.

Without another word, he drove into her. She was already wet, and yet his cock was so large that she was on the edge of pleasure and pain.

He blinked. He looked down at her, his eyes glazed with lust. "So tight. So very tight."

And then he began to move.

Whimpers became cries as he used her body, thrusting into her as hard and fast as he could. She tried to move against him, but he held her down, clearly determined to control every bit of this fucking. Her mouth unleashed sounds that she knew told him exactly how much she loved the sensations he caused in her.

He pounded her, echoing her need, no more silence for once. "Oh, yes. Oh, fuck ... Liz ... Hell, yes."

He adjusted his angle, finding that perfect spot where she sheathed all of him, even as he hit that sweet part inside her, and then launched into overdrive. This was no lovemaking; it was rough, hard feral sex -- and it made

her hotter than she had ever been before, to have him take her, hear him growl his pleasure.

“Oh, fucking yes!” he roared as he rode her, his plaything to be enjoyed as he chose.

She suddenly felt his rhythm change. He threw his head back as he emptied all of his desire into her, a shudder traveled from him to her as his warmth flooded her. He collapsed on top of her.

They lay there for several moments.

Without knowing why, she reached up and pulled his mask off. He didn’t stop her.

Kent’s brown eyes stared back at her as she felt herself turning red, turning hot.

Liz’s eyes opened, suddenly aware of the heat of midmorning sunlight resting on her skin.

Chapter Twelve

Sinking into the couch, she glared at the small pile of junk mail on the low side table by the door. She had spent the whole day running errands all over town, in sticky, smothering heat. Yet, upon coming home, she still had stuff to do. Liz narrowed her eyes. Maybe if she stared at the pile of mail long enough, it would just go up in flames. Some people randomly developed cool superpowers in the middle of their lives, right?

Sadly, not even a curl of smoke appeared. Liz made herself get up. No, she only had the lame half-banshee voice, which was completely useless except when it came to her neighbor's annoying little dog.

Kent's voice abruptly echoed in her head. *Scream for me.*

Liz went to the kitchen, trying to brush him from her mind, trying once more to avoid thoughts of either of her lovers the way she had all day. Not that it worked.

She pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge and set it on the counter as she rummaged through the drawers for a corkscrew.

The stupidest things would remind her of Kent, she thought as she twisted the cork off. The color of the honey that had been on her fingers when he had kissed her. The smell of lemon in a shop. Handwriting on some document, with looped letters just like Kent's.

She reached into a cabinet, snagged herself a wineglass and poured herself some wine. Holding the delicate stem in one hand, she flipped quickly through the mail, with the other.

Something prickled at the back of her neck.

“You know, I’m not quite sure why I’m never surprised when you step out of the shadows. And when I turn around, there you are.”

Ninja stepped toward her.

My apartment is a mess! She quickly pushed past him into her living room to gather up the papers all over the floor. How could she be such a slob?

“Look, I’ve had a really great time with you ...” From the corner of her eye, she watched him go suddenly still. He cocked his head at her. “But we both know that this can’t possibly work between us.” She picked up the pillows still lying on the floor and snuck another glance at him.

Ninja just stood there silently, as full of emotion as a statue.

“Listen to me, going on and on.” She set the pillows on the couch. “You probably have women throwing themselves at you.” She checked to see if he was going to do anything. If he would rip off his mask and declare his undying love to her -- and then try to have crazy sex with her again. She couldn’t, wouldn’t do it, even if she was trembling at the thought of it.

It was just sex. And oral sex at that. Really amazing, skin-tingling oral sex notwithstanding.

Liz walked into the kitchen and picked up her glass of wine, tossing it back. She was breaking up with a superhero.

He followed her, leaning against the doorway, his arms crossed against his chest.

Liz set the wineglass on the counter. “I’ve met someone.”

Perhaps he nodded; she wasn’t sure.

“He’s a really nice guy. I like him a lot. He’s become a really great friend. But you and I, all we have between us is sex.”

She could almost see him raise his eyebrow at that one.

“Okay, amazing, mind-blowing, earth-moving sex -- God, you haven’t even used your cock yet -- but it’s not enough. You know that if you stay around long enough, I’m going to start getting on your nerves, things like pestering you about taking off your mask and getting to know you as a person. You’ll end up having to actually speak.” She realized her wine glass was trembling in her hand and set it back down on the counter as smoothly as she could.

“I probably am getting on your nerves, aren’t I?”

Amazingly he shook his head.

“Look, both of us had fun. But I can’t do this anymore. I can’t lead a double life like this and keep seeing you both.” She wanted to put her hands on him, wanted to touch him. But she knew better. “We both know there’s no future here.”

No response.

“We live in two completely different worlds. You’re a ninja. Goin’ out, kickin’ ass, havin’ some fun. I’m just a boring girl who likes to come home from work and snuggle with a good book and some chocolate ice cream.” FBI spying notwithstanding, she thought. “We’d never work together.”

Not to mention that it would make working for the Bureau even more sticky.

He was a statue. His silence told her all she needed to know. If he wasn’t going to talk now, he was never going to. She was just another fling to him.

“Listen, I’ve had a really great time. But I think we both need to move on.”

He walked toward her with soundless steps, stopped in front of her and slowly took her fingers in his. Her hand had never looked as small and white as it did against his big black-gloved hand.

His voice was hoarse. Dry and raspy. “If you should ever need me, call into the shadows. I will come.” It was the most he had ever said to her. Now, when she was breaking up with him.

“But I don’t even know your name.”

He paused.

“I suppose you don’t even have a name to call yourself. Too ‘independent agent’ for you, rogue? Well, I’ve got news for you, you are a superhero. So you better think of one for yourself.”

“Night.” He squeezed her hand and walked back into the darkness.

Wait a minute. Was that his name or was he bidding her good night?

Chapter Thirteen

Looking around at Hong Kong, Liz could have sworn she was back in the States, stuck in traffic like any big metropolitan city. The same old skyscrapers, the same McDonald's and Starbucks rolling by. Well, except for the occasional Chinese signs outside, advertising the latest cell phones.

In the cab next to her, an Arab sheik sat talking on a cell phone. In front of the cab, a group of tourists, led by a German flag, crossed the street. Heck, even her own cab smelled of the same pine tree air freshener, with the same statue of Ganesh, the Hindu elephant god, sitting on the dashboard.

Maybe it was the fact she had been stuck on a fifteen-hour flight. Maybe it was the fact she was beginning to feel jetlag, but her mind wouldn't stop spinning. That was it for the ninja. No more ninja for her. What would Kent do if she really did try to start a relationship with him? Thank god Nick had insisted that Kent accompany him on the earlier flight. As partner, Nick outranked her and had the right to take her assistant when needed, especially when it came to this deal. She didn't know if she could have dealt with sitting next to Kent for the last eighteen hours. Was it possible she had distanced herself so much from him that he wouldn't want her anymore?

Liz rested her head on her fingertips and closed her eyes. What would it mean if she got close to him?

There would still have to be secrets. She had known that when she'd chosen this life. There would always be secrets.

Still, she had always considered herself a low-level freelancer. The fact that the Triad could have actually opened a gate to the Demon Realm frightened her. The cab stopped at another light, and Liz looked outside. A tall black woman, child in hand, walked by.

Maybe she was just imagining there was something more than sex between them. Maybe Kent got off on the idea of screwing his boss and seizing control outside of the office. Maybe this whole thing was absolutely insane.

Liz felt as if she were in a waking dream. Much sooner than she thought it would take, they reached the hotel. As she checked in, she barely realized that the receptionist was handing her a note. She took the message without looking at it. The bellboy tried to make small talk with her in the elevator, but she ignored him, occupied in her own world with thoughts of the ninja, Kent, and the Triad. Not until the bellboy left her the room did Liz open the message.

Liz,

I'm still monopolizing your assistant to organize a few last-minute details. You relax and recover from your flight. I'm sending a car to pick you up around nine p.m. to take you to the gathering. See you there.

Nick

Liz let out a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding. Great. A fancy-schmancy corporate party when all she wanted was bed. Kent would almost definitely be there.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror; her hair was frizzled beyond belief, and the dark circles under her eyes made her look and feel years older.

What the hell had she been thinking? Halting a fantastic, mind-blowing relationship with a superhero, no strings and no messy complications? She wasn't getting any younger. Her whole life was work; work for the firm and work for the Bureau.

Truth was, it probably would have been enough before. But then Kent had entered the picture, and with him came all the worries and considerations about risking not only herself, but his life as well.

Discovering the Triad attempts to open a gate to the Demon Realm had scared the crap out of her. It wasn't just about keeping track of a criminal organization anymore; it was really about preventing the goddamn destruction of the world. If the Triad head was this insane, there was no telling what he might do to his estranged grandson. She closed her eyes as she leaned against the dresser. Vy had told her this would happen, back when she had first gotten involved. And Liz had known, but it hadn't really hit her until now. There wasn't room for anything else, couldn't be room for anything else.

"And if you do somehow miraculously find the time," Vy had said, "you will put everyone, everything you love, in danger."

A vise seemed to grip the inside of her chest. What if she had brought harm to Kent by asking him to come to Hong Kong? What if his family found him?

Liz went to grab her suitcase. Kent didn't even know he was working for the Triad. Random chance had placed him under her; as a young associate, she wasn't even supposed to have her own secretary.

So many lies. Liz set her suitcase on the dresser and unzipped it. Kent hated the Triad. How would he respond if he found out who he and Liz were working for? If she really cared about him, she would tell him about the Triad. But there was no way for her to explain herself. If she tried, it would threaten not only everything she and the Bureau had been working for, but possibly both of their lives as well.

Liz walked toward the closet where the bellboy had hung her suits. She had been so selfish, so stupid with all the arrogance of youth. The thought of life without Kent opened up a hole inside her.

Liz sank down against the wall, curling up into a ball and resting her forehead on her knees.

But the idea of Kent coming to harm was unbearable; there was no other choice. To keep him safe, she would have to push him away. She would have to fire him.

* * * * *

Liz stood there, wineglass in hand, as a woman with a French accent chattered to her. She had no idea what the woman was talking about, but she nodded with a smile plastered on her face.

In the background, a dusky-skinned woman in a pale blue dress crooned a Billie Holliday song. The mansion where the party was taking place had been the governor's during Hong Kong's days as an annexed British colony. The sand-colored marble tiles sparkled with glints of golden light, reflected from the Swarovski crystal chandeliers high above. More than six hundred guests filled the room, from working women like her to cosmopolitan socialites and low level royals from seven different countries.

But Liz didn't care. Her whole body was on edge as she looked for Kent, yet it seemed he was nowhere to be found. When another man began talking to the French woman, Liz took the opportunity to glide away.

"Liz Blackwell?" asked a deep voice behind her.

She turned around. A blond man with classic Nordic features and wearing an elegant tuxedo stood before her, holding a glass of champagne.

"Yes. I'm sorry, I don't --"

He held his hand out. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Bryce Hanover. I'm a consultant working with Nalo."

Liz took his hand and shook it with a firm grip. "Oh, right. I thought your voice sounded familiar. We've had a few conference calls together, haven't we?"

"Too many, I think." Someone passed behind him, jostling him closer.

Liz stepped back. "I'll be glad when this deal is done."

"Are you sure you're so eager to be finished? You're a relatively new associate, and I bet you've learned a lot." There was something about his tone and the look in his blue eyes that made her cautious.

"Yes," she said with a tight smile. "I have learned a lot."

He stared at her for a brief moment before draining his champagne glass. "Well, you know what they say."

"What?"

"Curiosity killed the cat." And with that, he turned away and left.

Liz frowned at his retreating back. What was that? Was that supposed to be a Triad warning?

The music suddenly picked up, booming a rapid Latino beat. Cheers and whoops began running throughout the crowd as lights began to flash. The sounds, the alcohol, and the heat suddenly seemed gilded, empty, and menacing.

God, oh, God. What if they had Kent? What if she was too late? What if they had taken him? What if they had caught on to her? What if they had thought all that snooping around had been him?

Her heart pounded along with the heavy bass beat, solidifying her earlier realization that anyone innocent and so close to the Triad could only be hurt.

Nick had said that Kent had ducked out a few hours ago and would probably be back soon. But more than a few hours had passed, and he still wasn't here.

Where was he?

She had to get out of here to find him, but just then Nick snagged her arm.

“Liz, you have to meet Mr. Yoshimoto,” he said, dragging her away from the exit.

* * * * *

Kent tried maneuvering through the crowd of partygoers. He had just finished putting the final touches on the presentation for the meeting tomorrow, but even that could not dampen his inner glee. It had been all he could do to stop from randomly smiling during the most inopportune moments.

Because Liz had picked Kent. She had actually chosen him.

Even now he still couldn't believe it.

A waiter offered him some sushi. He shook his head and continued looking for her. And then he caught sight of her. To his credit, his jaw didn't fall to the floor.

She wore a deep jade-green dress; the thin silk hugged her sleek curves. Her skin was like cream, her hair like loose fire. Nestled just above her round cleavage, was a green emerald that looked dull compared to the green sparkle in her eyes.

He moved toward her, irretrievably drawn to her, a moth to her fiery feminine flame.

She looked so sophisticated. An older Japanese man standing with her and Nick laughed.

Something struck him; Liz and Nick looked perfect together, the very ideal of a power couple.

And then he realized the stiff way Liz stood, the way she kept her arms crossed in front, as if protecting herself.

In moments, he was by her side.

“Liz,” he said, startling her. He gave a quick nod to Nick. “I have a message for you, and I have a question about those Brazilian sugar contracts.”

She grabbed his arm, clearly grateful for the rescue. "Oh, I know exactly what you're talking about."

"But --" Nick began.

"Sorry, Nick, I have to take care of this. It's a project that Wanda asked me to work on," she said, referring to another partner in the firm, one who outranked Nick. She nodded to the old Japanese man. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Yoshimoto."

She held onto Kent's arm as they made their way through the exit. The scent of lavender curled around him. It was all he could do to keep his hands to himself, away from her, while they were out in the open.

He said something to the valet. Liz clung to him, trembling slightly. "Are you cold?" he asked, moving to take off his jacket.

"No, no," she said. "I think I'm just tired from jetlag."

He took off his jacket anyway and wrapped it around her shoulders. A car arrived quickly, and they got in. "The Mandarin Oriental Hotel," Kent said to the driver and sat back.

He tried to pull her against him, but she was so tense, so focused on staring at the streets rolling by. He looked at her carefully. She looked so strong, save for the slight trembling of her hands. "Is everything okay, Liz?"

"I ... We need to talk."

Was this where she was going to tell him about the ninja? He glanced at the driver, who seemed unaware of their conversation.

He leaned back, respecting her space. "Let's talk about it when we get to the hotel."

It was one of the longest car rides he had ever taken.

* * * * *

Liz kept her arms crossed, tried to keep away from him. How did he know just how to get close to her? But even so, the elevator took them up to her room, it was impossible to ignore the way his hand wrapped protectively around her waist.

She fumbled for the room key as they headed down the hall.

"I'm really glad you asked me to come, Liz."

She slid the key in the lock and pushed the door open. "Can I get --?"

He pushed her in, slamming the door behind him and pulling her toward him.

No, wait, her mind said. She opened her mouth to say something, but then his lips touched hers. Her body instantly melted against him, unable to resist. His tongue tangoed with hers as he ran his hands down her bare back, exposed by the dress. His touch was like a drug. She needed it, needed his hands on her ass.

No. She couldn't do this to him.

Her voice came out in a moan. "Kent, please."

His hands felt warm as they slid down her thighs.

"Stop."

She forced herself to ignore the feel of his lips on her neck. "*Stop!*"

He froze. She pulled away but he would only let her go so far. His eyes swept down her figure. "You look amazing, Liz."

The look in his eyes stopped her. She wanted him to look at her like that for the rest of her life. But that would be impossible, once she said what she had to say.

She made herself draw away.

"Kent, we need to talk."

Kent tried to draw her back to him. "We can talk later."

She slid out of his attempted embrace. "No. We have to talk now." She forced herself to turn her back on him as she walked to the mini-fridge. "Do you want something to drink?"

He was completely silent.

“Kent?” She glanced at him.

He leaned against the wall, his arms folded. Just like Ninja.

She shook her head.

“Why don’t you tell me what this is about?”

She opened up one of the small bottles of wine and poured it into a glass.

“It’s not you, it’s me,” she said, scrutinizing the label on the wine bottle. She was such a coward. *At least look at him, you idiot. You owe him that much.*

She looked up at him. “We ... it’s not going to work between us, Kent.”

The moment the words left her mouth, she wished she could take them back, if only to spare him the pain. Raw hurt emerged in his dark eyes. The intensity hit her like dull blade in the chest.

She closed her eyes and leaned against the counter. If she didn’t make this quick, she wouldn’t be able to do it.

“We can’t keep seeing each other. I’m sorry. And I -- the firm is letting you go. You can return to the States whenever you want.” It would be a bitch to explain to Nick, but she couldn’t put Kent in danger like this, not in Triad territory, with crazy alchemists trying to destroy the world.

There was silence. Then disbelief. “You’re firing me?” He moved toward her, taking slow, deliberate steps as if he were a predator stalking prey. His eyes had become hard and emotionless, his body tense.

Liz suddenly realized just how vulnerable she was. Not only was he an aikido master, if he was actually Triad, there was little she could do to stop him from doing whatever he wanted to her. She tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She backed away from him only to be stopped by the table behind her. She spun around, unable to meet his eyes.

His breath was hot against her ear. "You're right. I don't understand." The thin silk of her dress was no barrier to his hands. "Because I know how much you want me."

She knew she should push him away. She put her hands on his thick wrists as they encircled her waist, but all she managed to do was stroke his strong forearms as he caressed her curves. "There are things about me you don't know. Complicated things."

"Only because you let them get complicated." His fingers found the slit in her skirt. She heard a sharp intake of breath and felt his cock instantly stiffen the moment he discovered her naked ass underneath the dress.

"No, stop. Don't." But her tone lacked conviction, and the slow caresses never changed. It was as if he were a magician, his hands drawing away her will.

His voice was low and seductive. "Your mind may be saying no," he said, pulling her back against his chest. "But your body says yes." He bunched up the silk of her skirt in one hand, raising it so that he could touch her wet cleft. "You're so wet for me." The combination of his voice, touch, and scent started a sensuous tingling throughout Liz's body, the first promise of pleasure sapping her strength. "And you know it, because this," he said, sliding a finger in her, "feels so right."

To her shame, her hips squirmed against his hand, even as she tried to push him out. "Stop," she breathed, as he cupped her breast with one hand, pulling her closer to him. He pressed the fingers of his other hand into her, pushing her ass against his hard cock.

"Can you honestly say you don't want this?" he said, nipping her ear. His voice took on a tightly controlled edge as he paused. "Don't lie to me about how it makes you feel."

"Kent." She was about to protest again, but his dark eyes stopped her.

"Does it make you feel good? Tell me the truth. No lies."

She closed her eyes. "Yes."

His fingers stroked her with growing rapidity. "Say it again."

Spirals of pleasure curled around her, pulling her into a pool of sweet bliss. She gasped, unable to resist his power, his insistent, relentless movements all aimed at making her fall to pieces. She shouldn't, couldn't be doing this. It was so wrong.

But as shuddering bits of orgasm rolled into her, it felt so right.

"*Yes*," she breathed.

He felt perched on the edge of a dark abyss. Dark fury pooled in his stomach.

He would regret taking advantage of her like this. Another bloody mistake, another reason for her to hate him. He would never see her again, and he would be alone, with no Liz for either Ninja or Kent.

But right now, she was fire in his arms.

His fingers were still in her pussy, feeling her clench around him in those little shudders that drove him insane. With his free hand, he fumbled around his pockets.

She tried to turn, but he held her fast, impaled on his hand.

"Kent, we have to stop." Her voice was sultry, stirring his cock, even as the words tore the hole inside him just a little more.

Finally, he found what he was looking for. He withdrew his hand, and pinned her with his weight against the table.

She wriggled underneath him, only to feel more of his cock nestled against the cheeks of her ass. Her voice took on a tinge of desperation. "Let me go."

"Shhh," he said, trying to get the surprise ready. "I would never hurt you. But I just want you to know that you're making a mistake." He pulled up her skirt all the way, exposing the curves of that delicious ass.

She froze at the first touch of something hard and wet against her ass.

"I got this for you," he murmured.

She tried to fight him. “No, stop -- I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

He almost laughed at her words. It was too late for that now. “You’ll hurt me more if you don’t let me do this.” Her arms, which had been trying to push him away, relaxed. He nestled the butt plug between her cheeks, pressing against her anus. “Don’t fight what your body wants. You love this.” He pushed it into her body, bent over on the table. “I know you.”

He looked down at her, her long red hair, her green dress around her waist, her white ass high in the air, trembling because of his fingers. Not even in his numerous fantasies did he expect the sight to be so beautiful.

His throat began to close up at the thought of never seeing her again.

He flipped her over so that he could look into her face. He wanted to see her, her lust-glazed face; wanted her to know that it was him that made her feel so good; wanted her to feel just how right this was.

Her green eyes stole his breath and stopped his heart. Pain and sadness that echoed his own stared back at him.

He caught her gaze with those remote brown eyes. There was something dark there, something he was trying to hide. She reached for him with a hand. “Kent --”

He pushed her hand away and kissed her. Need and desire stabbed through her as his tongue claimed her mouth. He tasted like a man on fire, a tornado of emotions that threatened to pick her up and carry her away.

The bittersweetness of his kiss shattered her heart.

She couldn’t help but cling to him, wrapping her arms around him as she opened her mouth to him. Vaguely, she was aware of him unzipping his pants, the sound of a condom wrapper being opened.

His hands gripped her ass, the butt plug still in it, and she suddenly found her back against the wall. She looked up at him as his tip nudged her opening. He was determined,

merciless. She closed her eyes and turned her head. He licked her exposed neck as he impaled her one quick, stabbing inch at a time.

She felt so impossibly stretched full with his big, hard cock in her pussy and the butt plug in her ass.

“Liz, damn,” he managed to groan. “You’re so damn tight.” He arched his back, shutting his eyes, feeling each little clench of her pussy around his cock. “Don’t lie to me and tell me this doesn’t feel good.” He opened his eyes. “Tell me, Liz, tell me again how it makes you feel.”

She gritted her teeth, trying to maintain the last bits of control, hovering on the brink of such exquisite pleasure. She had no more strength to protest, but she couldn’t be so cruel as to encourage him. He palmed her breasts, kneading and massaging them, rolling and pinching her nipples so expertly it made her gasp. She couldn’t tell him, couldn’t say the words, couldn’t tell him how much he completed her, how he was the one, the only one, because once the words were spoken, she couldn’t pretend, couldn’t do what had to be done.

As she arched her back, her nipples demanding more carnal attention, he took advantage of her momentary loss of control and thrust into her warmth, burying his cock fully in her cunt.

He pumped into her, his cock flexing in her pussy with each forward thrust. One big hand grabbed her lush, plump butt, tapping the butt plug, sending shocks of delight up her spine.

“Say it, Liz, say how right this feels,” Kent demanded, his muscles straining.

All she could do was arch her hips to his merciless rhythm.

Her eyes open, she absorbed the pure ecstatic fervor with each motion of his big, hard cock sliding in and out of her. Faster. Harder. Faster. Harder. She tried to hold back, tried to savor this last bit of ecstasy. She tried to memorize the way his cock hit that oh-so-sweet spot inside her.

He nipped at her shoulder as one hand massaged a breast and another hand teased the curve of her ass. "Scream for me, Liz."

She hovered on the edges of a crashing wave of pleasure. The world spun, her heart pounding as aching savage need surged through her blood. She held up her hands, trying to stop him, but it was no use. His hard cock kept pumping in and out.

Kent was a man fierce and determined, a man that she knew she would miss, and so she gave him the only thing she could give him, the one thing she had never given any lover.

With a last deep thrust, he pulled out the butt plug, and she exploded, screaming at the intensity of her release. Wave after wave of acute and sharp ecstasy convulsed her form as he held himself above her. She felt his arms trembling with the aftershocks as he tried to hold himself up so he wouldn't crush her.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she sought to imprint these last moments on her memory: the smell of his arousal mixed with hers, the deep thump of his heartbeat, the enveloping warmth of his arms.

She had no right to any of it.

She pushed at him, not expecting him to move, but to her sadness and surprise, he released her.

Liz drew herself up, adjusting her dress and trying to put on her corporate lawyer face. She had to do this.

She was amazed that her voice wasn't trembling. "Kent. I'm sorry, but it doesn't change anything. You have to go now."

He blinked, a blank expression on his face as he zipped his pants. He picked up his jacket.

"Goodbye, Kent."

He gave her one last, hard look and left, closing the door gently behind him.

Only then did she sink to the floor.

* * * * *

She glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. Five a.m.

Not that she had been asleep.

Damn. She felt like an empty shell, one that had been cracked and roughly pieced back together.

Her heart felt raw, her body bruised, not from Kent, but from the very lack of him.

Her cell phone beeped, as if on cue. She searched for her bag for several moments before she found the stupid thing. Glancing at the numeric combination, Liz groaned.

Vy's pickup had to be done that evening.

* * * * *

The pink tinge of sunset lingered in the sky as Liz stared, numb, out the taxi window, past the city scenes streaming by. She'd endured unending business meetings and negotiations, all of which were ridiculously difficult because she didn't have Kent around. Nick had not been pleased that Liz had fired Kent so abruptly, though his actions confirmed her belief that Kent was an innocent. Nick simply had given her a look, questioning her abilities to command subordinates. "I know sexual harassment is bad and all," he had said. "But couldn't you just put up with it until after we got back? You're the boss after all. He was a great assistant. You could have just let me deal with him and stayed away from him." The look she had given him had ended that conversation, though she knew that her abilities would be questioned and scrutinized that much more carefully from now on.

But, now, at the end of the day, that job was done, and her other work was just beginning.

Liz followed the Bureau's instructions exactly, and found herself in a little bar next to a seedy-looking casino.

She entered. It was dark, with strings of Christmas lights running around the room. In the background, a Filipino band was doing an amazing cover of a Rolling Stones song. To her surprise, the crowd was a mixture of young professionals; mostly foreign expats filled the trendy, American West-themed lounge.

Liz slid into a seat at the bar.

A man with short, spiky brown hair wiped the counter in front of her. "What'll it be, ma'am?"

The man's Australian accent reminded her of Kent, sending a sharp pain through her chest. "I'm told you have some house specialty drinks that aren't on the menu."

The bartender picked up a glass. "Aye, that we do."

She set her little black pocketbook on the counter. "I'm also told you have a drink called Big Snake."

"We do." The bartender refused to meet her eyes. "Are you sure you can handle it, miss?"

She studied a little plastic green cactus placard on the bar. It seemed to be advertising drink specials, but then again she couldn't read Chinese. "I've handled lots of big snakes in my time."

The bartender simply nodded. "Comin' right up, ma'am."

She looked around the dirty bar. This was how her life would be from now on.

"Here ya go, ma'am." He set a tall glass filled with a red liquid in front of her. "And here's a free keychain pen for out-of-towners like you."

"Thanks."

Liz picked up the keychain. It had the bar's name and logo on it and was almost definitely a keychain flash drive this time.

Liz quickly finished her drink, which was nothing more than a strawberry wine cooler. She paid the bartender, bundled into her jacket and stepped outside. The wind, though

warm, seemed to cut right through the aching hole inside her. Funny, wasn't it, how she didn't realize how lucky she was, to have that connection with Kent until he was gone? Could there possibly be anything worse?

An arm wrapped around her throat.

She immediately kicked backward, shifted her weight, and flung her attacker to the left, just as Kent had taught her to do. But as she opened her mouth to scream, she felt a prick at her neck.

She pulled the little bug-like thing off, and looked at it, suddenly feeling lightheaded. "It looks like a syringe."

The ground rushed to meet her.

Chapter Fourteen

Kent stood on the red-bricked river promenade, leaning against the railing, watching the green-tinged waters of the Hong Kong harbor splash against the concrete barriers. The sounds of two children laughing and screaming in Cantonese reached him as they ran past.

When troubled, his teacher had always said to find water. “Learn your lessons from water; water always flows, unceasing in its journey, uncaring what it touches. You can contain water, change its course, change its form even. But water always achieves its goals long after those who claimed triumph over water are gone.”

What a bloody fuckwit he was.

He set his elbows against the railing, his head in his hands. A seagull cried overhead. He looked up. In the harsh sunlight, the colors of the boats dotting the harbor seemed washed out.

So this was what it felt like to have your guts ripped open with a spoon.

Footsteps approached him. “Scuse me. Ya gotta light?”

Kent didn’t even look at the newcomer. “No.”

The voice echoed with an odd tone. “Are you sure?”

Kent looked up.

The alchemist. He smiled, reaching for Kent's shoulder.

Kent grabbed the alchemist's forearm, only to feel a jolt run up his arms and into his head at the touch. His vision exploded into lights and stars. Alchemical electricity seized control of his muscles causing his limbs to feel like they were melting.

Kent sank to the ground.

The last thing he saw was the alchemist's hand reaching for his face.

* * * * *

He could taste the metallic tang of blood in his mouth. Every fiber in his body burned, even as the odd muscle in his thigh and forearm spasmed uncontrollably.

His eyes were so dry it hurt to open them. Of course, the bright lights beaming on him didn't help either.

"So you have returned," said an elderly voice.

Kent tried to raise his hands, only to find them tied behind his back. As he tried to rise, he found his ankles bound and tied to the floor. He said with gritted teeth. "You bastard."

A tall blonde woman, well-dressed, with ice-blue eyes and sharp cheekbones walked up to him and slapped him in the face. Her Russian-accented voice was as cold as a Siberian wind. "Do not address your grandfather with such rudeness."

"Now, now, Sonya, this is not the time or the place." The elderly Chinese man stepped into the light. He was hunched over, shorter than Kent, with white hair, and leaning on an intricately carved rosewood cane.

Kent could almost feel the alchemical power radiating from the man, a hot dry heat. How had the old man attained such power?

"Grandson," the old man said in Cantonese. "You've returned earlier than I thought."

"I am not your grandson," Kent replied in English. His mind raced, trying to figure out where the lights were coming from. *How much does the old man know?*

The door swung open behind Kent. He looked back, only to be punched in the face. He fell to the floor. Bound like this, with light surrounding him, there was little he could do. But as he tried to pull himself up, Kent knew exactly who had entered.

Dark tattoos curled around the alchemist's bare arms, though fewer and less intricate than before. The alchemist didn't even glance at him, stalking toward the old man, who looked at the alchemist with dispassionate eyes. The alchemist raised his hand.

"It's done. And you have not given me what we agreed upon."

The Russian woman moved between the two. "Get out. You have no place here."

In a single motion, the alchemist grabbed her outstretched arm and used her forward momentum to flip her over his back. Her head smashed into the floor.

Guns clicked as the guards pointed them at the alchemist, who turned toward the old man.

The old man stood there, leaning on his rosewood cane. "Do not fire," he instructed his guards. "You'll hit the bastard behind him."

The alchemist waved a hand, pinning all of the old man's guards and everyone else against the wall with an invisible force. Kent struggled against the magnetic force, but there was nothing he could do that would not reveal his identity.

Still, what would this show about the old man's newfound alchemical power?

The old man still stood with his cane, his expression unchanged. "You are making a mistake," he said calmly.

"You made the mistake when you went back on our agreement, old man." He threw a punch.

The cane came up and hit the alchemist's fist with a sharp crack. The old man took a quick step forward, shoving the end of the cane into his opponent's stomach. The alchemist doubled over, even as the old man swung the cane up. His wrinkled, spotted hand slid smoothly along the knotted rosewood, grasping finally at the tip. With a flick of his wrist,

the handle swung through the air, striking the alchemist above the ear. Blood began to run from this fresh wound, just as the handle of the cane now snagged the alchemist's ankle. The old man yanked the cane toward himself, sweeping the alchemist from his feet. Grasping the tip of his cane again like a ninja holding his sword, Kent's grandfather brought the staff crashing down on the alchemist's neck, stifling the shattered alchemist's groans

The downed man grabbed his neck, clearly trying to breathe. The guards fell back to the floor, no longer under his control.

Kent knew about the pressure point technique the old man had utilized. He himself never used it; it was one of the more painful ways to die. Even now, blood was clotting one of the alchemist's major arteries, swelling them until his eyes leaked tears of blood. In moments, the alchemist would be dead.

The old man rested once more on his cane. Throughout it all, the old man's expression had never changed. "Remove him."

Three guards stepped forward, dragging the choking alchemist out of the room.

Kent struggled to his feet, trying to orient himself upwards, until the Russian blonde placed a gun, her hand trembling just slightly, to his head.

"Let him sit up, Sonya."

The blonde shifted back, and Kent stood.

The old man shuffled forward, leaning in until his face was inches away from Kent's. "You see, everyone has his place in the world. Fulfilling one's place is what makes one virtuous. When one tries to step out of his place, disharmony results. And despite your filthy dog blood, you are my grandson."

"I made myself who I am today."

"*I* made you who you are. Did you know that it was my money, Triad money that enabled you to travel, to go to Stanford, for your sister to study at the Sorbonne in Paris?"

Kent gritted his teeth. He and Joy had discussed the merits of taking the scholarship money funneled from fake non-profits, but had decided to use it anyway. It was less money that was available for the Triad to use.

“Indeed, your foreign blood makes you a fool. Everything you are is because of my money. Did you not know that the very people who employ you are employed by me?”

“It was Snakehead money that killed my parents, your own daughter.”

“You still don’t understand. Everyone has their place, grandson. Instead of fulfilling her duties, she chose to create disharmony by running away. Your mother created her own destiny.” The old man stopped.

Kent struggled against the cuffs. “Your own daughter. Don’t think I don’t know the trade you made. Their lives for yours.”

The old man stopped and paused, as if reconsidering something. “If one does not assume his place, they must be forced to it. In the end, your mother redeemed herself in death. Because of her sacrifice, the Tigerblood Triad has all but vanished and, we, the Snakeheads, are influential all over the world.”

“Convenient, isn’t it? That your ‘place’ profits so well on the deaths of others.”

“I have earned my position and my power. You think I am evil. But all I am doing is fulfilling my place in the world.” The old man shook his head. “Your mother never understood it, either. You are too much like her. You see only what you want to see, not the truth that is staring at you. But I’m afraid, grandson, like your mother, you too have a role to fulfill for me.”

Kent strained against the handcuffs, even as Sonya kneeled behind him, knife against his lower spine. “I’m not doing any favors for you.”

Sonya’s voice floated from behind Kent. “That’s where you’re wrong, puppy.” A thin line of precise pain sliced through his hands. Kent took in a sharp breath. He could feel the cup she held to catch his blood.

Shit. There were a hundred alchemical reasons his grandfather would want his blood. None of the more likely ones boded well.

“But this is not all you must give, grandson. I want information. I want to know about the shadow walker.”

“The who?”

The blonde woman slapped him in the back of the head. “Do not lie to your grandfather!”

“Come now. You know as I do that there is a shadow walker in Metrocity. Unfortunately, he has been causing numerous problems for us.”

“What makes you think I know anything about him?”

“I know you don’t. But your little redheaded boss does.”

“She’s not my boss.” He gritted his teeth. “I was just fired.”

The old man chuckled. “You couldn’t measure up to that shadow walker she was fucking, too, huh?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Too bad. Because she’s going to die a painful death if he doesn’t come to save her.”

The veins in his temples throbbed. He could almost hear the roar of a thousand warriors rushing in his head, grinding in his stomach. He clenched his fists.

“What do I care? She fired me. I owe her nothing.”

“Ah, indeed. The old ancestry still runs in you.” The old man shook his head. “Your foreign blood makes you hotheaded when that is the time you must step back and think.”

He gritted his teeth. “I don’t know who the shadow walker is. I don’t know how to contact him.”

He heard Sonya's movements behind him and then felt a blow into his shoulder blade. Bound to the ground in this position with so many bystanders around, he could do nothing but fall.

The old man stood above him. "You really are a disgrace. With all the great martial arts in your heritage, you chose that weak Korean shit your mongrel father practiced. Tell me what good does 'defensive harmony' do you now?"

Sonya kicked him in the stomach with a steel-toed boot, and Kent jackknifed from the pain.

Sonya shoved him forward to the ground and straddled him, as she took the knife and began to carve lines in his back. Russian-accented voice sneered at him. "Do you care nothing for the little slut who fucked you so well last night?"

He gritted his teeth as fiery scars were traced in his back. "She was just a fuck," he said, trying to make it true. "I don't care about her. She and her shadow walker can go to hell for all I care."

She stood up and kicked him in the face. She kicked him in the ribs, in the stomach, in the face. But the abuse that Sonya was giving him was nothing compared to what Liz had done to him earlier.

But then he realized he had to stop pitying himself. He had to save Liz.

"Stop! Stop!" he gasped between the blows of the Russian woman. "I think she might have e-mailed him. I can look up her e-mail."

The quicker he ended it, the quicker they would leave so he could find her.

"See, that wasn't so bad. You are a fool, grandson. To sleep with a trashy whore like that. Your talent is wasted. All you are is a washed-up computer geek, when you could be at the top of one of the most feared organizations in the world. You think everyone is as innocent as you?"

Sonya moved to slap Kent again, but he blocked her with his forearm.

“Good,” said his grandfather. He nodded toward Sonya. “See, I told you the boy learns.” The old man turned back to him. “Tell the shadow walker he must come to Macau, to western pier ten, warehouse number twenty-four, and give himself up to my men. Or she will die.”

Kent tried to sit up just as he felt another sharp blow to his shoulder. He staggered forward as the world began to spin.

His grandfather’s voice seemed to echo. “Don’t worry, grandson. The drugs will wear off soon. We can’t have you causing any more disharmony.”

* * * * *

Liz had a splitting headache. And why was it so damn bright, even with her eyelids closed? Her eyes fluttered open. She lay on a cold cement floor, bound with duct tape around her wrists and ankles, and whatever was in her mouth tasted awful.

Her eyes began to focus. She was in a shiny steel cage surrounded by bright and huge spotlights.

Great. Just great.

The voice was smooth, masculine, and elegantly British. “Ah. So you’re awake.”

If she could say something she would. Her eyes focused on a blond man, handsome in his black Armani suit.

Bryce. From the stupid party.

He walked forward with a cloth and knelt down. She flinched as he held it up to her.

“Don’t worry,” he soothed, wiping her forehead with the wet washcloth. The rose soap scent was a stark contrast to the oil and machinery smell of the warehouse. “Nothing like that. I’m just cleaning you up a bit.” He stood back up.

“No hard feelings, I hope. This is just business, you understand.”

She glared at him.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Really. Working for the Snakehead Triad. You should know better." He cocked his head at her, paused.

"This is where the villain in the story tells you all his evil plans. But you know what? As much as you won't believe me, I'm not the villain."

If she could've spit at him, she would have.

"I suppose it wouldn't matter if I told you I am sorry about having to leave you here. No. I suppose not."

He turned to leave before stopping and swinging back to her.

"I want to free you, but I can't. I know what this looks like. Don't worry, it will all work out."

She continued glaring at him, wishing she could burn holes in him with her gaze. There was no way that Night was working for the Snakeheads. No way at all. Thank God they had found and taken away her emerald pendant. Now she just had to wait for the right moment ...

His footsteps in the brightly lit warehouse died away, lost in the noise of machinery.

... whenever the right moment was.

* * * * *

Ninja was led through a long corridor filled with light.

A blond man, familiar to him, approached. "Boys, I'll take him from here."

The guards, eager to do as little work as possible, readily turned the bound shadow walker over to the blond.

"Well, well, well, you seem to have gotten yourself into a bit of a bind."

"What are you doing here?"

“No small talk, eh? Isn’t it obvious? It’s time for you to get your girl out of here. They’re supposed to be putting you into separate cells, but I’m going to put you both together. I can’t do anymore than that or I risk blowing cover.”

“I understand.” Ninja paused. He briefly whispered to the other man just before the guards arrived. “My sister doesn’t like you, Bryce.”

* * * * *

She had lain there for what seemed like hours, struggling with the damn duct tape. Her arms and legs were going to have the absolute worst cramps when she finally got loose. Not only that, she was freezing. Her fingers felt so numb she could barely feel them anymore.

The door clanged open. Her eyes widened.

It was Night. Handcuffed. Without his weapons.

The men unlocked the steel cage and shoved him in roughly. They laughed as the cage door slammed shut behind him.

Surprisingly, he spoke first. “Are you okay?” His voice was gravelly, gritty.

There was something about his voice. She nodded.

He twisted his handcuffs off and then undid her gag. She took a deep breath.

“Thank you.”

In the background she could hear the guards talking in Cantonese. One of them said something, and all the others laughed and took no more notice of them.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This has nothing to do with you.”

She was so used to silence from him, she hadn’t expected him to say anything.

“That’s not exactly true.”

He went still. Then he turned to her, those lenses, the mask, revealing nothing of his face. And yet his body seemed dangerously poised, as if recognizing an enemy for the first time. His voice was like gravel, harsh and rough. “What do you mean?”

Her heart skipped a beat in fear.

She closed her eyes, resigned to her fate, whatever it was. "Please don't tell me you're working for the Snakeheads."

His voice was sharp, angry. "What do you know about them?"

She was startled by his response. What the hell was going on? Her retort was equally sharp.

"I'm not working for them, if that's what you're trying to insinuate. Are you?"

"No." He was almost finished unwrapping the duct tape around her wrists. "How do you know about the Triad?"

"Long story. I'm surprised they didn't take off your mask."

"They're waiting for the head of their organization to arrive. He wants to unmask me himself."

"Dr. Chou?" Kent's grandfather?

He paused. "You certainly know a lot about the Snakehead Triad."

Vy was right. She had no idea who Masked Man was, who he worked for, or what his agenda was. Well, whoever he was, he was her only hope in getting out of here. The Bureau would never come for a freelancer.

She ignored his comment. "Can't you walk through the walls or something?"

"I can't do anything with all these lights on."

She took a deep breath. "All you need is those lights off, right? And then we can get out of here?"

He freed her wrists with a final yank. To her credit, she only whimpered. She snatched her wrists away, rubbing the raw, reddened skin. Blood began to return to her limbs, and cold pins and needles pierced her extremities with sharp precision. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, kneeling forward, unable to move.

His voice was oddly concerned as he put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she squeezed out. It had been so long, it felt as if cold fire was eating away at her flesh. "Moment! Please!"

Finally, she sat up, her fingers and toes still tingling, but at least controllable.

"If it suddenly got dark, could you free yourself? Could you get us out of here?"

"If it was dark, yes."

She took a deep breath. "I once told someone that I didn't become an opera singer because I have a voice that shatters glass."

Her eyes met his as she reached for his ears. "I was telling the truth."

She covered his ears and took a deep breath.

And began to sing.

The guards turned around, looking at her, and began to laugh. She ignored them, trying to find the correct pitch, the correct resonance.

Yes, that's where it would be.

Her song became a scream, and the glass-encased lights exploded around them, flooding the warehouse with darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

Liz clung to him as he carried her, her bulwark in the icy dark. She could hear his heart thumping almost feel the adrenaline that was pumping in his system. He was so warm, and the air around them was so dramatically cold.

He had been striding through the darkness for what seemed like eons; no sounds save for the rhythm of his heart and the pace of his breath reached her. She had lost track of all time; her echoing screams, the pops of a thousand bullets aimed at them -- all seemed like some long ago nightmare.

He stopped moving.

She felt the temperature change as he emerged from the shadows. She opened her eyes. Though it was still dark, it was a different kind of darkness. This blackness was alive with the sounds of bats and various other living creatures. Gently, he set her down on her feet.

She heard him click something. Immediately, she could feel the warmth of an electric light.

His voice was rough, like sandpaper. "Open your eyes." He stepped behind her as she opened her eyes. Her mouth dropped open.

She was in a huge cavern. Massive amounts of computer equipment sat scattered around on worktables.

“You’ll be safe here. I’ll be back soon.”

She turned around to reply, but he had already disappeared back into the shadows.

He had brought her to his secret lair.

A faint flickering thought, one that had been dancing around her subconscious mind suddenly reared its head and demanded her attention. The notion filled her with a mixture of joy, fear, anger, and sadness. But as much as she tried to dismiss it, she knew she couldn’t. The lemon-wood scent. The crazy martial arts. The scars on Kent’s torso.

As she approached the computer screen, she saw a thick folder with her name on it. With trembling fingers, she picked it up and flipped it open.

The folder was filled with an immense amount of personal information. Statistics, a biography, reports, e-mails, medical records, everything, right down to her first grade report card, was there.

Well, almost everything. There was nothing there about her work with the FBI. That secret, at least was safe.

As she flipped through the documents, a detached part of her mind was not surprised at the level of detail.

The fact that the notes scribbled all over the folder were in Kent’s handwriting, however, made her knees weak.

In a daze, she pulled the chair out from underneath the desk and slowly sat down to read.

* * * * *

Liz flipped through the folder for quite some time. Among other information, there were comments about her position in the company, her status, and her connections. Part of

her was flattered by the detailed and painstaking research that he had done on her. But the rest of her burned ice-cold.

She didn't know how long she had been sitting there when she finally finished the report. She closed the folder and stood up, pushing the chair back.

Somehow, she didn't need to turn around to know that he was there.

"How long have you been watching me?" At least her voice sounded more neutral than she felt. She gripped the edges of the desk, keeping her back to him.

"Long enough."

She took a deep breath and turned around; he was as tall, dark, and mysterious as always. He stood with his arms crossed, his broad chest inches away from her nose. She didn't even need to take a step forward. She looked up at him, hoping that her eyes would show none of what she was feeling and knowing that they did anyway.

Liz reached up to his face and slowly pulled away his disguise, revealing the same sexy cleft chin and full sensual lips that were all she had known of him to this point. Or so she had thought. She continued peeling the mask away, up and over his head, until it hung loosely from her hand.

She stared up into the face of her secretary, gazing into those brown eyes.

She stepped back.

Kent's face was a mask, his voice almost menacing. "Who are you working for, Liz? The Triad? One of the cartels?"

Her eyes narrowed. How dare he. After all the lies he had told her, all that he had done to her.

"Who am I working for! Who are *you* working for, Kent? Is that even your real name? It was you the whole time!"

He moved forward, his fury and rage barely controlled, and grabbed her by the shoulders, leaning in close. "I'm not going to ask you again. Who are you working for?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why don't you go and fucking research it?"

He shoved her against the table. "I have, and the only things I see are Triad connections."

She struggled to push him away, but he was too strong. "That's bullshit."

"The law firm's Triad, and you, a young attorney, work on one of the dirtiest cases. You're sent to Hong Kong, instead of how many others with more experience? And then the Triad picks you up. I know you were bait."

She trembled with fury as she spoke. "Bait? You asshole."

"Tell me." He grabbed her arm.

Her voice was low and dangerous. "Don't. Don't make me scream."

His eyes iced over. "Now you'll scream for me?"

"Let. Me. Go. Or I will scream so loud that your eardrums will shatter."

He stared at her with contempt for several moments. She glared back at him with equal vehemence. He backed away, but kept his gaze on her.

"I work for the FBI, the good guys. Which is more than I can say for you, *vigilante*."

His eyes widened. He moved to put his hand on her shoulder. "Liz --"

She pulled away and shoved his arm from her. "Don't you dare 'Liz' me!" Her words were ice, more chilling than the winds of the dark. Her voice echoed in the cavern, followed by a loud crack of stone. "Don't. Touch. Me."

He stepped back.

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "All this time. You lied to me. You used me. You made me hate myself for cheating on you, and it was you both times! I fired you to protect you! And then you accuse me of working for the Snakeheads? How could you even think that of me?"

"There are a lot of secrets you've been keeping."

Blood thrummed in her head. “How do I get out of here?”

“I have to take you through shadows.”

“Fine.”

He looked away. “I’m going to have to pick you up again to do that.”

“Fine.”

In a smooth motion, he swept her up and strode into the shadows.

* * * * *

The moment she was back in the hotel suite, she scrambled out of his arms as if scalded.

She kept her back to him. “Get out.”

“But --”

She closed her eyes, and repeated her demand in the same tone, but louder. “Get out!”

She could tell he stood there behind her, silent, unsure. He remained for a moment, and then somehow she knew that he was gone.

She walked around her suite, turning on every single light to rid the rooms of shadows.

Then she crawled into bed, under the covers, and cried into her pillow for a very long time.

Chapter Sixteen

She had handed in her resignation letter her first day back, and now her two weeks' notice was finished. She had broken all the protocols, called in all her favors, and assembled a portrait of the man known as Kent Alistair.

Everything was exactly as he had told her. His parents had been killed by a hit ordered by his own grandfather -- an honor killing used as an apology, which, through a series of Machiavellian moves, eventually led to the decimation of the Tigerblood Triad. Since then, he had harbored a hatred of the Snakeheads. Shortly afterwards, both children had gone to China, which was presumably where Kent had learned his skills. And Night's appearances and hits coincided perfectly against Triad interests.

He had been one of the good guys after all.

She was so stupid.

And he had known that she had been looking, too, because suddenly there were files found that hadn't existed before, codes that were broken far too easily ... and a trail that any amateur could follow.

Off the record, of course.

Even so, there was no reason to trust the trail he'd left behind.

Since that night Kent had completely dropped off the radar.

It was probably better that way. *Stupid, stupid, stupid girl.*

She looked around her apartment. Empty boxes were piled in a corner. Her walls were already bare, frames on the floor, leaning against the walls, ready to be wrapped in foam and plastic.

Well, she had to start packing sooner or later. Though she had no concrete plans, she knew that she had to move away.

Away from him and all the memories.

Liz sank against the wall to the floor, cupping her face.

Was it always going to be like this? This raw gaping hole, as if her insides had been torn out? The thought of him didn't just hurt; it sat like a hard stone in her stomach, stabbing at what was left.

Perhaps it was better this way. Everything they had shared had been built on lies anyway.

Liz sat there and cried until she realized her voice was slowly cracking the porcelain lamp on the table next to her.

She had to go back to Ireland soon. At some point, she would have to get another Irish "emerald" from her ancestral home. It was a legacy of the banshee, the only thing that would keep her voice at normal levels; without the emerald, her voice would eventually become so strong she would be unable to whisper without destroying something.

She got up and cleaned her face in the bathroom. The cool water that washed away hot tears unfortunately did nothing to soothe the shattered remains of her heart.

Since that day, she had kept her all her lights on from sunset to sunrise, but walking into her bedroom now, she realized her bulb had finally burned out.

And of course he was waiting for her in the corner, dressed in his ninja outfit as always, only without the mask.

She sighed. "If you're going to show up, you could just come to the door and knock like a normal person."

"Would you have let me in?"

Even in the dark she could see that his brown eyes were penetrating in their intensity. After all, banshee blood made her a creature of the night as well.

At once, she hated him and loved him. Pride and the memory of his earlier accusations made her voice cold. "Why are you here?"

He ignored her question and looked around. "You're moving?"

"It's none of your business."

He moved toward her. "Please."

"No." She turned her back to him. "Leave."

He was silent for what seemed like an interminably long time. "If that's how you feel ..."

Her heart breaking, she said, "Yes. I want you to leave."

He paused.

No. Don't leave. Tell me it wasn't a lie. Tell me you felt something too.

"Fine. But before I go, I brought you back something that's yours. Here."

She turned around slowly. In his outstretched, black-gloved hand, the gleaming green of her emerald necklace sparkled in the moonlight.

She reached for his hand ...

... and that was all he needed to pull her into the shadows with him.

* * * * *

He had taken advantage of her surprise, picking her up and carrying her over his shoulder like a caveman. When they got out of the void she was going to kick the stupid man in the balls.

Before she knew it, they emerged, and he dropped her on a velvety soft cushion.

"I hate y --" she started to say, before he cupped his hand over her mouth. The leathery smell of the glove only stimulated her sensory memory. Traitorously, a tense heat pooled instantly in her lower body.

"Shhhhh," he whispered. "Listen."

Belatedly, she realized they were in a little attic area above the Metropolitan Opera House. On stage below, the opera singer was in the midst of his mournful Italian solo. His voice was sorrowful, tragedy in every note, and yet agonizingly magnificent.

"My foolish choices," Kent began to translate, "have lost me the only one I cared for." She froze, her eyes wide. Kent looked at her and paused, gently removing his hand from her mouth.

He followed the words. "I used you and deceived you, and now, you're gone."

He took off his gloves, took her face in his hands, and looked directly into her eyes.

"But I could not help it because you, I loved for so long. Our love was not a lie. As much as I tried, I couldn't leave you alone. I needed you to soothe the darkness inside."

He paused as the orchestra swelled and the singer began to reach his crescendo. He looked into her eyes as he continued to translate. "I don't deserve forgiveness, but to me, our love was not a lie. Our love was not a lie. Can you ever believe me? That our love was not a lie?"

When the song ended, so did his translation.

Below, thunderous applause boomed, but Liz's face was unreadable.

He couldn't lose her. He couldn't. He needed her.

But that did not mean that she needed him.

He took her hands in his. "I know I don't deserve to be forgiven --"

Her voice was sharp. "No, you don't."

"But I want you to know that through it all, I truly cared for you, Liz. I wanted a real relationship with you. That was no lie. And I still love you, Liz." His hands tightened around hers. "I need you."

He closed his eyes, afraid of what he would find in her face.

And then she kissed him.

Her eyes were bright and green when she drew back. And cautious.

"No more lies, no more masks, no more games, Kent."

"No more," he agreed. "Just you and me."

Epilogue

Vladivostok, Siberia

Thick clumps of snow fell from the sky. Her breath frosted the window as she spoke. “So it is him?”

A tall man, bare-chested and muscular, stood behind her, his face hidden in the shadows. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the faint lines of alchemical power that surrounded his strong body, ones that disappeared if she looked at him. “It is.”

“He brought down the Triad in America. You had him, and yet you let him go.”

“America is only one country. In any case, the Triad has fulfilled its role. What happens to it now matters little.” He stepped next to her, looking out the window. The streetlight outside reflected on the hard lines of his face. It was strange how much he looked like his grandson: the same sharp planes, the same dark eyes. He gathered her toward him, his arm around her waist. “But now he knows how easily I can reach him if I choose.” Sonya looked down at his large, strong hands, the way they had been when she had first met him so many years ago. “Let us see if he is too blind to see how the game has changed.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Strike him where he is weakest. The younger sister, of course.”

THE END

Racy Li

Racy Li is a New Yorker with a weak spot for Afghani food and cold leftover pizza (sometimes together). She wanted a cat but somehow ended up with a husband. Racy worked for the venerable Mega, Large, WeScrewEveryone, LLC law firm until she came to her senses and decided to write some kickass ninja smut. She is also a national award winning painter (age 6) and has recently discovered a new talent in dehydrating cacti. Occasionally, you can find things like free stories, deleted scenes, and winning lottery numbers at her website <http://www.racyli.com>. She also blogs about things like Wonder Woman underwear and chocolate at <http://www.racyli.com/wordpress>. You can email her at superstories@racyli.com.