

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

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Quickies

Carnal
Awakening

Taige Crenshaw

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Carnal Awakening

ISBN 9781419911859

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Edited by Helen Woodall.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication July 2007

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CARNAL AWAKENING

Taige Crenshaw

Dedication

To my mother who has always been my number one fan. Although you are no longer with me I know you are smiling down at me getting published. To Marilyn, my sister and second mother, who has always believed in me. To my lunch buddies who listen to me ramble on about my writing ideas. To Tracy F. who, from the first time she read my work, loved it. To Tina, whose enthusiasm kept me smiling.

Chapter One

A pleasurable tightening filled Shay Coles, warning her of her approaching orgasm. With a sensuous roll of her hips she took him deeper into her heated center. Gasping, she moved, feeling every delicious inch of him filling her aching slit. His long cock touched every inch of her heated pussy walls. Whimpering, Shay tried to get closer to him, savoring the expert precision of his glide.

Holding tightly to him, she moved her hips in tempo with his. His skin was hot and slick to her touch. She raked her nails along his back. Increasing his tempo, he grunted. Twisting his head, he laid a gentle kiss on her lips. Opening her mouth, Shay met his tongue with hers. Their tongues clashed lazily in contrast with the urgency of his taking. He bit her bottom lip, making her moan at the slight sting. Pushing her hips up into his, she strove for the pleasure that was just out of reach.

“Ahh...please...help...me...” Shay gurgled in the back of her throat.

Suddenly he rotated his hips in a motion that caused his cock to touch the right spot. The orgasm raced through her like liquid fire scorching her veins. Wetness pooled under her as his hot seed started to pulse from his hard cock, scorching her insides. He continued to pump into her, strong and sure, touching all of her, leaving nothing hidden. Arching her back, Shay moaned, overcome with the devastation of his taking. Her muscles tensed and the pleasure ripped through her again.

White-hot.

Scorching.

Decadent.

“*Mikhail.*” Abruptly Shay awakened, screaming as pleasure filled her.

Throwing her hands backward, she scrambled to find something to hold on to. Feeling the headboard, she gripped it tightly as the orgasms roared through her.

Shuddering, she rode the feeling as it continued to pulse. The orgasms came one after the other. Quivering, Shay bit on her lip to stifle her need to scream again. With a gasp she stilled and after a few moments she scrambled back up against the headboard. Looking around the empty room, Shay swore softly. Shakily she pushed back her tangled, sweat-drenched hair from her flushed face. Shifting slightly to cross her legs under her, she winced at the sore feeling in her pussy. She couldn't believe she had dreamed again.

These erotic dreams had been plaguing her for months. They had started innocently enough with a little kissing and petting. Over time they had escalated in intensity. Except this one was more than any time before. She had come so hard that she felt like she had actually had sex. Running her hand down her face, Shay tried to understand what was happening to her. It didn't make sense. She knew the man she saw in her dreams was Mikhail Adonis. He was a customer who came into her shop, Exotic. They only spoke briefly when he placed his orders. Although he made her heart race every time she saw him she was too much of a professional to try to make it anything more.

She had been attracted to men who came into her shop before, yet this was the first time she'd had such vivid dreams about any of them. Dreams that seemed more real than any sex she had ever had in her life. Her pussy pulsed as if in response to her thoughts. Cupping herself, Shay tried to still herself. It wasn't like her to act this way. Hot and bothered over a man she barely knew.

She couldn't understand. Something was going on with her. She was used to being rational and thinking things through, not being on this constant razor's edge of pleasure. She had been trying for months to figure out what about Mikhail was different. Sleep tugged at her and tiredness filled her. She was too tired to deal with it tonight. With a stifled yawn Shay slid back down into bed and pulled the sheet over her. She shifted around, trying to find a comfortable spot. Glancing at the clock, she noted the time read two-thirty-six a.m. Yawning widely, she got settled in and willed

herself to go to sleep. The store would open in a few hours and it would be nonstop people in and out.

And you will see Mikhail.

A shaft of heat raced from the top of her head right to her pussy making it ache. Shivering, Shay gritted her teeth. "Shit, what is wrong with me?"

Knowing it was useless to try to sleep now, Shay pushed back the covers, got up and went to the door. She couldn't stay near the bed for another minute. Glancing back at the bunched covers on the bed, she shook her head. It was going to be another sleepless night spent in front of the TV.

* * * * *

Jerking straight up in his bed, Mikhail A'do Nis reached down and grabbed the base of his cock tightly to stop the impending release. With a harsh groan he held on until the tight feeling in his sacs had abated slightly. Slowly letting go, he lay back on his massive bed. Taking a deep shuddering breath, Mikhail tried to calm his unruly body. He was shaken that he and the woman Shay Coles had shared a joint *Maerd Noisi* dream vision. The shared dream was not that common among his kind. And he had never heard of it happening with a human. Sitting up again, Mikhail scooted back to lean against the headboard as he tried to make sense of it.

Eight months ago he had been sent to the Earth realm to find the stolen Immortal Blossom. The Immortal Blossom was a rare sacred plant in the Sevlza sector within the Karvic Kingdom. The disappearance of the Immortal Blossom should not have been possible. No one could get into Karvic without any of them knowing. Hell, even if they got in, there should have been no way that they could leave with the Blossom. Yet the Blossom was gone and no one could find it. All their searches had turned up nothing. They had only known to look on Earth realm due to a vague feeling the Crimson Rayne – the seers – had that it had been taken there.

As the leader of the Blossom contingent of the Zerican Sentinel it was Mikhail's duty to find and retrieve the Blossom. He had to return it to its rightful place. Gazing out the window at the lush vegetation and five moons of Karvic Kingdom, one to represent each sector of the kingdom, Mikhail wondered why he felt compelled to keep going back to Exotic, the shop that Shay Coles owned and operated. He had searched the area several times and there was nothing to be found. Yet each week he found himself there buying flowers from Shay Coles. It was a baffling thing. No matter where he was he had an urgent need to go to the store.

Something was drawing him to the shop and none of the Crimson Rayne could tell him why. All they told him was to follow where he was led. Following their suggestions, he had hoped he would get some lead to take him to the Immortal Blossom.

The need to locate the Blossom was becoming so dire that the Matrix Council had decided to step in and send the Blood Oath Hunters to help in the search. The council didn't realize at first what they had done but they had quickly learned the error they made. The other beings that were not a part of the council, and therefore didn't abide by the council mandates, came out of the woodwork. They were all looking for the Blossom. Now it was open season and a race to see who got to the Blossom first. The Blood Oath Hunters had their hands full tracking and eliminating any of the others who got in the way. It was imperative no one else got their hands on it.

The rulers of the Karvic Kingdom were furious at the council's interference and the mess they'd made. Until the council had taken it upon themselves to step in, the rulers had been able to keep it quiet that the Blossom was gone. The leaders and Mikhail had agreed that he was to find the Blossom, no matter how long it took or what stood in the way. He had sent out more Zerican Sentinels from his Blossom contingent to search. So far it hadn't gotten them any closer to finding it. Each time he felt he was close he would lose the sense of it. It was frustrating. Glancing down, he looked at his still semi-erect cock. He couldn't afford to be distracted from his task. Shay Coles was turning out

to be a major distraction. She had gotten under his skin and he didn't know why. He had to ask the Crimson Rayne what the shared *Maerd Noisi* could possibly mean. At the thought of what the dream had entailed Mikhail's cock became fully erect once again.

"What is my master's pleasure?" a husky voice purred, interrupting his thoughts.

Looking up at the woman in the shadows, Mikhail saw her eyes were lowered. He knew she was trying to look meek but he knew better. She looked up at him and there were flames filling her eyes.

"Leave me, Siala." Mikhail waved her away.

She blinked. "You have no need of the Fire Maiden?"

Mikhail stifled a grin. Siala talking about herself by what she was and not by name meant she was truly shocked. Knowing the proper way to refuse such a generous offer without pissing her off, Mikhail looked at her from head to foot. He let her see his appreciation of her beauty then he raised his hand to her palm up. Siala stepped forward and put her hand in his, her palm touching his own. Her hand felt like he was touching an open flame. She was well on her way to being pissed. She glanced at him from narrowed eyes. Cupping her hand, he raised it to his lips and flicked his tongue between her index and middle finger, lingering in the soft area. She shuddered and purred. Rolling up his eyes, he met hers.

"I always have need for Siala, however I must refuse at this time." He gently bit between her index finger and thumb.

Siala moaned then laughed as she pulled her hand away. She turned and melted into the shadows slowly. Her eyes flickered as her voice came. "If you change your mind just whisper my name."

Mikhail laughed and, looking around the room, he knew she was gone. His laughter faded. It was time for him to stop wasting his time going to Exotic. He had to get the Immortal Blossom back. He had to keep away from Exotic and Shay Coles.

Looking down at his unruly cock, Mikhail whispered, "Behave."

* * * * *

The prickling sensation racing up her back made Shay Coles aware that he was now in the room. The mysterious man who, for the last two weeks, had made her scream with unbridled pleasure to an intense orgasm. It was, of course, all in her own vivid imagination. He had given no indication of interest. There was no basis for these dreams, yet each night she woke alone drenched in sweat with the scent of sex filling the air and her pussy feeling well loved.

She shouldn't be feeling this way about a man she only knew by his name and nothing else. He hadn't come in for over two weeks and she had missed him. She had thought she wouldn't see him again. She had grown accustomed to him coming into her shop, Exotic, every week for the last eight months. Eight months of sensory overload. Her hands started to shake. Quickly, she put down the vase she held before she dropped it. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for her body's unruly reaction to him. With one last deep breath Shay turned, her gaze automatically locked with his, Mikhail Adonis.

Her heart raced while her nipples tightened and her slit creamed. All in reaction to the usual detached look in his ice green eyes. That look made her ache to do something wild just to see what he would do. Shay silently chuckled at herself. She was too much of a chicken to do anything to capture his attention. The fear of what he might or might not do kept her from leaping across the counter that separated them, racing across the room, jumping into his arms and kissing him senseless.

Mikhail continued to watch her, unmoving. Unnerved by his unrelenting stare, she glanced down at his muscular body and had to stifle a whimper before it escaped. All that glorious sun-kissed skin that was usually covered up was exposed. These last few months of imagining and her dreams hadn't done him any justice. The black leather vest he wore teased her with tantalizing glimpses of his edible body. Her palms itched to touch him.

The muscles in his broad chest rippled all the way down over his stomach, disappearing into his pants. Licking her lips, she wished she could see his nipples. In her fevered imagination they would be the color of chocolate kisses and just as sweet. Biting her lip, she could almost taste the sweetness of his skin.

Snap out of it, Shay. You're horny over a man who doesn't even know you exist. Watching him turn away from her in a supple motion, Shay sighed, wondering if he would be so smooth in bed. At the sight of his ass in the green pants that molded over him like a work of art, Shay wanted to take a bite of each firm globe.

"Here's twenty-six dollars and fifty cents."

Jumping at the voice that intruded, Shay glanced back at her customer guiltily. Nodding, she quickly took the money, turned and walked to the back counter, finished wrapping the large bouquet, returned to the front counter and handed it to the customer. Absently she murmured her thanks, then motioning for Mia to take over, Shay stepped away from the counter.

"Go get him, girl," Mia whispered and chuckled.

Ignoring her close friend and employee, she glanced to where he was standing. He was gone. Taking a glimpse around at the various customers and displays in the good-sized room, she didn't see him. To her right was the exclusive merchandise section, she didn't even bother going in there since he had never before ventured into that part of the store. On her left was the other exclusive merchandise that focused on gardening supplies; he hadn't ever gone in there either. With a glance at the door across the room she was just in time to see him leave.

Frowning in disappointment, Shay was surprised he hadn't bought anything as he usually did. She was looking forward to seeing what wonderful mixture of flowers he would come up with. Okay, she would admit, it she was looking forward to ogling him up close and personal. Sighing at the lost opportunity, Shay turned away to take the next customer.

* * * * *

Striding out the door into the bright sun then turning left down the sidewalk, Mikhail swore viciously. He didn't know how he ended up back at Exotic. He had successfully avoided the pull to go there for over two weeks and planned to keep doing so. One minute he was in New York looking for the Blossom and the next he was at Exotic staring at Shay Coles. At the sight of her lush full-figured body he had gotten instantly hard.

She had her hair pulled back instead of in the loose waves she usually wore. When she had turned to him her honey skin had a slightly flustered look that made her sculpted rounded cheeks look captivating. She had smiled, making her whiskey eyes twinkle and her full lips quirk in that enticing way that made him want to go across the room and suck on them. When she turned to get the customer's order her full breasts had swayed and then her curvaceous hips moved in a sensual rhythm making her ass bob in a way that drove him insane. He had to get out of there fast or lose all his control.

Later, he would have to think of the reasons why he had appeared in Shay's store not under any of his own doing. For now his only thought was to get some space between him and Shay before he did something that would get him in trouble.

Looking up, he saw the air waver in front of him and then a man with a ponytail that hung over the shoulder of his long coat and mirrored shades covering his eyes appeared before him. Shaking his head, Mikhail stepped around him and kept going down the sidewalk. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man turn and walk beside him. Silently they walked around the corner and then across the street. Stopping, Mikhail leaned against the wall. The man mirrored him and leaned against the wall.

Mikhail sighed. "What do you want, Klarick?"

Klarick Spencer laughed. "Nice to see you too, Mikhail."

Chuckling, Mikhail wondered why he liked Klarick. "Get to the point."

Klarick hummed then said, "God, you're rude. How about a 'how have you been, Klarick' or 'how are you feeling'. Shit, you need some social skills."

Knowing he wouldn't like the answer, Mikhail asked anyway. "Why are you here?"

Klarick got serious. "Trance sent me."

Hearing that name of the head of Ryian—the fierce warrior group of Blood Oath Hunters—Mikhail knew whatever Klarick had to say wasn't going to be good.

Turning to look at Klarick, he asked, "What did he say?"

"You've got three weeks to find the Blossom, contain it and take it back to Karvic or else the Syians will get involved."

Mikhail eyes narrowed. The Syians were assassins, or if being polite, the cleanup crew of the Blood Oath Hunters and they were only sent in as a last resort, when you expected not to get anything back alive. It didn't make sense for them to be involved. He didn't appreciate it at all.

"Why?"

Klarick shrugged. "Trance got a vision and that's all he said."

Mikhail's eyes narrowed. "Fuck him and all of you, Klarick. There has been more than enough interference. No one will get involved any more in this or they'll have to deal with me."

Klarick flashed his fangs. "You don't want to go there, Mikhail."

Mikhail watched him, a coolness sweeping over him. He might like Klarick but if he had to kill him or any of the Blood Oath Hunters he would do it. The hunters may feel they were all-powerful but there were a few things none of the other races knew about Zerican Sentinels.

"You don't want to fuck with me, Klarick."

They watched each other and Klarick smiled, flashing his fangs, then he faded and was gone. Furious at the situation Mikhail turned and looked across the street at Exotic.

Chapter Two

Signaling she was leaving, Shay made her way toward the doors leading to the back of the store.

With a push on the carved swinging doors, she stepped into a haven of flowers and frenzy of work. Glancing around at the various floral designers she employed, she noted they were almost finished with the wedding order for one of her closest friends, Kara. She had been hoping to work up the courage to ask Mikhail to accompany her to the wedding.

Continuing to her office, Shay knew she wouldn't have the courage. Lusting from afar and the nightly dreams were all she could handle at the moment. It didn't matter. Even if she were bold enough to ask a man like Mikhail, he wouldn't want a woman like her—a sexually frustrated size twenty-four woman. If he knew the things she wanted to do with him he'd probably think she was a freak like her ex had.

After the fiasco with her last boyfriend, John, who thought she was a nymphomaniac for suggesting he use his mouth on her while she used hers on him, she could do without the rejection. His emphatic no still rang in her ears. It was fine if she gave him head so good he forgot how to say his own name but he didn't want to "get smothered with her wildness". Those were the exact words he said after his resounding "No". At the time she did her usual and took his insults then they went back to the same boring missionary position.

John's reaction whenever she decided to try something new in the bedroom made her feel like she was asking for sexual olympics. All she wanted was just one measly orgasm with a live, breathing man instead of by her own hand or with the aid of mechanical devices.

With her reserved nature she couldn't even ask Nisha, Zandra, Demi or Vique – her sisters – what to do to break him out of it. Telling her closest friends, Tundra, Kalina or Mia was out of the question. They were crazy enough to use their keys to her place, barge in, pull up a chair next to the bed and give John instructions on what he needed to do right.

She couldn't even think of getting a male opinion from her two brothers, Jalin and Adrian, whose sexual conquests were legendary. They hated John. Accepting John's lack of imagination in the bedroom as the norm was easier than the alternative, leaving him, so she accepted what he would give. Entering her office, Shay slammed the door behind her, cursing herself for being so stupid. John had imagination all right. He just wasn't using it on her.

A little under a year ago she had left the store early when her sister Zandra had surprised her with tickets to a play. Walking in on John buck naked in her bed being very imaginative – she hadn't even known the position they were in was possible – with her downstairs tenant had ripped her blinkers off.

She had wanted to smother his don't-know-what-to-do-with-his-dick ass with her bare hands. Before she could do anything, John ran. He had always been afraid of Zandra and she was getting ready to kick his ass. It wasn't until she and Zandra kicked out her tenant and changed the locks that the shame of being cheated on so blatantly hit her. She broke. Zandra being who she was wouldn't allow it.

Instead of letting her wallow, Zandra called the rest of the siblings and her friends. Before telling them what happened, she made them each promise not use their various legal and illegal resources to do John any harm. It took a lot to get them to agree, but when they did, they de-Johned the house.

The little bonfire they had going in the backyard was burning all of John's precious shoes and clothes really well. Since she and her sibs were neighbors they weren't concerned about the cops or fire department. At least until the fire trucks came. The

brass bed in which she had caught him with *Humping Hussy* had flared too high and someone had seen the flames and called it in.

When Zandra's usually persuasive skills as a lawyer didn't work, the cops were ready to haul them all off to jail. Jalin used his Federal ID and a bogus story to get them out of being arrested. Only the direct family and a few close friends knew Jalin wasn't with the FBI. Jalin was with some covert agency that no other agency knew of. He never told them which one since it was classified. He gave them a number so that if he disappeared they would know the person to contact.

The local police and fire department had bought it. Promising to deliver the fire captain's wife a bouquet of flowers each week for a year didn't hurt either.

Dropping into the chair behind her huge antique desk, Shay groaned. Almost a year since she and John had broken up. She would be going alone to Kara's wedding tomorrow and had to face John the Dick. John was Kara's cousin and in the wedding party. She didn't have the heart to tell Kara what her despicable cousin had done. Saying they broke up and it was okay John stayed in the wedding was easier than explaining.

"Three years wasted on that fucking idiot." Slapping her desk with her hand, Shay turned to face the floor-to-ceiling window that looked out onto Clarion Boulevard.

Idly she glanced at people hurrying up and down the sidewalk outside. She blinked, unsure if she was seeing things. Mikhail was standing across the street from the store. Shay got up, went to the window and stared at him, knowing he couldn't see her in the one-way glass that had been a gift from her family when she had opened five years ago. She leaned into the window and looked closer then grinned. It was him. He was staring at the front of the store.

Suddenly he turned and glanced directly at her. Shay jumped then grinned, realizing that he couldn't see her. A wicked thought popped into her head. Her grin widened, then watching him, knowing he couldn't see her, Shay licked her lips then blew him a kiss. He stared unblinkingly at the window.

Deciding to be more daring, Shay raised her hand to her neck, stroking down her throat, then slowly ran it down her chest to her breast, finally to settle over her nipple. She stroked lightly, feeling both her nipples bead. A moan bubbled in the back of her throat. She clenched her teeth to stifle it. An ache started deep inside, spreading downward. Blowing out a breath, she continued to stare out the window at Mikhail, imagining it was his hands touching her. Pinching her nipple harder, Shay imagined his strong fingers plucking at her aching breasts.

"Yesss. Like that. Harder. Please," Shay breathed out, sinking deeper into the fantasy.

A heat she knew so well but hadn't experienced in a while encased her from the tips of her fingers to her toes. Her clit throbbed and wetness flooded her. Closing her eyes, Shay ran her hands down her body until she came to her skirt and dragged it up, reaching between her legs to where she was aching.

Clumsily her fingers pushed along the edge of her panties then her fingers sank into her wetness. A moan broke from her as her legs went weak. Stumbling backward, she reached with her free hand, searching for something to hold on to. Her hand brushed against her desk. Stepping back until her thighs hit the edge, Shay pulled her skirt up farther and leaned against the desk.

Spreading her legs wider, she ran her fingers slowly along her wetness, stroking along her aching clit. At her touch, the fever running through her blood seemed to double. She was on fire. Gentling her fingers, Shay used just the tips to touch herself. Slowly, she increased pressure then gentled and increased again, teasing herself.

"Mikhail."

The pressure built inside, welling up. Knowing she was close, Shay increased her stroking, moans rippling from her. Her fingers against her clit became more urgent and harder. The feel of a mouth sucking strongly along her clit sent her over the edge. She screamed, dropping her hand. The sensation of a mouth continued sucking then, licking along her slit. Shafts of pleasure filled her as she went over the edge. Screaming at the

intensity of her orgasm, Shay was thankful her office was soundproofed to keep out all the noise from the shop beyond.

Shuddering slightly, Shay blearily opened her eyes and locked gazes with Mikhail standing right in front of her window. Her breath caught at the look on his face. The look of an animal on the hunt. The look of a hungry male ready to mate in the most primal way.

Shay's heart raced with expectation. A soft kiss brushed her lips. His lips curved in a dark smile as he seemed to fade then he was gone. Blinking rapidly, Shay raised her hand shakily to her mouth, still feeling the press of firm lips. Shaking her head, Shay jumped off the desk, scrambling for the window. Stopping just before it, tentatively she reached out to touch it. It was solid and warm to the touch.

"Oh God, I'm seeing things."

Wrapping her arms around her body to ward off the chill spreading through her, Shay searched for a practical way to explain it. Not coming up with any, Shay went with the only other explanation.

"It is EFF Syndrome." Shay spoke out loud.

With this thought she was calmer. The EFF Syndrome—Erotic Fantasy Fulfillment Syndrome—was a phenomenon she had not experienced but her friends and sisters all talked about during their monthly get-togethers. The one rule they all observed for these get-togethers was that they left whoever they were dating at home. This was to make sure they were unencumbered and able to talk about everything and anything. Their discussions usually led to sex.

She couldn't remember how the EFF Syndrome came about but it was something that her friends and sisters raved about. Although none of them, she recalled had ever experienced this when the man they wanted hadn't taken part in the actual sex.

Deciding not to dwell on it, Shay turned away from the window and toward the bathroom attached to her office. Inside the bathroom, she opened the closet and took out the turquoise dress she had originally worn to work. As Shay stripped she felt the

dampness of her clothes. Quickly tossing them in the basket next to the sink, Shay stepped into the shower.

Twenty minutes later she strode back into her office, walking to her desk. Absently she glanced out the window then away. Jerking her attention back to the window, she saw it was clear. Frowning, she wondered how long after sex the EFF Syndrome would last and if she would be seeing Mikhail's hungry eyes looking at her all day.

The ringing of her phone interrupted Shay's thoughts. "Exotic." Putting it out of her mind, Shay got to work.

* * * * *

She tastes like ambrosia. Standing outside Shay's office window, Mikhail watched Shay working. When he had looked up and seen her through the window he had wondered what she was doing. There were people going up and down the sidewalk outside her window. No one even stopped or looked at her. With her little show he couldn't resist coming closer to look.

Although weak, the strength of the enchanted glass had pushed at his senses. Absently he wondered who would have thought to have it installed. It had to be someone who knew there were other things in this world besides the humans. Looking closer he realized that it had a council mark. That in itself was a rare thing. He couldn't think of anyone on Earth realm who had that kind of pull with the council. Feeling it, he could tell it hadn't been reinforced, as it should have been. He happened to glance up in time to see Shay pull up her skirt and start to touch herself. He had tried to resist going in and tasting her but was powerless against his body's demand.

Her taste had rolled along his tongue like liquid honey. Sweet, tangy and addictive. Suckling her, he had tasted her as she came with a strong force. The taste of her changed to hot sugar while her scent almost made him lose control and take her. He had come to his senses just in time to go back outside the window. He had watched as she looked at him and let her see his hunger before going invisible. He had listened as

she tried to understand what had happened. He was tempted to tell her then lay her across the desk and finish what she had started. Only his oath as a Zericen Sentinel kept him from going inside.

"Fuck," Mikhail said as he watched Shay work.

Resting his hand on the glass, Mikhail felt it warm as he poured power into it. Checking to make sure, he was pleased that it was set so no one human could see inside and no one inhuman could see or pass through the glass without permission. He didn't try to explain away his need to make sure she was safe, he just accepted it. With one last glance at Shay he went around the building to reinforce all the windows.

* * * * *

Shay jumped at the sound of the buzzer on the wall to her right. Stifling an oath, she pressed the button on the phone on her desk to activate the intercom across the room. Continuing to write out an upcoming order, Shay replied absently. "Yes."

"Ms. Cramigla is here concerning her order." Mia's falsely cheerful tone came across the intercom.

Her hand instinctively clenched. "*She's what?*"

Mia's reply came across in a fierce whisper that didn't mask the frustration and anger in her voice. "Get up here *now*, Shay. She doesn't want to deal with us underlings." Mia clicked off.

Knowing what happened last time, Shay didn't even stop to glance at the wall she had open with the screen displaying the various work areas of the shop. She could see if there was anything that needed her attention. Pushing back quickly from her desk, she stood then hurried out of her office and down the hall. Upon entering the back area Shay didn't stop as she usually did to chat and check on the progress of the various orders. As she pushed through the doors leading to the main part of the shop the first thing she noticed was the silence. The usual bustle and noise she equated with the store was absent. With a quick glance around she saw that everyone's attention was focused

on Mia and Ms. Cramigla. Turning to focus on them, she was just in time to hear Ms. Cramigla speak.

"It's a shame really that with your...um...unique look that you don't have a boyfriend." She paused then looked at Mia.

Since Ms. Cramigla was standing at the counter closest to the door she had exited, Shay could see her expression clearly. From the ugly look on Ms. Cramigla's gorgeous sienna face, Shay could tell that it didn't bode well for her to defuse a confrontation. She couldn't see Mia's face but from her stance, which might have seemed casual to anyone who didn't know her, Shay could tell she was pissed.

Although they were the same height of five feet eleven inches, Ms. Cramigla gave Mia that haughty "looking down my nose at you" gaze as she took in Mia's ensemble. Ensemble was the only way you could describe anything Mia wore. Today's was a dress of such a deep red that it almost looked black. The random cut-outs throughout the dress were filled with a variety of other colors. The same colors made up of what looked like sheer scarves completed the rest of the dress from the knees to ankle. The deep red shoes matched the body of the dress perfectly.

When Mia came in earlier Shay had teased her as she usually did about her livening up the shop. Mia did what they all dubbed as the Mia spin, which entailed lots of hip shaking and posing. At the time Shay had almost felt dowdy in her own turquoise dress.

Ms. Cramigla continued in a syrupy-sweet tone, "You really should watch what you eat, dear." She made a tscking sound as she looked pointedly at Mia's voluptuous curves. "It goes directly to those places we least want it to." She waved a delicate hand that dripped with diamonds.

Mia's voice was bland. "Hmmm. That explains it."

Ms. Cramigla blinked, confused. "What?"

Mia's voice went silky and vicious. "Why you seem a little," she tapped her fingertip on her full lip, "haggard and drawn. I was worried that you may have been

sick. Now I see you've been starving yourself." She placed her hands on the counter and leaned forward a little then said in the same tone. "You really should watch what you eat, honey. A man likes a woman with," she ran one hand down her curvaceous hip, "a little substance." She placed her hand back on the counter.

Ms. Cramigla face went rigid then white with fury. "A man also likes a woman who isn't disfigured."

Mia went still. Shay gasped, then hurried forward. She reached Mia's side just as she drew back her hand in a fist. Catching her hand, Shay didn't even look at her.

Her gaze was steadily on Ms. Cramigla; she watched the smug smile fade from Ms. Cramigla's face.

"I'll handle this," Shay stated quietly.

Mia dropped her hand. Shay patted her arm, feeling the tense muscles.

Shay smiled, knowing that the smile that curved her lips was ugly. "Ms. Cramigla, I won't let you attack my employees with your vicious attitude."

She sputtered. "She was unprofessional. Making rude remarks about me. I have a mind to take my business elsewhere. Wh—"

"A mind. You don't have a mind and that's the first of your problems. The next is your arrogance in thinking that we would even have any business dealings after today."

Ms. Cramigla's eyes narrowed. "Who do you think you are dealing with, you fat bitch. I'll ruin you. Y—"

Interrupting her, Shay laughed coldly. "Now that's the first thing you said that I agree with totally. I am F.A.T. Fabulous and Tempting." She waved her hand at Mia. "We both are. Something that you could never even aspire to be." Shay felt the anger she tried to keep in check bubble over. "And yes, I am the *H.B.I.C.*" She leaned across the counter until she was almost in Ms. Cramigla's face. "*Head Bitch in Charge*. Get the hell out of my shop before I finish what you shouldn't have even had the audacity to

start.” With a glance over Ms. Cramigla’s shoulder she motioned for Klarin and Tevin to come escort her out.

She glanced back at Ms. Cramigla and was surprised at the look of satisfaction on her face.

“You will do,” Ms. Cramigla said softly.

There was a weird look in her gray eyes then it was gone. She nodded, turned and walked away, flanked by Klarin and Tevin. Frowning, Shay watched her until she reached the door.

A prickling sensation ran down her spine. Shay gasped, knowing that it could only mean one thing. With a glance around, she locked eyes with ice green. She hadn’t seen Mikhail come in. Memory of what she had done in her office made her flush and shift in discomfort. His eyes narrowed. Her breath stalled at the look of hunger in them. A dizzy feeling swept over her. Closing her eyes briefly to combat it, Shay swayed.

Chapter Three

"Shay, are you okay?" a concerned voice she didn't recognize asked.

When the feeling passed, Shay nodded her head and opened her eyes to look at Mikhail. He had the same detached expression he usually did.

You're losing it, girl. Pull it together. Shaking it off, she looked away from him to her right at a still-silent Mia. Her face was averted. Anger chased away the feelings of lust she was feeling from Mikhail being in the room. Taking a deep breath to calm some of the lust and anger still burning in her belly, she turned and looked at the customers and her workers.

Raising her voice so it could be heard, Shay said. "I'd like to apo—"

"Now, chérie, I know you're not going to apologize and ruin the afterglow. Hell, it was almost as good as a rip-roaring bout of sweaty sex." A languid voice interrupted her.

Knowing who it was, Shay smiled.

"Hunter," another voice hissed.

With a glance to her left, Shay took in the twinkling eyes along with the wicked grin on Hunter Brooks' face. From Flame Brooks', Hunter's sister, embarrassed expression Shay could tell Flame wished she were somewhere else. Flame hated being the center of attention while Hunter thrived on it. They were family to Mia and good friends.

"What? I said almost. It's not like we're not all adults here," Hunter stated.

There was a murmur of agreements.

"And I'm sure we..." Hunter paused, her eyes alight with mischief. She looked at her sister Flame then amended, "Well, at least some of us know what I'm talking about." She purred as if savoring each word.

There was more agreement tinged with laughter.

"Shay, it's always a pleasure coming here." Hunter winked. "And the entertainment is always a side benefit. Don't take away from—"

Flame interjected, "Do you always have to be the center of attention?"

Hunter glanced at her. "Of course. You should try it sometime. You might like it."

Flame glanced at Hunter, up and down, then turned to Tevin who had returned and was standing next to her. Flame reached up pulled him down and kissed him. Hunter's mouth dropped open. Everyone hooted. Shay, who knew how straight-laced Flame was, enjoyed the show, especially Hunter's reaction. Flame released Tevin slowly. He looked stunned. Shay stifled a smile at the look on his face.

Flame sauntered away then looked back at Hunter. "For once you're right, it does feel wonderful."

Hunter laughed then smacked Tevin on the arm. "Hah. Now that's what I call entertainment."

Glancing at Hunter, Shay mouthed her thanks. Hunter nodded, winked again and then said, "Come on, Handsome, I have my eye on that Sigal vase in the back."

Holding Tevin's arm, she led him toward the exclusive merchandise in the large room to the left. The regular noise level of the shop started to pick up as people dispersed. Observing the shop for a few minutes to make sure everything was okay, Shay turned to Mia.

Before she could say anything Mia turned, walked away, pushing the doors into the back room. Following her, Shay glanced back at Mikhail still standing silently across the room. Going through the doors she lost sight of him. Turning, she noticed that Mia hadn't gone far. She was standing in the doorway leading to the small flower nursery attached to shop.

Walking over, Shay said, "Stay here a little bit while I take over for you." Shay squeezed her hand gently turned and went back to the doors leading to the shop.

She glanced back and saw Mia walk down the aisle of the nursery. Seeing the slump in her shoulders as she disappeared behind some of the foliage, Shay's fist clenched. The callous words spoken by Ms. Cramigla had shaken the usually unshakable Mia. She imagined her fist connecting with Ms. Cramigla's perfect face and breaking her nose, maybe a couple of teeth. She hoped Ms. Cramigla tried to see through on her threat of trying to ruin her. She would be in for a big surprise. The reputation she had built at Exotic would hold. She wasn't anyone's pushover. Making a mental note to place a few phone calls, Shay went out the door into the store.

A half an hour later Shay hurried into the section where the exclusive merchandise was displayed. Going past the aisles, she greeted the various customers there but didn't stop to chat. Turning the corner to the aisle that carried Sigal's work—the most popular artist she displayed—Shay muttered to herself as she looked for the vase her customer wanted.

"Hmmm... I know it's here somewhere... I don't think it was sold... Ah ha...got ya." Seeing the vase, Shay reached up, grabbed it and spun around, then hit a warm body.

A gasp of shock escaped her lips and her body went weak. The vase slipped from her fingers and she felt his touch as he reached forward to save it. Involuntarily her eyes closed in defense. Without even seeing him she knew who it was. Her Mikhail radar was burning low in her back and spreading throughout her body. Biting her lip to stifle a groan, Shay shuddered, hoping he didn't know what caused it. The wetness was flooding her panties and she ached with a fierceness that almost brought her to her knees. It took all her power not to climb up his body like a monkey. A shudder ripped through her again. *God, she had it bad.*

Since this was probably the only time she would ever get this close to him Shay relaxed against him. They were a good fit. By her estimate Mikhail was approximately six four, complementing her height of six feet. Standing against him, Shay silently reveled in the feel of his warm body against hers. At least her being that close to

Mikhail confirmed a few things that she had been dying to know. He smelled as good as he looked and his body was firm. Shay's mouth tingled with the need to bite on his luscious chest.

A dizzy feeling swamped her. Closing her eyes, Shay saw mists covering Mikhail standing before her, his muscular chest bare. He held her close and kissed her with a passionate intensity she wanted more than her next breath. Gripping him tightly, she held him and he lifted her holding her effortlessly. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she felt her wet, naked slit touch his erect cock. He started to slip in. With a gasp Shay prepared for his entry.

"I didn't mean to scare you, Miss Coles," Mikhail's dark seductive voice whispered against her hair.

Scare me, seduce me, hell do whatever you want to me. With that wayward thought Shay's eyes snapped open and she was able to regain her senses and step back. Flushing, she realized she had slipped into a fantasy again. Rubbing the ache at her temple, she tried to act normally. Taking the vase from him, she turned and put it back on the shelf.

"Um, no, you didn't scare me, Mr. Adonis. I was just surprised. I didn't hear you walk up," Shay said as she glanced back then up at him.

Meeting his gaze, she again remembered what she had done in her office. She thanked God he would never know. His unblinking stare made her uncomfortable.

"What are you doing here?"

His eyebrow arched in question.

Realizing how it sounded, Shay cleaned it up. "You usually don't come into this section."

She winced at how that sounded. She didn't want him to think she was watching him even though she had been. Deciding the best thing was to shut up, Shay waited for him to speak. He didn't. He continued to stare. Mikhail's gaze dropped. Shifting

slightly, Shay controlled her instinct to squirm. It was too telling a motion of nervousness. Instead she imagined what he saw.

Her hair was pulled back instead of her usual loose bohemian chic, as she liked to call it. Her face was a smooth café au lait with a firm forehead, straight nose, sculpted rounded cheeks, full lips and rounded chin. She had been told her eyes were one of her best features. They were rich amber and tilted slight upward, giving them an exotic look. She knew her face was interesting, not devastatingly gorgeous or too ugly to look at but somewhere in the middle. As for the rest of her body, a mid-sized neck, rounded shoulders, ample breasts, full waist and curvaceous hips led to some nice legs. Her butt, another part of her body that she was often complimented on, was plump. With an innate sense of style she dressed classily with a dash of sexy thrown in. In her own opinion she was smart, classy and cute.

Shay stifled a bitter chuckle. She didn't lack any confidence in her looks. There were many other things of which she was unsure. The two most important were her lousy judgment in men and her inability to find a man whose idea of sexual fulfillment met her own. No matter how sexy Mikhail was she'd rather live with the fantasy than get involved.

Fantasy sex doesn't give you the same feeling, her wild inner voice chided.

Shut the hell up. What do you know? We haven't had any. Stick with the fantasy. At least we are getting some, her practical inner voice interjected.

Speak for yourself. Some fingers and plastic toys don't count unless there is someone else on the other end. Real sex beats fantasy sex any day, her wild inner voice retaliated.

When have you had any real sex that made you speak in tongues?

Umm... It was...ah... Humf, that, how long it has been. I rest my case. Stick with the sex that we do get.

"Both of you shut up," Shay hissed.

"Excuse me," Mikhail said.

Shay winced. His expression hadn't changed but she could hear the laughter in his voice. She was losing it big time.

"Nothing." She narrowed her eyes daring him to say anything.

He didn't. Silently he looked at her as if waiting.

Sighing impatiently, Shay asked. "Is there something specific that you are looking for?"

"Yes."

She waited for him to continue. He watched her. Shay resisted rolling her eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what it is?" She waved her hand in a come-here motion.

"Maybe."

Staring at him in bafflement, Shay looked at his closed expression then his lips twitched with a smile.

"Are you trying to annoy me?"

"Yes," he laughed.

Shay shivered at the husky sound. His face softened, becoming more approachable. Until that moment she didn't think she could become any more attracted to him. Oh, she was so wrong. His laughter stopped but a smile still curved his lips.

"Miss Coles, I'm looking for a gift for a very special friend."

"Call me Shay," she said as she had a hundred times before. "Sigal is one of our most popular artists. We have a lot of pieces by him. This vase—"

As she continued to show and talk about the various Sigal pieces, Shay struggled to not let her disappointment show. Since he never came in with anyone she always hoped he wasn't involved. With all the floral arrangements he bought, she knew she was deluding herself. It figured he would have a woman out there. That's what you get for being such a wuss.

"Which is your favorite?" Mikhail asked, interrupting her thoughts.

He watched her, waiting for her reply. She didn't want to tell him. Her fist clenched at the thought of some other woman getting her favorite Sigal piece from Mikhail. She opened her mouth to tell him she didn't have one, but the businesswoman in her wouldn't allow it.

"This one." She reached down and took it off the shelf and handed it to Mikhail.

Although it was heavy he held it effortlessly. Lifting it up, he looked at it then glanced at her. Shay met his eye, refusing to blush. Mikhail glanced back at the standing vase. The top part of the vase was done in gold and burgundy. At first glance it seemed like an ordinary vase until you looked closely. At the upper part that formed the vase each of the various sexual poses throughout was done in one color while the background was the opposite color. The lower part of the vase was formed into a rectangular shape and the colors overlapped against each other. The gold color represented the woman while the burgundy was the man. It clearly depicted a man and woman in the throes of passion. The piece was appropriately labeled *Seduction*.

Mikhail's intense silent study of the piece made Shay shift. He glanced up at her. The look on speculation on his face made her uncomfortable.

"There is also a matching painting," Shay said, desperate to fill the silence.

"Show me." His words were quietly spoken but intense.

A glance at him showed nothing. His usual detached expression was back. Shrugging, she walked toward the back of the aisle. Reaching the painting, she stopped. Mikhail followed and stood next to her. The black label plaque with gold writing next to the painting listed the painting's name, *Desire*.

Not wanting to see his expression, Shay looked at the painting that covered the wall from floor to ceiling. The first emotion that hit her was sexual hunger. It had the same effect every time she saw it.

Gold and burgundy surrounded the images in various places giving the painting a misty feel to it. The woman was astride the man. The precise detailing of each body left nothing to the imagination. The man's face was turned into the woman's body. Only the

top portion of the woman's face showed, eyes staring out from over the man's shoulder. The desire could be clearly seen in the woman's hazel gaze. Instead of a bedroom, the couple was in a forest filled with towering trees and flowers she had never seen before. The painting caused an ache to build in Shay's belly.

"I'll take it," Mikhail said.

Drawing her attention away from the painting, Shay turned to Mikhail in shock. He hadn't even asked the price.

"It costs..."

Mikhail waved his hand. "It doesn't matter. Have it wrapped along with *Timeless*," Mikhail waved at the other painting depicting the same man and woman in a different pose on the adjacent wall, "and this," and lifted the vase he still held.

Doing a quick calculation in her head, Shay stifled her gasp. The combined amount of the three pieces was over three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Mikhail went back down the aisle to the main part of the store. At a slower pace she followed, only stopping briefly to pick up the vase she had originally come looking for. Stepping into the main part of the shop, she saw that Mikhail was waiting for her at the station she and Mia usually shared.

Reaching the station, she handed Mia the vase for the other client then turned to Mikhail. Quickly ringing up his purchases, she accepted his credit card and gave him the form to fill out for his delivery. While the card was going through she watched him in the mirror above the register. He was looking around. Suddenly he glanced right at her. Quickly she dropped her gaze, busying herself. Focusing on his credit card, she saw his name Mikhail A'do Nis and realized she had been pronouncing it wrong. The machine beeped. Tearing off the paper, she turned and, without meeting his eye, handed him the paper and a pen for his signature.

He signed the receipt, and slid it along with the form and pen toward her. A glance at the form showed it was blank. Shay looked up at him.

"You didn't fill out the form. I need it to make delivery of your painting."

"I will call with the delivery instructions later," Mikhail stated.

With a nod she placed his receipt on the counter. Placing it in his pocket, he held out his hand to shake hers. Shay didn't want to touch him. She was afraid of her continued reaction to him. Reluctantly she held out her hand, steeling herself. He gently took it. She gasped at the heat spreading from his hand to hers. Shay tried to pull her hand away from his. He held on. She looked down at their hands then at him. His expression inscrutable, he slowly released her hand, turned and walked away.

"Thanks for shopping at Exotic," Shay said automatically.

He stopped, looking back at her over his shoulder. "The pleasure was mine."

He turned and continued across the room to the door. Shay watched Mikhail as he walked out the door and down the sidewalk. She didn't turn from the view until he disappeared from sight. Then she pushed open the doors and stepped through into the back. Walking back to her office, Shay entered, shut the door then went to her desk and sat down. She thought of what Mikhail had said. The purchases he made were for a "friend". A friend could be male. She really shouldn't care who he bought the pieces for but the idea of it not being for a woman made her feel better. Picking up her pen, she continued working.

Chapter Four

Mikhail staggered out of sight of the windows of Exotic. Falling to his knees, with his last bit of energy, he made himself invisible. Slumping to the side, he shuddered uncontrollably. He didn't know how he had controlled himself enough to get away from Shay. His hands scrabbled backward, looking for something to hold on to. Hot hands grabbed him and he looked up and met Siala's eyes.

She watched him, a calm unfathomable look on her face. "Master, you have need."

Teeth chattering, Mikhail cried hoarsely, "Take me home."

Nodding once abruptly, Siala waved her hand and an orange glow flowed from her fingers to encircle them. Mikhail felt them move through the realms then the soft feel of sheets came on his back. Through bleary eyes he saw his room in Sevlza.

"Get the healers," Mikhail screamed as another more powerful shudder racked him.

His back bowed off the bed and his roar filled the room, shaking the windows. For an instant everything went silent. His eyes rolling back in his head, Mikhail tried to fight the fire rolling through his veins. He felt like it was trying to rip out his insides. Before it could, he felt a cold hand push down in the middle of his chest and a calm settle over him. Looking up, he met Urlian's silver gaze. The head of the Crimson Rayne stared into his eyes.

"No healer is needed. You are going on a *Noisiv Tseuq*, Mikhail. I can only hold it off for a few seconds. Tell me what happened before you became this way," Urlian demanded in her mesmerizing compelling voice.

Racked with pain that had already restarted, Mikhail spoke quickly, as he told her what he knew.

She nodded. "Yes, it fits. Relax, Mikhail, stop fighting it. Y—"

He couldn't understand what she was saying. Her lips were moving but he heard no sound. Bucking, he felt other hands grab him and saw that some of Crimson Rayne held him while the others surrounded his bed. Raising their hands, they bought up a circle of protection. He saw the leader of Karvic Kingdom arrive and registered the fear and anguish in their eyes as his vision went black.

Walking through the mist, Mikhail saw the colors amber, yellow and silver swirling around him. Stepping through the mist, he saw Shay laughing at him. She beckoned him. Each time he got closer to her she flittered away. Suddenly the scene changed and Shay was standing before him, a somber look on her face. She was looking at him, waiting. Not sure what she was waiting for he took a step toward her. Before he could reach her she disappeared. Looking around frantically for her, he saw the scene shift again. Rubbing his arms, he felt like he was on fire. Shay glided out of the mist and up to him. She came in close and wound her arms around him. Feeling her body against his, he felt the burn increase. Shay smiled and kissed him.

With a scream Mikhail came out of the *Noisiv Tseuq*, feeling like his heart would burst out of his chest and his skin was on fire. Looking up, he realized that Siala's hand was pressed on his bare chest. Flames licked around her hands, bathing him. She drew back and Urlian came into view.

"Mikhail, can you hear me?" Urlian asked urgently.

He nodded.

She continued, "You went too far in *Noisiv Tseuq*. You started to fade. You need to rest to regain your strength."

Shaking his head, Mikhail sat up. He put out his arms. He was feeling surprisingly better. Getting up from the bed, he saw the room was empty except for Urlian. Silently Urlian watched him with her hands clasped in front of her.

"I have to get to Shay." Mikhail felt an urgency he couldn't explain.

Urlian nodded and left him. Taking up his clothes, Mikhail started to get dressed.

* * * * *

"Hey, boss, I'm outta here."

Startled by the husky voice Shay glanced up at Mia standing in the door with her bag over her shoulder. A glance at the crystal clock on her desk, she noted it was after eight o'clock.

"Damn. I meant to tell you and the others they would need to be here early to help me get the arrangements to take to Kara's wedding."

"Already done and I'll be here," Mia said.

Laughing at the impish grin on Mia's face, Shay asked, "What would I ever do without you?"

"Always work and have no life."

They laughed. Mia walked closer to the desk and said in a whisper. "Go up to the front."

Confused, Shay watched her. "Why?"

The grin on her face spread, taking on a sly slant. "You'll find out."

Waving, Mia left the office. Getting up from her desk, Shay quickly followed behind Mia. Going out behind her into the back room, Shay was in time to see Mia slipping out the back. Automatically she went to check the door, making sure it was locked. Turning around, she took a step then suddenly stopped.

She couldn't seem to catch her breath. She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life. Bathed in light, the flower stood in the middle of the table. It was regal yet seemed fragile somehow. The vibrant colors of pale yellow, purple and silver seemed to sparkle. Drawn to it, Shay went to the table. It was even lovelier close up. It swayed gently although there was no breeze, as if beckoning her to take a sniff. Unable to resist she leaned into it and inhaled deeply. She had never smelled anything like it. Going in deeper, she took another sniff. The petals parted and a pale yellow mist enveloped her while a sweet smell encompassed her. In an instant her body became sensitized.

Moaning, she sniffed again. A noise came from behind her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Mikhail standing in the doorway.

Mikhail's voice rumbled over her. "I've been waiting for you, Shay."

With a soft gasp Shay felt heat flood through her veins straight to her clit. Her nipples pebbled as if being stroked by a wet tongue. Turning away from the flower, she watched Mikhail. Licking her lips, she felt hungry and she knew exactly what she wanted to eat. Him.

With a quick flick of each foot she kicked off her shoes. The widening of his eyes made her purr in pleasure. A grin of pure sin spread across her face as she turned away from the table, going toward him a sensuous glide. His eyes heated into molten lava then he looked beyond her then back to her with a frown on his face. As if from a far-off place she heard him speak.

"Ah, shit. Shay, tell me you didn't smell the Immortal Blossom."

She didn't have a clue what he was talking about. All she wanted was to kiss him from the top of his luscious head to his big manly feet. Shay growled deep in her throat.

With a wary look on his face, Mikhail stared at her and held his hands out. "Shay, listen to me. If you smelled the Immortal Blossom you were hit with an aphrodisiac. This attraction you feel for me is false. You can fight it."

He lies. I only unlocked your deepest desire. It is up to you what you do with my gift. Do you have the courage to accept my gift to you or will you let fear rule you? a voice she hadn't heard before stated in a firm, mocking tone. Glancing at the flower, she saw it fold into itself then open again as if shoing her to him. Glancing back at him, she cocked her head to the side and watched him. "I don't want to."

He frowned then started to mutter too low for her to hear. As if reaching a decision he turned to face her, his face went blank and his eyes cold. "You don't have a choice."

At the challenge in his voice her blood heated. She liked nothing better than a challenge. Watching him under her lashes, she waited for his next words.

"It is my duty to save you from yourself," he stated as he held out his hand.

At the cold touch of metal she looked down, surprised to see the gold handcuffs on her wrists. Looking back at him, she jumped. He was standing directly in front of her. She hadn't even heard him move. Grabbing her arm in a firm grip, he pulled her into him. Looking up into his face, Shay raised herself on tiptoes and licked across his lips. He groaned. Using the opportunity, Shay stroked her tongue into his mouth. Lazily she savored him and he tasted as she expected—raw and male. His tongue dueled with hers playfully then he sucked her deeper into his mouth. Whimpering, she leaned in closer. Suddenly he wrenched his lips away with a mutter. "I am honor bound to protect you even from yourself."

His eyes blazed and a green mist started to swirl around him. It encircled her and suddenly the floor disappeared from beneath her feet. Before she could even think about screaming the mist cleared and her feet hit ground. With a fleeting glance around at the lush plants in every color of the rainbow and the sounds of various animals calling out to each other, Shay smiled. It was perfect.

Looking back at Mikhail standing a few feet ahead with his back to her, Shay could see the rigid way he held himself. He turned to face her and stated in a soft tone. "We have been taken off course, Shay, by the will of the Immortal Blossom. I need you to think clearly and control yourself, for both of our sakes."

She didn't know what he was talking about. Her mind was clear and she knew exactly what she needed to do. Holding her cuffed hands in front of her, she whispered, "*Sericanas*."

His eyes widened as the cuffs started to heat on her wrist then disappeared. His arms jerked in front of him and the cuffs reappeared on his wrists. Seeing them, Shay smiled then took off in a run straight for him.

Mikhail took a step back then stopped. The cool, determined look in his eyes made her stop a few steps before she reached him. He licked his lips in a slow and deliberate manner. Following his movements, Shay felt a ripple of heat go down her spine. From a

distant part of her mind she knew she was in an elaborate fantasy but she didn't care. She wanted this and nothing would stop her from having him.

Dropping her gaze, she watched his jaw, clenching then relaxing. The rigid way he held his body. He shifted, a supple movement of muscles that made her mouth water with longing. Taking a deep breath, she saw his eyes follow the motion of her breasts. Her nipples pebbled as hunger roared through her blood.

"Speak." The husky growl that came from deep in her throat shocked her.

His look of detachment didn't fool her. She didn't know how, but she could feel his body pulse with longing and some other undefined emotion.

His voice rumbled as he spoke cautiously. "The lust you feel is false..." he paused. A fleeting look that could only be described as longing flashed quickly in his eyes before they cleared. "I'm K—" he stopped briefly before continuing. "I'm from Sevlza sector within the Karvic Kingdom and the leader of the Blossom contingent of the Zerican Sentinel. I was sent by the ruler of the Karvic Kingdom to your world to retrieve the Immortal Blossom, the flower at your shop. It is a special plant in our realm," he waved his chained hands, "where you stand now. The Blossom has its own agenda and has taken us off course to the Forest of Fantasies and Myth which lies in the middle of the various kingdoms." Urgency leaked into his tone. "If you unchain me I will take you to our Karvic healers and you will be free of its control and you may go home."

He lies. You cannot keep a Zerican Sentinel chained unless they wish it so. Unlock your deepest desires, Shay, and all will be revealed, the same voice from her shop insisted, speaking in her mind.

Dropping her gaze, she saw the plant she now knew as the Immortal Blossom behind him. It was the same beautiful color and looked just as delicate. It folded into itself then opened again, spraying the fine yellow mist as before. Mikhail raised his head and sniffed the air then whipped around.

He muttered a curse then murmured something under his breath. The air wavered, glittering. The mist stopped advancing as if coming up on a wall. Shay narrowed her eyes and glanced around. The whole area surrounding where they stood seemed to waver while on the outside she saw a pale yellow mist circling what seemed to be a bubble that they were now enclosed in.

"You cannot control her, Blossom, she has made her choice." Mikhail's voice was regretful but firm.

A growl sounded then the voice came again. *The Zerician Sentinel lies.*

Shay had no idea nor cared what a Zerician Sentinel was. Shay looked at Mikhail. His hair floated around him as if alive. Embracing the beat of desire she felt for him, so long denied, Shay silently advanced on him.

"You lie. I cannot hold you if you do not wish it so," Shay purred softly.

Mikhail turned swiftly and watched her. Continuing toward him one small step at a time, Shay embraced the wildness she was feeling.

He watched her narrowly then said in the same detached tone. "You hear the Blossom's voice."

Shay nodded and continued to stalk him.

Mikhail frowned. "It is only in rare cases of a t—" he stopped abruptly.

Shay stopped and stared at him. He had been about to say something that was important and it seemed imperative she know what it was. His stony look made her certain she wasn't going to get a response from him. Glancing at the Immortal Blossom outside the wavering bubble, Shay waited.

The voice came again. *Only a true m—* The voice seemed to fade before it could complete what it was saying.

Glancing back at Mikhail, she saw he hadn't moved but instinctively she knew he had done something. Her mind started to clear as she watched him. Something about all of this seemed more real than a fantasy should. The beauty around her was too

vivid. The smell was cloying and enticing. Even Mikhail standing before her tall and strong was more real than she could ever imagine. In that instant Shay realized that this wasn't a fantasy.

Watching the realization dawn in Shay's eyes, Mikhail waited to see what she would do. The Blossom may have been found but with it spraying Shay he couldn't leave her on Earth. He had to bring her to Karvic. The Blossom had interfered and brought them here to the Forest of Fantasies and Myth.

With his knowledge that the Blossom was talking to Shay, he realized why he was drawn to her. The *Luos Etam*, the stages of the mating ritual, had started and he hadn't even realized. This made a lot of things clear. The Blossom's disappearance, his constant need to be near Shay, their intertwined dreams and the wild attraction he felt.

His body had recognized her before his mind did. Now it was up to her if she would accept the challenge that the Blossom placed on them both. The next few moments would decide their fate.

What if she doesn't know the rules of the Luos Etam? his inner voice demanded.

Ignoring it, he didn't know or care what she knew. All he wanted was to be buried deep within her until they were so joined she wouldn't care what tests she had to undergo. Shifting to find some relief from the feel of his pants confining his hard cock, Mikhail watched her.

She looked so lush and womanly standing before him in his world. He wondered what she would do if they made it to the final stages of the mating ritual. He pushed the thought aside. Mikhail couldn't think of that now. They had to get through this first, her acceptance of him as her potential mate, then they could face whatever was to come together. It would take all they were and ultimate trust on both their parts.

This first choice was hers to make.

As Shay's mind cleared she swore silently as reality intruded on what she wanted.

The voice insisted, *You can embrace what you wish if you let me in.*

With a glance at the Immortal Blossom outside the enclosure Shay silently countered, *I can take what I want without any help from you.*

The Blossom closed and opened then a chuckle followed in her mind. Information flooded her as she realized the Blossom was hers now and Mikhail would not be leaving with it. The Blossom spoke in her mind, confirming what she knew. *I would like to go back home some time before the next millennium, so what are you waiting for?*

The Blossom was right, she had nothing to wait for. She had no idea what was going on or what Mikhail was but she knew what she wanted. Turning back to Mikhail with a clear head, Shay looked him up and down, a smile on her lips that could not be mistaken. The flash of interest in his ice green eyes gave her the confidence she need to take the next step to him.

The silkiness of her tone was like a caress. "No one controls me, Mikhail. I know what I want and I want you."

His eyes heated to a swirling aqua while his lips pulled back into a feral grin and he stepped toward her. Reaching him, Shay locked eyes with him. Laying her hands on his chest, she slid them up along his soft shirt. The texture of the cloth was supple and sensual, like nothing she'd felt before. He shuddered. Smiling with pleasure, Shay stroked him again. He bucked then was still.

Rolling her eyes upward, she met his. The hunger in his gaze made her heart skip a beat then quicken in response. A silent message passed between them. Hers with all her needs and fantasy and his with acquiescence to anything she desired. A sense of anticipation filled her as she felt the heat from his body. He was hers at least for this moment.

"Shay." His sensual growl rumbled over her, awakening all her senses.

She gasped at the onslaught of heat climbing up her skin from her bare feet. Before she could even fully form the thought that she needed his lips on hers, he closed the distance between them and kissed her. Expecting it to be wild and hot, she was undone

by the tentative touch of his lips. His slow, thorough exploration was devastating to her already heightened senses.

Closing her eyes, she moaned in need. With a sensual pull he sucked her tongue into his mouth, stroking it lightly. Grabbing on to him, she sank into the sensuality of his kiss. Slowly he pulled away and, with a sound of frustration, she pulled him back to her but he resisted. Opening her eyes, she looked at him. The look on his face was intent.

“Shay, you must be very sure of this. There is no going back once we are together.” There was a warning and caution in his tone.

She didn’t know what he was trying to tell her. Nor did she even care. All she wanted was him.

She let all she was feeling and wanting come out in one word. “*Mikhail.*”

Mikhail looked at her a little longer then he leaned in and kissed her. A raw gasp escaped her. His kiss was bold without the tentative touch of the first kiss. The voracious hunger she felt ate at her. She pushed her tongue into his mouth deep and fast, the same way she wanted him to take her.

With a step forward she closed the gap between them, bringing their bodies flush against each other. His harsh inhalation seemed to suck the breath out of her until she felt lightheaded. Then he exhaled, giving her back her air and his sweet breath. A blaze burned along her skin and she needed the touch of his skin against hers. He pulled her tighter into him and she felt the slide of skin against skin. She didn’t know how he came to be unshackled or how they came to be naked. He ran his hand down her bare back, scattering her thoughts. Effortlessly he lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist. They both gasped at the feel of his erection against her weeping slit.

He deepened the kiss as he rubbed his cock against her. Shay tightened her legs around his hips, drawing him in closer as she glided up and down him. With quick movements he lowered her to the lush flower-covered ground. As he lay her down Shay knew what she wanted. Pushing him until he rolled onto his back with her

straddling him, Shay looked at him with his hair spread out beneath him. He watched her from under lowered lashes. The look of intense desire on his face was her undoing.

Licking her lips, she looked down his body spread out for her pleasure. Leaning in, she bit his neck gently then as he moaned she bit harder. His arms came around her tightly.

"Uh-huh. I've wanted this so long and it will be our pleasure," she purred against his neck.

He shivered then his arms fell away. Smiling, she continued down his firm chest until she reached his nipple. With a hard suck she pulled it into the wet cavern of her mouth. Shay sucked strong and sure without mercy as he bucked in pleasure.

"Shay...yes...Shay." His growls rose to a shout as she continued downward, feasting on all of him.

She slowed, letting him calm down, then repeated it. She could feel his hands clench and unclench in the grass.

He murmured in a language she did not understand. An urgent need to have him inside her swept her. Sitting up, she watched him as she positioned his cock at the mouth of her pussy then slid down. His eyes went vacant and his breath became harsh. She took him in deeper and deeper until she didn't know where he stopped and she began. The delicious feeling of being stretched made her body dampen even more and he slipped farther in. A moan rippled from her as she rocked against him. She started slowly but quickly picked up the pace.

Mikhail made a lusty sound and his body bowed as he countered her movements. The muscles in his neck stood out under the strain. Leaning into him, she bit gently along the side of his neck. Fine shudders rippled his body while his penis pulsed and lengthened within her.

Still riding him, Shay's voice was hoarse. "Suck me. Now."

Looking up at her through heated eyes, Mikhail sat up, spreading her wider as he lowered his head. Leaning back to give him access, she gasped as his cock slid into her.

Using the underside of his tongue, Mikhail dragged it across her nipple then pulled it into his wet mouth. He set a pace of hard suction on her nipple that made her grind against him. His cock hardened and lengthened even more. He changed breasts, giving the other equal attention, going back and forth between them as she cried in delirium. The sweet feel of her body tightening made Shay increase her movements, driving faster and harder for the heated release her body craved.

Shay's pussy contracted around Mikhail, milking him as her release washed over her. His hard cock pulsed in continuous pleasure. Mikhail rolled over, still embedded deep inside her then started to pump fast. Surprised how hard he still was, Shay locked her legs around his hips and met him thrust for thrust. He pressed deep into the cradle of her legs and pushed in and out. The slapping sound of flesh meeting flesh rang in her ears as a sobbing breath came from her.

His sensual invasion was more than she could stand. Her nails dug deep and she raked his body. It only spurred him on and he continued his battering of her body.

With a wail that burned her throat, Shay climaxed again. He continued, giving her no mercy as she pleaded with him.

"No... Yes...please... I can't... I want...more. Oh God...I can't... Oh yes...take me...harder..." Her pleas started loudly then sank to a hoarse whisper.

He continued to ravish her with intensity. Mikhail drove into her with hard, firm and deep strokes again and again. His hand gripped her leg, raising it higher until the angle of his cock pinned her with such breathless penetration that her eyes rolled back in her head as her hands lay limply at her sides. His hips rolled in a twisting motion. Screaming with pleasure, Shay scrambled to find something to hold on to. Finding nothing, she gripped his back as he continued to pump. His breath fanned her face as he growled harsh, incoherent phrases and he continued to ram into her.

Mikhail was out of control. Gritting his teeth, he pumped into Shay, letting her have all of him. With each stroke her pussy contracted tightly around his hard cock. Her

pussy walls sucked him in while she held on to him. Rolling his hips, he heard her keening wail and settled in for a hard, rough, deep ride.

Mikhail stroked in and out of her while her whimpers rippled from her throat, spurring him on. Her tight, hot cunt pulsed around him, dragging a groan from him. The liquid fire they were creating together drew him closer and closer. Shay arched, a silent scream contorting her face into a stark look of intense pleasure. He felt the impending orgasm tightening her body. Through a haze Mikhail watched the pleasure ride her in its tight grip.

Grabbing her ass, he tilted her more. He sank deeper within her heated honey center. His sacs tightened painfully, preparing for release. Driving his hips in and out, Mikhail pounded into her, savoring her fierce cries of ecstasy. Shay swiveled her hips as she took him. She peaked, a brutal clenching of her body gripping his cock, which triggered his own release. His back rippled as power poured off his skin, coating her. A roar tore from his throat as he pumped into her, riding the orgasm that held him in its grip. Pumping his hips, he stroked into her with an urgent demand.

Shay was being gloriously taken with such passion tears welled up in her eyes. His body blanketed hers even more as he pumped into her. His body bowed against her as another release took him, triggering her own once again. With the shaft of intense heat her body bucked with pleasure as he continued to pulsate inside her. He slumped against her but cushioned his weight on his arms.

His harsh breathing slowed then she felt a gentle kiss along her cheek. Opening her eyes, she looked at him and stifled a gasp as she took in his eyes. His ice-green eyes were now ringed with a glowing deep cerulean blue.

Chapter Five

Mikhail smiled, a wicked curve of his lips. His weight pressed against her then suddenly he looked to the right. Following his gaze, Shay's breath caught as she saw the most breathtaking man standing beyond the wavering bubble that enclosed them.

The man waved one hand and the field surrounding them disappeared. He walked toward them, his movements graceful and sleek. Shay knew she should feel embarrassed and scramble to get dressed but she felt none of these things, only a sense of acceptance. Reaching them, the man stopped then knelt next to them. Mikhail was still. The man looked at him then suddenly turned to look at her. She gasped not because he was even more handsome close up but because of his eyes. They seemed to be deep orange ringed with pale lavender. The man leaned down. Pinned by Mikhail and still too weak to move, Shay didn't even try to get away.

Long masculine, yet gentle fingers framed her face. The man stared into her eyes then he smiled a breathtaking curl of his lips. He leaned in and kissed her thoroughly yet gently. Shay stiffened then relaxed as a heated languid feeling overtook her. He bit her and a burning sensation ran along her tongue down her throat before spreading through her body. The man laughed in her mouth then withdrew. He looked at Mikhail and said something in the same strange language Mikhail had used before.

He looked back at her then said in sonorous voice. "If you ever have a need just rub the stone and call me."

A sudden weight on her neck made her look down. The necklace, with intricate symbols in gold offset with rubies and another jewel she didn't recognize, was beautiful. Shay looked back at him in confusion.

He smiled again. "You will understand when the time comes." Then he wavered and was gone.

Shay blinked then looked back at Mikhail who had a weird look on his face. He looked at her and it cleared.

Time will reveal all that you need to know, trust in yourself and believe. Remember call me if you have need, the same man's voice whispered in her head.

Who are you? Shay sent her thoughts, unsure if it would work.

Alenkic, the King of Renmus sector within the Karvic Kingdom at your service, Shay Coles.

His voice faded and she knew he was gone. Shay jerked then realized that everything was real. Her eyes widened with the realization.

Mikhail laughed then in a blink they were on their feet. In another they were fully dressed. Shakily she tried to process all that had happened.

Mikhail whispered, "I enjoyed every minute of it." He rubbed against her suggestively. "I'm ready for round two."

She looked up at him. The grin on his face could only be described as wicked.

"Later," he whispered against her lips as he kissed her. "Let's go home."

At his words Shay got a weird feeling in her stomach. Taking her hand, he led her to the Immortal Blossom, picked it up and hugged her to him.

He rubbed her arm. "We're in this together."

Shay looked up at him and pushed her doubts away. Pulling him to her, Shay kissed him gently before stepping back.

With a glance at the Immortal Blossom then back at Mikhail, Shay replied, "Take us home."

Mikhail nodded then that strange mist enveloped them again and she felt the same sensation of being displaced, then she was whole again. Looking around, she was relieved to see the back room of her shop. Cuddling into Mikhail, she glanced up in his face.

"Take us to bed."

Mikhail grinned at her words then waved his hand. Another look around showed Shay that they were now in her bedroom. The Immortal Blossom floated away. Turning back to Mikhail, she stepped forward, causing him to back up against the huge bed. Shay pushed, and he fell on top the bed. One minute he was clothed and the next naked. Suddenly, Shay felt the cool air on her on heated skin.

Cocking her head, Shay took in his masculine beauty in her bed then remembered. "Hey, want to go to a wedding with me tomorrow?"

Mikhail's look was provocative and his smile wicked. "Convince me."

With a laugh she straddled him and set out to convince him. The Immortal Blossom watched over the couple then folded into itself to rest, knowing that there was much more to come.

About the Author

Taige Crenshaw has been enthralled with the written word from the time she picked up her first book. It wasn't long before she started to make up her own tales of romance.

Her novels are set in today between people who know what they want and how to get it. As well as in the future of vast universes between beautiful, strange and unique beings. There is lots of spice and sensuality added to her work.

Always hard at work creating new and exciting places, Taige can be found curled up with a hot novel with exciting characters when she is not creating her own. Join her in the fun, frolic, interesting people and far reaches of the world in her novels.

Taige welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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