



Cat Marsters

Empire
After The Fall

Changeling Press

Empire 1: After The Fall

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"No one hides from the Empire. They see everything, they know everything."

After the Fall, one superpower emerged to rule the whole world. The Empire knows everything about everyone, and no one can hide from it. No one except a psychotic vampire mercenary known as Carver, who has fought both for the Empire and against it.

On the edge of the Empire, a wave of Neo-Puritanism has stifled Nalina, a fiesty shape-changer, into a passionless marriage. But when rebellion strikes and the terrifying, corrupt Emperor stakes his claim on Nalina, it's Carver she turns to for help.

But she's underestimated the rough soldier of fortune. Far from being a heartless bloodsucker, he's a passionate, loyal man with a dark and painful past. Escaping the all-knowing Empire for the drowned cities of the old world, Nalina's about to learn that passion can be found in the most surprising places.

Prologue

The necklace of rubies lay heavy against my collarbone, its probes already digging into my flesh. I stared at my reflection in the black window, the stones seeming to leech all the blood from my skin until I stood stark and white, angry and afraid.

At my feet lay the Emperor's dead concubine, her blood staining my hand. In the doorway were three dead Imperial soldiers.

And behind me stood John Carver, his sword still dripping.

"Well," he said, "now you've done it."

"They can't transmit from here," I said, my heart thumping. A piece of plastic slithered loose from the cracked monitor on the wall and pattered on the floor. "The EMP—"

The house shook with the force of another mortar blast, cracking the window in half. The electromagnetic pulse had killed anything with an electric circuit within a few miles, but the necklace hadn't been within that radius at the time. As soon as it went near a functioning transmitter, the Empire would know.

"Aye, well, then you can stay here out of the Emperor's grasp, and die, or you can flee, and live."

The rubies glowed in the dim light of the broken screens. I looked like a corpse standing in the wreck of my house, blue light flickering over white skin and darkening the blood on my clothes.

"He'll find me, Carver. As soon as the necklace starts transmitting, he'll find me." I glanced down at the dead woman, claw marks livid against her skin.

"You could have stopped her before she locked it around your neck," Carver said, tensing as the building shook again. He grabbed a fold of the concubine's clothing and wiped off his sword.

But I stared back at my own dark eyes, feeling tears gather. To my right was a scorched spot on the wall that I couldn't even explain to Carver. Not yet. "No. The necklace knew me, Carver. He sent it for me."

The house shook, and dust fell from the ceiling. Cracks shimmered into life on the walls, and Carver grabbed my arm and yanked me away from the window before it split open and shattered inward, toward me.

"The necklace couldn't know you," he said, dragging me toward the door. "It's never sampled your DNA before."

But I was shaking my head, tears dripping down my face as we sidestepped the rubble and ventured for the stairs. Carver didn't turn to look at me until we'd reached the bottom, and then I saw the realization come into his eyes.

"You've worn it before," he said.

The walls shook and danced, and shards of stone clattering against my back.

"I didn't realize," I whispered. "I said I'd be his if I wasn't married." And the Emperor had laughed. "Carver, I was nineteen. I thought he was joking."

Carver shook his head, eyes narrowed in disgust. The metal of his arm glinted in the moonlight. The scar across his eye twisted his face into something horrible. Carver the mercenary, Carver the taker of unwilling women, Carver the killer.

"You stupid girl," he said, but as the house shuddered and groaned, he wrapped an arm around me and sheltered me from the rubble. "Let's go."

Chapter One

My father knew the best way to avoid becoming the Empire's enemy was to serve it. He took on governorship of the drowned British Isles, that small, soggy colony on the edge of the civilized world, while I was a baby, and left my mother behind to enjoy the degenerate pleasures of the Emperor's floating palace.

My mother, Qiana the Jungle Cat, adored her hedonistic lifestyle and never missed my father. She died when I was young, in a spectacular accident involving half a dozen naked slaves, half a mile of chains, and a hot tub filled with champagne.

She never met my husband, the young, handsome and earnest Fallyn, and I was slightly glad for that, because she wouldn't have approved. Had I known he'd been chosen by my father because he was a Neo-Puritan, I wouldn't have approved either. But Fallyn was strong and beautiful, a farmer whose shoulders were broad and whose hands were agile, and I was young and fell in love.

I twisted and moaned in my bed for months, dreaming of him, of the night we'd finally share a bed, of his hands and mouth on me. My father made quite sure that none of the porn vids that were so popular elsewhere in the Empire ever made it to our house, and he forbade me to ever go to the village's taverns, but he couldn't keep me from overhearing the gossip of the girls who worked in the house and on the land.

"...with a bionic cock. I swear to God, I rode him all night..."

"...never tried it? What you do is this: you get him on his back and you kneel over his face, and while he licks your pussy you suck on his cock. Only be sure to stop when you're about to come, because they don't usually like teeth marks..."

"...with a vampire. God, it's amazing. The blood rush when they drink from you, it's like the best orgasm in the world. Even better if you're actually fucking at the time. It makes them so horny..."

I lay in my bed and touched myself, thinking of the ways I'd surprise and please Fallyn once we were married. But Fallyn was horrified.

"Are you a whore?" he demanded, when I tried to suck his penis. "Decent women don't do such things!"

"I am not a whore," I told him. "I just want to please you."

Fallyn softened. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know you're a good woman. Gentle and kind, and beautiful." He stroked my face, and I smiled, my body hot and tight with wanting. "And willing to do your duty."

Fallyn was terrified that I, like my mother, would run away to the flesh pits of the Empire and send myself to hell in the most sinful ways. Lewd women made demands in bed and cried out in orgasm. Not good women. Dutiful women. Kind and gentle women. Tame women.

I'd been trained since birth to be tame.

I was never allowed to accompany my father on his visits to Carnalis, the Empire's floating city. Not until my mother died, and only then because I was recently married, and even the Emperor had to respect marriage laws.

But I crept away from Fallyn's bed in the middle of the night, changed my shape and padded on four feet to the Hall of Pleasure, where the courtiers cavorted with each other in outrageous attempts to impress the Emperor or his wife into sharing their concubines. The Hall had a floor made of gold and thick diamond crystals, walls studded with jewels and a ceiling shrouded in misty drapes through which lights stabbed, reflecting bright jewel shades onto the moving bodies below.

I'd hoped to watch in secrecy, because despite the desperate burning in my body I was young and determined not to dishonor my husband. But the Emperor saw me hiding behind a statue of a couple entwined in ecstasy, and tilted his head to one side.

"Who is that tiger there?" he said. He breathed in. "It's a woman. A female tiger."

His eyes were lit up in obvious excitement. And not just his eyes. One of the women draped over his throne reached inside his robe and fondled the glossy knob of his cock as it stood upright.

"Come here, kitty cat," he crooned, "and show yourself to me."

I'd never been self-conscious about being naked, despite the shame my governesses had tried to instill in me. Besides, the Hall was filled with men and women of every species, wearing jewelry and boots and stockings and masks, but nothing else. Half a hundred bare pussies and naked cocks begged for my attention as I walked on two bare feet toward the diamond throne of the Emperor.

On his left was a woman with translucently pale skin and the suggestion of wings at her back. On his right the woman who so happily fondled his cock was so dark as to be blue-black. Both of them wore the ruby collars of the Emperor's harem.

"Qiana's daughter," breathed the Emperor. "Nalina, isn't it?"

"Yes, your Imperial Majesty," I said, and made the curtsy my governess had taught me.

"And you are a tiger," he said, eyes traveling over my naked body. I felt my cheeks flush.

"Yes, your Imperial Majesty." I waited for it, but he didn't express the shame, the horror, the disbelief that my father had when he learned what form I'd settled upon. Well, it wasn't as if I'd had any choice. Shape-changers can't choose what animal they eventually settle on, any more than they can choose the height or color of their human body.

"I have never met a female tiger before," said the Emperor, in terms of wonder. "In my harem I have several small cats and even a lynx, and Xyla here is a serpent," he stroked the breast of the woman fondling his cock, "but never a tiger. Usually only men become tigers, Nalina."

"Yes, your Imperial Majesty. I know."

"Great warriors. Men of strength and vitality."

My fingers curled into fists. I didn't need reminding of yet another failing. Fallyn hated me to change shape, to be reminded that his wife was not a domestic animal but a fierce predator. My father despaired that despite all his efforts to keep me from turning into my mother, including his removal of me to a damp, chaste place full of Neo-Puritans, I'd nonetheless grown into a wild creature. I only realized later why he'd been so keen to marry me off so young. He thought a husband might tame me.

But I was never meant to be tame.

"Nalina," the Emperor said. "Why are you here?"

"I—I wanted to see," I said, figuring the truth was as good a response as any. "I wanted to see if they were true. All the rumors."

"And are they?"

At the foot of the dais knelt a man in heavy combat boots with his hair styled into pink spikes. He had his ass presented to the throne, and a woman stood beside him, plunging a thick dildo between his buttocks. She was naked but for high boots and rings through her nipples.

Against the opposite wall, a woman dressed in silks had her skirts bunched up around her waist as a man vigorously licked her bare pussy. I caught a glimpse of his tongue, long and flickering and forked.

On a chaise lay a woman being pleased by three men. One lay beneath her, his cock buried in her ass. One stood between her spread legs, gripping her ankles as he plunged into her pussy with a wet slapping sound. And one knelt by her head, rubbing his cock over her face as she licked his balls and moaned in ecstasy.

All of them had one eye on the throne and the concubines there. To touch one of the Emperor's harem was forbidden, unless you'd been invited. Every single person in that room was desperate for such an invite.

My nipples were hard and tight, my pussy wet and aching. As I turned my gaze back on the Emperor, he'd tilted his head to lick at the pale breasts of his sprite, while the serpent woman knelt and licked his penis.

"They are true," I said, my voice hoarse.

"And do you like what you see? Don't lie to me, Nalina. I can see the way your body reacts. Can smell your arousal."

I nodded wordlessly.

"Ah, my sweet tiger. Such passion and strength. Don't you think, my beauties," he caressed his women, "she would make an excellent addition to the harem?"

The sprite nodded, her pale eyes inspecting me. Xyla lifted her head from the Emperor's penis and said, "I should like to play with her."

"Mmm, my darling, so would I. Will you join us, Nalina?"

Just for a moment, I abandoned myself to the dream of it. Of hands and mouths stroking and licking and sucking, of a cock thrusting hard into me, of flesh against my tongue. Of a life filled with decadence and the daily satiation of the desires that filled me constantly.

And the Emperor saw it. His eyes gleamed. He gestured to the sprite to retrieve something from behind the throne, and when she presented it to me I saw that it was a ruby necklace.

"Imperial Majesty," I began, faltering, as the stones sung in my hands. "I can't. I am married."

"And if you were not married?" the Emperor purred, bringing the sprite around to sit on his cock while Xyla continued to lick it. The sprite curled up against his body, pressing her mouth to his neck and kissing it, hard. I wasn't sure if she might have been biting him, but his eyes misted for a second with pleasure.

"Try it on," he said to me, voice thick. "For size."

Behind me, the woman enjoying her three men began to gasp and yelp out her orgasm. The woman whose pussy was being licked whimpered continuously. Somewhere in the room a woman was screaming, "Yes! Oh God yes, harder! Fuck me harder!"

I thought of Fallyn, urging me to silence because only wicked women cried out.

The stones of the ruby necklace were warm in my hands. At some gesture from the Emperor, Xyla rose gracefully to her feet and slid behind me. Her body was hot and

sinuous where it pressed against my back. Her hands touched mine, lifted them, pressed the necklace against my collarbone, then drifted downwards. She grazed my achingly sensitive breasts, brushing the nipples and making me gasp.

The necklace rested against my skin, unfastened and unsupported. It clung to me.

"It wants you," Xyla whispered in my ear. "It can feel you, your body ripe and sensuous, ready to explode with pleasure. It knows you're capable of boundless ecstasy. It wants to feel it with you."

Tiny, soft probes burrowed under my skin, but I was powerless to resist as at the same time, Xyla's fingers found the swollen folds of my pussy and plunged inside. I choked on a gasp and heard the rich laughter of the Emperor.

"Oh Nalina, I will enjoy you."

I began to protest, but right then Xyla's finger pressed against my clit and I came in a release so desperately needed that I couldn't help a tiny cry.

"Oh yes," whispered the Emperor, and in a daze I felt Xyla's hand slide up my back to fasten the clasp of the necklace.

"No," I breathed, and yanked it away. The probes left my skin with a sucking sound, and the Emperor stared.

"No?"

"Sir, I am married," I said, hating myself for letting it get this far. I stumbled away from Xyla, thrusting the necklace into her hands.

"I could obtain—for you—a divorce," said the Emperor, his gaze lingering on my full breasts and the wet pink folds of my pussy. He sighed. "But I see your father hasn't completely failed in his mission to make you a tame woman."

He said it with disgust, and I flinched, fearing his displeasure. "Sir," I said. "Imperial Majesty—"

But he began laughing. "Nalina," he said, "don't fear me. I would never hurt as rich and delicious a prize as you. But tell me something. Were you not married, would you wear the necklace? Would you join my harem?"

Grateful he wasn't angry, I nodded. "Yes," I gulped. "Sir, I would be honored. If I wasn't married."

Seven years later, the Arcadian rebellion killed my father and my husband, and along with the Imperial troops, the Emperor sent Xyla with my ruby necklace.

Chapter Two

"Where are we going?" I asked Carver as we raced across the black ground, ducking low under the shells spinning through the air. The Arcadians must have been secretly hoarding the primitive weapons for months before they set off the EMP.

"Away," he snarled.

"Yes, but where?"

He glanced at me, scarred face incredulous. "Anywhere that's not here!"

The house boomed and crumbled behind us, and as we ran one shell ignited another and the whole east side of the house exploded. I paused, horrified, and watched the destruction of the house I'd grown up in, a house that had stood since before the Fall. The fire lit up the hilltop and reflected in the dark water all around the island. The ground around the house was clear of arable robots, but within a few hundred meters their twisted and scorched carcasses lay where they'd fallen in the fields.

"My lady! Come on!"

Carver's hand grabbed my wrist and yanked me, stumbling, after him. Appalled, I kept glancing back at the flames now consuming everything I'd ever owned.

In the distance there was screaming. The village was on fire. The Imperial troops had brought lasers, but the Arcadians fought with ancient explosives, knives and guns.

Carver's sword glinted at his side. How had he come to carry it? The only people who carried such archaic weapons were the Royal Guard when they wore their dress uniforms. I couldn't see Carver, with his tangled hair and scarred face, fitting in with the impeccably groomed Royal Guards.

"Where are we going?" I panted. "Not the village?"

"No. Both sides would kill us."

"But—the Imperial troops?" They'd arrived to fight the Arcadians who'd set off the EMP. When an ordinary Imperial shuttle dropped out of the sky over the Pennine Isles, the Empire knew something was wrong and sent in troops.

Carver's face was manic in the firelight. "You look like an Arcadian," he said, and I glanced down at my plain brown dress in dismay. "Exactly how long do you think they'll spend listening to you before they gun you down?"

"But—the necklace—"

"Wouldn't mean a thing to the average trooper. Believe me, my lady. They don't get to see many concubines."

We reached the shadow of the trees bordering the house's private land. Carver had hold of my wrist in his left hand, but he dropped it to take up his sword instead.

"Your arm," I said, gesturing to the lifeless right hand exposed by his torn sleeve. His hand was intact and human, but the arm supporting it was full of metal. A cheap, crude form of early bionics. God only knew what kind of injury had made it necessary.

He didn't even glance at it. "Useless until I can get some new circuitry," he said. "We need to get out of the blast radius, find some civilian transport, some way to dull the transmitter on that collar."

I touched the warm rubies. They seemed to pulse against my skin.

"There should be a troop ship somewhere," Carver said. "We need to get to it before the Arcadians set off another pulse. Reckon they intended to take over this area and expand as they could. The flyover was just unfortunate."

"Unfortunate?" I said sharply. "Whose side are you on?"

For a second there in the darkness I was afraid. Carver the mercenary, who loitered in the shadows and did my father's dirty work for money, was now standing very close to me with a naked blade in his hand. He might only have one working arm, but that arm was powerful. His eyes gleamed an unexpected blue. The sharp pink line cutting down his face stood out in sharp relief.

Carver had fought in the Independence Wars. On both sides.

"I am on your side," Carver said. "My lady."

"Why did you come to the house when all the fighting was in the village?"

"I'm in your father's employ," he said, sounding annoyed.

"My father is dead. And I can't pay you."

"Look, do you want to get out of here or not?" Carver said.

I held out my hand, and made it turn into a tiger's paw. I flexed my claws.

"All right, you've made your point," Carver said. "Consider this mutual survival. We've a better chance together."

I hesitated, but there just wasn't any time to think it through. I nodded, and we set off through the woods.

* * *

The Imperial transport ship was guarded by half a dozen men outside the blast radius. Even if another pulse had been set off, they would be unlikely to feel the effects.

The soldiers had all been bionically upgraded: sight, hearing, speed, strength. Their armor, Carver told me, was configured to recognize the approach of any laser weapon. It could withstand the effects of most technology, except an Imperial laser on its highest setting.

But it was pretty useless against a sword.

Carver took out three of the guards before the rest of them even knew what was happening. Blood sprayed through the night, and a feral grin took over his face. I didn't know what Carver was—shape-changer, bloodsucker, fae or even a rare human—but he seemed to come alive when the scent of hot blood was in the air.

I waited, tiger-shaped, in the shadows. I might have teeth and claws, and they might have put an effective end to Xyla, but in truth I'd never really fought anyone before. I didn't know what to do with myself.

But when I saw Carver faced with three men wielding laser weapons, I bunched my muscles and leapt. Hot blue fire laced the sky and someone screamed, but all I was conscious of was the body I'd thrown to the floor. Wide, terrified eyes behind a visor, the irises patterned with circuitry. Rifle thudding against my chest, laser fire shooting off to the side.

I sank my teeth into his neck, and the rifle went still.

In cat form, my eyesight was more acute but limited as to color. Blood was easy to smell but hard to see. Laser fire wasn't. I saw two beams of it aimed at Carver, and sprang to my feet to knock him out of the way. Right now, I didn't understand his intentions, but he was still my only ally.

When the Arcadians started shelling the house, he was the only one who fought back.

I leapt on his body and powered him to the ground, hot fire burning through the fur on my back. Rolling with the momentum, Carver shoved himself free and leapt to his feet, sword whistling through the air like a spear to cut down one of the soldiers. The sixth aimed at us, but Carver had grabbed a fallen rifle and it spat blue fire, halting the soldier in his tracks. Carver swore, hammered his useless hand at something on the side of the rifle, and fired again.

The soldier exploded into atoms, just as my father had half an hour before.

I stared, dumbfounded. The whole fight had taken about thirty seconds.

"My lady," Carver said, gesturing toward the transport ship. I started after him, padding up the gangway on four paws. Carver went on ahead, checking the ship for any further troops. There was a brief scream, then he called, "Clear."

Cautiously, I padded forward. The ship was small and basic, a short-range troop carrier with one large room at the back and a cockpit at the front. In it, I found Carver cleaning his sword over the body of a seventh soldier. The light inside was bright, harsh and painful after the darkness outside.

"You know how to fly one of these things?" Carver said, and I shook my head mutely, staring at the vivid slash in the soldier's exposed throat. Breathing in the reek of blood. The dead man's helmet sat neatly on an empty chair.

"Well, I do, but I need two hands. You'll have to follow my instructions." So saying, he tossed the trooper's rifle on the chair and dragged the body outside. I changed my shape back to human, then realized I'd left my clothes outside in the wood. Dammit. Surely there'd be something I could wear, perhaps in the lockers I'd seen in the

main room of the ship. I started toward them, just as Carver's booted feet sounded on the gangway.

For a moment he stared at me as I stood naked in the bright light. Despite my natural instincts, seven years of marriage to Fallyn had me automatically trying to cover myself, but Carver just gave a soft laugh and hit the door close button.

"None of that, my lady," he said, "if you're going to join the Emperor's harem."

I touched the necklace again. A shudder passed through me.

"Should have thought of that before you let her put it on you," he said, locking the cockpit door and kicking the dead trooper's helmet and rifle aside to take a seat at the helm.

"It wasn't exactly my choice," I said.

"Oh, sure. The collar knew you. Called out to you, did it?" He looked disgusted as he flicked switches and checked readouts.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it did. And besides, she — uh — distracted me."

It can feel you, your body ripe and sensuous, ready to explode with pleasure. It knows you're capable of boundless ecstasy.

Carver gave me a slow up-and-down appraisal. "Oh, did she? Well, well. So that's why I never heard a peep from you, all those nights with Fallyn. Men don't do it for you, huh?"

My cheeks burned. "This is none of your —"

"It's women, isn't it? That's why you wanted to join the Emperor's harem. All those gorgeous naked women around. Pity you'll have to swive the Emperor too. Still, a small price to pay for all that female flesh. Soft skin and round breasts," he rose to his feet, "sweet lips on yours and a hot, wet pussy to stroke."

"You're disgusting," I said, willing my body to calm itself.

Carver gave a crooked smile as he stepped toward me, leather boots creaking. "Sex isn't disgusting, my lady. I know it excites you. I can smell it. You've just had the wrong flavor all these years. You don't like big, hard men," he said, right in front of me

now. Heat radiated from his body. His face was dirty with ash and blood, his long hair tangled, his jaw unshaven.

He ran one finger down my face, very slowly.

"You don't like men," he said, "hard and hairy, touching you. Don't like stubble rasping on your face, on those sweet little breasts of yours. Do you?"

Of course I liked it. I liked it so much even the thought of it made my nipples tighten and my sex clench.

"Tell me you don't like to feel a big body between your thighs," Carver said, pressing a little closer. "Thrusting into you. Thick and hot and hard."

"Stop," I breathed. He was so close I could smell the scent of his skin. Fallyn had always smelled of soap and clean laundry, but Carver smelled like fire and blood and leather, a dangerous animal with the scars to prove it.

"Don't even like talking about it?" He gave me a half-mocking smile. "Seven years, my lady. Seven. Years."

His face was suddenly very close to mine, and no longer smiling. But I wasn't afraid. I was so damn horny I thought I might explode.

"Seven years of sleeping under your window in that grim little outhouse. Seven years of hearing that bastard husband of yours groaning and thrusting while you never made a bloody sound. Seven years of creaking mattresses and wanking in the dark and taking dark-haired girls who were never you. Seven years, my lady, and the closest I'll ever get is —"

I grabbed his face and stopped his mouth with my own. His lips were rough, his beard scratched my face, and his clothes were sticky with drying blood. None of it mattered. He kissed as fiercely as he fought, his tongue thrusting into my mouth, his one working arm coming around me to press my body against his. He was hard everywhere, his chest and his thighs and especially his cock, pushing forwards as if trying to enter me all by itself.

He kissed and groped and ground his hips against mine, pressing me back against the wall of the cockpit, and I loved every second of it. I kissed him back as hard

as I wanted to, because here was a man who would never call me wicked and wanton and wrong.

Breaking away, hardly able to breathe, my hands already busy opening his clothes to get at his hard body and his swollen cock, I licked and bit at his neck. His hand slid between us, cupped my wet folds and probed inside. I gasped, and Carver said fiercely, "I won't have silence from you."

In answer I rubbed my thigh over his hip and pushed myself onto him, taking the head of his cock inside me and crying out at the hot, invading pleasure of it.

"Oh God," he groaned, "Nalina."

He thrust deep inside me, and I threw back my head and moaned.

"Yes," he said, "more, I want to hear you."

He didn't need to urge me on. The pleasure of freedom, of not holding back, of not lying still and quiet when my body was on fire, had me gasping. Carver rammed in hard and withdrew, then slammed into me again, the root of his cock pressing on my clit, rubbing with hot, insistent friction.

Out of habit I bit my lip, but Carver's mouth covered mine and just before his tongue invaded he whispered, "No more silence, my lady."

I gripped his shoulders, fingers digging into the leather of his jacket, nails turning to claws and drawing blood. When I'd done this accidentally to Fallyn he'd been appalled. Carver just gave me a feral grin and pumped harder, faster. The hot rush of ecstasy inside me spiraled higher, hotter, until I could barely breathe.

And when my orgasm exploded over me, I screamed.

Carver groaned as I convulsed against him, around him, and he jerked inside me, growling my name and burying his face in my neck. His teeth scraped my skin and I shivered, fluttering with pleasure.

When Carver looked up his eyes were yellow, his teeth sharp, and I stared, somehow not surprised.

"You're a vampire," I said, stupidly.

"And you're a tiger," he replied, breathless, his body heaving. His clothes were rough against my bare skin. An alien feeling.

"And I'm inside you," he added, wonder in his voice and his face. Yellow faded to blue, fangs retracted, and for a moment his whole face looked softer, kinder, more vulnerable.

"Nalina," he began, but then something bleeped on the console, and he swore and pulled away.

Chapter Three

I leaned against the wall, suddenly cold, my whole body tingling and my brain swirling with confusion.

Carver hit a few buttons on the dashboard and scowled. It was an expression he did very well. "We have to go," he said.

"Go?" Still quite stunned by what I'd just done, what I'd just experienced, I could only stare.

Carver flicked a switch and a voice crackled from the intercom. "Transport One, back-up required. Respond, Transport One."

"Oh," I said, and peeled myself away from the wall.

"Aye. We have to go before they figure out there's no one here to respond. Have you ever piloted any kind of craft?"

"Not in the air. Boats, yes."

"This is totally different. And it needs two hands." He ran his working hand through his hair and shook the other one in exasperation. His whole arm below the elbow was a useless contraption of scorched metal and twisted wires. "Look, you take Altitude, and I'll take Directional, and we should be able to get her flying. We only need to get a few hundred meters up and then autopilot can take over. Okay?"

I gazed at the huge collection of switches and buttons and readouts. "Uh."

"My lady, we've got no other choice. We've come this far, I'm not letting them kill us now."

I shook myself. "You're right. What do I need to do?"

For the next fifteen minutes, I almost forgot I was sitting naked with trickles of come sticking my thighs together. With one hand on the Altitude control and the other

hitting buttons as Carver directed, I had no time to focus on anything else. The small ship rose jerkily into the air, above the trees and the water and the flashes of light from the Arcadian bombs and the Imperial lasers.

"Oh God," I whispered as we turned and the ruined village came into sight. A heap of fiery stones and blazing bodies lit up the night and made my stomach turn. I knew that village, and every person in it.

"Don't look at it," Carver said. "Look at the distance. The horizon. The ship should tell us if there are any bogeys out there, but the pirates don't always advertise their presence."

After a short while, the Pennine Isles fell away behind us, and the world became a dark expanse of water far below. Every now and then, the lights of a boat bobbed distantly, and beacons highlighted small islands in the waves. Once they'd been hills and the valleys beneath them had been dry, workable land, home to millions of people.

A tall spike thrust up out of the darkness, lit by flashing lights on all sides. Once it had been the tallest cathedral spire in England. Now it was a shipping hazard.

"Think we can switch to autopilot now," Carver said, and I keyed in the instructions he gave me. The ship gave a series of bleeps, and settled into a smooth flight.

"Where are we going?" I asked, not recognizing the destination code.

"Lyon. I know someone there who can fix this, and he should be able to do something about the tracker in that necklace of yours. That should stop them finding —"

My fingers touched the warm rubies. Their light was reflected in the dark windscreen.

Don't hide from your duty.

"I don't think so," I said distantly.

"No, he's good. Really good —"

Good girls do as they're told.

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what? We might be able to break —"

Break a promise and you'll go to hell.

"I made a promise," I said, watching my own reflection, seeing my mouth shape the words. "I promised I'd be his if I wasn't married. And now I'm not."

The words seemed to be coming from someone else, even though I could see myself saying them. I stared at the woman reflected in the window, trying to see what the Emperor had seen in her. What he wanted that he'd go to such trouble to get her. She wasn't so very remarkable. Her features were pleasant, her figure decent, but she wasn't such a glittering prize. She wasn't worthy of a dozen deaths.

"What the hell? My lady, you're in shock."

"Maybe," I said, "but I still remember telling him that. And clearly," I touched the necklace, "he remembers too."

"But you don't have to go through with it!"

"And what if I don't? I spend the rest of my life on the run, Carver? From the Empire? No one hides from the Empire. They see everything, they know everything. The Emperor claimed me, personally, for his harem. He saw me seven years ago, and he still remembered. Instantly. Do you really think he'll just let me wander off?"

Carver was silent, and when I looked at him his face was grim.

"I might not be as worldly as you, John Carver, I might not know hackers who can reprogram Imperial tech, I might not be able to fly an aircraft or hack people to death with a primitive weapon, but I'm not stupid. What the Emperor wants, the Emperor gets. And even I know how possessive he is of his harem."

Carver's expression grew darker.

"He's claimed me now, he's not likely to give me up, is he? And besides," I added, looking out at the blackness all around us, "where would I go?"

The rest of the flight passed in near silence. I left Carver brooding in the cockpit and searched through the crew lockers for something to wear, ending up with a spare suit of bio-armor. I left off the heavy jacket but kept the undershirt, and searched for boots. When I didn't find any I gave up and went barefoot back to the cockpit, carrying the med kit I'd found.

Carver leaned against the armrest of his chair, chin on hand. His bionic arm hung uselessly at his side.

"Let me take a look at that," I said.

Carver gave me a sardonic smile. Any of the tenderness I thought I'd seen had vanished now. "Thought you didn't know anything about tech," he said.

"I know a little about bionics," I said. I'd functioned as a nurse for most of the people on the estate, since the nearest clinic was a boat ride away. "We had some veterans in the village."

"Which side?"

"Empire."

"Of course." He was mocking me now.

"Does it hurt?" When he frowned I clarified, "Your arm."

"It's metal, my lady," he explained, as if I was stupid.

"Metal fused to muscles and bones and nerves," I said. I reached out and touched it, and he flinched away.

"It's fine."

"Carver, let me help."

The lighting in the cockpit was low, but I could still make out that his expression had turned mulish.

"Would it help if I took off my shirt?" I asked in a flirtatious tone that I'd stopped using soon after Fallyn told me it sounded like something a loose woman would do.

Clearly, it was the wrong thing to say. Carver swung on me, big and angry, reminding me he'd killed plenty of armed Imperial soldiers in the last few hours. He gripped me with one hand that had the strength of two.

"Is this a joke to you?" he demanded.

"Do you see me laughing?"

"You don't get it, do you? Everything you do is transmitted to the Emperor. That necklace isn't just a tracker; it records all your body's functions. It's the same tech they

put in those damn biosuits, and so help me, if you've synched yourself into that I'll tear it off of you."

"I haven't," I said, astonished at the ferocity of his tone.

"Nalina," he said, and just the use of my given name told me how serious he was, "the Emperor already knows you've fucked me. That bauble around your neck told him when you came. Synch with Imperial tech and they know *everything* about you. Why do you think I switched sides during the war?"

I swallowed, my mouth dry. "I figured the pay was better."

Carver let out his breath in a harsh laugh. "The Prince couldn't even pay his bar bills. But I was sick of the bloody Empire knowing every time I drank a beer or swived a woman. They monitor everything. Right now the Empire knows you're tired, knows you're hungry, and knows you've had a man inside you."

My hand went to my mouth. No one touched the Emperor's concubines unless he gave permission. An invitation was considered the highest compliment.

Carver saw the realization come over my eyes. "Aye. Maybe you didn't know, but I damn well did, and should have known better. But I couldn't help myself, and if you offered again I still couldn't."

"Thought you had better control than that," I whispered hoarsely.

"Not when it comes to you," Carver muttered, and released me.

* * *

I could do nothing with his arm, which had been put together in the first place by someone with a very rudimentary knowledge of bionics. We continued on to Lyon, and Carver told me shortly that he'd contact the Empire when we landed to hand me over.

"If you don't mind, I think I'll keep out of the way," he said. "The Emperor might forgive you, but I don't want to be the man who assaulted his woman."

"You didn't assault me," I said. "I seem to remember being pretty consensual about it."

"Think His Imperial Majesty will agree with you?" Carver said, and I couldn't answer that.

At his recommendation, I put on the rest of the bio-armor, including the helmet, but tore out the synch port. The thick suit disguised my body and totally hid both the necklace and my face. It would also keep the retinal scanners from recognizing me, at least until Carver had visited the tech genius who could fix his arm and, perhaps, meddle with the necklace enough to remove the evidence of my interlude with Carver.

The Emperor might already know about it. But perhaps he might doubt his own knowledge if the necklace didn't back it up.

It was a slim hope, but right now it was all I had.

Lyon, like most big cities, had designated areas for civilian craft arriving by both air and water. Carver and I had a brief discussion about whether we expected to get away with pretending to be Imperial troops, and decided we probably wouldn't. We brought the shuttle down in a slum area of the old city, lights off, and left it to be cannibalized by the shady denizens.

I'd never visited a city like this before. Apart from one trip to Carnalis to be presented to the Emperor after my marriage, I'd never left the Pennine Isles, where the largest settlement was a town of about ten thousand people. Very little of the old city remained, after the Rhone burst its banks and forced the inhabitants into the mountains. There they built a temporary city that somehow became permanent. Now Lyon was the largest city in France, seething with people of all species.

After the Fall, humanity was nearly wiped out, and all the species who'd spent millennia hiding came out into the light. Well, the shady darkness, in some cases. The northern parts of Europe were overrun by elves, large areas of North America found themselves populated by yeti, and in China the dragons became a serious problem. All over the world, vampires, pixies, werewolf and other creatures that had been assumed to be fictional suddenly became very real.

New species evolved, such as the shape-changers like my parents. Unlike werewolf, we weren't bound by the phases of the moon and only fixed upon one animal

as we reached adulthood. My father, a methodical, intelligent man, became a silverback gorilla. My mother, a lynx, was unusual for a woman in being such a predator.

Women, my father told me, were expected to be small, practical animals. No decent woman settled into adulthood as a tiger.

No one really looked at Carver and me as we walked through the nighttime streets of Lyon. As in many cities, pedestrian traffic occupied elevated walkways, some of them automated, moving all by themselves. As we moved deeper into the new part of the city, sprawling up the side of the Alps, the walkways became giant escalators. Nearly all of them were lined with advertisements, holograms that leapt out and assaulted passersby, targeting them personally.

"Hi, Prisiana! As a werewolf mother of seven, we know you'll appreciate how hard it is combing tangles out of thick fur!"

"Mr. Grxxnk, have you considered cosmetic surgery on your fangs?"

"Now that you've moved to a garden area of the city, Lwxana, why don't you try our imp repellant on your roses?"

I was astonished. Carver hadn't been lying when he said the Empire knew everything about everybody. The adverts scanned the passersby retinally, and automatically knew what products to try and sell them.

When an advert targeted Carver, it addressed him, "Mrs. Greenlow, as a mature dragon we're sure you'll love our new scale revitalizer!"

"Mrs. Greenlow?" I murmured.

Carver gave a feral grin. "You don't think I'd actually let them know who I am?"

I frowned. How had he done that? I glanced at Carver's eyes, which were organic and not bionically enhanced. I'd seen them change to the slitted yellow of a vampire, so they clearly weren't implants. Just how clever was this hacker friend?

Carver guided me away from the busier streets and down a series of increasingly dark and ugly alleys. In one we had to bypass a troll demanding payment to pass. Carver wordlessly drew his sword, aimed it at the creature's hairy throat, and we passed unmolested.

"Someday you're going to tell me how you came to fight with such a primitive weapon," I said.

Carver just smiled.

I followed him up a dark metallic staircase clinging to the side of the mountains, and he tapped at a door with the hilt of his sword. I didn't blame him for not touching the corroded metal, stained with things my eyes didn't want to identify.

A tiny hatch slid open, revealing a heavy brow and a lot of hair. "Yes?" growled a voice within.

"Here to see George," Carver said.

"Password?"

Carver drew his sword and pressed the tip through the hatch.

"Good enough," growled the bouncer, and half a hundred bolts slid open to admit us.

Chapter Four

"Oh God!" screamed a woman just in front of me. "Oh God, oh yes!"

She was tied up to a metal frame, legs spread wide, and she was totally naked. The lizard-skinned man before her was whipping her with a leather flogger, striping her hips and thighs with raw pink skin. Every so often the whip would curl between her legs, and that was when she screamed.

"Don't make eye contact," Carver advised me, "unless you want to join in."

I confess, part of me was tempted. The woman on the frame was squirming and panting and clearly having the time of her life. All around us were other men and women and some creatures whose gender I wasn't entirely sure about, all of them engaged in some sort of sexual activity.

"It's like Carnalis," I whispered to Carver as we picked our way through the fornicating couples and groups.

"It's like everywhere in the Empire," he replied tonelessly, and stepped over a man who was lying supine while two other men licked and sucked and kissed each other around his cock.

Unlike the Hall of Pleasure, this establishment wasn't full of gorgeously dressed—or undressed—people. There were no silks, but plenty of leather. No jewelry, but a myriad of piercings. One man had a large ring attached to the piercing in his penis, and he was being led around by it like a bull. Plenty of people carried whips, and more than one crawled around on the filthy floor, led by a collar and leash.

From behind the doors and curtains we passed came orgasmic shouts and cries of "More! Harder!" I witnessed more varieties of sex there in those chambers than I'd ever imagined, even after my visit to the Emperor's Hall.

Finally Carver knocked on one door and waited, then, rolling his eyes, shoved it open. Inside, I could hardly see anything for the dim lighting and dismantled tech covering every surface, flashing and bleeping and creating obstacles to be climbed over or under. But I could certainly hear the inhabitants, a man and two women. They were giggling. He was moaning.

"Yes, and if I touch her pretty boobies like this?" said one of the girls.

"Mmm, that feels so good!" cried the other.

"Don't you wish you could touch her boobies like this?" said the first girl.

"Yes," moaned the man. He sounded quite young.

Carver rolled his eyes at me and ducked under a sloping beam covered in circuitry. I thought it might once have been part of a piece of farm tech.

"But you've been far too naughty," crooned one of the girls.

"Yes. You've been a bad, bad boy," agreed the other, and the man whimpered.

Carver brushed aside a curtain of fiber-optic lights to reveal a young man tied to a chair, totally naked, his cock standing quiveringly upright. In front of him were two young women of improbable proportions, wearing cheap plastic underwear and fondling each other's breasts.

"George," said Carver, "could you at least program in some decent dialogue?"

George's eyes snapped to us, panicked, but the two young women paid us no attention, continuing to coo and giggle over each other's gigantic mammaries. As one turned her back to me, I saw a control panel at the nape of her neck. A robot.

I pressed my lips together, suddenly desperate to laugh.

"Well, dialogue isn't exactly my top priority," George muttered, clearly mortified. His cock began to sag, and the two lovebots started mewling in disappointment.

"I have never," Carver said, reaching around the back of one and switching her off, "heard any woman," he switched off the second, "make any noise like that. Have you?" he asked me, as if we were conversing about an unusual species of bird.

"Uh, no," I managed.

George's eyes flickered over my bulky biosuit, still looking panicked. "Are you, er, back with the Empire now?" he asked Carver, hands still fastened behind his back.

"Like hell I am," Carver said, kneeling to untie the knots. "Take the helmet off, my lady."

I'd forgotten I was still wearing it. The moment I removed the helmet, George's eyes flew open wide. Well, was it so unusual to see a woman in a biosuit? I suppose one tended to assume they'd be men, but —

"Oh no," George said, trying to stand up and failing, his ankles still lashed to the chair. "Oh no no no. Why'd you bring her here?"

Carver and I exchanged looks of mutual incomprehension.

"You know each other?" Carver said, finally freeing George.

I shook my head, and George stumbled to his feet, pushing past the eerily frozen lovebots and tapping at a keypad so fast his fingers blurred. A newscaster's image came up on the screen, and a second later sound followed.

"...DNA which has now been analyzed. Concubine Xyla was murdered by Nalina Bradwell, a known Arcadian sympathizer, following the violent deaths of Sir Bramley Eyam, her father, and Fallyn Bradwell, her husband. Implicated in the attack is Imperial Traitor John Carver, also known as Jack Culper, also known as Jack Sexby, also known as Edward Necker, also known as Edward Rainsborough, who deserted the Empire during the Independent Wars to fight in the Prince's Army. Citizens are warned that Bradwell is a tiger shape-changer and Carver is a mercenary with psychopathic tendencies. The pair are considered to be extremely dangerous, so do not, we repeat, do not approach them. Imperial troops are tracking the concubine's ruby necklace stolen by Bradwell, which she is believed to be wearing."

Another news story flashed up, but all I could see were the aerial images of my home, alive with flames, of the bodies littering the streets, of a biosuit's cam zooming in on the scorched wall where my father had been standing, on Xyla's torn and bloody corpse, on Fallyn's bullet-ridden body.

"And you two turn up here?" George said, panic clear in his voice.

I didn't feel panicked. I felt numb, detached, and a little sick.

Carver caught me as I fell. "Turn that swiving thing off," he growled at George, who rushed to obey. "And if I see you calling in any troops, I'll rip your dick off personally, understand?"

"Troops?" George wheezed. "Here? With all the contraband stuff I've got?" He put his hand to his skinny chest, struggling to breathe. I knew how he felt. "For tech's sake, Carver, why'd you come here? A concubine's necklace? They'll trace that in seconds! They're probably already on their way, adding my name to the warrant —"

"George," Carver said warningly.

"Just like that, oh God!"

Carver pushed me into the seat George had vacated and drew his sword on George. "Shut the hell up or you'll be singing castrato. Now listen. They can't track me, they can only track her. She's never synched with Imperial tech, she's just got the necklace to worry about. Can you neutralize it?"

George blinked. His gaze stuttered between me and Carver. "Uh. Well, I, uh. Are you microchipped?" he asked.

"Like livestock?" I replied, surprise jolting me out of my fugue.

"That's how the Empire sees its citizens," Carver growled. He sheathed his sword and came over to me. "Let him see the necklace, my lady."

All I could think as I stood up and began removing the heavy biosuit was that it was so strange he kept calling me "my lady" when he'd been inside me.

To completely show George the necklace, I had to take off everything above the waist, and I distinctly saw George's cock rise under the hastily snatched blanket he'd draped around his hips. But I was only functioning from a sort of distance, and didn't really think about it too much.

Carver glanced at the lovebots. "How do these two take orders?" he asked as George examined the necklace. "Is there a specific command?"

I stared dumbly at the two lovebots, standing motionless and obscene.

"Say their name, then 'command' then tell them," George said. "That one's Fellatia, and that one's Cunnilingua."

Carver shook Fellatia's hand. "Charmed," he muttered, switching them both back on and ordering them to go over by the door, where they were to begin making out if they heard anyone approaching. "And if anyone forces the door, you thrust those gigantic airbags in their faces then go down on them. Understand?"

"Yes, Master," they purred.

"What if the troopers are female?" George asked.

"Maybe they'll like women," I said, trying to keep up, using a brain that didn't feel as if it was connected to my body.

"We can only hope," George said, a little mistily.

"Do you have a male 'bot?" Carver asked, and George's cheeks went pink.

"No!"

Carver's face took on a mocking expression. "Not working on one for a client?" he said.

"Well, uh – "

Carver started throwing things around to get to the cupboard doors, and George shrieked, "Yes! Yes, all right, just stop destroying my stuff! Closet over there. His name is Felcher."

"Lovely," Carver said, and uncovered a 'bot with a completely hairless body, a gigantic shlong and a lubricant dispenser attached to his wrist. He sent Felcher off to join Fellatia and Cunnilingua, then came to stand over George, looking menacing.

"Time is of the essence here," he said.

"Well, you're not helping by looming like that. It's a complicated design, and it's totally synched in ... I mean, it's not like a microchip, but it's nasty."

"How nasty? Can you get it off her?"

George frowned and came to stand behind me, fiddling with the necklace's clasp. "Maybe."

"If that's faster, do it. You can neutralize it later."

Someone hammered at the door, and all three of us froze.

"Could just be the landlord," George said into the sudden silence, and then the door started rattling and the three lovebots started exclaiming lewdly over each other's outsized genitalia.

"Get that necklace off now," Carver snarled, and George's hands shook a little as he reached for a laser device. For a long, awful moment he fumbled, and my eyes met Carver's.

And I knew what to do.

Chapter Five

"Can you just rip it off?" I said.

George's head shook as his fingers flew. "It's burrowed into your skin. In dozens of places. It'd take half your flesh with it."

My eyes didn't leave Carver's. "Do it."

"But —"

The door exploded open and the three lovebots went into noisy overdrive. Soldiers shouted. We had seconds before they made it through the jungle of tech and discovered us.

I lifted my hand to the necklace, grasped it and braced myself. Then I yanked — once, twice — and it came free with a terrible wrench that tore out huge patches of skin all over my neck and chest.

Gasping, my whole body suddenly alive with pain, I stumbled to my feet and over to the window. Outside was a sheer drop out onto the mountainside and the buildings far below.

I tossed the necklace out as far as I could.

Carver and George were staring at me, and their eyes bulged as I unfastened my pants and kicked off my boots. "Carver," I said, "you're wearing too many clothes." And without any more preamble, I slashed his shirt open and pushed it and his jacket to the floor, tossing his swordbelt under a table groaning with tech and pulling his pants open to grab at his cock. "On the floor," I said, hearing the soldiers start to break away from the lovebots' determined attentions, "and bite me."

"What?"

"Bite me," I hissed, shoving him to the floor with tiger strength. "As messy as you can." I touched my fingers to the ruin of my neck, and understanding came into his eyes. He nodded and reached for me, and as I straddled him I glanced back at George, standing there gaping at us both, and said, "Behind me. In me. Whatever. Put on a fucking show!"

The soldiers cleared the fiber-optic curtain just as Carver's fangs ripped into my neck, and a second wave of pain flooded over me. I'd heard vampire bites were deliriously pleasurable: apparently I'd heard wrong.

Terrified, shocked, and sick with pain, I buried my face in Carver's neck as he tore at my throat, and felt George grasp my hips and hesitantly enter me. Two men in one day! And I was suffering the complete opposite of enjoyment.

Then Carver's tongue touched my neck, and something miraculous happened. Warmth spread from that place, that tiny place, and where it spread the pain just disappeared, as if that lovely, comforting, pleasurable heat neutralized anything unpleasant.

I wasn't afraid any more. I wasn't shocked and scared and sore. I stopped worrying about having sex with two men, and just enjoyed the slide of George's penis inside me.

Carver's hand swept over my neck and spread the blood over my face, my chest. Masking me. George tentatively reached up and brushed his fingers against the sides of my breasts, and I moaned and arched back against him.

Carver continued to suckle at my neck, his bloody hand cupping my shoulder now, feeling me move over him as George found his rhythm, cupped my breasts and thrust into me. Beneath me, Carver's cock started to swell, and I wriggled against it, trying to get it to press against my clit.

I was so unaware of anything but the sensations inside my body that I'd forgotten the soldiers were even there, until one of them barked, "Where is she?"

Carver licked me, and waves of sensation crashed through me. I whimpered, clutching at him, arching my hips as George faltered and slipped out of me.

Then Carver moved his mouth from my neck, and the pain slid back in as he growled to the soldiers, "This is a private party."

"We have an Imperial arrest warrant," snapped the man in charge, as I shuddered and tried to get back that melting feeling of pleasure. George was clearly terrified and didn't know what to do, and while Carver still held me reassuringly close against his body, he wasn't doing any of that magic that kept the pain away.

"Sex ain't illegal," Carver retorted, and bent his head again. But instead of biting me he whispered in my ear, "Change your face. Just a little. No fur, just a little like a tiger. Eyes too."

I stared, wondering if he was mad: they were looking for a woman who could turn into a tiger! But then I realized what he meant. The soldiers hadn't yet seen my face, and if I altered it slightly, they hopefully wouldn't be able to match me to whatever pictures they had on file. I didn't know if changing my eyes would fool a retinal scanner, but I was willing to try.

If, however, they sampled my blood for DNA, they'd know me immediately.

"There was a woman," George said behind me, and I tensed. Maybe this had all gone horribly wrong. I caught Carver's eye and knew what he was thinking: that we might just have to slaughter the lot of them.

"She ran through a few minutes ago," George said, "but we were, er, busy."

One of the soldiers sniggered.

"Where'd she go?"

Beeping tech told me they were trying to discern this for themselves. Probably, all George's equipment was interfering with their tracking devices.

"Out the window," Carver said, irritation and malice in his voice. His eyes glowed yellow. The news report hadn't included the information he was a vampire, and I was guessing he hadn't allowed it to become common knowledge. "She ran through, jumped out the window. Hope the stupid bint can fly, or she's bird food now."

He touched his mouth to my neck again, but before the bliss could steal over me again, booted feet strode over and a hand grabbed my hair, forcing my head up and back.

I stared, panicked and defiant, hoping the partial change I'd effected would disguise me enough. He yanked something from his belt and waved it in front of my face. A wave of blue light scanned me, and I tensed, forming my hands into claws in preparation for killing him.

The soldier made a sound of disgust behind his helmet. "You've got two hot lovebots and you're swiving this minger?"

"Hey," Carver snarled, and George's hands tightened on my hips. He rubbed his cock against my pussy folds and glared at the soldier until he dropped my hair and let me go.

George said with unexpected calm, "Have you done interrupting and insulting us?"

Something beeped over by the window, and the trooper stomped in that direction. A female soldier—so George had been right—said, "I'm registering the necklace, sir, several hundred meters away. Far below. Can she fly?"

"She's a fucking tiger, what do you think?" snapped the commander, and they all trooped out. I heard the lovebots make another attempt on them by the door, but George had the presence of mind to shout at them to desist before they were smashed to pieces.

Then there was silence, and none of us moved.

I was almost too afraid to breathe. Then Carver brushed a bloody kiss against my mouth, and whispered, "Clever girl," and suddenly I could move again.

I pressed my cheek against his, heart hammering, then lifted my head and said to George, "And you. Well done."

He shrugged awkwardly and stepped away. His cock had gone down—probably due to sheer terror, and on impulse I sat up and reached for it.

"No. I think we all need to release some tension," I said and ran my fingers lightly up and down his shaft. It was sticky from being inside me, and as I touched it, it grew.

"Are you all right?" George said, clearly torn. His cock said he wanted to have sex with me, but clearly the blood all over my neck was a bit off-putting.

"If Carver will lick me or bite me or whatever he was doing," I turned to the vampire still lying below me, "then I'm sure I will be."

Carver's yellow, slitted eyes were impassive for a second, then he nodded and said, "Turn over and lie back against me. George, pass that towel."

I did as Carver suggested, and as he lapped soothingly at the wound on my neck, he wiped away the worst of the blood.

"Seems a shame to waste it," he murmured, then said even quieter in my ear, "Do you want George back inside you?"

I nodded. Carver's tongue was heating me right back up again, and without even realizing it, I'd started stroking my own breasts and hips. I beckoned to George, opened my legs wide and hooked my ankles over Carver's knees. George looked like he couldn't believe his luck, but he knelt between my legs and rubbed himself in the wetness coating my pussy.

"If you don't want me, there are always the 'bots," I said, and George's eyes widened.

"Who wouldn't want you?" he said, and slid back inside me. I smiled, the first genuine smile I'd managed since the EMP first went off, and put my arms around him. His skinny body was tense and I rubbed soothingly at his shoulders, the way I used to with Fallyn when he got worried about being married to a wanton woman.

Fallyn. I'd barely thought of him. And now that I did, I realized his death hardly pained me at all. Seven years of bloodless subjugation, of living like polite strangers who occasionally bumped uglies without any semblance of passion, of just damn well giving in, had robbed me of any love I'd ever had for him.

Maybe it was the shock talking, but right now I felt closer to Carver, and even to George, than I ever had to the man I'd called my husband.

I turned my head and touched my lips to Carver's. He tasted coppery, my own blood on his lips, but the tiger in me roared to the surface and I thrust my tongue into his mouth, kissing him hard. Echoing the same movement, George pushed deep inside me, angling his hips a little, then withdrew to leave just the tip inside me.

"You're so wet," he gasped. "And so hot."

"That's because she's real," Carver muttered, and George flushed a bright red. I caught his face with my hand and brought it down to kiss his mouth. Carver's cheek was pressed against mine, rough stubble abrading me as I explored George's surprisingly soft mouth with my tongue. With one hand I reached down to cup his buttocks as he thrust and withdrew, his movements fast and frantic.

Beneath me, Carver's cock was swollen hard, pressing against my back. I left George's mouth and returned to Carver's, realizing as I did that the wound on my neck hardly hurt at all. A brush of my fingers told me it had already stopped bleeding, as had the dozens of tears where the necklace had been ripped away from me.

With one hand on George's ass and one on Carver's face, I kissed the man who had saved my life and healed my wounds. I licked every coppery trace of blood from his rough lips and hot mouth, then I carried on kissing him because I damn well liked it. He had his hand on my hip, feeling me move as George rammed faster and faster into me, his own cock pressing harder into my back all the time.

And I wanted more.

I yanked my face away from Carver's, focusing on George and gasping, "Stop. Stop, George!"

He faltered, looking uneasy.

"I want to turn over," I explained. "Then you can get back inside me."

He looked confused, but pulled out and helped me straddle Carver, pressing my wet, swollen folds against the hard ridge of his cock. I rubbed myself there a little bit, enjoying the heat and the slide, coating him in my copious juices. Then I leaned

forward, pressing my breasts against his chest and feeling the crisp hairs there tickle my exquisitely sensitized nipples.

Carver moved to enter me, but I whispered, "Not yet," and glanced back at George, who knelt there with his cock fisted tightly in one hand. "Finish what you started," I purred, and he leapt back toward me so eagerly that he tripped and bumped into me, nearly pushing his cock inside my ass.

The press of his hot, wet penis against that entrance, one I'd never even thought of suggesting for myself, sent a thrill of anticipation through me, but evidently it wasn't what George had in mind. He quickly righted himself and thudded home inside me, filling me up with his eager cock.

I returned my mouth to Carver's, marveling in the simple pleasure of long, deep kisses. Well, I suppose it wasn't such a simple pleasure, what with another man thrusting away behind me, fondling my breasts and gasping that he was nearly there. But it was good, all the same.

I angled myself to press my clit against Carver's throbbing cock, and he moaned low in his throat. I smiled against his mouth, and smiled even wider when the movement of George's hips sent me rubbing against Carver's hard flesh.

Pretty soon I was gasping, the hot pleasure winding higher and higher inside me until I was gripping Carver's shoulders and burying my face in his neck as I frantically writhed toward my orgasm. And when it came, crashing over me with massive force, I cried out, my whole body shaking.

Dimly, I was aware of George throbbing out his release inside me, but only really realized it had happened when he collapsed against my back, and I felt his come trickling out of me.

I lifted my head, and met Carver's eyes. They were still yellow, slitted and feral, and the heat inside me flared back up to life again.

"I want you now," I said, and laughed at the frantic speed with which he dispatched George and slid his own thick cock inside me.

I whimpered. Carver was bigger than George in all respects. He was taller, his shoulders were broader, and by God his cock was bigger. I moaned as he filled me right up, his balls hot against my dripping wet folds. He kissed me once, hot and hard, then pressed his hand against my shoulder and said, "Sit up, my lady. Let me see you."

"I'm not your lady," I said, staying where I was. "Not like this."

His eyes gleamed. "Then sit up, Nalina," he said, caressing my shoulder with his one good hand. The other lay at his side, motionless, and a pang shot through me.

I sat up, slowly, arching my back as I did and reveling in the press of Carver's cock inside me as I moved on him. Somewhere off to my right, George groaned, and I glanced over to see him kneeling there, fingers once more wrapped around his dick, pumping it back into life.

I smiled at him, then turned my gaze back to Carver, who was watching me with one hand on my hip, encouraging me to move back and forth on him. I did, never breaking eye contact, and slid my own hands over my body, stroking my breasts and tweaking the nipples. Hot fire shot through me, and I remembered lying there beside Fallyn on those lonely, angry nights when I'd made myself stay silent and still under him while he did his duty. After he fell asleep I'd touch myself, pinching my nipples hard and fingering my clit until I came in a silent, gasping release.

"I will not be silent," I said fiercely, and Carver, his eyes intent on me, replied, "Good."

I dragged one hand down over my stomach, feeling my own muscles jump in pure pleasure at such a touch, and parted the folds concealing my clit. I touched myself there, once, twice, then reached for Carver's hand and pressed his fingers to the same place. I moaned softly, and he smiled.

He stroked me, and I closed my eyes and threw my head back, moving faster on him. Beside me I could hear George gasping his way toward a second orgasm as I bucked and writhed on top of Carver.

I was going to come again. I could feel it inside me, building, spiraling, the heat spreading through my whole body. My fingertips tingled. I pinched my nipples harder, thrust myself onto Carver's hand, squeezed myself tight around him.

But I didn't come until I opened my eyes and saw him watching me, his face fierce with pleasure. He watched me come undone, and he smiled as I whimpered and gasped and screamed.

Then he rolled me to my back and thrust hard inside me, while George gasped, "Oh God, oh God, I'm going to come again," and groaned as he spurted all over the floor with a complete disregard for all the tech littering the place.

And all I could think about was the man pounding into me, enjoying every second his body was in contact with mine, kissing me fiercely as he throbbed inside me and came, hard.

He fell against me, hot and heaving with sweat, and I wrapped my arms around him and drifted away into sleep, blissful despite all the reasons I shouldn't be.

Chapter Six

I woke to silence, and a darkness so absolute even my feline eyes couldn't penetrate it.

Even in the remote Pennines, nothing had ever been truly dark. Tech lit up the roads and waterways even at night, marking the safe passages and the hidden outcrops of rock. In the fields, machines buzzed quietly all night, their status lights winking into the darkness. Every house was lit inside and out, even while everyone was asleep. And patrol 'bots bobbed around, challenging anyone out after dark and taking retinal scans.

Even on the very edges of the Empire, everyone and everything had to be accounted for.

I lay silently and tried to take stock. I was in a bed, warm and clean. I smelled laundry soap, and the sea, and then a scent that was at once very familiar and oddly alien. Carver. He was close, and the smells of leather and smoke that usually clung to him were missing. I smelled no sweat or blood. He was clean, and he was naked.

Carver. He'd always been there. Well, maybe not always, but I couldn't actually remember the first time I'd seen his shadowy presence around the estate. Of course, knowing he was a vampire explained why he spent so much time lurking, but to me, lurking was just part of who he was.

Most people were afraid of Carver. My father had issued orders diffidently, and Fallyn had outright avoided him. Every now and then I'd see one of the maids attempt to flirt with him, but they were usually rebuffed, and often ignored.

I allowed myself a smile. Of course, my father was probably the only person in the Empire who employed flesh and blood maids instead of housebots. The kitchen of the ancient house was staffed with cooks, and in the garden people pulled up weeds by

hand. When I, embarrassed that we were so backwards, asked my father why he didn't buy the inexpensive tech, he replied, "Then who would feed these people?"

I didn't appreciate that at the time. I didn't appreciate much about my father, who was boring and hardworking and only ever seemed to be disappointed that I'd failed to become the ladylike daughter he wanted so much. But now I remembered him spending patient hours teaching me names and dates from history, how to play musical instruments and paint pretty pictures. He made sure I was schooled in intellectual pursuits, as well as the things he considered necessary for a lady.

He used to read to me as a child. I never heard the end of his stories, always falling asleep first. Whatever he read seemed terribly dull and old-fashioned to me anyway. If I wanted fun, I went to my mother. She'd spend hours chasing me around the house, constructing elaborate fantasy games, shrieking with laughter and driving my father insane.

I thought about the laughter, the effortlessly beautiful music my mother played, the sensual dances that I thought were pretty and my father thought were unnecessarily provocative. I thought about the light streaming in through the tall windows as I gazed out at the garden, listening to my father name the plants there. I thought about Fallyn, stripped to the waist and gleaming with healthy, honest sweat as he worked alongside the villagers in the fields. I thought about our first few shy, nervous conversations, about the formal parties my father organized for us, about the blossoms that fell from the trees on the day we became engaged.

I thought about all the happiness my life had contained, and tried to block out the last few days. The last few years. But memories of my mother always led to her arguments with my father, screaming, spitting arguments that eventually sent her back to the Empire, where she was happy. Thoughts of Fallyn reminded me how different things had been in the early days, before everything I did turned out to disappoint him. Remembering my father was impossible without seeing the outrage, the naked fear on his face as he found me with Xyla, moments before she turned him to a smoking shadow on the wall.

I couldn't think about my house without remembering it being destroyed. I couldn't think of my family without being reminded they were dead. The more I tried to think of the happy memories, the more the horrifying ones came back, and tears started burning through my eyes as I lay in the quiet and the dark, crying by myself just as I'd done for years.

Only whenever I'd lain beside Fallyn and cried, he'd never woken and taken me in his arms and soothed me. Carver did. He touched me hesitantly, then when I curled against his chest and sobbed he wrapped his arms around me, strong and indomitable, and told me that everything would be all right.

"How?" I sobbed. "How can it be all right?"

"Things are as bad as they can be. They've got to get better."

"How do you know? It could get worse," I wailed, by now so far beyond comfort I don't know how I didn't drown us both with crying.

But Carver stroked my hair and said, "What else have you got to lose?"

I raised my head and would have stared if I could damn well see him. "You," I said, because it was blindingly obvious. "I've got you."

For a second Carver said nothing, then he held me tighter and said firmly, "You will never lose me, my lady. I am always yours. Do you understand? Whatever else, I am always yours."

For some reason that made me cry harder, and Carver gave up on trying to say anything else until the storm had passed and I found myself hiccupping into his shoulder, feeling rather foolish.

"If I find out we've had an audience for this, I'll bloody kill you," I muttered, and for the first time since I'd known him, Carver laughed.

He kissed my hair and said, "I'm glad you're feeling better," and gently laid me back down on the bed to move away.

It was only then that I realized how he'd been holding me.

"Your arm," I said. "It's working now?"

He picked up something that rattled, and said, "George fixed it. Good as new. Well, good as it'll ever be, anyway."

"George? Thought he couldn't wait to see the back of us."

Something scraped, and with a sharp flare of sulfur, light flashed into my eyes. "George worships you," Carver said, his back outlined in silhouette as he made the light stronger. I realized he'd been lighting a match, something backwards even by the standards of the Pennines. "You're the first real girl he's ever had sex with."

He turned, a flickering lamp in his hand, and I blinked at the brightness, my tiger-assisted eyes adjusting quickly to see almost as well as in daylight. Carver stood naked and unashamed, and I took my fill of him.

The lamplight picked up lighter tones in his usually dark, tangled hair. It flickered over the intense pale blue of his eyes and the stark pink of the scar that just missed his eye. Although he'd bathed, he hadn't shaved. I wasn't sure I'd recognize him if he did.

His body was muscular but lean, the body of a predator. And like a predator he'd suffered injuries, some of them horrendous. The awful scorch of laser fire marred his chest and one shoulder, and a long cut that had clearly been made by a blade ran down over one hipbone. In a wide curve over one side of his torso, reaching around from his back, was the ragged scar left by the teeth of a huge animal. The metal that replaced his right forearm spoke of an injury too terrible to even imagine, the crude bionics revealing desperate surgery by someone on the wrong side of the law. This wasn't even George's work; it had been fashioned by an amateur.

I let my eyes wander lower. Carver's thighs were as strong and lean as the rest of him, and nestled between them was the long, thick cock he'd plowed into me twice already.

I'd spent years trying to be afraid of Carver. Despite the warnings of my father and Fallyn that he was a dangerous, unstable man, I knew my father wouldn't have let him stay if he really posed a threat. And besides, I'd never really feared anyone in a physical sense.

What frightened me about him was his sheer wildness. Unlike ordinary people, who wanted to live safe, easy lives, Carver didn't seem to care for comfort. Despite the offer of a room in the house, he'd slept in one of the outbuildings. The one, in fact, under my bedroom window. He hadn't seemed to care about bad weather, about hunger or discomfort. If he wanted something, he took it, whether it was food or a woman or a life. Regardless of who it belonged to.

Part of me wanted to be like Carver, to be wild and free and do what felt good. And part of me feared that my father and Fallyn were right, that giving into basic impulses was wicked. That Carver lived a harsh life and at the end of it, he'd go to hell.

I was afraid that Carver really was mad, and evil, and that if I gave into my wild tiger side, I'd be mad and evil too.

I reached out and touched the curved scar over his ribs. He watched the movement of my hand, not flinching, and said nothing.

"You healed me," I said, touching my neck with my other hand.

"It's something we can do," he said. "With open wounds. Else our food would bleed to death." I raised my eyebrows at him, and he gave a half smile. "And that would just be wasteful."

I ran my fingers along the laser scar. "But you can't heal yourself?"

He shrugged. "Usually I can. If I'm hurt too badly, if I haven't fed enough, then I sometimes can't." He brushed his hand over a few of the marks. "Fighting for the Independents. Imperial strategy was to starve us out, and even I wouldn't feed on wounded comrades."

I touched the bite mark again and looked up at him questioningly. His eyes were piercingly blue, and I glanced away. Back to the painfully ragged scar.

"This wasn't made by Imperial weapons."

"Some scars I'd rather keep as a reminder."

"And what is this a reminder of?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Carver lifted my chin with his fingertips and made me look at him. "It reminds me not to underestimate anyone."

The only sound in the room was our breath, our heartbeats.

"Where are we?" I said, and my voice sounded kind of thin. I tore my gaze from his and looked around the room, and what I saw was faded grandeur. A huge, ornate bed, gilded and canopied, and beautiful rugs on the floor. On the walls were mottled mirrors, sconces and faded wallpaper, patched in places, ruined by water in others. Large windows were obscured by long curtains, and no trace of light peeped round the edges. Around the room were handsome pieces of furniture in an antique style. I doubted they were real: after the Fall countless antiquities were lost.

"Are we still in Lyon?" I asked doubtfully.

Carver shook his head, smiling slightly. "Paris," he said.

"No," I replied, looking round again and noticing the details. "Paris is underwater."

But my voice faltered as I took in the water-damaged walls, the uneven floors, the draperies which looked a little too new to match the rest of the room.

The slight, persistent scent of the sea.

I got up from the bed and made my way over the layers of carpet to the nearest window and pulled back the curtain.

And yelped as a thick tentacle, covered in suckers, slapped itself across the glass in front of me.

Speechless, I stared at the gently pulsing suckers, then past them to the iridescent darkness beyond. The water—for it was water, not air—was strobed here and there with faint lights, as if something bright floated far above. Beacons, warning passing craft of the dangers posed by the submerged city.

"Like I said," Carver's voice came from behind me. "Paris."

I turned to stare at him, completely unable to think of anything to say.

"Well, technically Versailles." He reached past me to pull the curtain back in place. "You can look at it in the morning. We're not really deep enough to have lights showing here."

"But," I said, and couldn't find anything to follow it with. "But..."

Carver slipped his arm around my shoulders and led me back to the bed, where I sat down heavily and he sat beside me.

"But?" he repeated, a faint mocking expression on his face. Then it faded and he said, more kindly, "The Empire has no idea anyone lives here. The Mer colonized it years ago, and started making it watertight, renovating it. They don't like to be in the water all the time," he added.

"Mer?" I managed.

"Aye. Mermen, mermaids—bit of a misnomer if the ones I've met have been any indication. They're an aquatic kind of werefolk," he explained, as if a conversation about merpeople was completely normal.

"Mermaids," I said.

"Yes." Carver watched me steadily. "The Empire doesn't know everything. And plenty of people don't want to be a part of it. There used to be a term for people who lived invisibly: underground. Well, we don't have enough ground to go under, but we do have a lot of water."

"And people live here?" I asked, looking around the room which, with each glance, revealed more signs of water damage. But the walls and floor were dry, and the window had seemed inches thick. "I mean—people who breathe air and everything?"

"There are pumping and filtration systems, they take air in through the skyscrapers. It's all done with hydraulics. Virtually no tech at all. That's why the Empire can't detect it. They think Paris is an underwater ruin—and London, and New York, and don't get me started on Venice."

I finished cataloguing the room and brought my stunned gaze back to Carver. He was watching me carefully, as if he expected me to burst into tears again, or faint.

"How do you know all this?"

"Where do you think all the Independents went?" he said.

"They were all killed or captured," I began, because that was what the Empire had always told us. I shook my head. "They came here?"

"A lot of soldiers had families. They came here. Waited for the prisoners to be released. Started new lives. There are hundreds of thousands of people living underwater."

"And the Empire has no idea?"

"And the Empire has no idea."

I cocked my head, took in the glint in his eye. "And that amuses you terribly, doesn't it?"

Carver shrugged and gave that half smile again. "I'm not the biggest fan of the Empire."

I touched the laser scar on his chest again. A blast from an Imperial rifle that could easily have killed him. I wondered how he'd survived.

"Do you have any bionics here?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"Just the arm." He cracked a smile. "The rest is all me, baby."

My hand drifted down, back to the curved scar over his ribs. I traced it around to his back, a jagged and uneven ring of scar tissue that had to have hurt like hell. In two places on his back I could see the marks of the animal's upper canines, long deep tears from powerful teeth, and when I traced the scar back to the front I found two similar marks from the lower fangs.

"It must have hurt," I said, and Carver gave a spare nod. "Could have killed you."

"Vampire," he reminded me.

"Vampire," I said, smoothing my hand over his flat stomach to the long cut bisecting his hip. "Mercenary." I let my fingers sweep closer to his groin. "Lover."

Carver's breath hitched. I looked up at him, kissed his lips very softly, and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I wasn't." A flicker of a smile crossed his face. "How many other men have you taken chunks out of?"

"Just you."

"I'm honored."

I kissed him again, remembering that night three or four years ago when I'd slipped from Fallyn's bed and changed my shape, needing to run. Needing to pound out some of the frustration that hounded me every time I had to suppress an orgasm, bite my lip to keep silent, fist my hands in the sheets to stay still.

I'd padded down the stairs and out toward the back door, but then I heard someone whimpering and paused. Someone was in pain. A woman. And now she was begging, "Please, please..."

I moved fast, bounding on four silent paws across the tiled floor of the kitchen and down the corridor to the laundry and various small rooms that served archaic functions. The door to one of them stood open, and the cries were coming from there.

The scent of sex was heavy in the air, more pungent to me as a tiger than as a human, and as I approached I heard the woman's whimpers reach higher and higher. Skidding round the corner, I saw her stretched out on the table, her breasts bare and her skirts pushed up around her waist. A man leaned over her, mostly dressed but for the opening at his fly, where his thick cock pounded into the woman. It was Carver, the mercenary who menaced the field workers and terrorized the villagers. At his hip rested his sword.

His hands pinned hers above her head, and there was blood on her neck. She whimpered, "Oh God, oh please," and I launched myself at him, roaring in anger that he should be taking her by force.

Jaw wide open, I clamped my teeth down on his ribs and the force of my leap sent us both crashing into the far wall. The woman screamed, and Carver bellowed, wrestling me away from him and losing chunks of flesh as he did.

I could have bitten right through his ribs, could have snapped his spine if I'd wanted, but I wanted to punish him more than that. Wanted to hear his apology to the girl. Wanted to take him to the courts and slam him with the heaviest possible sentence for rape.

No sooner had my teeth left his body than he had his sword at my throat, and the girl screamed again. "For God's sake, Carver, don't kill her!"

Carver hesitated. I peeled back my lips and growled, showing him the blood on my teeth. His blood.

"Her?" he said.

"That's Mrs. Bradwell. The governor's daughter," the woman said pleadingly. Vaguely, I recognized her as one of the girls who worked in the kitchen. "Mrs. Bradwell, ma'am, I'm sorry, we shouldn't be in here, we'll clear everything up..."

Carver shot her a disbelieving look, and she amended, "I'll clear everything up. And I'll clean. I'll work double shifts, I'll —"

"I wasn't raping her," Carver said to me, ignoring the girl's babbling. He still had his hand on his sword. If the massive bloody tear in his side pained him at all, he didn't show it.

"God, no," she agreed, her eyes wide. Belatedly, she shoved down her skirts and wrapped her arms over her breasts. "I wanted it. I brought him here. Ma'am, you can't blame me. You've got a handsome husband. I just wanted —"

"Shut up," Carver said, never taking his eyes off me, and she fell silent.

I glanced from her to him, then back to her again. I sniffed, delicately, scenting female arousal. She'd been wet, very wet.

She'd been pleading with him for more.

In that moment I was grateful for nothing so much as the fact that tigers can't blush. I nodded slowly to Carver while I collected myself, then carefully stepped back and stretched, changing my shape to human again.

I was totally naked, and there was blood all over my face and neck, but I lifted my chin and said to the girl, "I want to hear it from you. He won't hurt you. I'll protect you." To prove my point, I kept one hand clawed. "Did he hurt you? Did he force you?"

Wide-eyed, she shook her head. "He didn't hurt me at all." Shyly, she turned one of her own hands into a rodent's paw and gestured to her neck. Now that I looked at it, I could see the small claw marks. "I did this. To make it, er, more exciting."

I glanced at Carver, whose gaze had left mine to wander over my naked body, and as I watched he sniffed. Damn and bloody hell.

In that moment, I hated John Carver. He could tell I was aroused. Could tell the sight and scent of raw sex had turned me on. Could tell that my anger stemmed from humiliation—and from the fact that it had been this nameless kitchen maid being fucked on a kitchen table, not me.

"Care to join us, my lady?" he said, lifting his gaze insolently to mine.

"You're disgusting," I told him, and turned on my heel to leave as fast as I could.

I didn't see Carver for several days after that, and when I did, he showed absolutely no signs of remembering the incident—or the considerable wound I'd dealt him.

Now I sat naked beside him in the drowned Palace of Versailles, my fingers stroking the scar I'd given him, my lips feathering over his jaw. A few inches from my hand, his cock had grown considerably, getting thicker and harder as I kissed and caressed him.

"I need to confess something," I said.

Chapter Seven

"You don't need to confess anything," Carver said.

"That night," I traced the thick scars where my canines had sunk into him, "I didn't think you were disgusting. Well, I mean, obviously when I thought you were raping her I did, but after that..."

That half smile hitched up one side of his mouth again. "Good to know."

"I was actually jealous."

"Jealous?"

He was teasing me. I took in a breath and let it out in a nonchalant sigh. "Of you. I wanted to touch her pretty boobies," I said, and Carver laughed, his eyes crinkling and his teeth showing white. It was such an unexpected sight that I smiled, and then I laughed too.

"George would probably lend you Fellatia," he said.

"I think Cunnilingua would do a better job, don't you?" I moved further onto the bed, tugging Carver with me. He came willingly, the mattress sinking and tilting us into one another.

"Or maybe I should ask for Felcher," I said, tumbling to my back and yanking Carver down on top of me. "Because what I was really jealous of then was her and you, together."

Carver tilted his head, and my smile faded. I pushed my fingers into his hair to hold him near me, and said, "I wanted what she had. A man who'd make her scream and beg for more. If I'd done that with Fallyn he'd probably have had me exorcised. He hated me to make a sound. To move too much. He said it was wanton and wicked and decent women didn't do such things."

Carver's eyes were cold. "He was an idiot."

"Maybe he was right." I attempted a smile. "After all, look where this wickedness has got me. On the run from the Empire, rolling around naked with a wanted Imperial Traitor."

"A wanted Imperial Traitor who has seen wickedness in many, many varieties," Carver said flatly, "and knows you've never come close to any of them. Nalina, you are not wicked. You are not wrong. You are passionate, and strong, and brave. You are the reason I stayed in the Pennines."

I stared up at him, at a face I thought I knew, at a man I thought I knew. "I wish you'd told me this seven years ago."

"Would you have listened?"

"Probably not." I tried another smile, and this one was more successful. "Just think, though. I could have left Fallyn and run away with you."

"You'd never have left him," Carver said.

"You sound very sure of that," I said, despite knowing he was right.

"I am. Your integrity is one of the most beautiful things about you. I'm not sure I'd have had these feelings for so long about a woman who'd up and leave her husband for a vampire mercenary."

I didn't ask what those feelings were. It was pretty obvious to me. Plus if I asked, and he told me, I'd have to confront how I felt about him. And I wasn't sure I could do that yet.

So I kissed him. I touched my mouth to his, and fell into the passion and joy he was kissing into me. Such a simple delight, to kiss without inhibitions. To wrap my arms around his naked body and press myself against him. To feel his heat and strength and know that whatever I did with him, he'd accept it and enjoy it.

I broke the kiss and rubbed my thigh over his hip. "I want to put my mouth on you," I said, and felt no embarrassment at the confession. "I want to taste a man who's not afraid to make love with me."

Carver closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and said, "You really ought to warn me before you say things like that." He shifted, and I felt how hard he'd suddenly become.

"You might have to give me pointers," I said. "I've never done any of this before." I started kissing his neck, stubble rough against my lips. Fallyn had always been scrupulously clean-shaven, and Carver felt wild and feral in contrast.

"That part you did yesterday," he said, breath coming a little faster.

"Yes, but beyond this is alien territory. Virgin, as it were."

He groaned, and I felt the vibration in his throat. "Don't say things like that," he repeated raggedly, and I smiled and moved to his shoulder.

There was a dip below the shoulder bone and I poked my tongue into it before continuing down his arm, stroking the surprisingly smooth skin and unsurprisingly hard muscle. Not an ounce of fat on him. Muscle and bone, like the wild animal he was.

I shivered deliciously and pushed him onto his back, the better to explore him. Carver lay below me, watching as I surveyed him, allowing me to do what I wanted. When I picked up his bionic arm and traced my fingers over his palm, his fingers curled around and held me there.

"Your hand is real," I said, turning it over and examining the hairs on the back of it. When I blew gently on them, they stood up in reaction.

"Well, it ain't made out of chocolate," he replied, and I sucked his middle finger into my mouth just to make sure. From Carver's reaction, it was the right thing to do.

I touched the steel rods and wires that made up his forearm, disappearing at both ends into a sheath of skin. They looked vaguely like an anatomical model, albeit one made with the wrong materials. Here I could see the rod functioning as the ulna, and there the radius. Flexible cords functioned as muscles, wires as nerves and veins, sending impulses up and down his arm to his hand.

"This was made by a doctor," I said, frowning, "not a technician."

Carver nodded. "Patched me up with what he had. Bits of other people's bionics."

I wanted to ask what had happened to cause his whole arm to be replaced with bits of tech, but kneeling over his naked body didn't seem the right time to do it. I turned his hand over and kissed the palm, then pressed it to my breast. Carver curled his hand around my soft flesh, running his thumb over the nipple, and I smiled even as I caught my breath.

I dropped my head to his chest, using hands and mouth to map the territory. Dozens of smaller scars became apparent, each of them testimony to someone's real and earnest wish to kill him. I kissed each one I found, and when my explorations brought me closer to his nipple, I kissed that too. It hardened under my lips, and I flicked my tongue across it, enjoying this new sensation.

Candlelight played over his body, lending his skin a warm hue. He was never cold, I realized, not as cold as I'd have expected a vampire to be. Resting my head on his chest, I listened to his heartbeat, felt the thump of his life echo through my own body.

Carver had one hand on the back of my neck, and his fingers slid up into my hair, stroking and playing with it.

"How does a mercenary taste, my lady?" he asked.

I raised my head and met his gaze with my own. "Like a good man," I replied, and slid my hand down his stomach to grasp his swollen shaft. My eyes on his, I ran my hand up and down it, then slipped my fingers down to cup the heavy balls hanging below.

Keeping eye contact, I crawled down his body and put out the tip of my tongue to catch the drop of moisture seeping from his cock.

"Like a very good man," I said, and wrapped my lips around him.

I'd seen this done, years before in Carnalis. Had seen both men and women licking and sucking at each other. I'd heard the groans of the lovers who were being so delicately pleased, had watched them arch and spasm, had seen the jets of come go spurting into the air.

I'd seen people swallow it down, or spread it over their faces. I'd seen lovers taking a thick shaft so far down their throats I thought they'd choke.

Nervous, but determined to please him, I sucked delicately on the head of Carver's cock, and he rewarded me with a soft moan. I ran my tongue around the throbbing flesh in my mouth, and he gasped. Lapping at the slit in the top had him clenching his fingers in my hair.

"You might have to instruct me," I said, and Carver panted, "No, you're doing fine. A natural."

I smiled at that, because it felt natural. I'd wanted to do this so many times, but Fallyn never let me. But Carver groaned in appreciation as I licked up and down the length of his shaft, laid kisses all over it, and stroked whatever bit my tongue couldn't reach. I sucked him as deep as I could, which considering the huge length, wasn't very far at all, and then I moved to his balls and spent some time exploring them.

Not once did Carver tell me to stop. He never mentioned the word "wicked." He moaned, and gasped, and several times compared me to God, but nothing he said made me feel wrong. I gave him pleasure, and he accepted it, reveled in it, worshipped me for it.

But eventually he called my name with mounting desperation, and dragged my head away, and said, "I'm going to come."

His chest was heaving. He was slick with perspiration. I caressed the line of his hipbone and said, "I know."

"Then let me —"

"No," I said, preventing him from pushing me away. "Let me."

I put my mouth back on him, and ignored his warnings, and when he erupted in my mouth I tasted him. I tasted a man who loved me, and wanted me to be nothing other than what I was.

I swallowed down every drop and licked him clean, and when I raised my head Carver looked thoroughly dazed. I crawled up his body and his arms came around me, and after a moment he said, "You really are a natural."

I smiled at that, kissed his mouth, and if he tasted himself on me he didn't complain.

Gradually life returned to my vampire lover, and his kisses became deeper, more passionate, his hands roaming over my body. He stroked my breasts, making me gasp, and trailed kisses down my throat, over the tender skin he'd healed earlier.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, touching me very gently.

"Only at first," I said. "It's fine now." I hesitated. "In fact it felt – it felt good."

He grinned at that, clearly pleased. "That's the idea." His teeth grazed my nipple, sending a jolt of pleasure through me, sharper than I'd ever felt before. His hands stroked my arms, my hands, found a spot of sensitivity inside my elbow. He caressed my stomach, my back, my buttocks. He kissed his way over one hip and licked my thigh, making me arch right off the bed.

Everything he did drove me higher and higher. Each tiny caress, each lick and each kiss was a thousand times more exciting than anything Fallyn had ever done to me. Carver was making love to me, and that had never happened before.

When his hand slipped between my legs and stroked my wet, aching folds, I whimpered. He stroked up and down, then slid between and delved inside me. One finger, just resting there inside me. I felt as if I was a dam about to burst. I wanted to come so badly, and all I had inside me was one finger.

His lips brushed my inner thigh. His thumb touched my clit. And the dam burst. I gasped, my whole body shaking, back arching, breath coming in quick snatches as pleasure rippled through me, hot and delicious.

But Carver didn't let me come down. His mouth touched where his thumb had been, and my gasps became moans. His fingers had been delicate, exploring me with infinite tenderness, but his tongue lapped at me so softly sometimes I thought I'd imagined it.

Then he sucked at my swollen, throbbing clit and made me scream. His fingers plunged inside me, first one and then two, three. His other hand stroked my labia, inside and out, rubbing with delicacy and precision.

My head tossed on the pillow, fingers clenching in the sheets. Later, I realized I'd ripped them in my excitement. I couldn't stay still, constant spasms of bliss arching

through me. My world dissolved into one long, glorious orgasm, just Carver's mouth and hands and waves of delirious pleasure.

He slid his fingers to my clit, pinching and rolling it, and pushed his tongue inside me. Curving it, he hit a spot that felt so good my hips came off the mattress, and he slid one hand under my buttocks to hold me there, lifting me closer to his mouth. He absolutely ate at me, feasting himself on my pleasure.

And when I thought I couldn't take any more, he replaced his mouth with his hand and sank his fangs into my thigh, pulling blood from the vein and pumping ecstasy back into me.

I screamed and screamed, eyes shut against the overwhelming heights of pleasure, and the last thing I heard before I passed out was Carver, his voice thick with wonder.

"My God," he breathed, "you're glorious."

Chapter Eight

I woke in Carver's arms, my head on his chest, his fingers playing in my hair. He was awake, lying quiet and still while I slept off my orgasmic stupor. Lifting my head, I smiled at him.

"Did I wake you?" he asked.

I shook my head and kissed him. I could taste myself on his lips, salty and sour. For some reason that turned me on incredibly, and I slid my thigh over his, rubbing it against the coarse hair at the base of his cock.

"My lady," Carver murmured, "you are insatiable."

"Can you blame me?" I asked, licking at his jaw. "Now I've discovered what I was missing."

Carver shook his head in faint disbelief. "He really did a number on you."

I said nothing. Carver held me away from him, looked for a long time at my body, and eventually said, "Who in the world would want to tame you?"

It was the right thing to say. I threw myself at him, kissing madly, stroking his body with my own, rolling to my back and arching my hips against the hardness of his erection.

But Carver rolled me again so that I was on top of him, and raised himself up on his elbows. He took my nipple into his mouth and sucked, his hands caressing my back, and I sighed and rubbed myself against him, finding his cock with my hands and sliding it into me.

It was unexpectedly beautiful, this new feeling of making love. With Fallyn it often felt as if he was having sex and I was just lying there. Carver introduced me to astonishing heights of pleasure, acts I'd dreamt of but never thought I'd experience.

Yesterday I'd had sex with two men. Last night Carver had put his mouth to my most private place.

Yet none of it felt quite as intimate as this. Arms and legs wrapped around Carver, I rose and fell on him as he held me, kissed me, made me feel precious and wanted. Those icy blue eyes met mine, and they seemed warmer somehow.

I fell apart in his arms, and he held me, kissed me, and shuddered out his own release inside me.

For a long while we lay together, still and quiet and comfortable. Silences with Fallyn had always been painful, bursting with words I was too angry to say. Silence with Carver meant that neither of us needed to say anything.

Eventually he said, "So what happens now?"

I yawned and stretched and said, "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Carver paused, then laughed softly. "I didn't mean that," he said, sitting up, "but if my lady wants food, then food she shall get."

I watched him pull on his clothes. The room was still lit by lamplight, the curtains still drawn. I wondered if the whole place really did function without tech. Even in the backwards Pennines, there was barely a single aspect of life that wasn't assisted by a computer chip.

"You've got to stop calling me my lady," I told Carver as he pulled on his boots. "People who've done what we've done together..."

He flashed that feral grin at me, and my insides heated up. "I know," he said. "But you're always a lady to me."

With that he left, promising to be back very soon with food, and I got out of bed to pad around, examining the room, the faded furniture, the heavy drapes. Peeping outside, I saw a vast courtyard, totally submerged in water. The ground was covered in sea life, plants and flat fish and weird, undulating creatures I had no name for. Seaweed waved in the current, festooning the walls of the building like ivy.

Versailles, he'd said. The Palace of Versailles. Before me was a courtyard that had seen the rise of the most decadent power in the world—and also its demise. Not a

particularly obtuse metaphor. I'd been a teenager during the Independence Wars, and they'd barely touched the British Isles. It seemed inconceivable to me to even think of the demise of a power as all-encompassing as the Empire, but then that was probably what Louis XVI thought, too.

I left the window and explored the room some more, finding a neat, functional bathroom that seemed slightly at odds with the faded grandeur of the bedroom. Nonetheless, I tested it out, and was luxuriating in a hot shower when a small sound made me aware there was someone else in the room with me.

Through the clouded glass of the shower screen, I couldn't make out who it was, but one breath of his scent told me not to be afraid.

"Carver," I said reproachfully, "it is traditional to knock."

"I did." He pulled back the screen and stood there, fully clothed, letting his gaze roam over my wet, naked body. My nipples puckered in response to his frankly appreciative expression, and I found myself smiling. Fallyn would never look at me naked, claiming it wasn't gentlemanly.

I leaned forward and curved my arm around Carver's neck, kissing him soundly. "I'm so glad you're not a gentleman," I said, and he looked confused for a moment. But only a moment, because then I started pulling his shirt off.

Grinning, he helped me divest him of the rest of his clothes, then climbed in with me and pressed that big, hard, naked body of his against me. We kissed, lovely hot naked kisses, and I reached down to find him hard and ready for me.

"I want you inside me," I whispered, knowing he could hear me over the rush of the water. "I love having you inside me."

"You could drive a man mad," Carver groaned, but he lifted me by the hips and pressed me against the wall, holding me there as he pushed inside me.

His thick cock stretched me deliciously, bringing awake every nerve ending I had. Wrapping my legs around his waist, gripping his shoulders tight, I felt his muscles flex and bunch as he drove into me.

"Harder," I gasped. "Really hard."

He pounded into me. Raw, hard strokes. A deep, primal fuck that had me gasping, then moaning, then screaming as I came. But Carver wasn't finished yet. His hands, slippery with soap, parted my buttocks and found the tight hole between them. One finger pressed against it, and I yelped, hot sweet pleasure rushing over me.

Carver paused. "No?" he said.

"Yes," I moaned. "More."

His finger pushed inside, carefully, gently, while his strokes slowed in time. Pretty soon he was slowly fucking me, front and back, his cock and his finger moving with agonizing slowness, driving me to peaks of madness.

"I never thought," I gasped. "I didn't know..."

"It's good?" Carver asked, his fangs grazing my throat.

"It's good. Oh God, yes, bite me."

A second of pain, and then delirious pleasure flooded me as Carver took my blood and my body, penetrating me in every way possible. A deep quake started inside me, growing to an orgasm that filled my whole body, rocking through me like lightning, making me glorious.

I screamed and shouted and clung to him, the only solid thing left in the world, my whole body spasming and out of control in the most delicious way.

He bit deep into me when he came, a roar shuddering through him. The pleasure was so intense I blacked out for a moment, and came back to myself to find him licking at my neck, healing the wound he'd made.

Carefully, as if I were made of glass, he lifted me out and dried me, wrapping me in a robe and kissing my forehead.

"I'm not a child," I said as he dried my hair.

"Most definitely not," he said, briefly sliding his hand inside my robe to caress my breast. "But you are precious. Let me take care of you."

Waiting on the table in the bedroom was a small mountain of food, which I fell upon like a starving woman. Well, it had been more than a day since I'd eaten anything. Fallyn had always disapproved of my large appetite, which wasn't ladylike, but that

was one area where I'd stood firm. He might not like me being a tiger, but I couldn't help it, and a big predator needed lots of food.

Carver watched me eat with a faint smile on his face. He had a plate of cold meat in front of him, but barely picked at it.

"You're not hungry?" I said.

He gestured to his fangs, hidden now. "I've eaten."

"So you don't need normal food?"

"No. I can eat it, but I don't need it. This is all for you."

"How did you know – "

"You're a tiger, my lady. I wouldn't expect you to eat like a bird."

I finished the massive bowl of soup I'd started with, and reached for a drumstick. "Where does all this come from?"

"There are vendors. It's like a small city – "

"No," I smiled, "I mean where outside of Versailles? I guess you could keep animals here, but how do you feed them? Where do they get grain, or plants, without sunshine? You can't tell me all this grows underwater," I said, gesturing to a tomato.

"I can," Carver said. "They have hydroponics."

"I thought there was no tech here?"

"No. The sunlight is manufactured by some kind of fae. They store it in their wings or something." He shrugged. "Don't ask me about sunlight."

I cocked my head. "So it's true then? That vampires can't tolerate it?" I frowned, putting down the bone I'd just chewed dry and picking up another piece of meat. "I'm sure I've seen you about in the day before."

"You have, but never in direct sunlight." He reached over for the chicken bone I'd just discarded and twirled it between his fingers. "Consider it a severe allergy."

"And the rest of it? Garlic, crosses, all that?"

He shrugged. "Garlic's another allergy. As for crosses, that only works if it's backed up by belief. And you'd have a hard time finding anyone in the Empire who still believes in God."

"What about outside the Empire?" I asked softly.

Carver gave that half smile. "Let's just say there was more than one reason I never liked your husband."

I took in a deep breath and let it out, putting down my food and bracing myself. I'd have to face this sooner or later.

"And the other reason?"

Carver's eyes met mine, that curious pale blue darkening as he considered me. "Did you never ask yourself why an Imperial Traitor wasn't hiding underwater?"

"I didn't know about underwater until today," I reminded him.

"You must have realized the Prince's Army went somewhere."

I shrugged, realizing I'd never thought about it.

"Working for the Governor," Carver said, his eyes steady on mine. "A representative of the Empire, even somewhere as remote as the Pennines. Not the smartest choice for someone who wants to stay under the radar."

"Then why did you?" I asked.

He was silent a while, then he said, "Because I'd never seen anything as fine as you."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Qiana was proud of you, you know," he said, and I stared, because I'd never expected my mother to come into the conversation. "Had pictures of you all over the place. She asked me to take care of you. Knew a storm was coming."

"A storm?" I croaked.

"Independence Wars. Been going on for years, but it was the Prince who had everyone worried. She was a supporter of his, under the radar. She's the one who introduced me to him."

My gaze suddenly flew to Carver's sword, leaning in the corner. "The Royal Guard," I said.

"Aye. I switched sides to defend him. Middle of a pitched battle, not the best time to do it. I suppose I saw the light," he said mockingly. Then his expression sobered. "He's the only person apart from you I've ever had any belief in," he said.

I didn't know what to say to that, either.

The Prince had, slightly unexpectedly, led the final phase of the Independence Wars. Turning against his uncle the Emperor, he led his own army in a spectacular set of battles that came reasonably close to success. A few months later, the Emperor agreed to meet him for peace talks, but the Prince was murdered before he arrived. At the same time, his heavily pregnant wife was also brutally killed by members of the Prince's own Guard.

The Emperor proclaimed it to be an insider betrayal, and the Prince's Army splintered into factions. With no leader, and beset by arguments about the Prince's death, the Prince's Army was slaughtered by Imperial troops.

"So that's why you're an Imperial Traitor?" I said. "Because of the plot against the Prince?"

Carver's face hardened with anger. "The plot against the Prince never came from inside," he said. "The Emperor set up the whole thing and pinned it on us. Do you know what it's like to see a pregnant woman murdered? I wish I didn't."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Aye, well, so am I. Some Guard I am," he said bitterly.

I didn't know what I could possibly say to make him feel better, so I got up and went to kneel by his chair, slipping my arms around his waist and laying my head in his lap.

"Don't kneel to me," Carver said irritably.

"I'll kneel to anyone who's saved my life," I said, lifting my head. "Several times."

Carver said nothing, but he touched my hair, stroked the damp waves, and gradually, the silence became comforting. I stood up, held out my hand and led Carver to the bed, wrapping my arms around him and holding him close, because he was precious and I wanted to take care of him.

"You know it wasn't an accident," he said after a while. "Your mother."

"The hot tub full of champagne? It was the way she'd have wanted to go," I said idly, then what he'd said sank in and I frowned.

"The Emperor knew she sympathized with the Prince. She covered it well, but after George and I escaped —"

"George?" I said incredulously.

"His brain, my brawn, and Qiana's distraction," Carver said. "She wouldn't let us be food for the buzzards, she said."

"Yes, but ... George? He fought for the Prince?"

"Hacked for him is more what he did. Got into encrypted files, battle plans, that sort of thing. Helped us get the drop more than once." Carver paused, then said, "He was due to be executed with me."

I tightened my grip on him at that. "George isn't his real name, is it?"

"Nope. Carver's not mine, either."

"What is it?"

Carver smiled, and it gave way to a soft laugh. "Do you know, I actually have no idea," he said. "Carver was just a nickname the Carnalis street rats gave me."

"Dare I ask why?"

His hand formed a fist. "You can probably guess. I enlisted in the Imperial Army as John Doe, and the troops started calling me Necker after they saw me biting someone. They thought we were just making out. When the Prince heard that, he laughed, because apparently Necker was some hero of an ancient revolution in France."

"The French Revolution?" I asked drily. "The one that overthrew the owners of this palace?"

Carver gave me a look. "Maybe you learned about history, my lady, but it wasn't considered important in the gutter."

I kissed his shoulder. "You weren't really from the gutter?"

"Near as damn it. Before you ask, yes, I was a vampire from birth and no, I don't know who my parents were. Plenty of street rats running wild around Carnalis don't know who theirs were, either."

I nuzzled his neck, sad for the child he'd been. "Did the Prince give you your other names?"

"Some of them, why?"

"Because Culper was a spy ring in America when they fought for independence, and Rainsborough and Sexby fought in the English Civil War, against the king."

Carver was silent a moment, then he said, "Passionate, brave, beautiful. All this, and intelligent too."

"I'm not brave," I said, thinking of all those lost and frustrated years when I'd never stood up to Fallyn.

"You are from where I'm standing."

"You're lying down."

"I'm paying you a compliment, woman."

"Woman?" I smiled. "Not lady?"

"Ladies don't tease," Carver said, rolling to face me. He pulled me against him, sliding my leg over his hip. After our shower together, we both wore only bathrobes, and it wasn't hard to part the fabric and press skin to naked skin.

"Ladies don't do half the things I've been doing with you," I said. "Which is why being a lady is so very, very dull."

"I have never found you dull," Carver said, unfastening my robe as I rubbed my thigh over his, enjoying the friction from the hairs on his leg. He exposed my breasts and framed them with his hands. "I find you luminous, my lady."

"And I find you embarrassing," I said, "paying me all these compliments when it's pretty clear you don't need to."

"Of course I need to," he said.

"I mean," I parted my legs and felt the hot slide of his cock between my thighs, "you're already going to get what you want from me."

So briefly I wondered if I'd imagined it, a look of grief came over Carver's face. As if he already knew what he was going to lose.

Then it vanished, and he smiled and kissed me, and slid inside me, and made me come undone in his arms all over again.

Chapter Nine

"Do not betray us to the outside world," said the Mer King, and Carver bowed. He nudged me, and I curtsied. "You may live here in peace," the King said, and Carver thanked him and towed me away.

The Court of the Mer King was housed in a tall, grand room lined with mirrors on one side and windows on the other, looking out onto the aquatic courtyard. At one end was a galleried area, open to the water below, through which the Mer exited and entered. On the ground, they walked on two legs. In the water, their legs became tails, exactly like the illustrations I'd seen in books of fairy tales.

"I still have no idea how there's a giant hole in the floor, yet the place doesn't flood," Carver muttered as we passed it.

"It forms a vacuum," I said.

"So how is there fresh oxygen?"

"You said there were hydraulic pumps. Or maybe just lots of plants recycling the air. I don't know, I'm not an engineer."

"You could be." Carver glanced at me, caught my look of incomprehension. "A new life, my lady."

"What happens now," I said, realizing what he'd meant the previous day in bed.

"Exactly. You don't have to stay here. There are plenty of other cities underwater. Or even somewhere remote, up in the mountains perhaps –"

"Me?" I said. "What about you?"

A second's silence, then Carver said, "Whither thou goest, I will go." At my look of astonishment, he added, "I said I didn't know much about history. I didn't say I couldn't read."

I laughed and linked my arm through his, enjoying being close to him.

"I just don't want you to think you're stuck with me," Carver said. "You can go where you like, and I'll come with you if you need me —"

"I don't need you," I said, annoyed, "I want you."

He smiled, a genuine smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

I turned and kissed him, a simple pleasure but one I'd been denied for years. We meandered along the corridors of the ancient palace, lit only by flames or by phosphorescence, talking about the underwater city of Paris and how we might fit into it.

"I've only been trained to do useless things," I said. "Music and painting, and I wasn't very good at those."

"Rubbish," Carver said promptly. "You can cook, and you're a decent medic, and both of those are valuable skills. And you're smart, you know a lot. You could teach, maybe."

"And you?" I said. "Will you find someone else's daughter to guard?"

I said it lightly, but Carver's fingers tightened around my own. "I'm a soldier for hire," he said, "not a warm body to be rented out."

"I didn't mean —"

"I've waited seven years for you, my lady. I'll never —" his head turned as he spied something, "ever —" he slowed right down, "want anyone else —"

His whole body twisted away from me, and before I could quite register what was happening, he'd grabbed a man walking past us and kissed him, hard.

I stared, completely stunned. *I'll never want anyone else*, and then he's snogging a random stranger!

"Carver," I began, and then the stranger freed himself from Carver's grip, stepping back and pulling a sword in one fluid movement. The tip of it was against Carver's throat before I could take another breath.

"Give me one reason not to gut you right now," he said, and I leapt on him, clothes ripping as I changed shape mid-air, roaring in outrage at the audacity of someone daring to threaten my man.

I was a hairsbreadth from ripping out his throat when Carver said, "Nalina, stop. Don't kill him."

I snarled at the stranger, an unremarkable man with brown hair and forgettable features. So bland he was almost hard to see. I growled at him. I dug my claws into his chest just hard enough to let him know I could hurt him.

"Your pet, Carver?" said the stranger, apparently unafraid.

"My lady," Carver said evenly.

"And very loyal she is too. Call her off, would you? We'll talk."

Carver gave a bitter laugh. "She has her own mind," he said. "She'll call herself off. If she wants."

I glanced at Carver, cool and still in shades of blue. His hand rested casually on the hilt of his sword.

"Of course, the Mer King probably won't be happy about this sort of disturbance," the stranger said conversationally, as if he didn't have an angry tiger perched on his chest.

"Probably not," Carver said, "but if she rips out your throat, the disturbance will be over. And since you were supposed to have died seven years ago, I don't suppose you'll be missed."

The stranger was silent a moment, then he started to laugh. "My word," he said, smiling, "I won't harm you until we've talked."

"Your word you won't harm my lady," Carver said, "talk or no talk."

The stranger nodded, and I stepped off him, changing my shape and wrapping myself in my torn dress. Carver's arm went around my shoulders, possessive as hell.

The stranger got to his feet, dusting himself down, and frowned at the blood on his chest. "I can't harm her but she can gouge holes out of me?"

"Double standards," I said. "You're a man, you should understand that."

Carver shot me an amused look. "We should talk in private," he said, and the stranger nodded.

The Orangery at Versailles faced out onto formal gardens. They'd been formal before the French Revolution, and they were still formal now, despite being under a large amount of water. The Mer had sculpted aquatic plants into beautiful formations, and flitted about the empty fountains, playing with brightly-colored fish.

Carver and I faced the stranger under the cool stone arches of the cathedral-like Orangery. His hand had never left his sword the whole time, and as I noticed this I realized both men carried swords. Even considering the low-tech nature of the underwater city, that was unusual. Who was this man? Another former Royal Guard?

"John Carver," said the stranger, "according to news reports. Although I think I'd rather call you Sexby. Or maybe Brutus." I frowned at that, but he went on, "So this must be Nalina Bradwell, concubine-killer."

"It was self-defense," I said, not entirely truthfully.

The stranger gave an unhappy smile. "All this and beautiful too. I can see why my uncle wants you for his harem," he said.

At first I thought he was joking. But when neither he nor Carver said anything, I realized he actually meant it.

"Your uncle," I said, feeling sick. The sword, *Give me one reason not to gut you right now*, and Carver's sudden burst of passionate devotion.

"My uncle the Emperor," said the Prince, and as I watched his features came into focus, as if a veil was falling away from his face and letting me see him clearly for the first time. Blond hair, in need of a cut. Blue eyes. Strong, noble features.

A glamour. He'd been wearing a glamour.

"Your uncle, the Emperor, who clearly was unsuccessful in having you assassinated," Carver said, his eyes steady on the only other person he'd ever believed in.

"Not that clearly," the Prince said. "In seven years no one else has seen through the glamour."

"No one else knew you like I did," Carver said. "Why Sexby?"

"Because Sexby plotted to kill Cromwell," I said, and Carver looked confused. "English Civil War. Cromwell led the revolt against the king."

"Did Cromwell succeed?"

"Yes. The king was executed. Sexby fought for Cromwell, but when he went too far, Sexby plotted his assassination. And failed."

"You know your history," the Prince said.

"I know this man never planned your death," I said, looking him right in the eye.

The Prince sighed. He turned away and paced toward the high curved windows, looking out at the Mer garden. "He's a soldier for hire, my lady," he said. "Anyone's for the highest bidder."

"Spat into the world to cause death and misery," Carver said flatly. "Never happier than when slitting throats for money."

The Prince turned, looked sadly at Carver. "I wanted you to be more."

"He is more," I said, clutching Carver's hand tightly. "After all, I'm not paying him."

"Besides," Carver said. "If I'd been hired to kill you and your wife, I'd have killed you and your wife. And I wouldn't have been found unconscious at the scene, surrounded by dead Imperial troops."

"Twelve of them," the Prince said bitterly. "Twelve of them to take you down."

There was silence between them. I didn't know what to say, so out of my depth I might have been out in the water, drowning.

Finally, abruptly, the Prince turned his gaze on me. "My lady Nalina," he said. "You appear to have inspired devotion in both my uncle and my former First Sword."

"I don't think what the Emperor feels for me is devotion," I said dryly.

"No. In fact according to the news feeds, he's after your blood. As I suppose Carver is, in a different way."

My hand went up to the healing wounds on my neck where Carver had bitten me.

The Prince walked toward us, his gait elegant, like a cat. He took my face in his hand and turned it this way and that.

"Touch her once more," Carver said quietly, "and I will end you."

The Prince smiled and dropped his hand. "Do you love her, Carver, as you loved me?"

"I love her more," Carver said, and I squeezed his hand in mine.

"Very touching. I loved a woman once," the Prince said to me. "She died on Carver's watch."

"I did everything I could," Carver began fiercely, then stopped. Passed his hand over his face. He touched the scar running past his eye, and said, "If I trust you with my woman, will you believe me?"

Both of us frowned at him.

"I would give my life to protect her," Carver said, touching my cheek, "but I'll give her to you for one hour. She's wanted by the Empire. You could hand her over, and they'd kill her, and that would be punishment enough for me, don't you think?"

The Prince was silent a moment. Carver said, "I will trust you with her, as you trusted me with Annique."

"I could kill her," the Prince said.

"You could try," I replied, which made him smile.

"I did not kill your wife," Carver said steadily. "Seven years ago you trusted me more than anyone else to take care of her. Remember that trust. It wasn't founded on nothing."

"Maybe it was."

"You're not a stupid man," Carver said. "You didn't make me First Sword on a whim."

Silence stretched. I glanced at Carver, and he squeezed my hand. I think it was meant to be comforting, but it didn't help much.

"One hour," the Prince said. "Your chambers."

"If you've harmed her even in any tiny way, I will kill you," Carver said.

"I'd expect nothing less."

The Prince walked over to the windows, and I turned to Carver, hissing, "Are you mad?"

"Yes," he said irritably, "didn't you know? Listen, he won't hurt you. He's the only person I know who is more devoted to the concept of integrity and honor than you are. He needs to be reminded how much he once trusted me. And if showing that I trust him is the only way I can do that, then I will."

I searched his fathomless eyes.

"Please, Nalina. I once loved him immeasurably, and now he hates me."

Like me with Fallyn. It was a terrible thing to see love turn to hate.

"One hour," I said, and relief flooded his face. He crushed me against him, arms tight around me, and kissed me long and deep. His mouth did more incredible things to me in less than two minutes than Fallyn had managed in seven whole years.

When he finally pulled away, both of us were breathing hard and I'd half a mind to tell the Prince to sod off so we could get naked. From the look on Carver's face and the bulge in his pants, I'd say he was thinking the same thing.

"Don't let me disturb you," the Prince drawled.

Ignoring him, Carver cupped my face in his. "I love nothing in the world as much as you."

I licked my lips, still tingling from his kiss. "Not even the Prince?"

"Not even the Prince." He brushed his lips over mine once more, held me close and breathed in the scent of my hair. Then he released me, pointed his sword at the Prince and said, "One hour."

"One hour," said the Prince, and Carver turned on his heel to stalk away.

"You know," the Prince began, and I rounded on him.

"No. Stop. Shut up. I don't care who you are." To my horror, tears burned my eyes. I hadn't cried when Fallyn took half a dozen bullets, and I hadn't cried when my father was turned to dust in front of me. But at the prospect of anything hurting Carver, I wanted to curl up and sob.

Either that, or kill something.

"So it's mutual then," the Prince said, and I sniffed hard.

"When the Arcadians attacked my house, everyone ran except Carver. He came back to a crumbling, burning house, to rescue me."

"From what I've seen, you don't require much rescuing."

I looked at my hands, where tiny flecks of blood remained from my attack on the Prince in the Hall of Mirrors. "No, but he came all the same."

The Prince nodded, then held out his hand to me. "It's cold here," he said. "We said we'd meet Carver back at your quarters." He paused. "I assume they're joint quarters."

I nodded, and after a moment took the Prince's hand. We walked from the Orangery in silence, then I said, "If you hurt him, I'll kill you."

"I know," said the Prince.

"And if you hurt me, I'll kill you."

"No, you won't." He looked slightly amused. "Carver'll get there first."

I led the way back to the room I'd shared with Carver. His scent was all over it, no longer alien but utterly familiar. Comforting.

And I realized I loved nothing in the world as much as him.

Chapter Ten

"He was a brilliant fighter," said the Prince, who had asked me to call him Edward. I wasn't sure about that, and so far I'd refrained from calling him anything. "Completely fearless. Just didn't care if he lived or died. John Doe, the legend. I heard about him when he was a foot soldier in the Imperial Army. Of course, I was on the same side at the time."

"You ran the army for your uncle," I remembered.

"Until I got tired of fighting through all those rebellions. They were just people who wanted to govern themselves, and be free of all this constant prying the Empire does. The more I listened to them, the more I realized they were right. My uncle is corrupt. Horribly so. He takes everything and gives nothing back. Even your Carver, a man who became famous for ripping out the throat of anyone who got in his way, finally saw the truth."

I touched my own neck, and said, "He killed the people he fed on?"

"Sometimes. He's an animal, Nalina. Brutal, visceral. Lives for food and sex. Takes what he wants, no matter who it belongs to. He became obsessed with you before he'd even met you. Saw the pictures your mother kept."

I narrowed my eyes. "I thought you knew him," I said.

"I do."

"You don't. Or you're lying. Because why would you have left an animal to guard your wife?"

The Prince said nothing for a moment, but a small smile touched his lips. He was a handsome man, more handsome than Carver would ever be, and he had an air of

refinement about him that I might have found attractive before Fallyn's refinements had bored me half to death.

"Even wild animals can be tamed," he said, and my fist curled into a violent ball. "A vicious dog will be loyal to its master."

"And a tiger can live happily in captivity? No, sir, I don't think it can."

We eyeballed each other, and then I said, as levelly as I could, "He could have killed me once, three or four years ago. He certainly could have hurt me. He might have attempted a rape. But he never did. Seven years he spent sleeping in the outhouse under my window, sir, seven years. And he never took what he wanted. If he was so obsessed, if he's such an animal, don't you think he might have?"

For a long while the Prince was silent. His hand curled by his mouth, he stared into nothingness, while I restlessly jumped to my feet and paced around, making myself angrier and angrier. This intelligent, worthy man, a man who wanted to end the tyranny of the Empire and hand freedom back to the people—this man was so shortsighted he couldn't even see what Carver really was.

"Oh Nalina," the Prince said eventually, and I glanced round at the tone of his voice. Regret, mixed with wonder. "I'm so glad you finally saw him."

I stared, caught off guard, confused.

The Prince gave a small smile. "I wouldn't have made an animal my First Sword, would I?"

I stared some more. Then I narrowed my eyes. "You meant—you didn't mean—I mean—"

He laughed. "Nalina, this man used to share a bed with me and my wife. The rest of the world thought he had the morals of a laser rifle, and in fact I suspect he rather enjoyed letting them think that. But under all that anger and hate and selfishness, there's a good man buried."

"Admittedly he might be buried rather deep," I said, and we both smiled. Prince Edward gestured me to sit back down again, and poured some wine for us both.

"He has a good heart," he said. "It's just rather grimy. And he loves you, that's pretty obvious. I've never met a man so fearless in his devotion."

I smiled shyly, because it was a little daunting to be the subject of such devotion. Then I cocked my head. "Shared a bed with you and your wife?" I asked, and Edward laughed.

"I wondered if you'd pick up on that. Yes, he did. Annique was a passionate woman, an absolute inferno. Before we were married she'd regularly take two men to her bed. Neither of us saw any reason to change that. I knew it was always me she'd wake up with," he explained. "And to be honest, I'm not immune to the charms of a third party."

I sat back in my chair. "Who chose Carver? You or your wife?"

Edward twirled his wineglass between his fingers. "It's funny, but it was Annique. She was the person who told me to trust Carver in the first place, and after I took her advice, he ended up being my right hand. And when she suggested he join us in bed, I wasn't even surprised."

The thought of it was making me a bit hot. I remembered the threesomes I'd seen in the Emperor's Hall of Pleasure. Not to mention the previous night with Carver and George. "So—did you..."

"Yes," Edward said, smiling.

"I didn't even ask!"

"Whatever it was, the answer is probably yes," Edward said, still smiling. He glanced at the antique clock on the mantelpiece, the kind with a dial and two arms that went round in a circle. "You can ask him when he gets back."

"We still have fifteen minutes."

"I suspect he'll be early."

I picked up my wineglass and sipped, suddenly nervous. And excited. Because I thought I knew what that look on Edward's face was.

Beneath the robe I'd changed into, my nipples puckered.

Of course, he might be making all this up. He might be just like his uncle, and trying to get me into bed by whatever means necessary. Just because I had an impulse to go over there and see what his mouth tasted like didn't mean I should. Carver probably wouldn't be very happy if he walked in and saw me snogging the man who'd accused him of murder.

But then, Carver's immediate reaction on seeing Edward had been to kiss him.

"What?" asked Edward softly, and I realized I was chewing my lip.

"Did you ever call him Brutus?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"For the last seven years. You have a beautiful mouth."

"Perhaps Mark Antony might be more appropriate. The friend who stayed loyal to Caesar."

"They shared a lover."

"He exposed Brutus as one of the assassins," I said, trying to cool myself down.

"And stabbed himself when he thought Cleopatra was dead," Edward said thoughtfully. "A loyal man."

"Exactly. To his friend and to his woman."

"Well, not exactly to his woman. He was married to another woman when Cleopatra bore his children," said Edward, watching me. "Are we really talking about history?"

"We're distracting ourselves," I told him. "At least, I am."

"From what?"

"From all this talk of men sharing lovers." When Edward raised his eyebrows, I explained, my cheeks hot, "It's not that I think it's a bad idea. But it's not a good idea to start anything before Carver walks in—"

I broke off as the door opened. Edward smiled to himself and murmured, "Ten minutes."

Carver paid him no attention, striding forward and grabbing me from my chair, yanking me against his body and kissing me so long and deep I nearly had an orgasm on the spot.

"Are you all right?" he said against my mouth, his eyes glittering bright and fierce. "Did he hurt you? Are you safe?"

"I'm fine," I said, smiling. I touched his hair and leaned into him, his warmth and strength and devotion. I loved this man. I loved him so fiercely it brought tears to my eyes.

Carver noticed, and his face burned bright with fury as he spun on Edward. "What did you do to her?"

Edward held up his hands. "Nothing."

"Carver, I'm fine," I repeated. "He didn't do anything."

Carver didn't look like he believed either of us.

"At a guess, those tears are happiness. At having you back, Carver," Edward explained, clearly fighting a smile.

Carver glanced at me, and I nodded, slid my arm around his waist and leaned on him. I felt the tension slide out of his body as he held me for a moment, then led me to the small chaise and sat down with his arm possessively around me.

Edward watched with amusement. He poured a third glass of wine for Carver, who took it suspiciously, and sniffed at it before drinking.

"Nalina and I were talking about the old days," Edward said.

"Nalina and you don't have any old days," Carver said. "You met an hour ago."

"Whereupon she tried to rip out my throat. I can see you two are a perfect match." Edward saluted us with his glass.

"You threatened to kill him," I pointed out.

"Fair enough." Edward sipped his wine and eyed Carver. I tried to imagine the two of them together, two very different men despite all the things they had in common. Carver's body was lean and scarred, and in comparison Edward seemed almost elegant. He was blond, where Carver was dark. His features had a noble, chiseled look, in contrast to Carver's unshaven, weather-beaten and scarred face.

"What 'old days' were you talking about?" Carver asked, and Edward and I exchanged a look. It was full of heat, that look.

"The days when you used to kiss me, without anybody trying to kill anybody else."

I felt Carver's muscles tense. "Oh," he said noncommittally. "Those days."

"Days where there would be three of us," Edward said, his eyes turning dark, so dark I blinked because they looked almost black. Precisely what kind of creature was he?

"Or nights, more accurately," Carver said.

"Usually," said Edward, smiling slightly. He sipped his wine, never taking his eyes off Carver.

The tension in the room was almost unbearable.

"Let me get this straight," Carver said. "You've decided I didn't plot to kill you, or your wife, and you want to celebrate by getting naked with me. And Nalina."

"That's as straight as you're going to get it," Edward said, dark eyes shining.

Carver turned his eyes on me. In contrast to the Prince's, they were pale blue, bright and intense. "What do you think?" he said.

"I think somebody better take their clothes off before I explode," I said, and Edward burst out laughing.

"I think that's a yes," he said, and before either of us could move, he'd gone to his knees in front of Carver and kissed him passionately.

It was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen. Nothing in the Emperor's pleasure hall could possibly compare to the heat and passion between these two men. And I had a pretty good view. I watched Edward cup Carver's face in his hands and tilt his head, their lips moving together almost tenderly. Carver's hand came up to Edward's shoulder, and as his sleeve fell away I caught a glimpse of metal from his bionic arm. There was more strength in that arm than there was in the whole of most male bodies.

Unkempt dark hair mixed with gleaming blond strands as they kissed, bodies arching together. My nipples were tight, hard and aching, and between my legs a frantic pulse beat. Neither man was clean-shaven and I could hear the rasp of their beards against one another.

My own hand stole inside my robe and caressed my heavy, aching breast. Watching them was deliriously hot, but I desperately wanted to join in.

Eventually they surfaced, both breathing hard, and Edward pressed his forehead against Carver's.

"I've missed you," he murmured, and Carver brushed his fingers through Edward's hair with a tenderness that made me jealous. Then he glanced at me, and so did Edward, and both of them stared at my fingers pinching my own nipple.

"Oh, but this won't do," Edward said, removing my hand and replacing it with his own. As his coarser fingers brushed my soft flesh, I moaned and reached out for Carver, pressing my lips where Edward's had just been and kissing him deeply.

Carver's hand cupped my other breast, stroking and kneading, as Edward dipped his head and took my nipple into his mouth. I gasped, a high sharp sound, and then moaned as one of them—I no longer had any idea which—pushed my robe aside and slipped his hand between my legs.

I writhed against that hand, arching against it, biting into Carver's lip and being rewarded with a growl. I tugged at his clothes, discovering as I did that while he had one hand on my breast, the other was tangled in my hair, so it must be Edward who was stroking my pussy.

With Carver's shirt open, I began kissing my way down his neck to his chest, his lovely firm, muscular chest, scarred here and there from God only knew what manic, fearless fighting. I slid my hands over his lean body, walking my fingers down his ribs, sweeping in circles over his stomach. I unfastened his fly to release his cock, straining against the fabric.

As I took Carver's thick cock into my hand, Edward left my breast and kissed my stomach. Then my thigh. Then he pressed his mouth against my bare pussy, and I trembled in unexpected orgasm.

"Mmm," he said appreciatively, as if he'd just tasted a delicious wine. "She's so responsive."

"She's also not deaf," Carver muttered, and I smiled up at him before going back to the serious business of licking his chest all over.

"Your pardon," Edward said formally, his dark eyes shining at me. "You're so responsive. And delicious," he added, giving me a thoughtful lick that made me shudder before leaving me and getting to his feet.

I watched from the corner of my eye as Edward undressed, standing naked and handsome before me. His skin had a warmer hue than Carver's, but then he didn't need to worry about sunburn half as severely as Carver did. The scattering of hair on his chest and groin was golden, and his cock stood up proud. It was maybe a little longer than Carver's, but not as thick.

"I think," I said, trying not to stare, "I think we ought to do this on the bed."

"I think you're right," Edward said, and held his hand out to me, as if he were helping me alight from a boat.

I took Edward's hand, and held my own out to Carver. His face serious, he took it, then used it to pull me against his mostly clothed body and kiss me deeply. While Edward held onto my other hand, I don't think he was under any illusions about Carver's message. I belonged to the vampire, and the Prince had better not forget it.

Carver released me to lie down on the bed with Edward while he undressed in record time. When he joined us, Edward was gently kissing my lips, hands roaming over my hips and thighs, molding my body against his. Carver rolled against me from behind, sliding his cock between my legs and rubbing it against me.

His hot length caressed the wet, swollen folds of my pussy and I moaned against Edward's mouth. He smiled, reached down and caressed my clit before reaching for Carver's cock and feeding it into me.

Being filled by one man while another kissed and touched me was so glorious I can barely describe it. Carver raised my thigh up to give Edward better access as he stroked me, kissing and licking my breasts. Then he moved down my stomach again to lick the folds stretched wide around Carver's thickness, and I actually yelped.

Carver rolled to his back, taking me with him, and turned my head to kiss my mouth while Edward did the same to my pussy. He licked and sucked at my clit, and all the while Carver drove into me. I was fairly sure Edward was also licking Carver. His tongue was caught between Carver's balls and my clit on more than one occasion, which made my eyes cross with pleasure.

When I came, I came hard. With a thick cock inside me and a mouth on my pussy, the stimulation was so great it had me screaming. My back arched, pushing my breasts against Carver's hands, and he rolled my nipples between his fingers as he thrust harder and harder into me. After a few seconds I could barely breathe, bucking and gasping. Torn between desperately wanting more and not sure I could survive it.

But neither man let up, and before long I was pretty sure I was going to die from excessive orgasms. My whole body was a quivering mass of nerve-endings, and each one of them was on fire.

"Stop," I gasped, "stop, I can't bear it."

Edward raised his head. "Stop?" he enquired lazily.

Hardly able to breathe, I nodded. Carver ceased thrusting into me, and for a few seconds I lay sprawled across him, sucking in lungfuls of air.

"Has anyone ever died from this?" I asked, when I had enough breath.

"I couldn't think of a sweeter way to go," Carver said, feathering his lips over my ear.

Somehow, I gathered enough strength to slide off his body, leaving him lying there with his cock standing high and throbbing, glistening with the evidence of my orgasms.

I crawled down his body, and gave it a lick.

Carver shuddered, so I did it again. Then Edward, smiling, moved to Carver's other side and did the same thing. With two tongues sliding up and down the length of his cock, Carver moaned.

Before long, Edward and I were clashing tongues, licking my come from each other's lips, and all but kissing around the straining girth of Carver's swollen cock.

When Edward moved up to take the head of it into his mouth, I moved down to lick and suck Carver's balls, taking them into my mouth and making appreciative noises that had him howling.

Despite the toll my earlier multiple climaxes had taken on me, I felt myself getting distinctly wetter again. My own hand slid down my body to caress my breasts, then slip between my legs to fondle and soothe my own aching flesh.

Carver saw what I was doing, and motioned me to move so he could stroke me instead. I did, and felt the bliss of his fingers pushing into me, pinching my clit and rubbing my labia between his fingers.

I stroked under his heavy sac, finding the sensitive area behind his balls that made him gasp out my name. Slipping further, my hand wet with my own juices, I pressed against his anus, and he yelped.

"I'm going to come," he panted. "I'm nearly there."

Edward pulled his head back and massaged Carver with his hand until he erupted, a hot spurt of sticky come that Edward caught in his hand and used to massage Carver's perineum. Pushing against his anus, he slipped one finger inside.

"I remember," Carver said raggedly, "you were always a hard taskmaster. Never gave me time to recover."

"It's the only way to increase stamina," Edward agreed, before leaning forward and kissing Carver's lips. Then he withdrew his hand and fisted his own cock, standing hard and upright. Since he was clearly desperate for some attention, and I needed someone inside me, I reached out and stroked it.

Edward gave a gasp, and said, "Carver. You don't mind, do you?"

Carver's head flopped back against the pillows. "So long as you let me watch."

Chapter Eleven

Edward grinned and laid me out on my back beside Carver, spreading my thighs wide and pushing that long cock of his inside me. I lay back and simply let him pleasure me, kissing my mouth and stroking my breasts.

"Three men in as many days," Carver marveled, and I turned my head to smile lazily at him. "Perhaps Fallyn had a point," he added, and some of my glow faded. Guilt crept up on me.

"Fallyn?" panted Edward.

"Neo-Puritan husband," Carver explained. Then with contempt, "He tried to tame her."

"Lunacy," Edward said. "Who in the world would want you to be tame?"

I smiled at that, then laughed, joy returning. Edward kissed me, then so did Carver, pressing his body close against my side.

He stroked my breasts, and murmured, "This morning, in the shower. I touched you..." His hand trailed down my side, over my hip and the leg Edward held upraised. Carver's fingers slipped between my buttocks.

I moaned.

"You liked it?"

He was testing me. I cupped his cheek and said, "Very much."

Carver smiled, almost shyly, and rolled away from me to get something from his discarded coat. It was a small tube, and when Edward saw it he laughed.

"Is that for me or her?" he asked. "Or you?"

"What is it?" I asked, and then looked closer. Lubricant. "I'm not sure I need that," I said as drily as I could with my whole body quaking from Edward's efforts. I was dripping wet, and they both knew it.

"You might at the back," Edward said, and I blushed at my own mistake. Passionate, maybe, but I was still such a beginner.

Edward rolled me over so I was on top of him, and held my hips steady so he could plunge up into me without making me move too much. Behind me, Carver knelt and spread my buttocks, kissing me there. I shivered, and beneath me Edward smiled.

"Relax," he said. "If you want it, it can be glorious."

Carver began stroking my anus, spreading cold lube that made me jump. "It'll warm up," he assured me, and he was right. Within moments my skin was as heated as it had ever been. Maybe more.

Carver pressed gently with one finger, slid it in and pushed in and out, mimicking Edward's motions only an inch or two away. It felt mildly pleasurable, but it wasn't what I wanted.

"More," I said, and they both laughed, rich dark laughs of enjoyment. Carefully, Carver spread my back entrance, probing gently with a second finger. Then a third.

By now I was gasping, beginning to understand what Edward had meant about glory. When Carver knelt behind me and began to slowly push his cock inside, I found myself panting, gripping Edward's shoulders.

"Don't tense up," he said, massaging my back and stilling his thrusts as Carver penetrated me. "Keep your muscles relaxed, and it will feel much better."

"Better?" I gasped. "How could it be better than this?"

As Carver covered my body with his, I thought I might die from sheer pleasure. Not just the physical joy coursing through me at every move either of my men made, but the uninhibited glory of finally freeing myself to do and be what I wanted.

I was never meant to be tame. I was meant to be wild and glorious, loving hard and fierce, taking pleasure and giving it in equal measure.

Two men made love to me, a prince and a mercenary, both outlaws, both dangerous and dark. And I threw back my head and reveled in it.

* * *

One lamp was lit, the flame turned down low, casting shadows over Carver's body as I lay beside him, utterly spent, unable to move.

"I don't know how you can even get out of bed," I said to Edward as he dressed, his hair still wet from the shower.

"Military discipline," he smiled, tugging his shirt on.

"You don't have to go."

Edward and Carver exchanged a look I didn't totally understand. "Three's a crowd," was all he said, before kissing me on the forehead, a strangely platonic gesture after all we'd shared. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Carver nodded, and Edward took his leave, both of them somehow reverting to an odd politeness that confused me.

"An hour ago you were all over each other," I said into the stillness.

"For pleasure. My guess is it's been a long time for him."

"You don't think he's been with anyone since his wife died?" Carver shook his head. "But..."

"But," Carver said, gathering me close so my head was nestled against his shoulder, "he loved her. They might have had other people in their bed, but it was always their bed. I never stayed long. Three, as they say, is a crowd."

I was silent a while, digesting this.

"He didn't want to intrude on us," I said, "on our being together."

"No. He was devoted to Annique," Carver said. "He understands how I feel about you."

I felt tears burn at my eyes, and I didn't know why, because when I thought about it, all I'd ever wanted was to love a man who loved me, passionately.

"I know," Carver began, pain in his voice. "I know I..."

I looked up at him, searching his face, but finding no clues. He looked miserable, but I didn't know why.

"Seven years," he said eventually. "Seven years, and I wanted you the first moment I saw you. And I could never figure out why I didn't just take you. Any other woman..."

"I know," I said, trying to add some levity. "I saw, remember?"

But that only made him look more pained. "They were never you. And you barely ever even looked at me, and I figured it would just pass, but then when I saw that Imperial squad headed for the house, I..."

"You came back," I said. "You're the only one who did." Carver opened his mouth again, but I put my finger against his lips. "Enough agonizing. You're here with me now."

"And I keep expecting to realize I'm dreaming," Carver said.

"Well, if that's the case then I don't want to wake up. Carver, I spent seven years sleepwalking. I talked and ate and let Fallyn have sex on me occasionally, but I might as well have been a ghost in my own life. And now I have no home, my father is dead and the Empire wants to kill me, and if someone offered to reverse all that at the cost of giving you up, I wouldn't do it."

Carver was silent a moment, and quite still, staring off at the distance. Then his eyes tracked to me, slowly, disbelievingly.

"I love nothing in the world as much as you," I said, and he stared at me as if I were speaking in tongues. "And if we spend the rest of our lives underwater, and never see the sun again, I don't care, as long as you're with me —"

He didn't let me get any further, grabbing me tight and pressing his face into my hair, breathing in my scent as if it contained his last breath. "I don't ever want to lose you," he said fiercely.

"You won't," I said, extracting myself before he crushed me, and tilting his face to look him in the eye, but he turned away to glare at nothing. A quiet war of emotions

broke out on his face, and once more I had the feeling he was seeing some terrible thing that was invisible to me.

"How can a man like me keep something as fine as you?" he said to the air.

"Carver," I said, trying to make him look at me.

"I love you with everything I have," he said, "but I will lose you. The world will notice, and take you away from me."

"Carver, you're frightening me," I said, and at that he did look at me. "Kiss me," I said, and he dragged himself back to the present and did just that, his body warming as I held it close.

"You won't lose me to anyone," I said, and I could almost convince myself he believed me.

* * *

"Where will you go?" asked Edward two nights later as we stood waiting on a platform hidden between the iron struts of a tall, triangular tower thrusting out of the dark water.

"For now, Orléans, and then wherever we can get a transport to," I said.

"George fixed your retinal records?"

I nodded. Carver had explained to me that before he took me from George's studio in Lyon, his hacker friend had found my retinal and fingerprint records and altered the data so that not one word of it related to me.

Edward embraced me, then Carver. "Good luck to you," he said.

"How can we contact you?" I asked.

"You can't." His gaze skittered away, his hands shoved in his pockets. "It's best this way."

"For who?" I asked.

"For everyone."

"Will you stay here?"

"Doubtful. I'm still trying to find somewhere that doesn't remind me of Annique." He looked back at us. "But I am glad I've seen you." He clasped Carver's shoulder. "I wanted—seven years—I never wanted it to have been you. But..."

"Doubt is a terrible thing," Carver said, as a faint light heralded the arrival of the boat taking us to the nearest city on land. The Mer standing silently by slid into the water and brought the vessel right up to the platform.

Edward kissed me, then Carver, and said to us both, "Good luck."

"You too," I said, and he gave a hollow smile.

"You won't betray me," he said, half request, half command.

"To who?" I said. "We're not planning on mixing with anyone from the Empire."

"The smallest whisper can travel," Carver said. "We'll say nothing to anyone."

"Not even each other," Edward warned, and we both promised to keep his secret.

* * *

When we reached Orléans, they were waiting for us.

The little boat pulled up at a slimy, half-forgotten dock, and the Mer who'd been piloting it slipped silently away before anyone could see him. Carver tied the vessel up, then leapt nimbly to the shore and extended his hand to me.

Then he went very still, and fell forward, statue-like, into the boat. It rocked violently, and I grabbed at him to keep him from falling into the dark water.

"Carver? What the— are you all right?"

A quiet whisper of sound was the only warning I had before a second dart hit me, and the world narrowed to one glint of light on an Imperial helmet, before fading completely.

* * *

"Did you really think," the Emperor said idly, "you could escape the Empire?"

He had me naked and in chains, shoved to my knees before his throne. Bruised and dirty, frightened and angry beyond belief, I'd spent countless hours in a cell. The shackles on my ankles and wrists, chains wrapped so tightly around my body that they

dug in, conspired to keep me from changing my shape fully. A metal collar had been clamped around my neck, deep enough to chafe my jaw and prevent me from altering my features enough to do any damage.

My hands had formed claws, but they were useless against the specially-equipped guards flanking me.

"Your Arcadian friends have all been captured," the Emperor continued, as if discussing the weather. "I had about half of them executed."

He waved his hand at the window, where bodies in varying states of decomposition could be seen strewn over the outer platform supporting the floating city of Carnalis. Many of them were familiar from the Pennine Isles. Several of them had been friends.

None of them belonged to Carver.

"Where is he?" I asked, my voice surprisingly calm considering the murderous rage coursing through every part of my body.

"Who?" the Emperor asked innocently.

"You know who."

He appeared to think about it, then suddenly come up with an idea. "Oh, your little pet? When you said 'he' I assumed you were talking about a man."

"He is a man," I said levelly, "a hundred times what you'll ever be."

"You wound me, Nalina," he said, making a little moue that made his court simper. They stood all around, the men and women I'd seen that night in the Hall of Pleasure. Richly dressed, hair spiked and flounced, faces painted.

I wanted to kill them all.

"Where. Is. He."

"It's in the dungeons somewhere. I suppose really we ought to get it out and execute it properly before it starves to death," said the Emperor. He waved at a couple of guards and they clomped off.

"Execute?" I said, working hard to keep my voice steady.

"It's what we do to Imperial Traitors."

"He's not a traitor. Give me one iota of proof that he's committed treason," I said.

A small door set in the paneling opened, and Carver was shoved through. The Emperor had been waiting for an opportunity to bring him out, I realized. I leapt toward him, grateful beyond belief he was even alive, but the wretched chains binding me so tightly just yanked me back, biting in and drawing a snarl of pain.

Carver looked terrible. He was naked, and hardly an inch of his body had been spared abuse. He was swaddled in even more chains than I was, and his seemed heavier too. Filthy and bleeding from a dozen places, he looked at the Emperor with murder in his eye.

Then he saw me, and had he not been held back by a dozen heavily armed, bionically enhanced guards, I think he'd have ripped out the Emperor's throat in a heartbeat.

"You swiving pig," he spat, thrashing and flailing against his bonds. "What have you done to her, you bottom-feeding turd —"

A metallic fist landed in his mouth, and Carver spat out blood. His eyes glowed a hot, electric blue. His lips peeled back over his teeth, which were bloody and broken.

"I will kill you and enjoy it," he promised, before three guards wrestled him to the floor and wrapped yards of rusty chain around his jaw, silencing him.

"Apart from its previous crimes," the Emperor said boredly, "it assisted in your escape. Harboring a known criminal carries a heavy penalty."

"I'm not a criminal," I said.

"You killed my Xyla," he snarled, the first emotion I'd seen from him since I entered.

"She killed my father," I snarled back. "With no provocation. He walked in —"

"Enough," said a voice from behind me, a female voice that made the Emperor scowl. I growled, a low deep tiger's growl, wanting with every fiber of my being to rip into his throat and spray his blood all over the throne room.

But I couldn't move more than an inch or two, so was restricted to turning my head and watching a woman walk by. Her skin was smooth, dark and gleaming, her

features elegant, her eyes like still water at midnight. She wore silk robes of crimson, her hair fashioned into an elaborate design of spikes and loops, and there was no trace of emotion on her face.

She was flanked by two young men of such immaculate beauty I couldn't believe they were real.

"My lady Empress," said the Emperor, as everyone around me bowed. I didn't move, and neither did Carver, although by now he was so heavily bound and gagged he couldn't if he'd tried.

She swept into the smaller throne beside his and regarded me and Carver dispassionately, her two attendants taking up stations behind her, each with a hand on her shoulder.

"For God's sake, if you want her in your harem just put her there. There's no need for this ridiculous charade."

"She killed Xyla —"

"You sent Xyla to be killed," said the Empress, casting her husband a look of contempt. She glanced at me and said, "He gets bored easily. Be careful, please him, and you might survive."

"Another man who wants to tame me," I said, by now beyond caring what the Emperor said or thought of me.

"That's all they ever want," said the Empress. Her disdainful gaze fell on Carver. "What is that?"

"An Imperial Traitor," said the Emperor.

"A good man," I said.

We glared at each other.

"Oh," the Empress said. "Kill it, then." She picked up a magazine.

Six soldiers raised laser rifles and aimed them at Carver.

"Wait," I shrieked. "Wait. He's not an Imperial Traitor. He didn't do the things you think he did."

"If it's the Xyla thing, you can't really pin that on him," said the Empress, flipping over a page.

"He murdered my nephew and his wife," said the Emperor.

"But he didn't," I burst out, gazing wildly at Carver for help. "The Prince is — " Carver's eyes, about the only part of him still visible, widened in horror.

You won't betray me.

" — the Prince is — "

I once loved him immeasurably.

Carver's blue eyes pleaded with mine.

" — isn't relevant," I finished weakly, and for a long second the entire room was silent.

"Glad we've cleared that up," said the Empress, going back to her magazine.

The Emperor was watching me. He couldn't have missed the communication between me and Carver.

"Xyla was a bitch," he said abruptly, and leaned back in his throne. "Join my harem, Nalina."

"Not for anything in the world," I said tiredly.

"Not even his life?"

I glanced at Carver, then back at the Emperor. And I realized that what the Emperor had seen wasn't our silent communication about Edward. He didn't care about the Prince. He cared that I loved Carver enough to make a sacrifice for him.

It had been his plan all along.

"Join me, or he dies," said the Emperor, and from the look on his face he knew he'd won.

I looked back at Carver, whose eyes were closed. When he opened them again they were so full of sorrow, so full of regret, that I knew this was what he'd feared. *I love you with everything I have, but I will lose you.*

I felt the tears start, and my voice wobbled as I said, loudly so he could hear through all those damn restraints, "I love nothing in the world as much as you."

Carver gave the tiniest of nods, and a tear spilled onto my cheek.

"You are mine," said the Emperor to me.

"God, I'm bored," said the Empress, to nobody in particular.

"Yours in body," I told the Emperor. "That's all."

"My dear, that's all I want." To the guards, he said, "Kill him."

And between one heartbeat and the next, they did. I had no time to scream, to move, to even blink, before the fire of six laser rifles arced silently toward Carver, bit through the chains binding him, and sent his body flying three feet in the air before it landed with a clatter and a thud on the polished marble floor.

I couldn't breathe. The air had turned to some solid stuff I couldn't ingest or even move through.

"Check it's dead, then throw it out," said the Emperor.

The world will notice, and take you away from me.

A guard in a biosuit shoved away the chains that had bound Carver and felt at his throat. How could he move when I couldn't? How could time be working for him and not me?

"No pulse," he said. "No breath."

He put his hand to the ruin of Carver's chest and said, a touch smugly, "No heartbeat."

"Throw it out then," said the Emperor, and someone hit a button that opened the large window overlooking the terrible terrace heaped with corpses. Two men picked up Carver's suddenly limp form, and I sucked in a breath, finding my voice in a scream.

"Do shut up," said the Empress.

Every breath was dragged in on a sob. Every heartbeat hurt. Every sound that came from my mouth sounded like an animal in pain.

"And you want this creature?" said the Empress to her husband.

"I'm beginning to wonder if I do," he said.

They tossed Carver's body out into the wind and the rain and the shrieking carcass-eaters of whatever Godforsaken shore we were currently floating by.

Scavengers immediately descended from the sky, their raucous, gleeful cries abruptly cut off as the window closed.

I stared in helpless horror as they landed on the body of the man I loved with everything I was.

"Come here," said the Emperor, and I turned my face to him. As soon as I was unchained I'd feast on his entrails, and welcome the laser fire that would follow.

"What else have you got to lose?"

"You. I've got you."

"She's ugly when she cries," said the Empress, studying me as if I were livestock she was considering buying.

I sucked in a shaky breath, and this time managed not to scream. "You said you'd let him live if I joined you."

"No," said the Emperor, "what I said was that I'd kill him if you didn't. Subtle difference."

I stared, appalled beyond measure. Outside, the screaming of the birds had reached such a pitch it even came through the glass. I couldn't bear to look that way.

"Bring her here," the Emperor commanded, and I was picked up off the ground and placed on my knees in front of the throne, between his legs. Fine, then. I'd bite off his dick and maybe rip into the femoral artery on the way. That ought to do enough damage.

Calmly, I smiled at him, and he looked vaguely unsettled as he unfastened his fly. There it was, meaty and thick and ready to be chewed into pieces. I opened my mouth—and Fallyn yelled, "Nalina, what are you doing?"

For one viciously surreal moment, I wondered if the whole of the last week had been a dream. But no. The Emperor's head jerked up, and in a reflex action he shoved my face away from his crotch.

The Empress laughed softly.

"Mr. Bradwell," she said, and both the Emperor and I stared at her, before I managed to turn my head enough to see Fallyn standing in the doorway, looking appalled.

"Fallyn?" I said in stark disbelief. Maybe I'd already died, and this was some sort of hideous afterlife.

"Nalina, get away from the Emperor! What do you think you're doing? What will he think?"

By now I wasn't the only one gaping. Plenty of people in the court seemed astonished that Fallyn was challenging the Emperor. Not to mention his prim shock at witnessing a near-miss sexual act. He strode toward me, a look of outrage on his face.

"I—" I began, and realized I had no idea what to say after that. "Aren't you dead?" I said eventually.

"Clearly not. And if you hadn't gone running off with that terrible creature your father employed, you might have found that out."

"But I saw you shot," I said. "A dozen times. They were using old-fashioned bullets. One of those can kill a person," I said, reciting facts as if they'd help me.

Fallyn looked a tiny bit embarrassed. "Ah," he said. "Yes, well. They might have killed me, except I've got rather a lot of bionics. Needed a huge amount of repair, of course, but not as badly damaged as I would have been with laser fire. Accident when I was a child," he explained into the silence that followed. "Most of my organs are made of metal now. I didn't tell you, because, well, you know I'm not a fan of bionics. All those enhancements seem, well, dishonest."

I stared at him. The Emperor stared at him. The Empress continued to read her magazine, a faint smile on her face.

"You knew this," the Emperor accused her.

"My love," she said, her voice devoid of all emotion, "why would I possibly be interested in the medical condition of a farmer from some soggy little colony on the edge of nowhere?"

But how, I realized, could she know who he was and what he did unless she'd taken an interest?

Her dark eyes flickered in my direction, and for a moment, just a moment, I fancied they warmed up.

And, cutting through the grief with sudden clarity, an idea came to me.

"Sir," I said, looking up at the Emperor. "We had a bargain."

"A bargain?" said Fallyn.

"Your wife promised to be mine if she wasn't married," the Emperor told him smugly, and then his expression changed, so quickly it was almost comical.

If I'd been in a mood to laugh, that is.

"Nalina! Is this true?" demanded Fallyn.

"Yes, it's true," I said, barely glancing at him. I kept my eyes on the Emperor. "But I'm still married, it seems."

The Emperor's nostrils flared.

"Taking an unwilling woman is a serious offence," said the Empress idly.

"I'm the swiving Emperor," he snarled.

"Yes, but the law still applies. Can't force a married couple apart, either."

The Emperor ground his teeth.

"Do you renounce your claim on me, sir?" I asked.

He fumed silently.

"You will never search me out and make me join your harem," I prompted, and the Emperor gnashed his teeth at me.

"I will never search you out and make you join my harem," he snapped. "Happy now?"

"With you all as witnesses?" I said, turning to the room, and letting my gaze linger on the Empress a shade longer than necessary.

"Can't see why he wants an ugly cry-baby like you anyway," she said. "Oh for God's sake, get her out of those chains," she added to her attendants. "And bring on the dancing boys."

Chapter Twelve

"My aunt's house," Fallyn said, looking around the spacious rooms approvingly. "I haven't been to see, but I'm told the Pennines house isn't salvageable. To be honest, I spent most of that week trying to track you down."

A week. Only a week. And another one had passed since, and I still didn't feel any better. Half my time was spent staring at nothing, trying not to remember Carver, and the other half was spent sobbing, great wrenching sobs that took over my whole body.

A chime sounded at the door, and when I listlessly ignored it, Fallyn answered.

"Package for Cleopatra," said a voice, and my head came up.

"Cleopatra?" Fallyn turned to me. "Is she the woman next door?"

"Take it," I said, standing up, and waved my bandaged hand at him. I was covered in bruises and cuts from the brutal chains the Emperor had heaped me with, and around my neck in a perfect ring was a circle of flesh rubbed raw by the metal collar.

Fallyn acknowledged my inability to give my thumbprint to the courier, and did it himself. As soon as the door closed, I took the package from him and tore it open.

"Nalina! That's not for you —"

"Yes, it is." Inside the package was a sealed box which I had some trouble opening.

"No, it's for Cleopatra," Fallyn insisted. I gave him a contemptuous look and he frowned. "Really, Nalina, I don't know what got into you while you were away ... now why are you laughing?"

Partly I was laughing because really, he ought to have been asking who had got into me. Out loud I said, "Away, Fallyn? You make it sound like a holiday."

"Well, look, I know things must have been difficult, and stuck with that sewer-rat Carver —"

I snarled at him, a tiger snarl, so suddenly he yelped and leapt backwards. "Nalina!" he cried, shocked. "Don't growl at me!"

"I'll do what I swiving well like," I said, turning a hand into a claw and using it to prize the box open. A freezing gas flowed out, evidently preserving whatever was inside. I waved it impatiently away and stared at the contents.

A microchip, torn so recently from someone's flesh that it still had blood on it.

"What on — ? That's disgusting," Fallyn said.

I ignored him and tabbed up the tabletop reader, scanning the chip and scowling when it wouldn't read. Wiping it on my clothes brought a protest from Fallyn, which was also ignored.

The reader scanned the chip and bleeped up some information. A name, dates, places. Pictures. An encrypted file.

It took me a moment to recognize the pale features of the man in the picture clip, but eventually I realized who it was. The Mer who'd ferried us to Orléans.

"Nalina?" said Fallyn uncertainly, reading over my shoulder. "Friend of yours?"

"The very opposite," I said, reading the information. His name was an unpronounceable collection of vowels. He gave his place of birth as the Indian Ocean. And he was on pay grade six for informing the Empire of the whereabouts of two Imperial Traitors, Nalina Bradwell and John Carver.

"But not Edward," I murmured. I grabbed the packaging and read the sender's information.

And then I smiled, for the first time in a week.

"Nalina?" Fallyn read the packaging too. "Who is Julius Caesar?"

"You really are an imbecile," I muttered. I grabbed the reader again and tried to get into the encrypted file. Nothing. "Can you open this?" I asked Fallyn, handing it over.

"What is it?" he asked, but he tried to hack in. "No, I can't. Nalina, what's going on?"

"I'm leaving," I said, and a weight lifted from me with those words.

Fallyn opened his mouth, then his eyes narrowed, and he shut it again. For the first time in seven years, understanding came over his face.

"You mean me," he said quietly. "You're leaving me."

"What was your first clue?" I said, picking up my bag and shoving the chip and its packaging inside.

"Where will you go?"

I flashed him a smile. "Lyon."

* * *

"Oh yeah! Oh yeah, baby! Oh yeah!"

"Still need to work on that dialogue, George," I said, brushing aside the fiber-optic curtain and watching him thrusting frantically into a contorted lovebot. She seemed to be doing a shoulder stand, her ass in the air and her legs grasped by George as he pumped into her, hard and fast.

"What?" he said, glancing round wildly. "Oh! Oh shit."

"Don't let me disturb you," I said, moving closer and sliding one hand down his chest. "In fact, the sooner you're finished here, the sooner you can help me."

I pressed my mouth to his, fondled his balls as he slammed them against the lovebot's ass, and he came with a shudder. And I felt very little.

"Right then," I said dispassionately, moving to the sink and washing my hands. I had to move a snaking coil of cable out of the way to do so. "I need you to hack open a file for me, George."

He blinked dazedly. The lovebot remained where she was, moaning piteously for more. "A file?"

"Yes. Our mutual friend sent me an Imperial microchip and it has an encrypted file on it. I need you to read it. Pipe down, Fellatia."

"I'm Cunnilingua," she pouted, wagging her hips at George.

"Well, whatever. Shut up."

"What mutual friend?" George asked, pulling on a pair of pants and deactivating the 'bot, who lapsed into a sleeping position on the floor.

I paused. George had worked for Edward, but did he know the Prince was still alive?

"Just a friend," I said. "George, this might contain sensitive information. I need to know I can trust you."

"Of course you can," he said, wheeling a chair over to a massive, complex console and tapping commands so fast his fingers blurred.

"I mean it," I said, pressing claws to the back of his neck. He went very still. "I don't know what this file contains, but I do know who sent it, and if one tiny, infinitesimal rumor about that person gets out, I'll come after you and wrap your own entrails around your neck. Do you understand?"

George gulped. "Absolutely," he stammered.

"Good." I handed him the box containing the chip.

He opened the first file, the one containing the Mer traitor's record. "Oh yes," he said. "I remember this guy."

"You do?"

"Yes. Edward brought him to me. Needed to extract the chip without it self-destructing. They do that, you know, if they're removed."

"Edward came here?" I said, at once relieved I didn't have to talk in code, and surprised at the Prince's actions.

"Yep. Making similar threats, I might add." His fingers danced over a few dozen keys. "He eviscerated the Mer, by the way. Gutted him like a fish, haha."

"Haha," I repeated. "Look, I know all this information. What's in the other file?"

"I'm working on it." He frowned at lines of code on a separate screen. "I know this work. This is Edward, I think." He glanced at me. "He asked for some alone time with my tech."

"And you let him?"

"Wouldn't do it for just anyone. What happened to your neck?"

"Edward didn't mention I'd been captured by the Empire?"

"Oh. Yes, he did." George's fingers slowed. "I'm sorry about Carver."

I clenched my fist and willed the tears to stay away. "I'm sorry too."

George frowned as he concentrated on undoing the encryption. "It's funny," he murmured, "Edward was a decent programmer. Not as good as me, of course. But he's done something here so complex there are only a handful of people who could undo it."

"You being one of them?"

"Yes. And I'd be surprised if you knew the others."

"So why did he set up the encryption himself, then send me to you?"

George shook his head vaguely. "No idea." A screen flickered. "That's it."

I nearly threw him from his chair in my eagerness to read the file. At first, I thought it was a replica of the military record we'd just looked at. And then when I got close enough to read, I saw the name at the top.

John Doe.

Edward had sent me Carver's military record.

"It's his Imperial record," George murmured, pointing to a date when the entries abruptly stopped. "Look, here's where he switched sides."

I ignored him and stared instead at the pictures of Carver on another screen. A short clip of him standing, turning in a slow circle so his full face and body could be seen. A close-up on his face. He looked sulky, bored, annoyed. Didn't like having his image captured. He looked younger, his face missing its vicious scar.

My eyes burned with tears. God, I missed him.

Tearing my gaze away from the pictures, I made myself read the rest of the data, but there was nothing I didn't expect to find. No secret messages. Nothing encoded. A list of battles fought and honors won, and that was it.

"Are you sure there's nothing else?"

George glanced at his lines of code. "Nope. That's it. Were you expecting something else?"

I stared at Carver's beloved image. "A message," I said. "Something ... why did he send me this?"

George glanced at me, and I swiped away the tears gathering on my lashes. "Maybe he thought it'd be comforting," he said. "A picture. Something to remember him by."

I sniffed loudly and George pretended not to notice. "Maybe." As George moved away with unexpected tact, I stared hard at the screen, reading every line, trying desperately to infer something else. Why go to all this trouble?

"Date of birth: Unknown. Approximate age: Unknown. Place of birth: Unknown. Parents: Unknown."

"Even the Empire couldn't find this stuff out," I said, nearly managing a smile. And then I saw it.

"Species: Human."

"They didn't know he was a vampire," I murmured.

"What?" George said.

"Here." I jabbed with my finger. "They have him listed as human."

"Yeah. Liked to keep it close to his chest."

"Why?"

George shrugged. "Gave him an edge. An extra weapon. Plus, he's harder to kill. Was," he amended, wincing.

I tore my gaze from the screen. "Harder to kill?"

"Yeah. You don't want to go around advertising that the only way to be killed is to take a stake to the heart, or have your head cut off. Else people start carrying bits of wood around. And Carver had a lot of enemies."

"The only way," I repeated. "The—I thought all that stuff was just myth and rumor. Garlic and sunlight and things. He said they were more like allergies."

George shrugged. "The stake thing is true. I've seen it." He frowned. "I guess the Empire must have figured it out then. Which one did they use?"

"Neither," I murmured, staring hard at the screen, at Carver's scowling face.

"Neither?"

"They shot him with lasers," I said slowly, and my eyes met George's. "Where is he?"

He held up his hands. "Look, I could be wrong. Maybe they have a laser that will do it. Don't get your hopes up, Nalina."

"Where is Edward?" I demanded. Edward would know. Wasn't that why he'd sent the message in the first place?

"I don't know. I swear I don't! He never tells me anything, just turns up without notice and disappears again."

I scrunched up my face and tried to think. He'd sent me this as a message: Carver isn't dead. Hope swelled in me and I reminded myself not to want it too much. I might have misread it.

But he wouldn't have sent a message like that without giving me a next step to follow. Where was the only place I'd ever been with him and Carver?

"I need to get to Paris," I said.

* * *

But there was nothing in Paris. No matter what names I gave, what threats I used, what promises I made, no one anywhere had any clue who either Edward or Carver was.

"But they were here," I said to the Mer King. "Don't you remember? I turned into a tiger and attacked one of them. They drew swords on each other."

"They're long gone," said the King. "Betrayed by one of our own. They're no longer welcome here."

"But – that's not their fault!"

"No longer welcome," said the Mer King implacably. "I suggest you go back whence you came."

"But I came from –" I began, then stopped with my mouth open.

I'm told the Pennines house isn't salvageable.

"Thank you," I said, and the Mer King's immobile face glimmered for just a second with a smile.

* * *

I moved about freely now. My fingerprint and retinal records had been changed, and if by chance someone from the Empire should run into me, Fallyn had brought in a lawyer to draw up legal documents even the Emperor couldn't circumvent.

I belonged to no one now but myself. And anyone I gave myself to freely.

The small boat I'd hired bumped gently against the ruins of the dock that had served my house. I had to climb over piles of scorched timbers, felled trees and bits of rubble from the house, and when I came to what had once been the garden I stopped, pangs shooting through me.

The house where I'd been born, where I'd lived with my parents, then with my father, then my husband, stood open to the sky. Over half of the roof had gone, and on the east side a large portion of the wall had crumbled. The front of the house was badly marked with shells. Despite a recent rain, smoke still heavily scented the air.

The back of the house seemed reasonably intact. I pushed open the kitchen door and called, "Hello?"

A scurrying sound. Rats.

"Are you there?" I said, and from behind me an arm grasped my shoulders.

"Who are you looking for?" growled a voice, and I nearly collapsed in relief, because the scent of the man holding me was Edward's.

"I'm looking for Caesar," I said, and he relaxed his grip and turned me in his arms, grinning.

"Nalina," he cried warmly, kissing me soundly. "What took you so long?"

"What took me so long?" I boggled. "I had to go to Lyon to get your message opened, then Paris to find out where you were —"

"Paris?"

"Well, I didn't know where you'd be!"

"The last place they'd look," Edward said. He touched the raw skin of my neck. "How are you —"

"Edward, please." I brushed his hand away. "Tell me I read your message right. Tell me I have something to come home to."

Edward smiled gently and took my hand. He led me, silently, through the kitchen, the sculleries, and the boot room, each of them scattered with debris that had been left where it lay. Food moldered gently. A dress of mine hung over the drying machine.

Finally, Edward stopped in front of the meat closet. He opened it, pushed past the empty hooks inside, and clicked on a section of the back wall, which opened half an inch.

A secret door. I'd lived in this house all my life and never known it was there.

"I think I'll go take a walk," he said, and left me staring at the sliver of light coming from the secret room.

"Edward?" came a voice from within, and Edward retreated, smiling, as I rushed into the room. The voice had been Carver's.

"Not Edward," I said. "Me."

Carver lay on a bed shoved against the far wall, covered with blankets to the waist, his body a mass of barely healed sores. Scorched holes bore testimony to the laser fire the Emperor had tried to kill him with. Vicious tears remained from the carrion birds on the traitor's terrace.

But he was alive. My vampire was alive.

He blinked, stared at me. "Now I know I'm dead," he said, his voice rusty.

"No," I said, tears starting to fall. Stupid tears. "The Empire knows you're dead. Fallyn knows you're dead. And up until I walked in here I knew you were dead."

I threw myself forward, pressed my head against his chest and heard his heart beat, slowly. George had told me vampires didn't need to breathe, that their hearts didn't need to beat, but most of them did out of habit.

I thumped Carver's shoulder, and he yelped and glared at me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said. "That you were playing dead? I thought you were dead! I nearly let the Emperor's guards kill me!"

"Well, I didn't know it was going to happen, did I?" he said defensively. "And by the way, ow, you could have hit me somewhere that didn't already hurt."

"Is there anywhere it doesn't already hurt?"

Sulkily, he said nothing, then grabbed me and kissed me. Long. Hard. Deep.

"I thought you were with the Emperor," he whispered. "I thought I'd never get you back. How did you —?"

"Fallyn," I told him, and suddenly laughter bubbled up inside me. There were tears on my face, but I laughed, and told him the story. "That's two men who haven't died when they should."

Carver said nothing, just held me as if he couldn't believe I was real.

"And Edward set all this up?" he said eventually. I nodded. "Sly bastard."

I kissed Carver again, just because I could, and said, "See? You didn't really lose me. The world might take me away from you, John Doe Carver Sexby Rainsborough Culper Necker Antony, but I will always come back."

I tilted my head, and pulled aside the scarf wrapped around my neck. Carver looked furious.

"I'll kill him," he vowed, tracing the scar from the Emperor's collar with gentle fingers.

"You'll go nowhere near him," I said. "I won't risk losing you again. After all, next time they might figure out how to actually kill you." I pushed the scarf to the floor,

and angled my neck toward him. "Drink, Carver. You're hurt, and you need the strength."

"You're hurt too."

"I'm perfectly fine, but for some cuts and bruises. Have you even fed for a week?"

He shrugged. "Some of the preserved meat. Edward offered, but I..."

"Wanted to lie here wallowing in pain," I guessed, and he looked sheepish. "Drink, Carver. For me."

He didn't need further bidding. His fangs cut into my sore neck and I winced, then seconds later bliss followed.

"God, I've missed you," I moaned, and crawled over his body to straddle him. My hands touched his chest, felt the most vicious of his wounds heal under my fingers. He was growing whole again, and I was growing hot.

As Carver drank from my neck, I kissed his jaw. He wore two weeks of beard, rough against my skin, and I enjoyed the rasp over my lips. Hot fire ran through me from the place on my neck where Carver's fangs penetrated, and I pressed my body against him. Too many layers of clothes separated us, and I tugged off my jacket, throwing it to the floor and pulling open my shirt to press my bare breasts against Carver's chest.

The worst of the wounds were healed now, only patches of sore pink skin remaining, and Carver didn't seem to find it unpleasant to have me rubbing against them. In fact, if the swollen cock pushing against me through the blanket was any indication, he was enjoying it.

His hands found my breasts, pulled and rubbed at my nipples, and I gasped, needing more. I tugged at the blanket covering him until I'd exposed his cock and stroked it, loving the thick heaviness of it in my hands.

Carver groaned, the sound sending a harder wave of pleasure through me, and then he pulled his mouth away. Blood stained his lips as he said, "No more, or I'll take too much."

Bereft, I whimpered longingly, and he wiped the blood from his lips, pulling me forward to kiss my breasts. His hands moved to my waist, unfastening my pants and pushing them down. Delving inside and finding me wet and ready for him.

I wriggled away only as long as it took to pull off the rest of my clothes, then straddled him again, sinking down onto his cock and moaning, nearly crying at the wonder of it. Yesterday I'd thought he was dead, and now he was inside me, making love with me, staring at me with those feral blue eyes and kissing me, deep and hard.

I rode him to a delicious climax and felt him pulse inside me, holding me tight as if afraid I'd disappear.

"It's not a dream," I murmured in his ear, laughing softly. "I'm really here."

Carver held me close and breathed into my hair. Carver the lover, Carver the fighter, Carver the keeper of my heart.

"So what now, my lady?" he asked me. "A new life together?"

I lifted my head and looked at his face, took in every detail of my future, and smiled. "No," I said, and kissed him. "A new world."

Cat Marsters

Cat lives in a village in southeast England, which, while not quite a fairytale setting, is nonetheless very pretty and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of AD 1087. She shares a house with only slightly batty parents who hardly ever tell her to get a real job, and a musician brother who knows there's no chance she'll ever get one if he doesn't. Cat doesn't have children but she does have cats, who are her babies in every sense except the biological one.

Cat has been writing all her life, but in order to keep herself rich in shoes and chocolate, she's also worked as an airline check-in agent, video rental clerk, stationery shop assistant, and laboratory technician. She's aiming for a fairytale cottage, and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Visit Cat's web site at www.catmarsters.com.