



Empire City of Lust

Cat Marsters

Changeling Press

Empire 3: City of Lust Cat Marsters

**All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2009 Cat Marsters**

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this or any copyrighted work is illegal. File sharing is an International crime, prosecuted by the United States Department of Justice and the United States Border Patrol, Division of Cyber Crimes, in partnership with Interpol. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is punishable by seizure of computers, up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000 per reported instance.

**ISBN: 978-1-60521-268-5
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1046
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046
www.ChangelingPress.com**

**Editor: Sheri Ross Fogarty
Cover Artist: Bryan Keller**

This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Empire 3: City of Lust

Cat Marsters

"Nobody hides from the Empire. They see everything, they know everything."

The Empress left behind the only man she'd ever loved to serve the Empire, and now she's dedicated her life to decadent pleasure.

The Revolutionary lost the only woman he'd ever loved to the Empire, and now he's dedicated his life to bringing it down.

But fifteen years ago the Revolutionary and the Empress were Jack and Angelica, and their passion burned with bright intensity. Has she forgotten what it is to love someone? Has he mistaken her real intentions toward him – and toward the Empire?

In a harem in the steaming city of Carnalis, the Empress and the Revolutionary are about to turn the world upside down.

Prologue

From the memoirs of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Carnalis

On the night of my birth, my father was shot dead for Imperial treachery. The shock of it sent my mother into an early labor, which killed her and robbed me of my sight. Blind and orphaned, I was raised by distant relatives who were quick to condemn the emergence of my second sight as the devil's blight, a punishment for my father's sins.

That is, until they realized its economic potential. A virgin seer would make a perfect wife for the Emperor.

Of course, thanks to Jack, by the time I married I wasn't exactly a virgin any more.

He went by many names, even then. Dipper, Hunter, Get-The-Hell-Out-Of-My-Wallet. He left smiles on girls' faces and snarls of apoplectic rage on everyone else's. I called him Jack, after Giacomo Casanova, legendary seducer and charlatan. Jack the lad, Jack of all trades. I used to tell him if he wasn't careful he'd soon be Jack in a box.

He could charm the money from your wallet and the underwear from your body with little more than a smile, so they said. Myself, I never had any money to lose. As for the other, well, smiling at me never did any good. By the time I could see him smile, he was already touching me.

And, oh, how he touched me. Jack could have any girl he wanted, and he did, frequently. Which meant that by the time he got around to parting my virginal thighs he really knew his way around a female body. He could make me shiver with just a whisper, so imagine what he could do with his hands.

"Gorgeous girl," he would whisper, "it's a crime you can't see how beautiful you are."

"A crime against who?" I asked.

"Nature. The universe. Me." His fingers whispered a hair's breadth from my skin. "Let me touch you, gorgeous girl, so you can see yourself as I see you."

"I'm not sure I want to see myself as you see me," I said, quivering with excitement and hoping he couldn't tell.

Jack laughed, a rich, pleased sound. "Because if you could see yourself as I see you," he said, "you'll see a woman who wants me really badly."

This time I laughed. "You flatter yourself, Jack."

"I don't flatter myself, everyone else does it for me," he shot back. He was clearly enjoying himself immensely. "Why, only yesterday Carla Torcello couldn't stop telling me how hot I was. How big, and hard, and how good I felt sliding inside her. She told me I was the best she'd ever had, the thickest, the meatiest, that she'd never enjoyed taking a man's big hard dick in her mouth as much as mine. That I tasted so good she wanted to go on sucking me forever."

"Now you're bragging," I said, but I said it breathlessly. I could feel the heat from his skin.

"Ah, but am I? Lu Xing was so desperate to have me she had to drag me under the table. Then her father came in and she leapt into the chair but kept me under the cloth, licking her out, while he asked her how her day had been and she pretended everything was entirely normal. By the time he left she'd soaked my face with her cream and she needed to come so badly that when I finally stuck my fingers inside her and made her orgasm, it knocked her out. Totally out cold for several minutes."

"How very clever of you," I said, trying to pretend that I didn't want him to do the same to me. Between my legs a strong, insistent beat thrummed.

"No, it wasn't really, because I was pretty desperate to come too, and there she was, limp as a rag doll, entirely unresponsive. And I don't really get off on unconscious women, you know."

"You surprise me."

"Do I?" Jack was very close now, his breath warm on my cheek. He had to see how fast I was breathing. He could probably hear my heart hammering. "You think I'd swive an unconscious woman?"

"I think you'd swive anything with breasts," I said.

"Urgh, but what about old Mr. Omotswe? He's got man-boobs bigger than your head!"

I giggled. I couldn't help it.

"I wouldn't swive anything with breasts," Jack said, so very nearly touching me that I was panting with anticipation. "In fact, my list of potential swivees has narrowed considerably recently."

"And yet it still includes Carla Torcello and Lu Xing," I said.

"Ah. Well, slight fabrication there. Lu Xing was last year."

"And Carla?"

"Well, that was last week, actually, but," he added quickly as I opened my mouth to protest, "it was only last week she said it. I haven't seen her naked for months."

"You don't need to be naked to have steaming hot sex," I pointed out.

"Indeed you don't. Want to demonstrate to me how?"

I sat up straight. "No," I said. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm already naked, Jack, and you are too, and if you keep going on about your past conquests I'll never get naked with you again."

Jack laughed and pulled me down onto the bed with him. As his hands touched my back, my shoulders, I tuned into his sight and looked at myself, rolling naked on the bed, hair in disarray and nipples standing up proud, begging for attention. My lips were swollen and red from kissing, my eyes bright, my dark skin sheened with sweat.

Jack and I had spent all afternoon in bed together, and the afternoon before that, and the night before that, too. Since relieving me of my virginity two months before,

he'd begun daily lessons with me on the art of lovemaking. He said I was his most apt pupil.

"There's been no one else since you," Jack said, and I wished I could see his face. His voice was entirely sincere, but then Jack could always charm anyone into believing anything.

"Are you sure? No quick fumbles with Carla Torcello? No secretive shags under the table with Lu Xing?"

"Not one," Jack said. "How could I ever want anyone else, when I have you?"

He kissed me then, and I disconnected from his sight so I wouldn't see the embarrassingly devoted expression on my own face. Jack had fast hands, so they said – fast to get where they wanted, but wonderfully slow once they got there. They were slow now, cupping my breasts and teasing my sensitized nipples. One hand slid down over my ribs, lightly caressing, teasing, skimming my hip and stroking my thigh.

"You're so smooth," he murmured against my lips, "like satin. Like silk. I could touch you for hours."

"You frequently do," I reminded him.

"Mmm. See, I'm telling the truth."

His lips were soft, his tongue knowing. He knew every contour of my mouth, just as he knew every line of my body. And I knew every line of his.

I slid my hands down his back to his buttocks, his excellent firm, smooth buttocks, and pressed him against me. His sizeable erection pressed against my stomach and I wriggled, just to enjoy the feel of it there. Jack groaned, evidently enjoying it too.

He rolled off me and tugged me over to straddle his chest, the muscles firm and hot beneath my thighs. Spread wide open like this I could only imagine the image I presented to Jack. Pink flesh, wet and swollen with arousal, slippery with my come and his.

He drew me closer to his mouth and ran his tongue lightly over my outer folds, eliciting a gasp from me. Delicately, he parted my labia and searched inside, using only

his tongue and lips. He revisited the areas he'd already discovered would drive me wild, and took his time searching out new ones.

Hands on my own breasts, I rocked against him, head back, moaning softly. Jack explored me, his mouth a miracle, his fingers tracing delicate circles on my hips and buttocks, his occasional murmurs of appreciation winding the tension higher.

Then, without any particular signal from me, he went wild and just feasted on me. His tongue pushed inside me, licked me from top to bottom, then wrapped around my clit and sucked.

I gasped, cried out and eventually screamed as the hot pleasure exploded inside me, rocketing through my veins, filling every atom of my body and bursting from every pore. I screamed and thrashed and Jack held onto me, sucking and licking and making it better, longer, harder. And just when I thought I might die from pleasure he flipped me onto my back, limp as a leaf, and lifted my legs high in the air.

"Look at yourself," he murmured, the head of his cock throbbing against my dripping wet entrance. "See what I'm seeing."

Dazedly, I connected with his mind and saw—a decadent woman, sprawled wantonly in tangled sheets, her breasts heaving, her nipples brown and hard, her expression dazed. She looked like a woman who'd been well-loved.

Jack directed his gaze down my body, and my sight went with it. Down past the softness of my stomach to the dark hair between my legs and the pink wet folds peeking out. His cock rested against those folds and he rocked, gently, almost imperceptibly. His massive swollen organ pulsed hotly, begging for entrance.

"You're so beautiful," Jack said, his voice hoarse, and pushed inside me. He was huge, stretching and filling me. I didn't exactly have much of a frame of reference, but I didn't think there could be many men who could fill a woman so perfectly.

"Watch," he said, draping my legs over his shoulders and reaching out to caress my breasts. I shivered deliciously, and watched through his eyes as my own body quivered. "Watch me filling you. See how you take me in completely. How we fit together."

Helplessly, I watched him push home inside me, my pink folds stretched wide around him, my clit exposed, my legs spread wide.

"Watch me fuck you," Jack breathed, and I did, seeing through his eyes as he thrust in and out, seeing my body sway, seeing my lips part on a gasp of ecstasy. I slid my own hand down to stroke my clit and watched the pink bud swell as I felt it throb.

I felt Jack tense as he watched this too, felt him shudder, felt him thrust a little harder, a little faster. I felt the sweat trickling over my own skin, watched it from his eyes, and gasped as he bent to lick a droplet from my breast.

I gazed at his pale hand on my dark skin and sobbed with the beauty of it, of his hands and his mouth and his cock and the overwhelming rightness of him inside me, touching me, kissing me.

"I love you, Jack," I gasped, and his mouth found mine.

"I love you too," he murmured, before kissing me long and deep. I came like that, his mouth on mine and his cock in me, my heart in his hands.

The next day the Empire came to take me away, and I never felt Jack's touch on me again.

Chapter One

It was dark in the cells. Probably the only place in Carnalis that was. And quiet—well, relatively. Someone was sobbing nearby, but compared to the thumping music, whine of air traffic and grumble of ground vehicles, the hum of conversation and the frequent screams that filled the dirty air of Carnalis, night and day, just one person sobbing was almost like silence.

The man currently known as Wat Tyler rested his head back against the wall. It was filthy, but then so was he. Any minute now something would happen to disturb the peace, but right now he was enjoying it. Jail wasn't usually a bad place, most of the time.

Of course, most of the time didn't include the interrogations, beatings and occasional attempts at execution, but Tyler remained sanguine about them.

"Sanguine," he murmured to himself. "Also means bloody."

From his scalp to his toes, he was covered in bruises, cuts and the scorch of laser fire. Bionic manacles held his wrists behind his back, probes burrowing into his chafed skin, sending data to the Empire every few seconds about his physical state. They alerted the guards if his health got too poor—in which case emergency treatment would be carried out to keep him alive long enough for them to decide how to kill him. They also transmitted elevated levels of adrenaline and blood pressure, which would precede an escape attempt.

But Tyler had spent half his life in jail cells. His wrists felt slightly bare without some kind of restraint. He knew how to fool the manacles into transmitting whatever he wanted them to.

Right now they were transmitting that he was hungry, and they weren't lying. The Empire's prison food service left a lot to be desired. In fact it left everything to be desired. There was nothing at all desirable about it.

Down the corridor, out of view, came the sound of low voices.

"You know," Tyler called out loud, "the service in this place is terrible. I've been waiting what feels like hours for something to eat."

"Feels like hours?" called a voice in return. "It's all in your mind, Mr. Tyler."

"Really?"

"Yes. I suspect it's been more like days."

"Well, you can check my bio-data. Am I in danger of starving to death?"

The voice was coming closer. Young and male, calm and even. "Difficult to tell, Mr. Tyler. I would imagine you've developed several strategies for dealing with extreme hunger. I wouldn't believe a word this data told me."

Tyler raised his eyebrows. So someone had guessed who he was, had they? Or at least, guessed who he wasn't. Wat Tyler had been picked up for assaulting an Imperial Guard—the sort of offence that usually resulted in a prison sentence and maybe some kind of corporal punishment. Since Wat Tyler had a clean record, he didn't expect the punishment would be especially severe. Maybe a hand or a foot chopped off. Maybe his tongue, or his cock.

Shame if it was either of the latter.

The owner of the voice appeared on the other side of the double-trap laser cell door. A slight touch against the red beams would result in painful burns. Tyler knew, he'd tried. If he pressed any harder they'd slice his flesh off. And there were two layers of beams.

Blue light cast itself on a pale form, strong and handsome and clad only in a loincloth, tall boots and a studded collar.

Tyler felt his lip curl into a sneer automatically. That collar marked the young man as a member of the Empress's harem, a slave devoted to her pleasure. He was tall, muscular and inhumanly beautiful, with pale silvery blond hair and luminous green

eyes. His loincloth bulged out at the front over what was evidently a magnificent endowment.

Tyler shook back his shaggy, dirty hair, and said, "You'll catch cold, you know."

"We in the Empire have a wonderful medical program."

"I'm sure you do. We in the cells have a wonderful starvation program. Whatever your data's telling you it ain't lying. I'm bloody famished."

"I could arrange for that to end."

"Yeah. Dead men aren't usually that hungry."

The concubine smiled faintly. "Mr. Tyler, do you know who I am?"

"One of the Empress's whores." The words even tasted bitter.

"I am a member of her harem, yes. And I'm responsible for recruitment."

"Rec—" Tyler's mouth fell open. "What, you wander around the streets finding pretty boys to add to her collection?"

"Not the streets, exactly." The concubine hesitated. "My lady has a taste for ... shall we say, a certain type of male."

"Handsome ones with big penises?" Tyler guessed.

"You're on the right track. Stand up, please."

"Why?"

"Take off your pants."

Tyler blinked at him. "I'm sorry, that sounded like you just asked me to stand up and take my pants off."

The concubine remained unruffled. "I did."

"Because..." When the concubine didn't answer, Tyler finished his own sentence. "You want to see how big my penis is?"

The man gave a serene nod.

"You're not seriously asking me if I want to join this harem?"

"No, Mr. Tyler. I am not asking you."

Tyler looked up at him uncertainly.

"If you fit her Imperial Majesty's requirements, then there will be no 'asking'."

Tyler stared. What the hell did the Empress want with him? She couldn't possibly know who he was. No one knew who he was. And even if she did, why would she want him?

Maybe she had a thing for petty thugs. Maybe she liked a little bit of violence. Or maybe she just liked men with his eye color. Hard to say.

She'd never been an easy woman to understand.

Slowly, he got to his feet, using the wall as leverage. Lightheaded from lack of food and loss of blood, he swayed a little, then said, "Actually, I can't take my pants off," and turned to show the concubine his linked wrists.

The man hit something on his datapad and the manacles detached from each other, leaving two individual cuffs in place.

Maybe I can get away from him. Tackle him inside the double-trap. But the concubine had a laser pistol hanging against his naked hip, and Tyler was unarmed, not to mention in a pretty bad state. Poor odds, especially in a confined place.

All right, an escape from the harem. How heavily guarded will it be? Can I escape? Traditionally they're guarded by eunuchs, aren't they? Maybe I can lie low there for a while and join this guy on his recruiting trips, get out that way.

Or maybe I can just use the opportunity to settle an old score.

He unfastened his torn, dirty pants and let them drop. The concubine's face remained impassive as his gaze took in Tyler's cock, regarding it in the same way a farmer might look over an animal he wished to purchase. He said nothing.

Tyler scowled. He was, it had generally been agreed, more than unusually blessed in the crotch department. And he'd taken a pretty comprehensive survey, over the years. He had a huge talent, and he knew how to use it.

"I've never had any complaints," he goaded the concubine.

"No. It looks fine."

"It looks better than fine!" Tyler protested. "You should see it hard. Massive, it is. Made a woman faint once, and all she did was look at it. Have to be very careful with virgins. In danger of splitting them in two."

The concubine gave little sign of reaction. "Then show it to me hard," he said.

Caught off guard, Tyler said, "I'm sorry?"

"I need to see it erect. It's of little use to the Empress flaccid."

"Flaccid," Tyler scowled. "I'll give you flaccid." Defiantly, he palmed his cock, which for once refused to respond immediately. Tired, hungry, sore and aching in a million places, he was in no mood to get horny. Especially not in front of some pampered man-whore. In a jail cell. In fucking Carnalis.

For the bloody Empress.

His cock twitched.

The Empress? Godammit. He didn't want to get horny over her. The fact that every time he'd swived a woman for the last fifteen years she hadn't been far from his thoughts had nothing to do with it. The bitch had her glossy, jeweled, silken image everywhere in the Empire. Plenty of men jerked off over her. She was beautiful. She was also a conniving, faithless bitch who kept a harem of sex slaves.

She was repugnant. And yet he wanted her.

Tyler closed his eyes and brought her image to mind. Smooth dark skin, soft and touchable, like silk. Flawless, perfect, unmarred. Well, that was what wealth did for you.

Every picture of her, every captured vid, caught the light reflected from her luminous skin. Her glossy dark hair, like midnight, like dark water. Soft, flowing, smooth and straight or lusciously curly. She wore it decked with jewels and flowers, styled elaborately or left to fall in unadorned, gleaming curtains over her delicate shoulders.

Her shoulders, her neck, her breasts. She was always seen dressed decadently in silks and velvet, embroidered and accessorized, but Tyler let himself picture her without any of that. Without the jewels and hair ornaments, the subtle face paint, the swathes of fabric that cost more than a working man's yearly wages.

He thought of her the way he hadn't allowed himself to think of her for years. Naked, lolling against soft sheets, her body ripe and soft, warm and fragrant. Her

round, firm breasts, her neat waist, her curved hips. Her body was lush, juicy, edible. Every inch of her skin begged to be touched, stroked, licked. Those pouting brown nipples, standing up proud and demanding his attention. They'd crinkle up when he touched them, when he ran the tip of his tongue over them, when he sucked gently on them.

Every part of her was made of flowing curves. Soft where he was hard. Dark where he was pale. Smooth where he was rough. Her body held power, pliable and supple, the sort of body that could pillow a man and hold on to him with steel strength, all at the same time.

Tyler's hands moved automatically now, stroking along the length of his cock, cupping his balls and fondling them. She'd be hot, her skin flushed with arousal, damp with sweat. He imagined her writhing, lush lips parted, hips arching in invitation. Her thighs opening to reveal the dark hair and pink lips peeking out, plump and wet, ready for him.

Her hands would curl in the bedclothes, her head tossing, and she'd say —

"Very impressive, Mr. Tyler. You can stop now."

The cold and silence intruded, the damp stink of the cells replacing the hot, warm scent of aroused woman, and the vision of feminine loveliness before him vanished. In its place stood the semi-naked concubine, face impassive as ever, tapping at his datapad.

Tyler's arousal wilted. As the concubine called, "This one," to the jailer, he pulled up his pants and fastened them. So he couldn't finish his fantasy here in the cell. Soon enough he'd get the real thing.

* * *

It was one of the benefits of being blind. She could lay back her head and imagine her lover was another man entirely, without the reality intruding.

Of course, no man had the same touch, the same taste, the same scent. No man was the same at all.

And no man for the last fifteen years had successfully reminded her of Jack.

But she could pretend, when she was especially lonely, when she missed him especially badly. When Santos brought her news of another rebellion, another revolt, another body count. The Empire always triumphed over these petty, shoddy rebellions, but still they rose up.

The Emperor couldn't understand why they didn't give up. But then he didn't understand much about his subjects.

Virral nuzzled against her thigh, and she sighed. He'd been her eyes while she looked through history files, charting rebellions lost and won, heroes and martyrs. Jack always favored rebel names.

He'd been using one when he died.

Virral, sensing her upset, had offered to make her feel better. He'd started out with a massage that had rapidly progressed from her shoulders to her buttocks and thighs, and then when she turned over, he'd massaged right back up until he reached her pussy, and carried on stroking.

Virral was a fine, strong young man, a former soldier who'd grown sick of Imperial corruption and turned against his masters. He'd been marked as an Imperial Traitor when she'd found him and granted him a stay of execution for as long as he remained in her harem. No one had really cared. He was unimportant, unmissed, and by the time a new identity was created for him, she could release him without worrying he'd be found.

In the meantime, he'd eagerly taken on the disguise of Imperial Concubine. She'd explained that it wasn't necessary, but Virral had almost begged to make love to her.

And he was good at it. Right now, having brought her to orgasm already with his mouth on her breasts and his hands between her legs, he was licking at her thigh, preparing to make her come once more before he slid inside her and allowed himself to climax. He was considerate like that. Almost annoyingly so.

Virral's eager tongue sought out her clit and flicked it insistently. She felt the waves building again.

"The benefits of my position, Virral," she murmured, tangling her fingers in his soft, clean hair. He responded by sliding his tongue inside her, and she gasped, her body rising to meet him.

"And speaking of position..." She gently pushed his head away from her and knelt up. "I want you inside me," she told him, turning him onto his back. "I want to feel you come inside me."

"Whatever my lady commands," Virral said. His hands caressed her thighs and she allowed herself to tune into his vision while she positioned herself. It was so much easier to climb aboard a man when you could see where you were going – after a couple of knee-in-the-groin incidents with Jack, she'd learned this early on.

Don't think about Jack. Don't. He's dead. He's almost certainly dead. And if he's not dead he's not about to come knocking at your door, either.

"My lady?" Virral murmured, sitting up and kissing her shoulder, her back. She slipped her thigh over his hip, brushing his hugely erect penis as she did, and settled into his lap, facing away from him.

Virral cupped her breasts, still kissing the back of her neck, and she rubbed herself against his cock.

"Make me come," she whispered, needing something more to distract her. "Make me come as hard as you can."

"Anything you desire," Virral murmured eagerly, slipping one hand down between her thighs to position himself and push inside her. She moaned, breathing hard as he slid deep, the angle making for a hard press against the sweet spot inside her.

With one hand on her breast and another delving between her slippery folds to stroke her clit, Virral fucked her.

His fingers were practiced and sure, plucking pleasure from her body with expertise. He rolled her nipple, strummed her clit, and plunged deep inside her in a hot, exciting rhythm.

But it wasn't enough. "Cully," she called, breathless. "Come in here."

"You want more?" Virral said. He sounded disappointed.

"I want to come so hard I black out," she said, but even that reminded her of Jack.

Cully came in, and she used Virral's eyes to watch him move. Tall, broad-shouldered, with the rugged build of a purebred werewolf, he had skin the same dark ebony as her own and the gait of a predator.

"Lick me," she said, and it came out as a plea.

Cully's eyes gleamed, and he wordlessly came to kneel by the bed as Virral repositioned her, barely losing his stride as he knelt up and moved her legs wider.

She watched over her own shoulder as Cully lowered his head to her pussy, holding herself stable as Virral pounded into her, and then as Cully slid his hands up the insides of her thighs, she switched her view to him.

Her pussy was pink and dark, folds swollen and glistening. Her clit stood out, erect and throbbing, above the thick cock sliding in and out of her pussy. Virral's cock was slick with her juices, dark red with arousal, and as she watched Cully move closer, the head of Virral's cock slid out. It was shiny, rounded, dark and seeping liquid.

Cully gave it a casual suck before pushing it back in, and she felt Virral's hands tighten on her. Then her second lover pressed his mouth to her pussy and feasted, and she withdrew from his sight, retreating into darkness as the irrepressible pleasure swept over her.

The image of Cully sucking Virral's cock stayed floating in her mind. She turned her head and said, "After I come, do you want to finish inside me, or get Cully to suck you?"

Virral groaned and squeezed her breast. "Keep talking like that and there won't be much choice," he gasped.

"I'd like to suck you," Cully murmured, his breath soft against her thighs. "Or you could suck me."

Virral bit into the back of her neck, and from the way his cock leapt inside her she thought he was going to come right then.

"Yes," he gasped, "yes, we'll do that. My lady, I can't hold out much longer."

"Slow down, then. That's it. Nice and slow. Oh. Oh, that's good."

Calming himself, Virral thrust more slowly, sliding in and out and catching all her sweet spots as he did. She clutched at the back of Cully's head with one hand, and reached back for Virral, her fingers tightening as her orgasm approached.

After Virral's sucked Cully a while, I might get them to double-team me, she thought, and that was enough to push her over the edge, climaxing noisily, gasping and crying out, grinding her pussy down on Virral's jerking, orgasming cock and Cully's eager mouth as he lapped up both their juices.

Vaguely, she was aware of footsteps as she came down from her orgasm which, while it hadn't knocked her out, had definitely made her see stars. It was probably one of the boys coming to see what all the noise was about, and wondering whether to join in.

"Give me a minute," she said. "Play amongst yourselves and then I want at least one of you back inside me."

Virral kissed the back of her neck. Cully continued to lap at her pussy. And from the doorway, Santos said, "My lady. I have a new candidate for the harem."

Exhausted, sated and languid, she caressed Virral's neck and said, "Look at him for me, darling."

She tuned into his sight as he rested his gaze on the man standing next to Santos. Filthy and ragged as so many men were when they left the cells, his hair shaggy, his jaw unshaven, every inch of visible skin patterned with bruises and cuts.

His gaze roved over her, his expression disdainful as he took in her two lovers, her splayed legs, her puckered nipples, the sweat on her skin and the come slicking her thighs.

His eyes met hers, dark blue and intense, and she felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach.

"Hello, Jack," she said.

Chapter Two

From the memoirs of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Carnalis

The city of Carnalis floated on the endless oceans, everywhere and nowhere all at once. Massive, overwhelmingly so, built like any city on slums and grime, the glittering buildings of the Empire rising up like crystals from the dirt.

Soldiers passed by our retinue, Imperial Troopers in their heavy biosuits, every footstep thudding on the ground. As my new husband waved to the citizenry, I heard a woman shout, "No, look out!" and then a crash.

"What was that?" I asked, alarmed.

"Some stupid woman drove her cart into the path of the soldiers," said the Emperor. "Don't worry, my love—their suits protected them."

I could hear the woman sobbing over the tramp of the soldiers' feet. "But what about her?"

"What? Oh, who cares about her?"

I turned away from him. Carnalis throbbed with life, screamed with it, men and women and children and animals swarming over every inch of the place. The city was like a hunk of meat, rotten and crawling with maggots. Even Imperial craft such as ours couldn't escape the stink and heat of the slums.

Adverts blared out as we passed. "Why not upgrade your implants! CryTech Industries' new OmniChip can not only transmit your data to the Empire, so we can take care of you when you need it—but also automatically download healthcare, news and other automatic upgrades directly to your brain! OmniChip: bringing you closer to the heart of the Empire."

My hand went to the back of my neck, where a newly-implanted microchip resided. Everyone who worked directly for the Empire was chipped—the soldiers, the guards, the palace staff. Every prisoner taken by the Carnalis Imperial Guard had his neck microchipped, as well as bionic cuffs attached to his wrists.

I had been chipped before we even left New Amsterdam. “For your own safety,” said the Emperor, but I knew he was preventing me from running already.

“Your apartments have been prepared,” my new husband told me as we approached the palace. Up here the streets were cleaner, and the tramp of Imperial biosuited feet was even louder. The city was crammed with soldiers.

“My apartments?” I said. “Don't we share—?”

He laughed at that, not particularly kindly. “Oh no, my dear. You'll come to my bed, of course, when I command. But I have my own rooms, my Hall of Pleasure, my harem, a whole complex.”

“Harem?” I croaked, because while I'd heard of it, I'd sort of assumed it wouldn't be necessary now he had a wife. Stupid girl.

“Yes. You can have one too, if you like. Don't want you to get bored between visions.”

I shook my head slowly. There was only one man I wanted to sleep with, and I'd never touch him again.

“I don't think that will be necessary,” I said.

The Emperor just laughed.

* * *

She knelt on the bed, looking like a primal representation of Woman. Naked, ripe and lush, flushed from lovemaking. No. Not lovemaking. Sex. Her breasts heaved, the nipples tight and wet, her body caressed by her two lovers. He guessed one wasn't enough for her any more. She'd moved on from those intense nights in New Amsterdam.

Languidly, she commanded the man behind her, the man still inside her, to look at him. Irrational jealousy streaked through him. She had to have a strong connection

with someone to use their sight. It was an intimate thing, touching someone else's mind like that.

Or maybe she just didn't care whose mind she used these days. He lifted his chin, defying her to make a comment on his filthy, ragged clothes or his starved and beaten body.

Would she even recognize him?

He knew the instant she did. Her beautiful, useless eyes went wide with shock, her soft plump lips parted, and her voice broke fetchingly as she said, "Hello, Jack."

Stupid hope crested inside him. She remembered, she recognized, she knew.

Then reality reasserted itself. Who was watching this? What games was she playing? God only knew what plans she had for him.

The concubine who'd brought Jack from the cells frowned. "My lady?"

"My name is Tyler, Imperial Majesty," he said, mocking a bow. "Wat Tyler."

The Empress—because that's who she was now, not the girl he once knew—shook her head, and broke her connection with the slave's sight. She knelt up, sliding the man's penis from her body, pushing away the concubine kneeling between her thighs.

To Jack she said, "You're filthy. Come with me."

"It's nice to meet you, too," he said as she swept to her feet and out of the room. It was more of a screened alcove, one of many around the large central room of the harem.

Jack followed her, ignoring the curiosity of the three concubines and trotting after the Empress as she sashayed, naked and unashamed, through the harem.

He had to admit, there were worse places to be imprisoned. Well, he'd just come from one of them. The harem was large, light and airy, filled with plants and statues like a classical garden. Water played in several pools and fountains, and in the approximate centre there was a large rock formation, down which water tumbled into a pool big enough to swim in.

And men did indeed swim in it. Several dozen of them wandered around in plain view, some of them scantily dressed and the others totally naked. They swam, they read, they worked out and they dozed on the various couches dotted about. One pair appeared to be wrestling. Another pair were making passionate love on the rocks surrounding the pool, their muscular bodies glistening and heaving.

The Empress made her way along curved paths, up and down steps, and paused to greet a couple of her concubines, all without stumbling or holding onto anything or giving any other sign that she couldn't actually see where she was going.

Maybe he'd misread the situation and the Empire had found some way of making her sight work. Maybe those beautiful dark eyes were really bionic. Or maybe, he conceded, she just knew her way around really well.

He watched her move, sensuous and elegant, her loose hair brushing the smooth, bare skin of her back, her firm high butt swaying with each step. He'd stood in the doorway and watched her orgasm, her body trembling, her breasts quivering, and catalogued the differences and the similarities between the body he saw now and the one he remembered. Because oh, how he remembered.

Her rounded youthful body had refined into a sleeker shape, her waist neater, her breasts fuller. Her stomach was flat, her butt firm. Her thighs were rounded yet strong, the sort of thighs a man wanted to lose himself between.

Her face had changed only subtly, tiny indefinable marks of maturity altering juvenile prettiness into adult beauty. Her cheekbones were high, her lips full, her eyes still dark, gorgeous and unseeing.

She hadn't changed much. And yet she was a totally different person.

She led him up a flight of stairs and through a door that was opened with a palm print and iris scan. The entryway was a full body scanner, and after she passed through, she turned and said, "It will tell me if you have any concealed weaponry."

"Right," Jack said, "because they totally failed to check for that when I was arrested."

He stepped forward, and the scanner bleeped. A modulated computer voice said, "Detected: prison manacles."

He raised his wrists and gave her a mocking smile.

"Connected to database?" she asked.

"Negative. Connection terminated at cell 2562."

"On whose command?" she asked.

"ID 155265. Concubine Santos."

She nodded to herself, hit something on the control panel and gestured him forward. Behind them, the door closed itself, and he heard locks clicking into place.

They were in a bedroom, a proper one, with a huge soft bed and a couple of comfortable-looking chairs. A dressing room was visible to one side, and a bathroom on the other. There was no window, but then he didn't suppose she needed one. There was, however, an array of subtle lighting, throwing her tempting curves into relief.

"So—" he began, but she launched herself at him, throwing her arms around him and pinning him back against the door with the force of her attack. Her mouth found his, kissing him with desperate passion, her fingers digging into his bruised skin, her arms holding him so tight he could barely breathe.

"Jack," she sobbed, burying her face in his neck and breathing deeply. "Oh Jack, it is you."

Jack winced, because she had her nose burrowed into his neck, and it had been a damn long time since his skin had seen fresh water. But she didn't seem to care, inhaling his scent and then coming back to his mouth for more hot, fevered kisses.

She kissed the way she always had done, with passion and abandon. She tasted the same, smelled the same, felt the same.

But she wasn't the same. She was a cold-hearted bitch who'd screwed him over for power and riches, and he'd spent fifteen years building up a good, hot hatred of her.

He pushed her away and glared at her. She, of course, couldn't see that, but he didn't care.

"I thought you were dead," she said, and those lovely eyes had tears in them.

"That was the idea," he said, stepping away from her before her kisses fogged his mind.

"Jack," she said, and caught his wrist. The manacle still rested there, a deep cuff of some unbreakable compound, its probes wriggling under his skin. It might have been disconnected from the Empire's databases—but then, it might not. He had absolutely no reason to assume that either Concubine Santos or his mistress was telling the truth, and as for computers, he of all people knew what they could be programmed to say.

"This must be sore," she said, and led him to the bed, pushing him down to sit while she fetched a sonic key. Scanning the instrument over the manacle released it, and this time Jack couldn't help flinching as dozens of probes popped out of his skin, leaving a web of fine holes in a wide ring around his wrist.

She did the same with the other arm, tossed both cuffs into a waste receptacle, and for a long moment remained on her knees before him, his wrists resting in her hands.

"I can get you something for the pain," she said.

"You act like I've never been manacled before."

She flashed a brief smile. "Of course. I've seen your record." Her fingers caressed up his arm toward the elbow, smearing blood as she went and frowning at what she detected.

"You're hurt, Jack. I know they're never gentle, but if you didn't fight so hard you wouldn't get beaten so badly."

"And what would you know about fighting?"

She flinched and got to her feet, resting her hands on his shoulders, feeling his arms, his chest, his back, as if she was checking for injuries.

"You're too thin," she said, and stroked her hand over his jaw, feeling the contours of his face.

Jack squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe she'd forgotten she was stark naked, but he hadn't, and there she was standing right in front of him. Her breasts were level with his

head, the nipples soft and round, swaying softly as she moved. And even though she was a traitorous bitch, he still wanted to lean forward and suckle on her soft flesh, hear her gasp, feel her fingers burrow into his hair.

He wanted to reach out and slide his hands down her back, cup that fine round ass of hers and bring her closer, straddling him. He wanted to pull open his pants and push himself deep inside her, rocking deep into her heat and wetness, her breasts pressing soft and warm against him, her mouth on his.

He wrenched himself away, cold with shame and disgust. And hot with lust.

It must be lack of food, or blood loss, or maybe he was just going insane.

"Yes, well," he said. "Your husband's cells aren't the most hospitable place I've stayed."

She straightened away from him.

"Those cuffs'll tell you the last time I ate," he went on, ignoring the ache in his stomach. "The last time I had anything to drink. They'll tell you how much damage your Imperial drones did to me with their big noisy boots and their laser rifles. How is he, by the way? Your husband?"

She flinched as if he'd physically hurt her, and turned away toward the bathroom. "You need a bath," she said, "and some food."

"I'm fine." It was a blatant lie. He was even starting to feel a little lightheaded. Well, that made sense—so much blood had rushed to his groin, there wasn't enough left for his head.

"Jack. I don't need eyes to see you're not." She leaned over the large bathtub and turned on the water, adding something from a small, jewel-bright bottle that scented the steam wafting his way. She moved as if she could see, but he remembered her old habits: every movement practiced, rehearsed, every item placed meticulously in a precise place. "Take a bath, and I'll get you some med patches for the worst of those wounds, and—"

"Why are you doing this?"

She was silent a while, still facing away from him.

"Cleaning me up for the cameras? Can't take a filthy, starving man into the Throne Room. Ah, but it's not that, is it? I've seen those executions broadcast live. The more pathetic the prisoner, the better. You throw them out on the terrace for the birds to eat, well, those birds must go mighty hungry if all they get are the starved corpses you throw out there."

"I don't throw them out there," she said tightly, passionately. Her hands gripped the edge of the bathtub.

"Your husband does," Jack said softly, "and aren't you a single unit? The Emperor is the Empire, so we're told, and doesn't the same go for the Empress?"

"I am not my husband," she said, every word, every syllable hot with anger.

"No," Jack said. "I've never wanted to swive the Emperor. But apart from that I don't see much difference."

She whirled to face him, murder in her expression.

"You have no idea," she spat, voice low. "No idea whatsoever."

Jack stood up. "Then—" he began, but the world dipped and swayed around him. "Whoa. Okay. Y'know—"

"Jack?" There was caution in her voice, panic on her face. Her face, which was beginning to blur slightly.

"You know what, maybe I'm better off sitting down," he said, or at least he tried to say it. The words slurred and tangled themselves into knots, and the floor rushed up to meet him, the world growing rapidly darker.

But he never hit the ground. She was there, catching him, grabbing at him even though she couldn't possibly have seen him fall. She lowered him to the ground and pulled his head into her lap. Then—stupid girl—she leant over him, warm and close and soft and naked, her breasts dangling right above him. As if that was supposed to make him less dizzy.

"Jack," she said, tapping his face. "Jack, don't pass out on me. We have far too much to talk about."

"Mmm," he said, dreamily reaching up for her breasts and missing by about a foot.

"Jack, can you hear me?"

"Little bit closer, darling."

She leaned further down, and those wonderful breasts of hers brushed his aching forehead.

"Love?" he said, and she smiled at him and caressed his cheek.

"Yes?"

"Use my eyes."

She frowned, and then he felt the brush of her against his mind, and knew exactly when she connected. Her eyes looked up through his and saw her nipples inches from his face.

She yanked away from him, mentally and physically, and Jack managed a slight chuckle.

"Pervert," she said.

"You're the one rubbing them in my face," he said, lolling on the carpet. The whole room swirled. "D'you mind if I just lie here a while?"

"I think you need those med patches now," she said. He closed his eyes, listened to her moving around, and then he felt her hands on him, pulling his clothing aside, undressing him.

"Maybe later," he slurred.

She ignored him, sensible for once, and he felt a cool wipe on his wrist before she wrapped a med patch about it. The patch's probes were tiny, gentle and unobtrusive, Imperial technology at its best, reading his body chemistry and altering the imbalance. Maybe they were emergency ones, used independently of any recording device. Or maybe they were transmitting every detail to the Empire. Right now he didn't care.

She wrapped another patch around his other wrist, one on each side of his throat, and two on his chest. She'd just started to unfasten his pants when he passed out.

Chapter Three

From the memoirs of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Carnalis

"Jack Hunter," I said. "New Amsterdam."

The computer bleeped. "No record found."

No record had been found for Jack's real name, his real date of birth. I wasn't surprised. Despite the Empire's best efforts, there was a flourishing black market in altered identities.

"Same location," I said. "Giacomo Casanova."

"No record found."

"Dipper."

"No record found."

"Anybody by the name of Jack."

"No record found."

"Anybody from New Amsterdam born in that year."

A handful of names were reeled off. One of them was mine. A point of minor interest for anybody who cared. Once I'd had a name, I'd had a family, I'd even had a birthday. For so many years now I've been the Empress, and I have to try harder each time to remember who I was before that.

And sometimes I wonder why I make the effort.

Jack used to go by many names. I tried every one that I could remember, but none were traceable. Instead I set the computer to trawling names from history, the names of great revolutionaries, heroes and martyrs. He'd always had a fondness for martyrs.

Guido Fawkes had been incarcerated for theft of gold four years ago – which was interesting, since he'd been put to death for treason hundreds of years before the Fall. The Fawkes of four years ago escaped, and insider help was suspected.

Two years ago Paul Revere had been prosecuted for treason but argued so successfully in his own defense that he was released without conviction, and never heard from again.

During the last seven years, Claus von Stauffenberg was reputed to have made several daring and highly improbable raids on Imperial arsenals, but never caught.

Not long after I left New Amsterdam, Marcus Junius Brutus had been arrested for murdering an Imperial Guard, but protested that he'd done so only because he'd caught the guard raping a civilian woman. DNA testing proved he'd told the truth, but Brutus was still imprisoned for use of unreasonable force. He escaped, possibly with the help of the violated civilian woman.

Ten years ago, John Lilburne was caught by an iris scanner as the man responsible for releasing dozens of Imperial Traitors from jail. However, overwhelming evidence to the contrary was produced by so many people that the case was dropped. In part, this consisted of three women claiming to have slept with him. Later, vid files captured all four of them in bed together.

I confess I used Imperial overrides to access these files, and watched them through Santos's eyes.

They showed one man and three women in a large bed, naked but for a few silk scarves and handcuffs. Lilburne pleased one of the women with his mouth, another with his hands and the third bounced around on his cock. Occasionally one of them would thrash and scream in orgasm before subsiding, and swapping place with one of the others.

The man giving so much pleasure to three insatiable women was undoubtedly the man to whom I'd given my virginity. At one point I caught him looking at the camera, his expression fleeting, almost as if he wanted to say something but changed his mind.

Six months later he was dead. The body of a man whose DNA profile matched that of Lilburne, Brutus, Fawkes and half a dozen other thorns in the Empire's side was flaunted live on a mandatory broadcast. After which his hands and eyes were severed and sent to four different labs for verification.

The man I had once loved more than anything else in the world was dead. I took to my bed for three days with two men and a stupendously well-endowed sexbot, but it didn't help.

* * *

"Who is he?"

"Thanks, Santos, I'm sure he'll be fine," she said, sitting back and pressing her hands to her face. Her head ached, with tiredness, concern, and with fear. What the hell was she going to say to Jack when he woke up?

Right now he rested on her bed, knocked into an artificial sleep by the med patches as they healed the worst of the Empire's indignities. Bruises and laser burns weren't the worst of his worries. The med patches had reported internal injuries that probably would have killed him without proper attention.

"The patches will work," Santos said. "They're the best the Empire has to offer."

"But you deprogrammed them."

"Only so they can't transmit his data. They'll still work. Lady, he'll be fine." Santos paused. "But why are you so worried about him?"

"He's badly hurt."

"So are most of the men we bring from the cells."

She shrugged, then realized her nonchalance wasn't going to get her anywhere. Santos knew her too well.

"Who is he to you?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "An old flame. Are there any patches left over? I have a hell of a headache."

He moved around, came to kneel before her, and pressed the patch into place on her forehead. Almost immediately, the pain eased.

"I didn't think you had old flames, my lady."

"Believe it or not, I used to have a life before I came here. Not much of one, by Imperial standards, but it made me happy."

"Then why did you give it up?"

His pale face, the shock and surprise, the pain – the pain –

"I had no choice," she said, and Santos took her hands in his. He kissed her fingers.

"Is it a coincidence," he asked, "that your old flame is now a renowned terrorist?"

"Renowned?" she asked.

"He changes his name, but ... yes. Your friend Swann put me onto him. He changes his name every now and then, but his friends know him for who he is."

"And who is he?"

"They call him the Revolutionary. He takes his name from famous rebels throughout history."

"Wat Tyler?"

"Fourteenth century leader of a revolt in the Kingdom of England."

And Guy Fawkes, and Paul Revere, and Brutus, and all the rest. But they were dead.

"I thought he was dead," she said, her whole body aching as she remembered the broadcast, the mutilated body, the lolling head so clearly that of the man she'd loved. Santos had been her eyes for that. She'd needed to see it. Needed to see the results of the tests carried out on his hands and eyes, too.

"The fingerprints and iris scans and DNA results were positive," she said. "It was him. DNA can't be changed or faked."

"No, but the records that match it can be. Think about it, my lady. For every brilliant step the Empire takes, the rebels are half a step ahead. Who are the best programmers you know?"

"People whose names I can't speak out loud," she said, even though her bedroom was the one place she felt entirely secure. The data broadcast to the Empire's greedy eyes was entirely falsified, and the real happenings inside the room kept entirely secret.

Santos was stroking her hands now, caressing them in a way she might have welcomed on any other day. But not now. Now she gently pulled her hands away, and Santos got quietly to his feet.

"What was he to you?" he asked again, and she thought of the heat, the smiles, the laughter, the warmth and completeness. She thought of Jack, and felt her eyes burn at the loss of him.

"He was everything," she said.

The shrill bleep of the intercom startled her. Santos moved away to answer it, and she ran her hands over her face.

"His Imperial Majesty requires Her Imperial Majesty's presence," said the pompous voice of one of the Emperor's aides, and she tried not to laugh at the ludicrous statement.

"When?" Santos asked.

"As soon as is convenient."

"I will inform her ladyship."

He ended the transmission before the aide could say anything more, and the Empress pressed her fingers to her temples. The headache was coming back.

"Remember when I had a name, Santos?" she said.

He paused. "No, my lady. I don't."

She sighed. "Me neither, most of the time. Perhaps it's better that way. What do you think he wants?"

Santos had already picked up a datapad and started scrolling through for information. "There's some trouble in Riyadh," he said. "It might be to do with that. Or the Atlantis drilling, which he's still pushing ahead."

She groaned. "Atlantis! Hasn't it occurred to anyone else that my husband is insane?"

"Apparently the citizens of Riyadh have noticed," Santos said calmly.

She stood up. "Right. I'll go and see him. Might as well get it over with."

"Would you like me to come?"

"No, stay here and keep an eye on Jack. I'll get Cully to come with me. The Emperor is frightened of him."

She dressed carefully in her full Imperial regalia and instructed Cully to put on the thigh boots, jeweled loincloth and studded collar all her concubines wore whenever they appeared in public. Cully, who had been a prize-fighter before he'd turned revolutionary, was nearly seven feet tall and seemed as wide, built of solid muscle. She enjoyed intimidating her husband with the larger of her personal escorts.

The Emperor's quarters were about as far away from hers as they could be, which suited them both fine. After the disastrous and frankly humiliating wedding night they'd shared fifteen years ago, he hadn't attempted to join her bed, preferring to slake his considerable lust on his ever-growing harem of women, or the court attendants begging for his attention in the Hall of Pleasure adjoining his suite of rooms.

She found him there, his naked body glistening with the oil he'd smeared over the woman kneeling in front of him. She had her head down on the floor, her ass in the air, and the Emperor was plunging his skinny cock into her oiled anus.

A second woman rubbed herself against his back, her huge breasts likewise oiled. Both women wore the ruby collar of the Emperor's harem, a tracking device that kept them from ever leaving the palace.

The walls of the high-ceilinged room were encrusted with jewels, the floor made of slabs of diamond over plates of solid gold. From the ceiling wafted banners of silk and beams of colored light.

She tuned out of Cully's eyesight as soon as she'd located the Emperor in the centre of the room, but held onto the burly arm of her escort, trusting him to guide her between the multitude of thrusting, grunting, heaving bodies filling the room.

Cully was used to escorting her and guided her so smoothly that no onlooker could possibly have guessed she couldn't see where she was going. It helped to be royal, to have an excuse not to meet anyone's eye.

She felt Cully's pulse speed up as they plunged further into the room. He shifted awkwardly as they walked, and she smiled. "Anything catch your eye?"

He cleared his throat. "No. Well, yes. There's a lot of naked flesh around."

"I know. I can hear it." The slap of bare bodies echoed all around, the gasps and grunts and sighs of dozens of people satisfying animal urges.

"There's a – well now, that is impressive."

"Describe it to me. Maybe we can try it later."

His muscles tensed. "A man standing up, unsupported, holding a woman upside down. She's sucking him and he's licking her."

"Oh, that."

"You've tried it?"

"Dear Cully, there isn't much I haven't tried. It's fun for a little while, but hard to keep your balance, especially once you really get into it. Is my husband still plugging away at that poor girl?"

"Yes. She looks rather bored."

"Poor child. They never know what they're getting themselves into."

As they approached, the sounds of the Emperor's labors became louder and more elaborate. Evidently in need of an ego boost, he'd called another girl over, and this one lay awkwardly beneath him, trying to suck his balls as he thrust frantically between the buttocks of the girl in front. The girl behind him, her skin an apparently natural magenta, was caressing him feverishly, and gasping as if she were the one getting royally fucked.

"Oh yes, oh God yes. That's so fucking hot. Oh! Oh yeah. Just like that. Mmm, you have such a fantastic cock. God, I want to suck it and ride it. This is so hot. I could come just like this."

The Empress rolled her eyes and said to Cully, "If I ever make noises like that during sex, gag me."

She could hear the smile in his voice as he replied, "As you wish, my lady."

The Emperor redoubled his efforts at her approach, slapping the quivering buttocks he was driving between and grunting, "You like that? You like my thick cock inside you?"

The girl with her face pressed into the ground nodded. "I love your thick cock inside me."

"Inside your ass, you dirty little bitch. What are you?"

"I'm a dirty little bitch, sir."

He slapped her harder. "Imperial Majesty, bitch!"

"Imperial Majesty!"

The Empress stopped a few feet away and stood still. "You called, sir?"

Her husband gave her a sly glance, then yanked the girl behind him around to one side so he could suck and grope at her breasts. She made even louder, more fake-sounding noises of delight, and he grunted and groaned and eventually shouted loudly that he was coming.

His wife aimed her eyes at the billowing drapes, and affected an expression of boredom, which seemed to infuriate him. Truth be told, she was bored. The Emperor liked flashy toys and kinky positions, mostly, she suspected, to cover up a total lack of expertise and interest in pleasing anyone but himself.

Coming from Jack's bed to the Emperor's had been a terrible shock. Her first lover had taken infinite time and patience with her, had spent hours coaxing her body to the greatest heights of pleasure, had made her laugh and gasp and orgasm so hard she occasionally passed out.

The Emperor had ordered her to lie down and watch as he undressed, and she'd winced, realizing she couldn't hide her blindness any longer. He'd been horrified, disgusted, and accused her of deliberately misleading him—which she couldn't really deny.

He'd knelt over her, shoved her hands onto his cock and told her to get to know it that way. He'd pleased himself in her mouth, between her breasts, and then he'd pulled her over to a padded sling arrangement, organized her body so she was doubled over with her ass in the air, and plunged into her pussy without any sort of foreplay or attempt to please her.

"Frigid little bitch," he'd gasped, hammering away at her. "At least act like you're enjoying it!"

But she'd been too busy holding back tears to pretend any such thing. Against all her wishes, he was her husband, and the likelihood of ever being able to leave him was so remote it made her weep in earnest.

He'd been revolted, and had told her to play with herself for his gratification. She'd found it nothing but humiliating. Worse was to come when he told her she needed lessons, and brought in two lasciviously spiteful women from his harem to pleasure her with various toys, to press their shaved pussies to her mouth and hands, and finally to give up on her and have noisy sex with her husband while she tried not to listen.

After that terrible night, he'd never summoned her to his bed again, but that didn't stop him exhibiting himself and his lack of sexual expertise whenever they met.

At the loud yell that signified he'd finally finished humiliating his three women, the Empress turned her head in his direction and tuned into Cully's sight. It was a small connection of her mind to his, non-invasive, barely touching his thoughts. Her mind sought out the neural pathways linking his eyes to his brain, and synched in with them. Jack had been the one to help her perfect the technique. These days, she did it without any effort at all.

The Emperor withdrew his shriveled, oily dick from the ass of the unfortunate girl kneeling on the hard floor, and got to his feet.

"You're late," he said to his wife.

"You're premature," she replied, and he snarled at her.

"I need you to tell me what's going on in Riyadh," he said, wiping come from his cock with a cloth handed to him by the magenta-skinned woman.

"The newsvids can do that."

"You know what I mean," he scowled. "Use your Sight, woman. Who's behind it, and what do they want?"

"Dissidents who want to separate from the Empire," she said promptly.

"You already saw this?"

In every other rebellion the Empire had faced. "It's the same as always," she said.

"I don't care." He threw himself at his throne, beckoning to the girl who'd been sucking his balls. "Lick it up," he said, cupping his sticky genitals. "All of it."

No trace of emotion crossed her face as she knelt to comply. The Empress kept her face likewise empty of expression.

"I want you to see who's behind this in Riyadh," her husband said. "Now."

"I can't always see on demand," she said. "You know that."

His expression wasn't the blissful look of a man having his cock sucked. It was demonic and smug. "Try."

She closed her eyes, disconnected from Cully's mind, and held onto him as she gathered her concentration. Blocking out the sounds of the Hall of Pleasure took a few seconds, and then she focused her mind down the long tunnel away from the present and into what she'd always thought of as The Possibilities.

Her Sight was never unwaveringly accurate when it came to predicting the future, but it could give an uncanny insight into the present. She visualized the space between the floating city of Carnalis and the coastal city of Riyadh. Time spread out before her like a map, the past under the present under the future, layers all bleeding into each other. She saw the desert it had once been, the ancient city rising up from the sand, millennia of people and animals and life. She saw the swirling seas conquer the desert, turning a dry city into an ocean port. She saw lasers and fire and death and —

Wait, that was it. The fiery plans for the future. She zoomed in on them, finding their imprint inside a dozen brains. Precise plans held inside the minds of a small collection of people, the larger details distributed to hundreds.

"Well?" said the Emperor, and her concentration flickered.

She could tell him it was nothing, that he didn't need to even worry about it, but she'd lied once before and felt his flicker of uncertainty. He had to trust her, had to believe she told the truth about this and so many other small rebellions, because how else would he believe that she never saw the big one coming?

The change, the turning of the tide, a revolution even bigger than the Fall. She had to keep him from suspecting anything.

"A small rebellion," she said. "A dozen ringleaders in Ar Rafi'ah. A few hundred others who are just following orders. Nothing the troops can't handle."

She opened her eyes, but didn't tune back into Cully's sight. She didn't want to see her husband's smile of satisfaction, or the shame of the girl sucking his cock, or any of the other desperate, loveless acts going on around her. Acts of power and self-fulfillment. Degrading, humiliating acts.

"Will that be all?" she said abruptly.

"Unless you want to stay and enjoy yourself," the Emperor purred.

"I've enjoyed myself enough today, thank you," she said, and turned to sweep out of the room. She walked right into a couple sixty-nining, which made the Emperor laugh out loud. Everyone else whose mouth wasn't otherwise occupied joined in.

Chapter Four

From the memoirs of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Carnalis

The Emperor's Hall of Pleasure was known throughout the Empire as a place of decadence and sin. Invitations were highly coveted, and courtiers who made it through the bejeweled doors were the envy of the whole Empire.

It wasn't enough to be decadent in the Hall. Participants had to be beautiful, sensual, imaginative, and totally uninhibited. Around the walls were various swings and seats, and on the golden floor rested plenty of large, thick cushions. Fucking vigorously on a hard surface might be all right for a quickie, but not for long sessions.

Servants dispensed lube and towels. Every possible variety of sexual toy was offered. And yet ... I never found it alluring in the least. It was crude and mechanical, like watching a porn vid. It might get you off in an obvious way, but it was somehow unsatisfying.

Needless to say, my husband adored it.

* * *

Silently, Cully took her arm and led her around the sucking, licking, feasting couples, and she reluctantly used his sight to avoid any more collisions. They walked around couplings and threesomes and foursomes and one giant, gyrating group of indeterminate size, all fucking madly with one eye on the Emperor's throne.

By the time she reached the exit she was shaking. Anger, disgust, humiliation and, most infuriating of all, lust, surged within her. She shoved open the door, banged it back into place and gripped Cully's arm so hard she felt him wince.

"Sorry," she snapped, rubbing at her forehead.

"It's all right, my lady. I've been hurt much worse, and with much more deliberation."

His bare arm was hard and hot under her hand. His skin was smooth. She backed him against the nearest wall in the deserted antechamber and kissed him, hard.

"I hate that place," she whispered against his mouth.

"I know you do."

"It's so—so—so soulless. So mechanical. They might as well be bloody sexbots." Her whole body heaved with anger. "None of them want to give pleasure. They just want to take it. Every one of them. Finding bigger, harder ways to show off. Cully," she wrapped her arms around his muscular neck, "how can people enjoy that?"

"If they thought about it, they probably don't enjoy it all that much."

"And the way he humiliates his women." She shuddered at the memory of being one of them. "It's all about power and status. He doesn't care about them at all."

"Lady." He gently kissed her ear. "They can probably hear you." Of course they could. The Empire had ears everywhere.

"I don't care. I don't care, Cully." His big body was warm under her hands, and he held her gently, with arms capable of crushing a man to death. "I don't do that to you, do I? I've never wanted to treat anyone like a—like a machine."

"Of course you don't, my lady," he said soothingly, but how could she believe him? He even used her title.

"Cully—what do you want? What do you enjoy?" Anxiously she said, "Is there anything I haven't done for you that you'd like?"

"There's nothing, lady." He stroked her back through the heavy fabric of her robe. "Just being with you pleases me."

"Yes, but—but..." How could she know he wasn't just saying that? "I'd release you, you know, if you wanted to go. You don't have to stay with me. We fixed your identity ages ago. You can go—"

"Lady," he interrupted her gently, "there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

He kissed her trembling mouth, wrapped his big arms around her and held her, close and warm, his hands caressing her through her elaborate robe.

When she pressed herself against his nearly-naked body, she felt the bulge of his erection. Maybe it was a reaction to the multitude of inventive acts going on inside the Hall, or maybe it was the way she was rubbing herself up against him like a shameless kitten. She reached down and cupped the huge, swelling shaft through the rich fabric of his loincloth and whispered, "You don't have to wear this, you know."

A rumble of laughter shook his chest. "Good idea. Let's take it off right now."

"I mean..." She laughed shakily. "If it demeans you. You can wear —"

He nuzzled her neck. "Do you know what kind of looks I get from women, walking around like this? They all want a piece of the Empress's concubine."

"You could go with them, if you like."

He hesitated, pressing wet kisses against the curve of her breast revealed by her low-cut bodice. "I already have. Once or twice."

She smiled, stroking his close-shaved head. "I'm glad."

The fabric covering her torso was heavy and stiff, but Cully managed to ease it down enough to free her aching nipples, stroking one and kissing the other. She fumbled with the jeweled belt holding his loincloth in place, and tugged away the fabric to reveal his splendid erection to her touch.

"Look down at yourself," she whispered. "I want to see you."

He obliged, letting her brush against his mind to look down at the thick dark shaft pulsing against her hands. She stroked both hands up and down its length, and it grew, stiffening against her fingers.

Cully let his gaze linger there a while, then he slid it up, over the embroidered bodice of her gown to her pushed-up breasts, wet from his mouth, the nipples hard and puckered.

"Lady," he breathed, "how could anyone not want to give you pleasure?"

With that he sank to his knees, ducking under her skirts and giving her a perfect view of the golden cagework supporting her skirts, of the pink stockings tied above the knee by silk garters, of the delicate underwear lying pale against her skin.

She might not have worn any at all, but today's dress had no opaque layers below the thigh, and she was damned if she was going to give those dead-eyed pleasure-seekers a free glimpse of her pussy.

Cully nudged the fine fabric to one side and ran his fingers over the pink folds peeking out. She gasped and began to withdraw from his sight, but he murmured, "No, my lady. See how beautiful you are."

He stroked her, parting her folds and exploring her delicately, his touch exquisitely slow. Her sex was pink and dark, sensitive folds like petals, glistening with her own moisture. Her clit stood out, throbbing with the need to be touched.

Jack had looked at her like this. Jack had stroked her and made her watch, had feasted on her and kissed the taste into her mouth. Jack had shown her how delicious it could be to give pleasure to someone else.

Cully lapped at her inner thigh, and she closed her eyes, trying not to pretend she was with Jack. It wasn't fair to Cully – to any of them, but she couldn't help it, every time one of her harem touched her, licked her, fucked her.

"Yes," she murmured, "just like that," and then as his tongue touched her clit – fire exploded behind her eyes. The hot, crackling flames of real fire, burning her skin, filling her nostrils with smoke. Her useless eyes slammed open to stare on a vast field of burning rubble, a city on fire, hungry flames devouring buildings and vehicles and people. Dear God, the people. Screaming, tortured in death, trapped and helpless, dying in their thousands, hideous, fiery deaths. She saw them, felt them, the panic and mind-consuming fear. People running, stumbling, tripping, falling trampled underfoot. And those eyes, a new face but always the same eyes. Lasers arced into the dark sky, blades glinted, blood ran in rivers, sweeping bodies away and drowning, drowning –

"My lady?" Cully said, his voice coming from miles away, and the ground rose up to meet her.

* * *

Jack awoke, tired and heavy, aching all over in a disturbingly familiar way. The artificial sleep of heavy duty emergency med patches always left him feeling hung over.

"And I didn't even get to drink anything," he murmured. "Well, probably."

He was somewhere silent and clean. Jack cracked open one eye, then the other. Lighting was dim, and he couldn't make out any details, but he was sleeping in a large, soft bed and he was covered in patches. Must have been a bad fight.

He wondered who'd picked him up this time. George? No, George slept in a camp cot with sexbots for pillows. Swann? Maybe, although he didn't detect the constant creak and rock of a ship at sea. Maybe it had been Edward, or Carver. This made more sense, especially since Carver had taken up with a lady of quality, which might explain the soft bed and clean sheets. Clean sheets had been lacking in Jack's life lately.

He sat up, just as the door lock bleeped and the portal slid open to reveal a huge figure, apparently naked, carrying an elaborately-dressed woman in his arms.

Her head lolled, her lips formed silent words, her eyelids flickered, and she flinched as if in the throes of a particularly terrible dream.

His heart lurched. He'd seen this before.

"Lay her down," he said, moving to the edge of the bed to get out, then reconsidering when a wave of dizziness hit him. "How long has she been like this?"

The man-mountain gave him a distrustful look. "You need to get out of here," he said, laying the Empress down on the bed, still dressed in some highly structured court gown with half the skirt missing. She grasped blindly at the sheets and tossed her head in pain.

"Let him stay," said Santos, the concubine who'd brought him from the cells. To Jack he said, "You've seen her like this before?"

He nodded. "It's a vision. A pretty bad one, by the looks of it. They don't knock her out often."

"No," said Santos. "Cully, what happened?"

Cully straightened up. He was entirely naked, Jack saw, and the huge cock swinging between his legs was enough to make even Jack feel a little insecure.

"She gasped and fainted," he said. "I thought she was just coming very hard, but then she started crying and shaking."

"Coming?" Jack said sharply. "Hell's cats, how many times a day do you swive her?"

"As many as she wants," Cully replied implacably. He looked down at the shuddering Empress and his cock twitched.

"Get out," Jack said. "She needs quiet and calm, not a bloody bull in heat."

"I am not a bull," Cully growled. "Minos is the bull. I'm a werewolf." There was a clear threat in his voice.

Jack ignored him and began unfastening the elaborate gown.

"Get your hands off—" Cully began, but Santos stopped him.

"It's all right, Cully. Jack knows the Empress of old. He knows how to take care of her."

"We take care of her," Cully said mutinously, but he stepped back and allowed Jack to remove the Empress's heavy dress. He slipped her stockings off, trying not to notice the smoothness of her skin, and instead concentrated on how cold she was. She shook as if fevered, trembling and sweating.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she gasped, eyes flickering madly.

"So am I, sweetheart," Jack murmured, pulling pins from her hair. "You two, go. She needs peace and quiet."

The two men hesitated.

"She trusted me enough to let me sleep in her bed," Jack said, "unguarded. You can extend the same trust, can't you?"

"We don't know you," Cully said.

Jack pointed to the shivering woman on the bed. "She does."

He pulled the covers over her and rested his hand on her forehead. She was hot there, feverish.

"The vision will play out, over and over if it's a particularly traumatic one. The only way for her to escape it is to step into a memory, a dream, and wake herself from there."

Santos was watching her shudder. He nodded. "She's said this before," he admitted.

"When she wakes she'll be exhausted, mentally and physically. She'll have a raging thirst and she'll desperately need sleep, but she won't allow herself to drop off because she's still too frightened of the vision she's just had. Does any of that sound familiar?"

Reluctantly, both men nodded.

"And has she ever wanted you around when it happens?"

They both shook their heads. Jack looked at the concern in their eyes and allowed himself a small smile. "And do you stay anyway?"

"Someone has to make sure she doesn't hurt herself with all this thrashing," Cully said.

"Right," said Jack. "Me."

Chapter Five

The man with the thousand faces turned slowly and his burning blue eyes met mine. I'd never seen him before, but I'd seen him a hundred times. Never met him, but I knew him so well.

Behind him, all around us, crackled the endless fires of the end of the world. Nothing stood except for us. The Empire had vanished in an inferno of blood and fire.

Fire crackled against his skin, but he did not burn.

"And you will save us?" I asked.

"I can lead you," he said. "You must save yourselves."

"Who are you?"

He smiled. "You know me, my lady. You believed in me once."

I screwed up my eyes and tried desperately to think. I'd only ever believed in two people, and both of them were dead.

No—Jack wasn't dead. Was he?

"You're not Jack," I said, and the man with the thousand faces smiled. Every time I saw him he looked different, but every time he was the same.

"I'm not Jack," he agreed. "I once had a claim to your loyalty, but never to your love."

"He's important, isn't he?" I said. "Jack. And the others. Swann of the Mer, John Carver the mercenary—I've seen their faces and I know they're important in what's coming."

"Yes. I couldn't do it without them. Or you."

"But who are you?"

He smiled again. "I am myself. Duck, Empress."

"Duck—?" I began, and he shoved me out of the way as a steel girder, molten with heat, crashed down on where I'd been standing.

"The world has to end to begin again," he said. He gestured to the ground, where a blackened and bloody hand lay. The arm it was attached to had been so badly burned it was barely recognizable as human flesh. Through the flames I could just make out the rest of the body.

Beyond it lay thousands more.

"Must it end like this?" I said. "In fire, and blood, and pain?"

"You must be prepared for it," he said.

"I don't want a fight like this," I said. "All these deaths, it's senseless."

"There must be sacrifices."

"But this many?" I gestured at the endless fields of corpses, the skeletons of buildings, the eternal flames. "What is there left of the Empire?"

"Nothing."

"But the Empire is everything! Every man, every woman. Destroy them all and there's nothing left. You might have vanquished your foe but you'll be damn lonely here, alone in this burned out husk of a world."

The man with the thousand faces laughed suddenly. "I've been alone for years," he said.

"I won't be a part of this."

He gripped my arms and turned me to face him. "The Empire is not everybody. It is not every building and it is not every soul. It's a part of everything, nothing more."

I looked up into his blue eyes, turning brown from the flicker of reflected flames.

"Remove the Empire and you remove a cancerous growth," he said. "We can recover. We will recover."

"From this?" I said, gesturing to the endless flames.

"From this," he said, and turned me to face the fire.

And I knew what I had to do.

"There will be blood," I said.

"Yes."

"There will be sacrifice."

"Yes."

"And there will be freedom."

His hands tightened on my arms before he let me go. "Yes."

I nodded, and walked into the fire.

* * *

She screamed, a hideous unearthly sound, and her eyes flew open. Beautiful, dark, and sightless, they darted frantically around, never settling anywhere near Jack.

He grabbed her hand and laid his fingers against her forehead. Her temperature was normal. The vision fever had passed.

"Empress?" he said, watching her rapid breathing. "Imperial Majesty?"

She said nothing, shaking slightly like a child waking from a nightmare. Her free hand batted at her skin as if trying to free it of insects. Or put out flames.

"Angelica," Jack said softly, and her breath caught in her throat. Her head turned toward him. "I'm here," he said. "You're all right. The vision's passed."

Her breathing slowed. The frantic pulse fluttering in her wrist calmed.

"Jack?" Her voice was thin and fragile. She didn't look like the almighty Empress. She looked like the woman who'd left him fifteen years ago, waking from a terrible vision, frightened and in need of comfort.

"Yes," he said, taking her in his arms and cradling her. "It's me."

She folded up against him, tucking her face into his neck and clutching at him, shuddering as if sobbing, but no tears came. He reached around her for the carafe of water he'd already filled, and guided her hand to it.

She drank, emptying it all, and sucked in a deep breath. "Do you know what I'd give," she said quietly, "for first sight instead of second?"

Jack gave a small smile and stroked her hair. She'd said that to him often enough in the past. He couldn't count the times he'd woken to find her trembling and sweating

beside him, tears drying on her cheeks, sobbing. Whenever he asked what was wrong, she'd said, "Bad dream."

"No one has dreams that bad," he'd said eventually. "What was it really?"

She'd gone quiet, then so softly he almost couldn't hear it, replied, "The end of the world."

But the end of the world hadn't arrived, despite her predictions. He'd thought when she left him that might be it, but the Earth kept on turning. When news of Edward's death had reached him, he'd figured there wasn't much more point breathing any more, but still he'd gone on doing it, and the world had remained much the same.

Now she lay in his arms, the Empress no less, still shaking slightly, her skin cool and smooth against his.

"End of the world again?" he asked.

She shuddered and nodded. "The end of the Empire."

"Really?" Jack said. "You didn't happen to take notes, did you?"

"Funny." She reached for the water again but the carafe was empty. Jack eased away from her and padded to the bathroom sink to refill it.

She lay, small and delicate, dark against the pale sheets, her hands covering her face. When he nudged the carafe against her fingers she took it and drank every drop. Jack refilled it again, saying nothing.

She drank and drank, and finally set down the carafe with some water left in it. "Thank you."

"I remembered you were always thirsty after one of those."

She nodded. "Thirstier than usual. There was fire." She shuddered again. "And a man..."

"I don't think I want to hear this."

She gave a wry smile. "Not like that. I ... I knew him, Jack, but I don't know how. He's been in my visions before, I think. Always the same but always different. He's ... he's important. Really, terribly important."

"In what way?"

She took in a deep breath and let it out again, slowly. "He could save us all."

"I thought the Empire saved us all," Jack said sourly.

"Like God? Like faith?"

"Isn't that what the Emperor is? A god? Isn't the Empire some sort of fanatical religion? Believe in us or die?"

"He could save us from the Empire," she said quietly, and Jack stared.

"From?"

"Like cancer. Jack, he reminded me of Edward."

He stared at her some more, then moved to sit on the bed again. "Empress," he began, and something tightened in her expression.

"I'd rather you called me Angelica," she said.

"I'd rather you hadn't screwed me over in pursuit of glory and riches," he replied. "We all have to bear life's disappointments."

She rubbed her arms and curled away from him. "No one calls me by my name anymore," she said. "Did you know that? I don't even have a name. It's been erased from all records. Angelica Western died that day in New Amsterdam. I'm Her Imperial Majesty the Empress now."

"Angelica wasn't the only one who died that day," Jack said, watching her. "There wasn't much of Jack left, either."

She flinched. "Jack—"

"I don't want to hear it. What did you mean, this man reminded you of Edward?"

She shrugged, an elegant gesture. "His ... fire. His passion. His charisma. The way he was so certain of victory."

"Didn't get it though, did he?" Jack said harshly. "Your husband saw to that."

She stiffened. "That's not an opinion you ought to venture outside this room, Jack. Men have died for less."

"For implying that the Emperor killed his own nephew? Come on, Angelica, you don't really believe he was killed by his own guards?"

She was silent a long while. Prince Edward, the great white hope. He'd spoken often of the Empress, his aunt by marriage, although they were of an age with each other. He seemed to believe she was sympathetic to their cause, but Jack had always been swift to correct him. The Empress cared for no one but herself. Without the Empire, there would be no Empress.

Pretty soon, Edward had stopped mentioning her to Jack.

"His own guards would no more have turned on him than I would," Jack said.

Angelica lifted her head. "You knew him?"

"I fought alongside him. Any scrap against the Empire, I was there. He was a good man."

"Yes, he was."

"And the story the Empire concocted about him was bullshit."

"That's not all that's bullshit," she murmured.

"What was that?"

She sighed heavily, then turned to face him. He didn't ask how she knew where he was. She always knew.

"Who was Edward's father, Jack?"

He frowned. "The Emperor's brother. He died before Edward was born."

"Yes, and weren't the circumstances unusual? A fever, when he was alone in the desert, no guards, and his implants were malfunctioning?"

Jack had long thought this was suspicious, and said so. "But there wasn't any reason to have him killed. He was the Emperor's younger brother, and never made any threat to his position."

Angelica bit her lip, then said, "Younger brother."

"Yes. Come on, why am I telling you this?"

"He was the older brother, Jack. He should have inherited. Any children he had would have been next in line. Frankly I'm amazed Edward was allowed to grow to adulthood, the threat he posed."

"But..." Jack shook his head, unable to take this in. "The Emperor was the younger brother? But it's ... I mean, it's a matter of public record."

"Jack. Do you really think it's difficult for the Emperor to change public record? He erased my name. He erased his own!"

"But people must remember. Edward's mother?"

"Died giving birth. Probably the first woman to do so for hundreds of years."

"Courtiers!"

"Can be silenced. Permanently."

"And yet you know all this," he said accusingly.

"What am I, Jack? A seer. It's why he sought me out. To confirm the prophecy. 'The younger brother shall rule the Empire as it should be'."

"As it should be? Should? What sort of hellish vision of 'should' do you —"

Younger brother.

"Oh God."

Warily, Angelica asked, "What?"

"Did it say whose younger brother? This prophecy. Did it mention an older brother?"

She shook her head, frowning. "That's all it said. His previous seer was the one who made the prophecy, I just confirmed it."

Jack shook his head slowly. "Empress," he said, "you signed your nephew's death warrant."

"What? No. Edward was an only child. He was killed because he was such a threat to the Empire."

"He wasn't an only child." Jack's voice sounded hollow. "He had a sister. An older sister. He told me. A half sister. Illegitimate. Empire wasn't supposed to know about her. She died not long after his assassination."

Angelica's face was appalled. "He was a younger brother?"

"The prophecy was about him. The Emperor discovered the sister and had them both killed. And Edward's wife. And quite probably anyone else he suspected of knowing about it." He cocked his head. "Except you. Must be love."

Her face was ashen.

"You sent your nephew to his death with that prophecy, Empress," he said. "Remember that."

Chapter Six

She stood for a long time by the windows overlooking the city. Through the reinforced glass she heard the drone of air traffic, the thump of music playing far below, the occasional raucous squawk of a seabird. She felt the heat of the sun. The city lay spread out before her, a tangle of buildings bristling high into the sky, obscuring the sea beyond. She'd seen it many times through the eyes of others. Knew it exactly.

She could barely remember the last time she'd actually been physically present in the city.

"You should rest, my lady," said Santos behind her.

"I'm fine," she said distantly.

You sent your nephew to his death.

She'd always liked Edward. Intelligent, quick-witted, unexpectedly kind, he was virtually the total opposite of his despotic uncle. His pretty wife, Annique, had become a friend too. Their defection had devastated her, even knowing as she did that it was the right thing to do.

"I wish I'd come with you," she'd said during an infrequent communication with Annique.

"I wish you had too. But Edward says you're needed where you are. You can misdirect the Emperor. And tell us his plans."

"He doesn't share many of them with me."

"But maybe you'll see something in a vision?"

"Maybe. I'll tell you if I do. Are you both well?"

Annique giggled. "So well I can't believe it. You've got to keep this secret, okay? You can't tell anyone. But I'm pregnant."

"Annique! That's wonderful news! Edward must be delighted."

"He is," Annique said doubtfully, "but he's also nervous. He thinks someone might use me against him. I can take care of myself, but not when I have the baby to worry about."

"I won't breathe a word. Won't even think about it."

"This child," Annique said fiercely, "will be born free. To a world where the Empire is a thing of the past. Something to learn about in history lessons."

"To a father who's a worldwide hero," the Empress teased, and Annique laughed.

"To a new world," she said passionately. Then, after a hesitant pause, "There will be a new world, won't there? For us all. We will win this war?"

The Empress sighed. She'd tried, so often and so hard, to see the outcome of it all. But the future refused to be shown on demand. The more she tried, the less she saw.

"We will win," she said. "There will be a new world for your child."

But there wasn't. Neither a new world, nor a child. Annique had been assassinated on the same night as her husband. The story put out by the Empire was that the Prince's own guard had turned on him, and his wife who was traveling separately, as they journeyed to peace talks with the Empire. His followers had been in such turmoil following the deaths that the whole Independent movement had broken up.

Angelica knew the real story. Edward trusted his Royal Guard more than anything in the world. His death had been planned by the Emperor, and Annique's too. The Royal Guard escorting them both had been slaughtered trying to protect their charges. According to the Empire's propaganda machine, they'd killed themselves in a suicide pact.

Angelica thought of John Carver, Edward's right-hand man, who'd been protecting Annique at the time of the attack and was so badly wounded that had he not been a vampire, he'd be dead. He was the only survivor of the attack, a fact completely unknown to Imperial sources.

He and his lover, a shape-changing tiger who had narrowly escaped the Emperor's harem, had recently been quite instrumental in helping Angelica free rebels from Carnalis's cells.

She leaned against the glass and let the sun warm her skin. If anyone knew whether Edward had really been a younger son, it would be Carver. Annique had confided that the two men were so close, Carver occasionally shared their bed.

She turned away from the window and crossed the harem to her bedroom. Sealed from the Empire's ceaseless gaze, it was the only place she could contact the outside world in true secrecy.

And she only had one method of doing this.

Running water in the bath, she slid under the surface and closed her eyes. Maybe this would be possible using another medium, but she'd only ever had success with water, and only with a few Mer.

Surfacing, completely soaked, she murmured, "I wonder if air works for fae?" Not that it was important. She didn't know any fae.

Concentrating, she thought of Swann. Captain of a Mer squadron during the War, he'd been captured and tortured by the Empire. Beaten, burned, and raped, he'd made it his life's work ever since to do whatever he could to pain the Empire.

Recently, this citizen of the drowned world had taken up with a dragon shifter called Libby. Angelica had no idea how he coped with fire and air, or she survived deep underwater, but she wasn't about to ask.

She found them, as so often, in the large bathtub belonging to the captain's quarters of Swann's ship, the *Swift Revenge*. Swann had ducked under the water and effected a partial change to his aquatic form in order to go without air. His head was between Libby's thighs, licking and sucking at her pussy as she gasped and shook, splashing water over the sides.

Although Angelica couldn't see any of this, she felt every movement in the water. She considered withdrawing, but this wasn't the first time she'd interrupted the couple in the middle of something. She coughed politely, and Swann's head snapped up.

"What—? Oh. Imperial Majesty."

"What?" Libby gasped. Her voice, coming from the air above the water's surface, sounded oddly distorted.

"I can come back later," Angelica said, and began to withdraw.

"No, stay," Libby said. Her hands were caressing Swann's head, drawing him back against her thighs. "You don't need to breathe under there, do you?"

Since Angelica technically wasn't there at all, she didn't. She smiled and reached out with her senses to find Swann's cock rampantly erect.

"Indeed I don't," she said, and closed her lips over the head.

He groaned, and bent his head to Libby's pussy again. While he darted his tongue inside her, lapped up all her moisture before it mixed with the water, and sucked on her clit, Angelica made love to his cock with her mouth. She swirled her tongue around the head, poked it into the slit at the top, and took him as deep into her throat as she could.

She'd been practicing deep-throating. One of the Emperor's odious concubines had insisted on teaching her, that horrible night fifteen years ago, and for years she hadn't wanted to be reminded of it. But a long, lazy afternoon with Cully and Santos and a large bottle of oil had renewed her interest. She still couldn't manage to take in much of Cully's huge member, but she was working on it.

Swann's cock hit the back of her throat and she opened wider to take more of it in. A trick she'd been practicing was to lick the balls while she sucked the penis, and she tried it out now.

"Oh holy gods," Swann gasped, and she smiled to herself.

"What's she doing?" Libby wanted to know.

"Something she'll have to teach you. Sharks in bonnets, that's so fucking good!"

Angelica allowed herself an internal chuckle at "sharks in bonnets." Probably Swann knew a few of them. She tickled his balls with her tongue and sucked hard on the head of his cock.

"No more," he begged, "I don't want to come just yet."

He slid from her mouth and floated unsteadily for a few moments, panting. The gills in his neck fluttered.

"Want me to lick you both?" Angelica asked, and Libby made a whimpering sound.

Swann moved behind his lover and lowered her onto his hugely swollen cock. Angelica imagined her hungry pussy swallowing it, pink folds swollen and stretched tight around Swann's impressive girth. They both moaned, and his hands came up to caress her breasts, pinching the tight pink nipples and making her gasp.

Angelica moved closer and extended her tongue, running it up over Swann's balls to his cock. Then, as Libby thrust down, she continued up, over the hot contours of Libby's pussy to the throbbing bud of her clit. Puckering her lips, she sucked, then slid back down to vigorously tongue Swann's balls.

She could taste them both, the hot saltiness of Swann's cock, the tangy slide of Libby's juices on her tongue. Dragon and Mer, fire and water. Libby's cream was flowing, and Angelica lapped up mouthfuls of it, investigating the plump folds of her pussy and returning every now and then to her clit.

Libby tensed, her hands breaking the surface of the water to tangle in Angelica's hair. She was grinding herself frantically on Swann's cock, thrusting her pussy into Angelica's face. From above the surface, her gasps got louder and louder.

Her orgasm flooded Angelica's mouth with come and coated Swann's slick cock. She licked up as much as she could, sliding down to suck his balls into her mouth. They were drawn up tight, ready to come, and his cock throbbed against her lips.

"Come inside me," Libby moaned. "Come deep inside me, Swann."

Angelica gently grazed his sac with her teeth and he yelled, "Oh, holy gods!" and came, his cock jerking with the force of his orgasm, his come dripping from Libby's pussy onto Angelica's tongue.

She lapped them both clean, then floated back in the water to give them some privacy. That moment after sex, that wonderful warm, glowing moment of being held in her lover's arms, was what she missed most about Jack.

For a few seconds when she woke up to find him holding her in bed that afternoon, she'd allowed herself to believe in the fantasy, just a little.

"That was amazing," Libby sighed, and Angelica heard the contentment in her voice as Swann held her, nuzzled her neck and caressed her skin. Jealousy stabbed through her. Generous as the men of her harem were with their sexual favors, and affectionate as she felt about them, she'd never have anyone to hold her, cuddle her, fall asleep with her.

"Glad to be of service," she said briskly. "Swann, I wanted to ask a favor."

"After that," he said lazily, "anything."

"I need to contact Carver. Do you know where he is?"

The Mer sighed. "Right now? Hard to say. We last saw them—when was it, a couple of weeks ago, Lib?"

"Dropped them off in Svalbard," she said.

"Where are you now?"

"Baffin Bay. Idling in the Deeps. Why, do you need us?"

Carnalis was currently in the Southern Oceans, drifting round and round the buoy marking the South Pole. The other end of the planet from Swann and his Mer crew.

"No, it's not important. I just wanted to talk to Carver. If you can get a message to him I'd—whoa!"

With a sucking gasp, she was yanked away from the *Swift Revenge* to the bathtub in her own suite. Hands grasped her shoulders, shook her, and a voice demanded, "Angelica! Angelica!" with increasing desperation.

She parted her lips to say that she was fine, when a mouth covered hers and began forcing air into her lungs.

She'd have laughed, were it not for the fact that she'd just been pulled away from a pretty arousing scene, and that she was totally naked, and that unless she was much mistaken, the lips now covering hers were Jack's. And he was naked too.

She ripped her head away, gasped, "Jack?" and felt for his arms, his face.

"You weren't breathing," he said, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her tight against him. "You weren't breathing. I thought—I thought—"

"I'm fine," she said. He was so warm, and so close, and so naked. His skin smelled delicious—and thanks to the sonic cleanser she'd put him in while he was unconscious, a whole lot cleaner than it had before. "Jack, I'm fine."

But she wasn't fine. She was being held, naked and wet, in the arms of a man she'd once loved beyond all measure. Possibly still did. She could still feel his lips on hers, the tingle and wonder still as astonishing as it had been fifteen years ago, the first time he'd kissed her.

"Oh, Jack," she murmured, breathing in his scent, kissing his neck. His skin was rough and unshaven, a far cry from the spotlessly clean and hairless aesthetic endorsed by most of the Empire, including the men in her harem. She kissed his jaw, his cheek—and then he turned his face and touched his lips to hers, and she was lost.

His mouth had seemed like a miracle all those years ago, something Angelica had figured was just due to her own inexperience. But after fifteen years of highly skilled men kissing her with ardor and passion, she'd still never experienced the same awe she felt kissing Jack. It hadn't faded then, and it wasn't fading now.

Her arms twined around his neck, his skin warm against hers, damp with the water dripping from her body. His mouth was soft and hard and gentle and fierce all at the same time. He tasted delicious, hot and wild and tempting. Jack the legendary seducer and charlatan. He tasted wicked and dangerous and sinfully decadent.

Angelica heard herself moan with pleasure, and all he was doing was kissing her.

She'd missed this. Missed the searing flame of passion born of love, not just desire. The men of her harem touched her with passion and affection, and daily assured her that they did so because they desired her greatly, but none of them had ever actually loved her.

She twisted in the bath, trying to touch more of him, and rose up on her knees to face him. Her breasts brushed his shoulders, his chest, as she aligned herself with his

body, but she still wasn't close enough. She wanted to touch all of him, feel every inch of his hard, lean body pressed against her.

"Jack," she said, half pleading, and his hand slid down her back to caress her buttocks for a moment before he stood, pulling her with him.

For a long moment he stood holding her, not kissing, and she felt the heat of his gaze.

"The more I try," he muttered, "the worse I fail."

She lifted one leg to rub over his hip. His cock pressed hot against her belly. "I can't believe you ever fail at anything."

"At fighting, at lying, at charming or seducing, I never have," he said, stepping into the bath with her. "At getting over you, I'm the biggest failure there's ever been."

And before she could react to that, she was back in his arms, his mouth was on hers, and she just couldn't stop kissing him.

Somehow he got them both in the water again, leaning back against the bath with her straddling him. He felt indescribably good there, his body cradling her, his lean chest and stomach pressed against her while his cock slid between her legs. He was hard and he was hot, and just the faintest brush against her desperate flesh made Angelica more frantically excited than she'd been since—well, since the last time she'd felt Jack's naked cock between her legs.

"Angelica," he breathed, as she dipped her head to make love to his collarbone. "You are married. To the Emperor."

"You think I can ever forget that?"

"You broke my heart and screwed me over and I hate you," he said, easing the head of his cock inside her. Her breath hitched and so did his.

"I'd hate me too," she said, but it turned into a moan as he pushed deeper, filling her. "I..."

"I don't care," Jack said, capturing her lips again and kissing her fiercely as he thrust into her. She drove down to meet him, taking all of him inside her, every cell in her body singing with fierce delight.

That Jack Hunter, he'll swive anybody, was the refrain she'd heard over and over throughout her youth. Incapable of love, of commitment. Too enamored of the chase. But he'd loved her. She knew he'd loved her.

Jack's lips left trails of fire down her throat, licking into the hollow of her collarbone and slipping down to her breasts. She arched her back and thrust her aching nipples at him and he suckled her, hard, first one and then the other, as she rose and fell on him.

She could never get tired of this. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she squeezed her muscles around him and was rewarded with a groan. Pressure was building in waves inside her, the searing hot delight of joy and hope pushing the sheer pleasure higher.

"Jack," she gasped, clutching at him, "Jack, I've missed you so much!"

His reply was lost in the drowning flood of her orgasm. Glory and power swept through her and she screamed with release, Jack groaning and thrusting his orgasm into her at the same time.

She fell against him, his body heaving and hot, water splashing around them in waves. His arms came around her, held her safe and close, and she nestled her head against his shoulder.

"Oh, Angelica," he murmured, stroking her wet hair. "What do you do to me?"

Chapter Seven

From the memoirs of The Revolutionary

I thought she was beautiful the first time I saw her. But at the time I was sort of on the run. That is, Toshiko Naruto's husband had just come home and the bugger was so silent neither of us heard him until he was threatening me with castration. So I ran, obviously, slightly naked—well, totally naked if you want the truth—but it was better than Mr. Naruto's alternative.

As I careened around the corner, heading for the warehouses on the edge of town where I figured I could lose him, I nearly ran straight into a woman coming the other way. In fact, had she not stepped smartly aside, I'd have cannoned into her.

She had high cheekbones and full lips and skin so dark and smooth I wanted to lick it.

"Try the woods," she said calmly, as I stared at her. "He's frightened of the dark."

I frowned, briefly considered the idea that she might be on Naruto's side, then figured I might as well go for it—the woods were as good a place as any to hide.

"Thanks!" I gasped, and she smiled, not even glancing at my naked and—I have to confess—pretty impressive cock.

"You're welcome," she said, and continued on as if this was entirely normal.

He didn't find me—turns out she'd been right about the trees—so once I was safely clothed and, more importantly, armed, I started asking around about the dark-skinned beauty who had such good instincts.

"Oh, you mean the blind girl," said Carla Torcello. "Can't see a thing, but always seems to know exactly where everything is. Eerie."

"What's her name?"

Carla shrugged. "No idea, lover. Come back to my place, there's no one around."

"Bit busy," I replied, because I'd just seen Mr. and Mrs. Naruto enter the marketplace.

"But Hunter—" I was going by the name of Hunter at the time, "—I need you. It's been weeks. I want your cock inside me."

"Later, Carla."

"I need your hands on me. I'll suck you off. I love having your cock in my mouth," she said, voice rising as I moved further away. "I want your cock in my mouth!"

She shouted the last bit, and everyone turned to look at her. Carla turned crimson and fled, leaving me free to seek out the "blind girl."

I eventually found her walking the fields on the far side of the woods. New Amsterdam wasn't a big place, being only one of several potential sites to rebuild a large city destroyed by the Fall. Plenty of start-up towns had been abandoned in favor of somewhere higher in the Appalachians. The seas were temperamental in the early days after the Fall, and New Amsterdam had flooded once or twice before things had settled.

Truth be told, I was just passing through New Amsterdam, on my way to somewhere more exciting. Carnalis was the big draw. Glittering, sinful, decadent Carnalis. Home of the Empire, and of lots of very rich people just waiting to give me everything they had.

And then I met Angelica.

Funny how it happens. I'd never been remotely interested in commitment until she came along. And she didn't even want me. Well, not at first.

She was walking along one of the high ridges scooped out of the Earth by the rising waters of the Fall. There were sort of terraces in the hills, some of them only a few feet high and some of them so lofty you couldn't even see the top.

It was along one of these she was walking. Right at the edge. A blind girl.

"Hey," I called, then, not knowing her name, "blind girl!"

She paused, smiled, then carried on. "Did you escape him? Mr. Naruto?"

"Yes, but how did you ... never mind. Look, you're walking really close to the edge."

She moved her foot a few inches to the left, which left it dangling over hundreds of feet of nothingness. I suppressed a scream of terror. "Be careful!"

She laughed. "I'm fine. I never fall."

"You'd only have to do it once," I muttered, and stepped closer. Hell's teeth, that edge was close. "Please move away from the edge."

"Your concern is very touching, but I'm honestly fine. I know exactly where the edge is."

"So do I, and it's about two inches from your foot. Do I have to come up there and rescue you?"

She laughed some more. "I don't need rescuing. But you're very sweet to offer." She turned to smile at me, and that movement brought her even closer to the edge. Horrified, I darted closer, far too close for my own liking. The edge loomed up at me, a sheer drop of hundreds of feet. Maybe thousands. I didn't want to find out.

"What are you—" she began, and stepped backwards. I yelped—in a manly fashion, of course—and leapt after her, catching her around the waist and whirling madly from the edge, only to thud her against a tree about six inches away.

Behind me, the sharp drop was incredibly close. But the body of the woman I'd just saved was even closer, trapped between me and the tree. Soft, womanly, warm. I'd have taken fuller advantage of the situation had I not been so terrified.

Her eyes were a rich deep brown, large and framed with thick, curly lashes. She had gorgeous lips. The sort of full lips that bypass the eyes and speak straight to the cock. "We'd look great wrapped around you," they say, and you agree with your whole body.

But that's not what they said to me. They said, "You didn't need to do that. I wouldn't have fallen."

I glanced at the edge. It was horrifically close. A cool breeze blew over it and tickled my face.

I shut my eyes.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You're trembling."

"It's cold up here."

"Not that cold," she opined. A note of incredulity crept into her voice. "Mr. Hunter," she said, "are you afraid of heights?"

I winced, realized she couldn't see me, and said, "No. Of course not. I'm just sensible."

She laughed, and I felt it with every muscle in my body. Most especially the one between my legs.

"I don't believe you've ever been sensible in your life," she said.

"Hey," I protested, then realized she was right and changed tack. She felt wonderful there against me. "How do you know who I am?"

"I'm blind, not deaf," she replied. "Will you let me go now?"

"I just saved your life," I pointed out.

"You just put my life in jeopardy by distracting me," she said.

"But I still saved it, didn't I?"

She hesitated, and a smile crept across her lips. She was very beautiful when she smiled.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Angelica."

"Kiss me, Angelica."

Her smile faltered, then widened. She shook her head.

I blinked. Women didn't shake their heads at me.

"No?" I said, just to check. "No?"

"I don't want to," she replied, matter-of-factly.

"Don't want to?" I echoed, incredulous. No woman had ever said she didn't want to kiss me. "But ... why not?"

She looked patient. "You're a notorious rake and I don't want to get involved with—why are you laughing?"

I thought I'd kept it silent, but my shoulders were shaking.

"Rake?" I said. "Has anyone actually used that word for hundreds of years?"

"I did, just now," she said, annoyed. "I believe they call it the *mot juste*."

"*Le mot juste*, actually," I said, intrigued that she knew the phrase, but still confused over her refusal. "Listen, Angelica—"

"Besides," she said. "I don't kiss liars."

"Liars? I haven't lied to you," I said automatically, trying to remember if I had.

"You professed you weren't scared of heights," she said. "Yet I notice you haven't made a single move to go anywhere nearer the edge, and your muscles are tense as hell."

She had her hands on my arms as she said this, and slid them up to my shoulders. It felt good. Very good. But she was still playing the ice maiden with me, and pretty as she was, I didn't have all day to stand around defrosting her.

"Well, look. If you're going to be all ungrateful and cast aspersions on my character," I said, "I think I'll be going."

I moved—very carefully—away, but she gripped my shoulders and pulled me back. "No."

"No?"

She moved—not carefully at all, I noticed, but very precisely—to stand with her back to the gaping edge of the terrace. Her heels grazed the overhang. Her sightless eyes sparkled. "I can't abide dishonesty," she said.

"Who can?" I replied, wondering if she was, in fact, insane.

"Stand close to the edge," she said. "As close as I am."

"Uh, no," I said. "I don't think you realize just how close to the edge you are—"

"I realize precisely," she said. "Half an inch and I'd have to learn how to fly. Now will you do the same, please?"

"Why?"

"Because I should hate to prove you really are a liar. Or a coward."

"I'm not —"

"Are you frightened of heights, Mr. Hunter?"

"No," I said automatically.

"Then stand here with me and look over the edge."

"I don't want to," I said.

She gave me a very knowing look, which is disconcerting from someone who can't actually see your face. "Face your fear," she said softly. "And then I'll kiss you."

Well.

Hell.

"A proper kiss?" I said. "Not just a peck on the cheek?"

"Full mouth-to-mouth," she promised, smiling a smug little smile that said she didn't think I'd go through with it.

But clearly, whatever she'd heard about me she hadn't heard about the lengths I'll go to to get a pretty girl to kiss me. Because once I've got her kissing me, the rest is easy.

"Okay," I said, and took her hand. It was warm and dry and her fingers squeezed mine reassuringly. I stepped up next to her and squeezed my eyes shut. Because she couldn't see me. She didn't know whether I was looking or not.

"Open your eyes," she said.

"How the hell can you tell?" I exploded.

"I guessed," she said, laughing. "Open them. Look at the view. Isn't it gorgeous?"

"Again, how can you tell?"

She smiled, a sad, faraway sort of smile. "I might not be able to see, but I know what things look like," she said, cryptically.

I sighed, and opened my eyes, and —

"Wow," I said.

Spread before me were three more terraces of land. On the top one, sheltered against the cliff, was New Amsterdam. Below that lay fields. Below that, the sandy

shore stretching out to the sea. The sea, sparkling and glittering, the sea that covered most of the world and turned us all into island-dwellers. The sea that had drowned the old world and made the Empire ruler of all.

"Is it pretty?" Angelica asked.

"No. It's amazing."

She smiled, and I smiled too, and drew her back away from the edge and into my arms. She tensed slightly, and I touched her hair, brushed my lips over her cheek.

"I won't bite," I said, and she gave a nervous smile. "At least, not unless you want me to."

That turned the smile into something more genuine, and before it vanished I touched my lips to hers and kissed her.

And right there, standing on that breezy cliff top holding a woman I barely knew, I was lost. All my ambition, my confidence, my swaggering seductions and grand designs faded to nothing. With Angelica's lips on mine, her tongue gently discovering mine, her hands clasping my arms as if she was afraid I'd blow away in the breeze, I was undone. I wanted nothing but to be with her, and forever.

I simply couldn't stop kissing her.

And the thing is that part of my success with women was always that I knew when to stop. When to give up. When a woman said no and meant it, instead of no-but-I-want-you-to-change-my-mind. I never pushed for more than she wanted to give.

I expected Angelica to draw away after a second or two. A minute, maybe. But I don't even know how many fathomless ages we spent locked together on that windy ridge, kissing and touching and breathing in each other.

And when, inevitably, my hands slipped from her shoulders to her waist, over her back, her gorgeous high round butt, her small sweet breasts, she didn't protest. She didn't tell me I was taking liberties. She arched into me, pressed all that warmth and softness against me and sighed.

Hot blades of joy and hope stabbed through me. This woman — this one, out of all the others, was meant for me.

And all that with a kiss.

I backed her against another tree, this one further away from the edge, and kissed her deeper. Her taste was ambrosia, her skin like silk. My hands found their way inside her dress, unbuttoning and sliding inside to cup her breasts. They were high and round and perfect, each fitting into my palm as if they'd been designed for the purpose.

I kissed her mouth, her face, her neck. I licked into her collarbone and caressed her shoulder with my lips. Then I trailed lower and took one sweet nipple into my mouth, one plump, sweet brown nipple, and Angelica gave a sharp gasp that sounded sweeter than any lover's cry I'd ever heard before.

My hands slid lower, gathering up her skirts until I could touch flesh, the softness of her thighs, the perfect skin, the heat and trembling muscles. As my fingers skimmed over her thigh she moved her legs apart, and I couldn't have stopped myself going further for an eternity of heaven.

I slid my hand upwards, up to the hot, damp fabric between her legs, and cupped her sex gently. Her breath hitched. I slowly tugged the material aside and her fingers dug into my shoulders.

When I touched her bare pussy she gasped again, louder, higher, and I groaned just to hear it. I parted her carefully with my fingers and searched inside, getting to know her, finding out what made her gasp and tremble.

She was a virgin. If I knew anything it was that. I'd be careful, slow, not push her too far or frighten her. If anything, I should have stopped before I got my fingers inside her knickers, but like I said. Not for an eternity of heaven.

I moved my mouth to her other breast as I discovered her pussy with my hand. Slid one finger inside her and felt her hot, wet sex tighten around it. She'd be heaven when I got inside her. She could make a man see God.

The little pearl of her clit stood proud, begging attention, and I circled it, enjoying the way her fingers tangled in my hair and her breath came short and fast. She was ripe, responsive, and wouldn't take much to push over the edge.

I envied no one at that moment. Wouldn't have chosen to be anywhere else but that windswept ridge, discovering the delights of Angelica Western.

And when she came, convulsing around my fingers, gasping for breath, crying out in wonder, I knew I was lost. I'd never want anyone else.

"I'm yours," I murmured against the sweetness of her breast. "No one else's. Just yours."

Shaking, shivering, she swallowed and said, "Wha'?"

I looked up, traced my fingers over her lips and felt the pleasurable pull as she sucked on them. Swapping hands, I gave her the fingers that had been inside her, and she licked them clean, a smile tilting her lips.

"I am yours," I told her.

"Mine?" she murmured.

"Body, soul and whatever other parts you want." I kissed her softly, but she pushed me away.

"Don't joke," she said, smile gone.

"Joke? I've never been more serious. Angelica, when I kissed you I felt ... I don't know. Something I've never felt before."

She closed her eyes tight, as if trying to hold back a tear.

I tried again. "This isn't ... usual for me."

"What, to go around seducing virgins? I'm sure that's very usual for you."

"That's not what I meant. Look. I know exactly what my reputation is and so do you. I've been with God knows how many women —"

"God knows? Don't you?"

"Only a bastard would keep count. The point is, Angelica, I've never felt what I did with you, just then."

"I'm sure you have."

"I'm sure I haven't. And believe me, I've got a pretty big frame of reference."

"I'm sure it's very big," she said politely.

"Listen to me. That was special. You and me. I've never felt like that before."

"Do you mock me," she said, "or flatter me?"

"Flatter. No! I mean I'm being sincere."

She began to straighten her skirts, tugging them free from my grip. "I think you should go now," she said.

"What? No! Why?"

She fastened the buttons of her dress, one by one, her movements sure but her hands trembling. "You might have had it all from me, Mr. Hunter," she said furiously, "if you hadn't ... insulted me, by pretending I'm any different from the rest."

"But you —"

"Are different? Yes. I'm blind. But some things I can still see, and one of them is that a man with your reputation doesn't suddenly give up and fall in love with a virgin. Especially one he hasn't even fully deflowered yet."

And then I made my biggest mistake. I tried to joke.

"Well, if that's your worry we could always finish it," I said, and she gave me the coldest look I've ever received.

"Goodbye, Mr. Hunter," she said. "I wish you luck with your fear of heights."

She walked away.

And I swore there and then I'd never give up on Angelica Western.

Chapter Eight

"This is all bollocks," said Jack, and Angelica sighed.

"What, precisely, are you referring to?"

"Everything! Your whole harem. 'I've missed you so much, Jack, it's been terrible for me, Jack,' well, clearly you managed to get over it!"

They stood on a dais overlooking the main room of the harem. Men swam in the pool, exercised with weights, watched entertainment vids and occasionally made out.

"Life goes on," she said. "I didn't have the liberty of mourning you, Jack. Not when I left and not when I heard you were dead. If I betrayed by even a glimmer how I felt about you—" She broke off, turning her face away.

Jack snarled silently at the harem below. "Yes? Then what? You might have remembered, is that it? Been taken out of your lovely comfort zone, all your handsome lovers, your clothes and jewels and entourage—"

"Jewels? You think I did this for jewels?"

"No. I think you did it for power."

She looked aghast. "Do you really think that of me, Jack? You once knew me better than anyone. Every moment of my life, every breath, every dream, every vision. Ask yourself, really ask yourself, if that's the person I once was."

"I don't think anything remains of who you once were," Jack said, the words like lead in his mouth.

She stared sightlessly at the air.

"The world has fallen from its axis, Angelica. The woman I once knew would have cared about that. And the woman beside me has the power to do something about it. And what do you do? While the Empire sickens and runs mad, you cavort with your

pretty boys. Make a tally of cocks ridden and orgasms taken. What do you do all day but seek out exciting new concubines to add to your collection? What good – "

The crack of her hand striking his cheekbone echoed throughout the high chamber. Down on the ground, the concubine known as Santos looked up, and so did the men nearest to him. One of them switched off his entertainment vid and nudged the man next to him.

The harem fell silent, trickling water the only sound.

"What good?" Angelica said, her voice low, as the shock of her blow rocked through Jack. "While the Empire sickens and runs mad, what do I do?"

Several of her men stepped forward, their eyes on Jack.

"I stay in my harem and swive as many men as I can. I don't make war, Jack, because I am the Empress and my husband uses my visions to guide his own hand. Tell him false once, and he'll never believe me again. I keep quiet, I stay in my harem, and I tell him whatever he wants to hear, because that way he won't suspect me. He won't notice who joins my harem other than that I have a taste for dangerous men. Which he already knows because he had you thoroughly investigated before he chose me as his bride. He knew all about you, Jack. He knew what you'd do if I told you I was leaving."

"And what would that have been?"

"You loved me," she said simply. "You'd have come for me. And he'd have killed you. I saw it all, Jack. Your broken, bloody body being dragged through the streets like a dog's toy."

He flinched at the heat in her voice. "And what about simply saying no?" But even as he said it he knew the answer.

"The Emperor doesn't like 'no.' He'd have destroyed the whole town and everyone in it. Do you really think it would take a Seer to see that?"

Behind him, a footfall betrayed the men surrounding them. She had a lot of concubines, and they were all, as she'd said, dangerous men. Many of them were taller than Jack, and while he could hold his own in a fight he hadn't had the luxury, as they had, of endless hours working out and honing his muscles. He knew several of them

were were-creatures, or shape-changers with abnormal strength. One of them had the horned, furry head of a bull – and muscles to match.

"I have seen the future, Jack. I've seen a dozen futures. Yours, and mine, and almost all of them depended on at least one of us surviving."

"And you chose yourself," he said, but he said it quietly.

"I chose us both. And when I heard of your death, of your ... activities, of what you'd done with your life since I left it, I knew what I had to do with mine. Losing me made you The Revolutionary. Losing you made me..."

"Made you what?"

"It made me. It gave me purpose. I know myself, Jack. And I know these men. All of them," she swept her hand at the silently gathering crowd, "every single one, owes his life to your cause. Every man here gave up his freedom to fight the Empire. And every one was condemned as an Imperial Traitor for it."

"And you brought them here?" said Jack. She liked a bit of rough. Liked walking on the dark side. Hell, she'd brought him in, hadn't she?

"I brought them here," she said, "when the alternative was a firing squad. Carefully, subtly. Added them to my harem. Kept them for a few months until they were forgotten. Then, for the most part, released them under a new identity."

"A new identity?" Jack said skeptically. "You can't create –"

"I am the Empress," she said. "I can create whatever I want."

He stared at the sea of men in front of him. One or two he recognized from newscasts. Some, he realized, had once been comrades of his – their appearance altered by whatever Imperial tech the Empress could get her hands on.

"Drops in the ocean," he said, but his voice lacked conviction.

"The ocean?" said Angelica. "It rose once. It swallowed the Earth. And it left behind the Empire. Next time it rises the world will have changed again. It's coming, Jack. I promise you that."

"What's coming?"

She stared sightlessly at her personal army. "Blood," she said distantly. "Sacrifice. Freedom."

Then her head spun and her blank gaze hit his so accurately he'd have sworn she saw every part of him. "The world has fallen on its axis," she said, a feral smile on her face. "I'm tilting it back."

Jack stared at her. Around him, her personal army gathered. Big men. Healthy men. Men who could turn themselves into wolves, tigers, all kinds of killing machines. He stood alone and unarmed.

"You fight for the revolution?" he said.

"I fight," she said, as a chime rang out from a comm panel. "Santos?"

The concubine nodded and moved to the panel. Nobody watched him. All eyes remained on Jack. They were loyal, these men of hers.

"The Emperor," Santos reported, and a flush of alarm ran through Jack. Had they been overheard? "Requires your presence in the Throne Room."

"Did he say why?"

Santos shook his head. "He wants you now."

She closed her eyes momentarily, then nodded. "Fetch my clothes," she said. "Cully, Minos. With me."

The large shifter and the bull-headed man nodded and withdrew. Angelica swept toward her room. "Jack," she said, and like a little dog he followed her.

"Are you serious?" he asked when the door was closed. "You said all that—out there—where anyone could hear?"

She pressed her hands to her face. "Yes. It had to be said. Jack—things are moving—happening—it's coming. Soon there might not be any point in keeping it secret." She screwed her hand into a fist. "I still shouldn't have said it. You have a habit of provoking me."

The door opened and Santos came in with an armful of regalia. He helped Angelica into it, fastening a tight, low bodice over her breasts and a silver cage around her hips. Layers of transparent fabric were draped over it in a parody of an ancient

court gown, except that this barely covered anything. Her legs, stomach and the full curves of her breasts were exposed by the sheer silk.

She stepped into tall boots that were mostly heel and leather strapping, and said to Jack, "Help with my jewelry, will you?"

Santos gestured to a pile of spiky silver things on the bed. Jack hesitated, then picked up a piece and tried to figure out where it might go.

"Why do you dress up like this?" he asked.

She looked surprised. "I am the Empress."

"Yes, but ... you can't even see what you're wearing."

"I trust Santos."

Jack raised his eyebrows at the other man, who didn't even look up. Angelica took the piece of jewelry from his hands and placed it around her neck, holding it there for him to fasten. When she spoke, her voice was uncertain. "What do you think he wants?"

"Probably to gloat over what happened in Riyadh."

"What happened in Riyadh?" Jack said, alarmed.

"Insurrection," Santos replied calmly. "Dealt with by Imperial troops."

"Why would he be gloating to you?" Jack said.

"Because he asked me to see who the ringleaders were. Don't look at me like that," she added sharply, even though there was no way she could have known what was on his face. "I do what I must to keep my cover. Bracelet."

Jack blinked. Angelica gestured impatiently toward an elaborately worked bangle in silver and emerald. He picked it up as she carried on talking and slid it over her hand.

"It's a choice, Jack. You've led men, haven't you? You've had to decide between killing a few and saving many?"

"Yes, but Riyadh's hardly small — there are a billion people there!"

"Most of whom are still alive, thanks to my lady's vision," Santos said, winding silver chains around Angelica's upper arm.

"You let Imperial troops kill the rebels?"

"Yes," she said, her expression tight. "Because if I hadn't, he'd have wondered if my vision was inaccurate. And then he'd start questioning everything else I told him. So when he asks me if I foresee any repeat of the Independence Wars, I can say no, and he doesn't think I'm lying. He has to believe I don't see anything, Jack."

He paused. "And do you?"

"Rings. Yes, I do. Change is coming. The world is turning, not round and round but upside down." She hesitated, allowed Jack to slip a couple of bejeweled rings onto her slim fingers. "I can see ... can see who's needed, but I never saw you. Could never see you. You understand?"

Reluctantly, he nodded his head. She'd told him early on that she couldn't see much in the future of people she was close to.

Perhaps that was why she didn't know the truth about Edward.

Jack watched as she pulled her hair back and Santos placed an elaborate wig over it. So that was how she managed all those ridiculous styles. This one had loops and pearls and stood nearly a foot high.

"Come with me," she said, and he blinked. "Come with me to the Throne Room, Jack. You can be my eyes. Come and see what it is I do. How little I can change things. Come and see what I must deal with."

"I'm not your slave," Jack said. "You can't command me."

"My lady," Santos said. "He's a wanted man. They'll recognize him."

Her face fell. Jack glanced at Santos, torn. Show off, or stick to his principles?

"You're right," Angelica said.

Show off.

He took her hand and flashed a grin. "Gorgeous girl," he said, "didn't you ever wonder how I was never caught?"

* * *

By the time Angelica had finished transforming herself into the Empress, Jack had transformed himself into her concubine. She borrowed Santos's eyes and looked him over.

If she hadn't known he was Jack, she wouldn't have known he was Jack.

It wasn't the uniform, although that helped. The jeweled loincloth, studded collar and high boots looked good on him, but then Jack could have worn a burlap sack and still drawn women like flies to honey.

He looked ... different. His face was the same, and yet it wasn't. His eyes were the same, but somehow changed.

He stood a little taller, his shoulders a little broader. The med patches had done much to fill out his gaunt frame, she knew, but he seemed a lot more muscular than she remembered. His face still held the same features, but they were subtly altered.

"A facial scan wouldn't recognize you," she said slowly.

Jack grinned. He tapped his eyes.

"Iris scan? Jack, you can't change your irises. Not without implants and they're strictly regulated by —"

"No implants." He looked pleased with himself. He wagged his fingers at her.

"And you really can't change your fingerprints. You can't even burn them off, they'll immediately trigger an alarm and —"

"They're not burnt. They're just ... different."

She stared. It was an unfamiliar thing to do. "But how?"

Jack winked.

"No, Jack, really." She left Santos's side, withdrawing from his vision, and touched Jack's face. Her fingers usually did the seeing for her, and what they saw now was a stranger.

"All those years," he murmured as she stroked his face. "All those scrapes, the prison sentences, the wronged husbands. And I was always released."

"Not always," she said. "You died once."

"A man matching the DNA profile of someone who'd committed a few crimes died," Jack corrected.

"It wasn't you? Who was he? Lilburne, and Fawkes—but it was your face," she blurted, confused beyond all measure.

Jack's lips curved in a smile. "It was me who did all those things," he said softly. "Just not me who got caught. I swapped blueprints with some other poor dead guy. Called myself Guevara and walked away."

"Blueprints?"

"DNA. I'm a chameleon, Angelica. Always have been. I change and adapt. Give out false readings—your prison cuffs will attest to that. And sometimes when I need to, I give out completely true readings. Eyes, fingers, blood, plasma and any other fluid you care to name." He grinned again. She felt it with her fingers. "It's why they can't catch me. At least, not for long."

She stepped back, dumbfounded.

"My lady," Santos said quietly. "You must go."

Angelica lifted her hands to her face, then stopped, mindful of the careful cosmetics applied there. She nodded. Of course she'd known Jack wasn't entirely human—who was, these days?—but she'd expected his ancestry contained some kind of elf or sex faery. Not this—this—she didn't even know such creatures existed.

"Stay with me," she said to Jack, "and say nothing. Understand?"

"Yes, my lady," he said, a trace of mockery in his words.

Chapter Nine

The Throne Room was busy with people, all dressed in court finery and murmuring excitedly to each other. This in itself was unusual—for the most part, the courtiers liked to affect an air of ennui, as if they'd seen and done everything of interest and now the world was impossibly boring. The last time she'd heard such excitement had been when a dragon smashed the roof in.

She smiled to herself. The dragon had been Libby, and it was Angelica's misdirection that had allowed her to escape.

"Ah, my lady wife," said the Emperor, and without asking both Cully and Jack, flanking her, put their hands on her shoulders. Behind her Minos loomed, a gigantic, threatening presence even her husband never tried to goad. Nobody was stupid enough to rouse the anger of a minotaur.

She pushed gently at Jack's mind, felt his acceptance, and looked out through his eyes.

As expected, the Emperor was sprawling on his throne with three or four concubines attending him. One, a sprite with translucent wings, hovered behind his chair, her legs draped casually over his shoulders, her breasts cushioning his head. He stroked her thighs absently as he spoke. "Just in time for the fireworks."

Angelica said nothing, but took her seat in the smaller throne beside him. Her three attendants took up position behind her, and she looked up at the large holo screen floating in the middle of the room. It could be viewed from any angle, allowing everyone present to get a perfect view.

"Isn't it glorious?" murmured the Emperor, and Angelica felt Jack's fingers tighten on her shoulder as he registered what was happening on the screen.

Several dozen men and women stood tethered to posts buried in the desert, under a burning bright sun. They'd clearly been there some time already, judging by the red, blistered skin on view. And there was a lot of skin to be seen: every one of them was naked.

One of them, toward the left, had fallen to his knees, his hands raised to cover his head. It was no good: his back was on fire. As he raised his head and howled silently, Angelica saw fangs. A vampire, burning alive.

"Can we have some sound?" the Emperor muttered, and a second later the room filled with the tortured screams of the vampire as his skin turned to ashes and his bones crumbled inside his body.

"His organs will be melting," said the Emperor, sounding like a child pulling wings off flies. "Or maybe boiling. What comes first?"

A general murmur of enquiry went around the room. No one seemed to know.

The vampire twisted and contorted, watched by the others around him, all chained too far away to help. Whatever camera recorded the revolting incident zoomed closer until flames filled the screen, the vampire's eyes bursting in their sockets, his teeth falling from molten gums.

"Delightful," said the Emperor, as if he'd just been watching a display of dancing. "Who's next?"

An aide to his left whispered something.

"No more vampires? So how long will it take the rest of them to die?" More whispering. "I can't wait that long!" cried the Emperor petulantly. "Blow one up or something."

Seconds later, a woman exploded, chunks of her flesh splattering the other prisoners.

"Much better. And think of something creative to do to the others." The Emperor turned to his wife. "Delicious, no?"

"What is their crime?" she asked as coolly as she could.

"Conspiring against us. Couldn't be bothered to get them transported here all the way from Riyadh," said the Emperor, who owned such transport as could accomplish it in minutes. "Thought this might be more fun. Less messy. Let the desert harpies eat their remains, hmm?"

She gave a smile and turned her head back to the screen. She needn't have bothered. Jack's gaze hadn't left it.

You know them, she thought, and was somehow barely surprised when he answered, *Yes.*

All of them?

About half. The rest I think are random selections from the populace. He likes to do that. Make an example.

Angelica watched as a third prisoner was sprayed with something sticky, and then a container was opened to reveal a swarm of insects.

His screams as he was eaten alive filled the Throne Room. Jack's hand tightened on Angelica's shoulder.

His name was Harris. He had a wife and child.

Beside her, the Emperor was watching the slaughter as if it were a porn vid of unusual quality. His hand fondled his own crotch then, as he realized what he was doing, he grabbed the hand of the nearest concubine and had her do it instead.

On screen, the swarm flew off, leaving behind some bloody bones. The audience applauded.

"Flay one of them," said the Emperor, and a man stepped forward with a knife to begin peeling strips of skin from one of the prisoners. "And put, I don't know, something on the bits that are left. So we can make a firework out of him."

Jack's gaze swept the room, and Angelica saw the glee on every face present. Painted lips were parted, jeweled eyelashes fluttered. Gasps emitted every time a piece of flesh was torn away, but they were gasps of excitement, not of horror. All around the room, couples began fondling each other.

This is porn to them, Jack said. They're getting off on it. On the hideous, painful deaths of innocent people.

Innocent people who conspired to blow up a major city, she reminded him.

And a dozen or so who didn't, he reminded her in reply. Your husband is ... Calling him sick would be like calling fire hot.

I know, Angelica replied, as beside her the Emperor started grunting and thrusting his hips, jamming his cock into the cupped hands of the girl servicing him. Now imagine going to bed with him.

Horror slammed through her from Jack, and she felt a small amount of satisfaction that he finally had an inkling of what her life was like.

"Is it not spectacular?" moaned her husband, motioning his concubine to suck his cock. "Wife, do you not enjoy it?"

Cully's fingers squeezed very gently on her shoulder. It was a warning, she knew. Everyone else in the room was becoming tremendously aroused, while she sat unmoving, trying to control her bile.

She had to keep her cover.

She swallowed, and said to Jack, "Slave. I command."

She felt his surprise, but reached up to pull him round. Shifting in her seat, she raised the layers of fabric covering her thighs, her bright stockings and the crisscrossing straps of her boots, and moved her legs apart.

Jack knelt between them. *You are a sick woman*, he said.

And you are a stupid man. I've got to at least look like I'm enjoying it, and you give the best head I've ever had.

Despite himself, Jack hummed with pride. He reached under her skirts and found the crotch of her underwear, cupping it gently.

"Tear it," she said, and he did, wrenching away the flimsy fabric and baring her pussy to the room.

It tore a few gazes away from the spectacle on screen, but not many.

"Now lick it," she said. "Lick it good."

Jack looked up at her, then directed his gaze at her pussy.

Watch.

He nuzzled her thigh, breathed in her scent. He kissed the strip of smooth skin between pussy and leg. He —

On screen, someone screamed, "Oh God, oh God! Please have mercy! Kill me!"

Angelica flinched and pushed herself closer to Jack. *Please. Lick it.*

She felt his soft laughter in her head. *Always so eager.*

I don't want to hear this any more. I don't want to be here. Let's both pretend we're not here.

If we weren't here, I'd have something to say about you commanding me, commented Jack, but he pressed his mouth to her pussy, lips open, and sucked. She let out a gasp.

You always were so good at that!

I've barely started.

He sucked on her labia, worked his tongue between and slipped it inside her. She wondered if the DNA he'd assumed had some lizard in it, because surely he had a forked tongue, darting with impossible quickness and plunging deep into her.

She began to breathe faster. "Yes," she murmured, "just like that."

Jack's hands slid up to cup her thighs, her buttocks, and lift her up so he could access her better. Beside her, she heard the Emperor's ostentatious groans as his concubines pleased him, and tried to tune them out.

On screen, something that sounded like a firework exploded.

I'm sorry, Jack, Angelica told him. *I have to go.*

What — he began, but she'd already withdrawn from his mind. She needed to act the part, to seem as if she were enjoying every second of this macabre spectacle, but with the screams of the prisoners in the heat of death, pleasure was the last thing on her mind.

She retreated...

...to a memory, fifteen long years ago, pacing by my window, checking it was unlocked and the safety field was off. My bedroom was high, ten stories above the street, which I figured would be a test for him.

He'd come tonight. He'd scale the building, slip inside my room and make love to me, and it would be incendiary.

A small transport buzzed past the window, making me jump. I hadn't turned any lights on. I'd no need to. My door was locked, and I wore a silk shift that had been bought in secret.

Because since Jack had kissed me on that lonely ridge, I'd always known we were meant to be together. Yes, always known. The knowledge felt as if it had been planted in my head since birth. I could see nothing of our future together—but then with people I cared about, I rarely could.

But just as he had to face his fear in climbing to my high window, I had to face mine in trusting that he'd give himself to me, and never look for another woman.

I was sick with nerves when he finally tapped on the pane and tumbled inside. He was shaking too, with fear and adrenaline, and I tabbed the window shut, resetting the safety field as Jack got to his feet.

"It's very high out there," I said, and I could hear him breathing hard.

"Don't remind me."

I smiled. "Why are you here?"

"Why? Why? God in heaven, you don't make this easy, do you?"

"Love isn't easy, Jack," I said.

"Jack? Why are you calling me Jack?"

I rolled my eyes. He'd missed out on the pertinent part. "Giacomo, if you prefer. Casanova. The legendary seducer."

Jack tapped at the window and checked the safety controls, as if making sure the outside and its terrible drop were far away, and not likely to intrude. Then, suddenly, he went still, and said, "Love?"

I smiled, and waited for him to turn before I slid the silk robe from my shoulders.

"You had to face your fear, Jack. I had to face mine."

With the window closed the street noise had gone, and the room was silent.

"Which was?" he asked, and I swallowed. Meant to be or not, nothing was ever certain.

"That I'm just another notch. A new variety of lover. Something to cross off on your list."

"I don't have a list," he said evenly.

"The blind are unusual these days," I said. "Most have implants."

"Why don't you?"

"They never took. I'm not meant to see. Not that way."

Some pain crossed his face. "Angelica." He went to his knees before me. "Listen, and hear me. I meant what I said, that I'd never felt anything like that. I hardly know you, but at the same time I feel like I do. As if whatever I do, I'll never forget you. Never love anyone else. I—"

I felt myself smiling, even as tears pricked my eyes. I went to my knees before him and pressed my finger to his lips. "Shh," I said. "No more words, Giacomo. You've won the battle without fighting the field."

"I..." His carefully prepared speech ran out of juice. "What?"

"I tried," I said. "But there's fate, and destiny, and against them my free will doesn't stand a chance. I knew it would be you. Somehow I always knew that."

I felt the heat of his gaze as he stared at me.

"This is the part," I whispered, "where you take off your clothes and come to bed."

He stared some more. For about a second. Then his arms were about me and he was kissing me, kissing with all the wondrous intensity he had before, only now I knew where it was going and I welcomed it.

"God, you taste divine," he murmured, and kissed me again.

"Promise me something, Jack."

"Anything."

"Don't make fun of me. Don't let this burn out, and then become something you laugh about with other lovers."

He stroked back my hair from my face. "How could I want another lover?"

"You haven't even made love with me yet."

His fingers trailed over my bare shoulder, making me shiver, and moved down to cup my breast.

"You have such potential," he murmured. "Promise me something, Angelica."

"Yes," I said.

"Don't treat me as a tutor, then discard me. I won't be practice for some other man. Love me, gorgeous girl."

"With all my heart," I promised, and then he lifted me in his arms and carried me to the bed. I was already naked, and it didn't take him long to join me. Stretching his lean, muscular body out next to mine, he pressed me against the length of him and kissed me languidly.

"I want to lick you all over," he said. "I bet you taste delicious."

My heart rate sped up.

"I want to taste you from my fingers," he said, sliding one hand between my legs and finding me hot and wet, hopelessly excited. "I want to feel your body arch and your muscles tighten around me, and I want to hear you gasp and cry."

"That all sounds good to me," I said breathlessly.

Jack gave a hot laugh. "Then let's get started."

He kissed me some more, his hands roaming over me, stroking me as if I were a wild animal that needed calming. Beneath his hands I grew bolder, until I was stroking him too, feeling the muscles move in his arms, his back, his stomach. I chickened out of going lower until I'd felt at his buttocks, high and firm and deliciously shaped. I wanted to bite them. I was pretty sure I'd get the opportunity.

Jack kissed my breasts and sucked one nipple into his mouth. As he'd done the week before, he drew all kinds of jolting pleasure through my body, toward that one

tiny centre of delight. My body rose from the mattress to meet him and I felt his laughter as his teasing fingers played patterns on my belly.

"So sweet," he murmured, tapping out his infuriating pattern lower, then higher, then lower, then back again, never quite reaching the apex of my thighs. They were spread wide open in invitation, in blatant, desperate need. I wanted him to touch me where he'd touched me before, to bring me to that dizzying peak of pleasure.

And instead the bastard stroked my thighs.

Well, all right, he stroked them extremely pleasantly. Teased and tickled, while his mouth drew on my breast until I was panting.

"Please," I gasped, "touch me there."

"Where?" he murmured.

"You know where!"

"Say it."

"Between my legs."

His hand hovered between my thighs, about two inches too low.

"Not there! Higher!"

Jack just laughed and switched breasts. "I don't know what you mean."

"Jack," I was nearly sobbing. "Please. Right there, on my—on my—on my pussy!"

He sucked hard on my nipple, then in an instant was between my thighs, doing the same to my clit.

I came in a trembling, excited orgasm, unexpected heights of delight flashing through me. But Jack didn't stop once my orgasm had started. He continued on, and on, sucking and licking, flicking his tongue with expert precision. He discovered lots of interesting places that were very, extremely, wonderfully sensitive, and exploited them to the limit.

By the time he slid a couple of fingers inside me and started pumping, I was seeing stars. Right there behind my blind eyes, stars twinkled and flashed.

"Jack, please," I gasped. "I can't bear any more!"

He gave me one last long, slow lick, then raised his head. "Can't you?" he said lazily.

"No. I might die. You're going to kill me with pleasure."

He kissed the mound above my sex. "Could think of worse ways to die." He slid up my body and kissed my mouth, and on his lips and tongue I tasted the saltiness of my own body. Tangy, sharp, but strangely delicious.

"I like tasting that on you," I whispered.

"So do I," he whispered back, and I managed a shaky laugh.

"Jack, I want to do that to you. To make you feel ... like I just felt."

"Like I'm about to die?"

"Well, maybe not that intense."

He took my hand and wrapped it around his shaft. It was swollen, smooth and hairless, and surprisingly flexible. I'd thought it would be rock-solid, immovable, but as I tested it, it gave.

Jack groaned. "Be careful, darling."

Immediately, I let go. "Am I hurting you?"

"No. Very opposite. Try stroking the tip." I did, tentatively. "Oh God. That's heaven."

Gently, he instructed me on what to do, always very generous with his praise. I discovered that I needed two hands to wrap totally around his girth, and even with one fist on top of the other still couldn't quite enclose his whole length. Squeezing gently made him sigh. Running my fist briskly up and down made him moan.

And lowering my head to give him a lick made him gasp, "No, don't, I'm not made of steel!"

I lifted my head, disappointed.

"Later, gorgeous girl. You'll ... what's the phrase? Unman me."

I couldn't help a smile at that. Jack pulled me back up his body so we lay side by side, facing each other. We fit together perfectly, his hard body and my softness, the crisp hairs on his skin against the smoothness of my own. I imagined us lying there,

white and dark, male and female, two halves of a whole, and chastised myself for getting soppy.

"What do we do now?" I asked shyly, and in response Jack fitted his swollen cock between my legs. It was hot, throbbing against my sticky folds, and my breath hitched.

"Oh, I see," I said, rather higher than I'd intended to. Jack kissed me again, softly, and raised my upper leg so it was draped high over his hip. He stroked me with his fingers, coating them in my wetness, delving inside and chuckling softly when I tightened around him.

I'd always been told it would hurt, and having felt the size of Jack's enormous cock I was sure it would, but he stroked and soothed and kissed and nudged inside me so gradually I felt no pain at all. All there was for me was bliss. He filled me in the most wonderful way, satisfying an aching void I'd never considered before.

His hands were everywhere, stroking and teasing and caressing, his lips hot on mine. He kissed my lips, my cheek, my jaw. He feathered tiny caresses over my eyelids. He made love to my neck. And all the time he moved in me, gently at first, rocking into me until the pressure built, until I was gripping his hips and breathlessly urging, "More, oh God, more!"

"God now, am I?" Jack asked raggedly. His hands stole down between us and tweaked my clit.

"Now you are," I moaned, feeling the insistent waves build again. Every movement made them lap higher, harder, until I could barely stand it any more. I grasped Jack's shoulders and clasped my leg tighter around him. We lay on our sides still, equals, neither dominating the other.

"More," I gasped. "Jack, I think I—I'm going—I need to—"

"Say it," he said, breath hot on my neck.

"Come," I said, "I need to come!"

"Whatever you want, gorgeous girl," he murmured, and thrust into me so hard and so fast my orgasm rushed up to meet me, nearly knocking me out...

...while around her, the Throne Room gasped and surged and thrust and fucked. Jack's mouth was hot on her pussy, Cully's hand tight on her shoulder, and to her left the Emperor was shouting, "Yes! Take it, whore!" and grunting out his own orgasm.

Angelica subsided, patted Jack's hair and murmured, "No more, love. No more now."

He withdrew silently, moving her skirts back into place. From the big screen came sounds of tortured moaning, punctuated by the occasional scream of agony.

"My lady," murmured Cully. "While you were ... absent ... a message came through for you."

"Message?" asked Angelica dazedly, most of her awareness focused on Jack as he moved to stand behind her again.

"Yes. About the ... slave you wished to buy. For your harem. The special kind of slave you like, my lady."

For the life of him she couldn't work out what he was talking about.

Cully made a sound of impatience. "You requested an audience yesterday," he said, "with our contact in Baffin Bay. The man you wished to see is waiting for you."

Baffin Bay. Swann. Carver!

"Yes," Angelica said, scrambling to her feet. "Yes. I have to go," she said to her husband, who from the sounds of it was enjoying the talents of at least three women. "I'm buying a new slave."

"Hope he fucks you better than that one," the Emperor grunted, and Angelica inclined her head before sweeping out of the room.

Chapter Ten

She said nothing until she was back in her own bedroom, Santos waiting with his datapad.

"He's in the South City, my lady," he said, and Angelica made a face, because of all the crappy slums in Carnalis, South City was the worst. "Kineton."

She groaned. Kineton was the murder capital of Carnalis. More people lost their lives there, in blood-soaked, hideous ways, than anywhere else in the city. Probably in the Empire.

It was also the sex capital of the city. Angelica was reasonably sure the two things were connected.

"A club?" she guessed.

"A vampire club. Doesn't specify which. A guide will be sent. My lady," Santos paused. "I'd really recommend against going in there without a vampire escort."

"Will Carver not be the guide? He can get us in."

"No. He will meet you there. He seems ... uneasy about leaving Kineton."

This made sense, since Kineton had the lowest number of cameras, iris scanners, fingerprint testers and guards in the city. Carver had been declared dead, but she couldn't blame him for not taking any chances.

She ran through the harem population in her mind. Skivan had been a vamp, but he'd left several months before. And Vartos, but he'd gone back to his rebel cell over a year ago.

"Bloody Carver," she said. "He must know we don't have any vampires."

"Um," said Jack, beside her.

"What? Do you know something I don't?"

"Firstly, did you say Carver? John Carver?"

"Yes. He has some ... information I need."

Jack paused. "I won't even ask how you know him," he muttered. "Secondly, do you really need a vampire?"

"Santos?"

"Yes."

"I really need a vampire."

Jack sighed. "All right. Give me half an hour."

No one said anything. Then Angelica managed, "Um?"

"It's harder to aim for something specific, rather than just random, but I can do it. Besides, I know Carver of old. I'll get us there."

She hesitated.

"Trust me, Angelica." His fingers found hers. "Face your fear."

She rolled her eyes and let out a breath that was half sigh, half laugh.

"Half an hour, then," she said, and went to get changed.

* * *

By the time Jack was done transforming himself for the second time that day, he was exhausted, but pleased with the results. He hadn't changed his appearance much, but had altered his body chemistry to require blood as sustenance. His teeth lengthened at will, and his blue eyes turned yellow with hunger.

Angelica emerged from her dressing room wearing a pair of white leather panties, a matching bra, boots, and lots of white leather strapping around her body. It contrasted deliciously with her supple dark skin, and made Jack as hard as a rock.

"Can I have a word?" he said, and dragged her back in her room without waiting for an answer. Before the door had even cycled shut his mouth was on hers, and he knew all the men in the harem had seen him grab her and kiss her for all he was worth.

And so they should. She was his, after all.

She kissed him back, startled but apparently completely compliant, and when he backed her against the wall and slid his hand down the front of those little leather panties she moaned.

"Jack..."

She'd washed since he'd eaten her out in the Throne Room. The scent of orgasm wasn't on her any more. But it should be—and not just because vampires could smell that sort of thing. Jack wanted to smell himself on her, wanted to know she was his, wanted everyone to know it.

He slid one finger between her folds and found her clit. It got her gasping, and he smiled, hard and fierce. Taking her hand, he lifted it to his mouth and pressed her finger against his teeth.

His canines were sharp, and blood welled almost instantly from her fingertip. He sucked it down, the sharp copperiness hot on his tongue, and went back for more.

"Vampire," she gasped, and Jack couldn't take any more. He shoved her ridiculous underwear down over her hips and pulled out his cock, rubbing the swollen head against her soft, bare skin. She'd shaved her pussy since he'd licked it, apparently in anticipation of the vampire sex den.

"Yes," he growled. "Vampire," and thrust his cock into her at the same time his brand new fangs tore into her neck and tasted first blood.

"Oh my God," she screamed, but not in pain. Jack knew Angelica's body literally inside and out, and the way she clamped down on his cock definitely wasn't a reaction born of panic.

Her legs came up around his waist, her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, and her head rolled back, giving him better access to her neck.

She felt so damn good, so hot and tight, and he surged into her, harder and faster as her sweet blood flowed down his throat. She cried out with every deep thrust, her body slamming back against him, her pussy spasming around him. She was coming, and coming hard, and Jack wasn't far behind her.

He ripped his head back and focused his gaze on her face, her eyes closed and her lips parted as she screamed her orgasm to the world. Her whole body jerked, and she squeezed his cock so hard he couldn't hold back his own orgasm.

With a feral roar he pumped into her, his Angelica, his Empress. Her blood stained his mouth and her nails scored his skin, and she was his.

For a long moment he leaned against her, both of them breathing hard, and then Jack lifted his head and said, "Did I hurt you?"

Her hand came up to her neck and touched the wound there. It wasn't a big wound, but it was sharp and vicious and would need tending to.

"I'm okay," she said, her voice shaking. "That was ... intense."

He gave a half laugh. "That's one word for it."

Easing away from her, he fetched a damp cloth from the bathroom and cleaned the blood from her neck. It had stained the strap of her white leather bra, but Jack figured this was probably no bad thing. It was a vampire den they were headed for, after all.

He fashioned a makeshift bandage over the wound—vampires and their lovers rarely having access to Imperial med tech—and tenderly kissed her bruised lips.

"You need a biosuit," she said. "You're acting as my guard."

He nodded, and they went out to where Santos was waiting with the suit. All eyes noted her bandage and the bloodstain on her clothes, but no one said a thing, and Jack felt his heart swell with possessive pride.

He stepped into the bulky biosuit, which had been modified so there were no probes burrowing into his skin. Cully the werewolf wore a similar suit, as did Minos the minotaur, although in his case the suit, and especially the helmet, must have been specially made. Normal men weren't eight feet tall with the head of a bull. A third man he didn't recognize completed the line-up. He was small and slender, possibly a sprite.

Jack realized that between the four of them they covered four different body types. Angelica was anticipating swapping one of them out for her guide.

If she thought she was going to swap him, she was very much mistaken.

Leaving the palace was a whole lot easier than Jack had ever expected. He made a mental note to steal a modified biosuit, or at least get George to copy one for him, so he could get in and out as he pleased.

Then he wondered if he'd need to get in and out as he pleased any more. A strange sense of the future settled over him, and it told him that his old days of sneaking around causing havoc for the Empire were over.

He frowned, and tried to dismiss it.

The Empress wore an elaborate court gown over her leather get-up, and was conveyed through the city on a hovering litter, flanked by the four men. The litter was surrounded by a force field so strong, Jack couldn't even make himself heard through it, but apparently he didn't need to.

They walked through the city's well-to-do areas, quieter and better lit than the rest of the place. The whine of overhead vehicles was less apparent here, and so was the constant bass beat and flashing lights of advertising bots.

As they entered a crowded plaza, as busy at midnight as it would be during the day, a fifth white-suited Imperial Guard approached the group. Helmeted, it was impossible to see who was inside, but the figure headed straight for the sprite traveling at the front of the litter. They marched a few steps together, then almost seamlessly, the sprite peeled off and it was as if he'd never been there. Jack doubted anyone in the crowd had noticed. They were all busy goggling at the Empress in her finery and shouting blessings on her, hoping for some recognition. Angelica smiled vaguely at them all, keeping her gaze distant. Jack supposed one of the privileges of royalty was never having to meet anyone's eyes.

Their guide led them silently to a quiet street in a business district, and headed for the underground docking area of a deserted building. Jack, who already had a decent idea of who the guide might be, was unsurprised when she took off her helmet and shook out a lot of long dark hair.

"My lady," she said, dropping a curtsy to the Empress, who smiled warmly in recognition and deactivated the litter.

"Nalina," she said, stepping to the ground and taking the other woman's hands in her own. "I hope you're well?"

"Very well, my lady." Nalina stripped off the biosuit, revealing a gown of rich brocade that contrasted with her milk-white skin. She was a very beautiful woman, intelligent, educated and refined, and Jack had still to work out what the hell she was doing with that old degenerate Carver.

"We leave this here," Angelica said, gesturing to the litter. "And continue on foot. Minos, is anyone following?"

The minotaur grunted and stamped his foot, which apparently Angelica understood.

"Dispatch them," she said, and he grunted again and turned to go.

"One of you is a vampire?" Nalina asked Jack and Cully. Jack raised his hand. "Show me."

Amused, he took off his helmet and smiled at her, a vampire smile. She glanced from his teeth to the wound on Angelica's neck, exposed as she took off the court gown and threw it on the litter.

"You can go," said Nalina to Cully. "No weres allowed in Biters."

Jack groaned. "Biters? You're taking us to Biters?"

As Angelica gave Cully leave to go back to aid Minos, Nalina gave Jack a slow once-over. He stepped out of the biosuit, revealing leather pants and a mesh shirt, an outfit probably considered tame by Biters standards.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"Quite probably," answered Angelica, but said no more. Nalina, understanding she wasn't going to be told anything, just nodded and led them out onto the street.

Jack knew where Biters was. The roughest quarter of Kineton, inhabited only by those who really didn't care if they lived or died. He'd taken up residence there once or twice. To his knowledge, it was where the vampire Carver had been raised, although considering Carver's street-rat youth, perhaps "raised" was too strong a word.

Nalina and Angelica drew plenty of attention, but both had been marked by vampires, and recently, so no one made a move on them. Jack walked close by Angelica, offering additional protection, and considered taking Nalina's arm too. But then Nalina was a shape-changer who could become a full-grown tiger at will. He didn't expect she needed much in the way of protection.

She led them up two flights of outdoor stairs, bathed in the neon glow of permanent graffiti. Down here in the slums, there was never a single moment of silence at any point during the day, and near a vamp hangout like Biters at midnight, the very air was thick with life.

"Name?" said the brute on the door, a creature who looked even less human than Minos.

Nalina gave him a beautiful smile. "Macbeth," she said. "Lady Macbeth."

Angelica's face went poker-straight. The door-creature grunted and let her through, then demanded of Jack his name.

He opened his mouth to speak, but a voice came from within. "They're with me."

"Name," repeated the creature, and a flash of silver sparked into life across its hairy throat. Jack grabbed Angelica and yanked her out of the way as the brute's body fell, and a figure stepped out of the club's dark interior. He was tall, with long tangled hair, an unshaven jaw, and an ugly scar running down one side of his face. He was dressed in leather that, unlike Jack's provocative outfit, had been designed for purely practical reasons. He held a sword, dripping with dark blood, in a hand attached to a bionic arm.

"Carver," Nalina sighed. "Was that necessary?"

Carver gave a mocking smile and a bow, ushering them inside. He glanced at Jack, and the smile widened to show fangs.

"Wat Tyler," he said, as Jack guided Angelica over the bulky corpse in the doorway. "You've changed."

He kicked at the corpse, sending it rolling down the stairs to barrel over a couple of people walking up them.

Jack rolled his eyes and said, "You haven't."

Carver grinned and led them through the dark, flashing interior of the club. Music blared, voices gasped and screamed, and the air was heavy with sex and blood.

They passed several booths, some with doors closed and others with them wide open. Their occupants varied in number and combination of sexuality, but all contained a vampire, feeding hungrily while his or her victim writhed in sexual ecstasy.

"God," Angelica murmured as he guided her, hand on the small of her back. "I don't think I need Sight to feel the lust in this place."

"Nope," said Jack. "You can smell it."

He certainly could. His altered blood was insisting he satisfy its demands and take Angelica, now, take her hard and fast. His cock throbbed with need.

"What's your business here?" he asked her, trying to distract himself.

"I need to speak to Carver," she said, looking uncomfortable. "About ... something you said."

"Why Carver? Speak to me."

She hesitated, and he helped her step over a group of lovers who'd spilled out of their booth.

"It's about Edward."

Guilt flashed through him. "What about Edward?"

"Was he really a younger son?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Why is that important now? What's done is done."

She bit her lip. "It's just ... those visions. Dreams. The man in them is just so..."

"Edward?"

She nodded. "And I wanted—I need—to believe that it isn't."

"Why?"

Her face twisted with sorrow. "Because if it is then all is lost. He's the only man who can take us to freedom, Jack. I've seen it. But if he's Edward, then—" a sob caught in her throat, "then he's dead and we're all beyond hope."

"Is that all?" Jack said. "For a moment there I thought you were going to get all dramatic."

She didn't smile. As they followed Carver and Nalina up a flight of stairs to a private area, Angelica said nothing.

I've got to tell her, Jack thought. Got to make it clear. But then a flash of recognition caught the corner of his eye, and his gaze snapped toward it.

Dozens of writhing, naked bodies filled his vision. The stabbing lights and thick pools of darkness were enough to confuse even vampire vision. Whatever had caught his eye was gone.

Frowning, he ushered Angelica into the private room, where Carver and Nalina were already twined together on a low chaise, kissing deeply. Evidently the surging hormones flooding the club had affected them both, as well.

"Jack," she turned to him, but he put his finger over her lips.

"Hush, love, hush. I need to do something, and I need you to trust me."

"Do what?" She tried a laugh. It wasn't convincing. "I don't have any virginity to lose and you've already drunk my blood."

"Do you trust me?" She hesitated, then nodded. Jack took her face in his, looked down into her eyes—and saw each cell that made up her being. Each chromosome. The specific way they combined. The strands of DNA that twisted so elegantly through everything that was her. He saw them, felt them, and then—changed them.

He felt her jerk and gasp, her body subtly realigning itself. The change had been infinitesimal, and she was still Angelica to a massively overwhelming degree.

But should anyone scan her eyes, her blood, her fingerprints, she was a stranger.

"What did you do?" she breathed.

"Made you invisible," Jack said. Because if there was someone following them, she'd need to hide.

And even if there wasn't, he was going to tell her about Edward. And once she learned the truth, she'd never go back to her palace on the hill.

The Empress had entered Biters. Angelica would leave.

On the couch, Carver and Nalina seemed to have forgotten anyone else was there. She rode on his lap, her skirts raised enough to show his cock pumping into her as he fed from her white neck. Her hands gripped his shoulders and from her parted lips came soft sighs.

Jack turned his attention back to Angelica, who was touching her face curiously. "Sweetheart, I'll explain later. But right now, I'm a vampire in a sex den and I'm desperate for blood. Your blood."

Her head turned in his direction. Her hand touched the bandage on her neck. For a second he thought she was going to deny him, then she smiled and tore the fabric away. "I'm a Seer in a den soaked with lust," she said. "I'm so desperate for sex I'd take the nearest man." She pressed her body against his. "Good job he's you."

"Damn good job," Jack growled.

Chapter Eleven

He bit into her gently this time, mindful of the sore wound on her neck. It hurt—but only for a second, until the pleasure started rolling in.

Angelica had heard that being bitten by a vampire could be an intensely sexual experience, but it wasn't one she'd had. Very few of the men she'd taken in had been vamp, and none of them had expressed an interest in her blood.

But Jack ... Jack savored her as if she was a perfect vintage. While he drank he lifted her in his arms, carried her past the gasping, moaning couple on the chaise and lowered her to her feet, her back to him.

"Look at yourself," he said, and she looked out through his eyes to see herself, reflected in a large mirror. Her eyes were luminous, huge in her face, her lips swollen and red. The white leather outfit she wore stood out pale against her skin, which in the low lighting looked like—*the most delicious chocolate*, said Jack's voice in her head.

"You're certainly enjoying the taste," she gasped, as his hand moved up to unfasten the leather bra and tug it free of her body. The soft hide dragged across her nipples, standing plump and full, desperate to be touched. She watched Jack's hand—paler now that he was a vampire—slide up over her waist, caressing with every stroke, and cup the fullness of one breast.

He lifted his head from her neck, licked the blood clean from the wound, and said, "You're so beautiful. Look at yourself. Like a goddess."

He rolled one dark nipple between his finger and thumb, and a sharp cry escaped her.

"Yes," Jack breathed. "Tell me. Tell everyone. What do you want?"

"Fuck me," she gasped, and Jack gave her a smile made all the more sinful by his fangs.

He slid her leather panties down over her hips and she stepped out of them, now naked but for some narrow leather straps and a pair of high boots. Her shaven pussy glistened wetly, pink folds peeking out. The sight entranced her.

Then Jack lifted one of her legs high and out to the side, and she saw he'd unfastened his own pants. His cock stood proud, swollen and throbbing, and she rubbed her butt against it.

"Ah, Angelica," he sighed, thrusting against her wet folds. "What do you do to me?"

She smiled at him through the mirror, and he smiled back, and then she reached down and parted her folds—touching herself, brushing her clit and shuddering—and guided Jack's steaming hot cock inside her.

They both moaned at the same time as he filled her. He fit her perfectly, his cock sliding in to the hilt, his balls brushing against her labia.

"Look at yourself," he whispered. "Don't move, just look at yourself. Look how open you are, how you're stretched wide around me. Look how your clit is standing out, throbbing with need. Look at your breasts," here he caressed one of them, lightly pinching the nipple. "How round and full they are."

His gaze traveled over every inch of her, taking Angelica with him. He lingered on the sight of his cock buried in her pussy.

"And look at me inside you," Jack said, slipping his hand down to touch her there. A sharp gasp escaped her as he flicked her clit. "Look how I fill you up. I was made for you, Angelica. You always knew it. I always knew it."

"Yes," she gasped, barely able to breathe with wanting him. "Yes. I need you, Jack."

He nuzzled the place where he'd bitten her. "And I need you, Angelica," he said. With shallow thrusts, he began to move. "I love you."

She gasped at the sheer overwhelming pleasure. "I love you. God, Jack," she choked out, reaching back and grasping the back of his neck, holding him close to her as he swived her slowly, thoroughly, making her watch every second of it.

His fingers slid around in the slick wetness where they were joined, stroking her delicate folds and occasionally slipping inside, with his cock, filling her just a little more. His balls slapped against her, harder with every thrust, and his hand moved up to press down either side of her clit and make it stand out proud.

"Look at this," he whispered. "I'm going to make you come, Angelica. I'm going to make you come so hard on my cock."

"Yes," she sobbed. "Yes!"

He pressed down hard on her clit then, and release shot through her, crashed over her, drowned her. Her whole body jerked and spasmed and for a second she lost contact with Jack—then he was back somehow inside her head with her, or she was inside his, and she could feel her own pussy clamping down on his cock as if the thick shaft belonged to her. She could feel the blood pumping through Jack's veins, the roar of passion, the thunder of release as he spurted into her.

She felt it from his body, and from her own, as he came copiously inside her, still strumming hard at her clit, prolonging her orgasm. Their shared vision filled with stars, and then went black as she could no longer sustain the connection.

Blissful darkness returned, her mind back in her own body, and Angelica slumped in Jack's arms. She felt him kiss her shoulder, then withdraw from her and pick her up, carrying her over to a soft couch.

"Sounded like a good one," said Carver's voice, and she smiled. He and Nalina had subsided at some point, but she'd no idea when.

Jack settled her in his lap and she cuddled against him as he stroked her hair. Gradually, she got her breath back.

"All right?" Jack asked softly, and she nodded. She lifted her head, took a deep breath and turned in Carver's direction.

"Mr. Carver," she said. "I need to ask you about my nephew."

A short pause followed, then Carver said, "The Prince?"

"The Prince. Was there ever ... did he have any siblings?"

Jack's arms tightened around her, and this time the silence was longer.

"A sister," Carver said. "Half sister at any rate. Dead now. Why?"

The languor of Jack's lovemaking slid away, and in its place came the cold, hard ball of guilt in her stomach. "Then you were right," she whispered. "I did send him to his death."

Jack heaved a sigh, and said, "No, you didn't."

"Just because I didn't mean to doesn't mean I didn't do it," she said. "The intention isn't always the important thing, Jack. I passed on the prophecy."

The full impact of it hit her. She'd caused Edward's death. Edward, the only man who could lead a successful revolt against the Empire.

She'd doomed the entire world.

Jack took a deep breath as she quivered in his arms, and let it out again. "Okay," he said. "Here's the thing. About trust and ... honesty. You passed on the prophecy, and your husband used it to order Edward's death. But Edward, um. Well, he didn't die."

The silence hung heavy.

"Didn't die?"

"Yes. You always said you couldn't see the fates of those closest to you, so I guess ... that's why you didn't know. But I knew. Swann knew. Carver knows."

"And now you know," said a new voice, a male voice, a cultured and educated voice. Edward's voice.

"But that's impossible," Angelica tried to say, and failed. Her lungs were empty.

"No. It's improbable," said Edward.

Right then, Angelica had never wished more for normal vision. Frantically, she tapped into Jack's, and then she wished she hadn't because she couldn't stop him turning his head to look – to look –

And she saw. Saw the man with the thousand faces. Saw the only man who could save them. Saw the man who'd promised her freedom. Saw the nephew she'd mourned for seven years.

Her lips moved without her own will, and she spoke without entirely realizing it. "There will be blood," she said.

"Yes," said Edward.

"There will be sacrifice."

"Yes."

"And there will be freedom."

"Yes," he said, and in the deep silence that followed they all heard it.

From downstairs, someone screamed. And not the ecstatic scream of a vampire or his lover. It was the sort of scream Angelica had heard from her husband's ritual torturing of the Riyadh plotters.

Edward held her gaze.

Someone is looking for you.

"It's coming," he said.

"Now," she said.

"What?" said Jack.

Edward and Angelica shared a longer glance, then Edward said, "You need to leave. All of you. Jack. Find a woman, any woman, and swap her DNA for Angelica's."

Something heavy crashed. The building shuddered.

"Must it end like this?" she said. "In fire, and blood, and pain?"

Edward nodded.

"What are you two talking about?" Jack demanded.

"Seers," Carver muttered. He grabbed Nalina's hand and said, "Come on, my lady."

Jack dragged Angelica to her feet and shoved her ahead of him toward the door.

"There are spies everywhere," Edward said. "You have to find him. You know that, don't you?"

Slowly, she nodded, and everything became very clear. Withdrawing from Jack's mind, she said, "Go. I'll catch you up."

"The hell you will," Jack snarled.

"I have to find the traitor. He's one of mine." Like ice melting from a frozen sculpture, the shape of the truth became clear to Angelica. "He's here, in the building."

"Then he'll die like everyone else!"

"And I won't know who to trust. Jack, go. I'll be fine. I'll catch you up."

"I won't—"

She caught his hand as the building shook again, steadied herself, and said, "Jack. Do you know me?"

An agonizing pause. Then he expelled a long breath and replied, "You are yourself, Angelica. You always have been."

"Then go. I'll find you."

He crushed her to him in an embrace that should have lasted a lifetime, but was over in seconds, then he followed Carver and Nalina out through a window and into the night.

Edward said, "Want me to stay?"

She shook her head. "I ... already know who it is. Isn't that strange? Like the knowledge of Jack being meant for me. Feels like it's always been here."

Edward touched her hand. "There must be sacrifices," he said, and then he was gone too, and Angelica was left alone in the shaking, shuddering room. The floor was growing hot. The building was on fire.

"By now half the city is on fire," came a voice from the doorway. The traitor. "It'll allay suspicion. Terrible fire, unsafe conditions, notorious slum. Empress was a fool to prize the acquisition of a slave above her own safety. Awful tragedy. Men in her harem commit mass suicide in her honor." A faint bleep came from his datapad. "At least, they will when they sit down to their dinner. Do you spell cyanide with a C or an S?"

"An S," Angelica said, "followed by an A, N, T, O and S again. An efficient killer."

"My lady," said Santos, and she just knew he was bowing.

"It will all end in blood, Santos," she said. "Fire, pain, and blood."

"You foresaw this? One of your visions?" He was sneering.

And she smiled. She laughed.

"What's so damn funny?" he snarled. Behind him, the door slammed shut.

"I saw it," she said. "Don't you know me, Santos?"

He was tugging at the door, but it was made of iron and he'd no hope of moving it.

"What's my name, Santos? Who am I?"

"Who bloody cares?" he screamed.

"I am myself." She stepped to the left. "Duck, Santos."

"Duck?" snapped Santos. "What the hell do you mean, duck—" and right then a steel girder, molten with heat, crashed down onto his head.

She watched him crumple, his head caving in like a piece of fruit, and dreamily turned toward the window, reaching it just as the floor caved in and the whole building collapsed.

Chapter Twelve

From the memoirs of The Revolutionary

We lay together in her bed, Angelica and I, still and quiet in the moonlight. Her body was curled around mine, warm and soft, her head on my chest. That first night, that magical first night. Drenched in happiness, love, contentment, we lay listening to each other breathing.

"What happens now?" she asked, voice quiet, sleepy.

"You're the Seer," I replied. "You tell me."

She stretched, and snuggled closer. "We get married," she said. "I'll wear orange blossoms in my hair and you can have a retinue of former conquests."

I smiled.

"And children," she went on. "At least a dozen. Of each."

"Of course. And some sort of large shaggy dog."

"Naturally."

We were both quiet again, thinking about it.

"Angelica?" I asked, voice nearly a whisper, half hoping she was asleep so I wouldn't have to hear her answer.

"Mmm?"

"What really happens? For you and me?"

"I can't see it, if that's what you're asking."

"But do you believe it? That we'll be together. You and me. Ten, twenty, forty years' time. We'll stay together."

Angelica curled her arm around my chest and looked up at me, her sightless eyes somehow meeting mine.

"We will be together," she said. "Always."

* * *

By dawn the news was everywhere. The Empress, visiting the most dangerous area of the city to buy a slave, had been killed in a horrific accident that had destroyed a huge chunk of the South City. Imperial fire-fighters had bravely tackled the blaze, but they were too late. An unidentifiably charred corpse bearing the DNA signature of the Empress was found in the remains of what was believed to have been a vampire club.

Her face was everywhere. Every viewscreen. Every newscast. Posters and protesters screamed for the Empress.

"No one knew her name," said Jack. "Only me. To everyone else she was the Empress."

Carver and Nalina were silent. Edward had vanished, as was his wont, leaving the three of them on a bleak transport headed for Australia.

The Emperor had released a statement so heartfelt and emotional everyone knew he hadn't written it. Jack wanted to scream every time anyone mentioned the Empress, wanted to yell that she was his, that she'd loved him, that she wasn't damn well loyal to the Empire, that she'd wanted to bring it down.

"She was mine," he said, tears choking him. "That's what everyone forgets. Before he even knew she existed, she was mine."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Nalina said.

"The Empire is a thief," said Carver. "It steals and poisons and murders. Turns beauty foul."

Jack stared bleakly at the endless ocean.

"We'll go to Australia," Nalina said, "and find a transport out of there. I can still travel unhindered, for the most part. We'll find George, and see if he has any communication with..."

Jack stopped listening. He'd fight, but without the burning fire he'd always had. Hating the Empire had been easy when Angelica had stood for it. And when she'd returned to him, had matched his passion, the victory seemed almost within grasp.

And now ... now she was gone, and his hatred still remained, but like Edward he'd lost his fire.

"Jack?" said Nalina, and he continued to stare at the sea.

"I think I'm losing the fight," he said. "Or ... the fight's losing me."

The fight will never lose you, said Angelica's voice from his memory. But that was strange, because he didn't remember her ever saying it.

"Jack, we need you," Nalina said.

"Angelica is dead and Edward has lost his nerve," Carver said. "We're the only ones left. We can't give up now."

My rebel, said Angelica's voice. *My Revolutionary.*

How am I supposed to do it? he asked her memory. *Without you?*

You're never without me, Jack. You know me.

You are yourself, he replied, and a tear trickled down his cheek.

Return to the place where you loved me, she said. *You'll find me there.*

"Is everything all right, Jack?" Nalina asked uncertainly, and he nodded without turning around.

"How does one get to North America," he said, "from Australia?"

* * *

New Amsterdam had changed its clothes, but the town was still the same. New shops, new houses, fresh paint and patched roads only mattered on the surface. Jack's feet took him automatically past the homes of former lovers, past alleys where he'd trysted with pretty girls long gone, past bars where he'd charmed his way into never once paying for drinks.

He found himself passing the warehouses, taking the path up to the ridge, walking the edge overlooking the terrace.

The old fear nagged him, *You'll fall, crack bones, die helpless and alone*, but he ignored it. What were cracked bones compared to a broken heart?

"Angelica," he said to the empty air. "Angelica, I remember you."

"And while you remember me, I live," she said, and this time he nearly did fall.

She grabbed him in time, laughing, and hauled him back up, against her body. She stood warm and strong, tendrils of hair flying in the wind, and Jack stared and stared. "But —"

She smiled, put her finger over his lips. "The Empress died," she said. "Angelica lives. You gave me that life, Jack. The remains of some other woman will have their state funeral and Jack and Angelica will go on together."

He touched her face, where an angry pink scar stood out. "How did you survive?"

"I shielded myself," she said. "Santos proved useful to the last." She paused. "The men in my harem...?"

"Mysteriously vanished," Jack said. "But there are reports of a bull-headed man in a colony of mercenaries somewhere in the deserts of Africa."

"The fight hasn't lost them," she said, and Jack stared hard into her guileless brown eyes.

I didn't imagine that, did I?

She smiled wider. *No. You're mine, Jack. And I'm yours. I always was.*

He kissed her then, backed her against a tree—the same tree—and kissed her, long and hard. Angelica wrapped her arms around him, hugged him to her and pressed his body closer to hers, tilting her hips against his in blatant invitation.

"The fight would never lose you, Jack," she murmured, sliding her hands lower and seeking out bare skin. Her clever fingers unfastened his pants, even as he pulled up her skirts.

"The Empire is sick, and running mad," he said, as she palmed his cock. He cupped her hot pussy, slipped a finger inside and felt her shiver.

"The world has fallen on its axis," she replied, arching against his hand.

Jack entered her with one smooth thrust, and caught her cry of delight with his lips.

"Then let's tilt it back."

Cat Marsters

Cat Marsters lives in England and belongs to a pride of adored cats. On occasion she can be persuaded to admit ownership of a demon puppy (but not if you suspect your flowers have been trampled). She enjoys watching TV and films that showcase the looks and talents of Richard Armitage, David Tennant and Hugh Jackman, reading books that make her laugh, dyeing her hair, and talking about herself in the third person.

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 still aiming for the fairytale cottage of her childhood dreams, and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Cat also writes madcap spy fantasies ... er, chick-lit mysteries, under the name Kate Johnson. She keeps a regularly updated blog at www.etaknosnohj.blogspot.com, and has a Facebook page at www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=521725685#/JohnsonCat-Marsters/24183756175, which she'd love you to join. There's also a Yahoo! group for news and updates at groups.yahoo.com/group/catmarsters/join. You can contact Cat at catmarsters@gmail.com and find out about her other Changeling releases at www.changelingpress.com/author.php?uid=61.