

Cat Marsters

Dawn
RISING

Empire

Changeling Press

Empire 4: Dawn Rising

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Empire 4: Dawn Rising

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

For too long Callie has been in pursuit of revenge, Edward has been searching for forgiveness, and the Empire has held the world under its boot.

Callie has a unique skill that can gain access to the Emperor and end his tyranny. To unlock it, she needs a man -- a strong, hot man like Edward. But Edward is too tortured by the failures of his past to believe he can save the future. Until an insistent drumbeat fills his head and drowns out the screams of his past, leading him to the one woman who could be his salvation.

There will be love and hot sex. There will be blood and sacrifice. And finally, if they can pull it off, there can be freedom from the Empire.

Chapter One

Any minute now...

Callie arched her spine and dropped her head back, letting her auburn curls brush her bare shoulders. Her tiny, bejeweled excuse for underwear tinkled as she twisted her hips, shimmied her breasts and generally gave the assembled watchers a hell of a show. The pounding, thumping music thrummed through her, heating her blood, pumping rhythmically through her veins.

She wore silk, the diaphanous fabric clinging to her oiled skin and revealing more than it concealed. The tiny pair of panties and matching bra, both consisting of a little bit of chain and a few jingling coins, hardly concealed her modesty.

But since Callie didn't consider she had much modesty in the first place, she didn't reckon much would be needed to conceal it.

"You. With the red hair. I want a private dance."

Yes. The man who'd spoken wore expensive clothes and had a discreet datapad strapped to his wrist. He was Imperial, from his neat goatee beard to his impeccably fashioned boots. Callie knew the type. He probably imagined he blended in perfectly with every other man in the dark, steamy, scented room, but to her, he absolutely screamed Empire.

She shimmied her hips and danced over to him, letting a sensual smile curve her painted lips. For a second, she gave herself over to the music, the heat and the thrum and the pounding beat. The air swam with spices and the scent of sex.

Her hands brushed the bare sides of her breasts and she shivered.

The lights flickered.

Callie forced herself to concentrate. The trick was to look as if she were about to orgasm just from his presence -- but keep herself as unaroused as possible.

When she reached him, she undulated to her knees and bowed, letting her hair fall forward over her face, then lifting her head and pouting in the general direction of his crotch. Since he sat with his knees wide apart, this wasn't difficult.

"My lord," she purred.

"Your name?"

"Boudicca," she said, allowing her lips to shape the word decadently. She arched her spine again, thrusting out her breasts and baring her throat. "How... private... would you like this dance, my lord?"

He shifted in his seat, but not before she'd seen the stirring at his crotch. "Right here," he said, and she resisted the urge to frown.

"Are you sure, my lord? We have private rooms. I could dance," she let her voice caress the word, "just for you."

He cleared his throat, the thought obviously tempting. But he said, "No. Just here."

She smiled. Some men liked to watch, and some liked to be watched.

"Very well," she purred, and rose elegantly to her feet. Motioning to one of the pipers to play for her, she began to dance, a steamy, sensual dance that was as close to sex as she could manage by herself and with her clothes on. She'd taken pains to learn it, to perfect every intricate step, to imbue every motion with sensuality. Each slow slide of her arm from its loose sleeve of transparent silk, each twist of her thigh that partially bared it, each undulation of her hips, was designed to simulate sex. To make a man's pulse race, to make his temperature rise, to make his cock swell.

And the Imperial in front of her was, after all, just a man.

Thank God they're too misogynistic to have many top-ranking women, she thought as she bent backwards almost fully, her head in his lap and her breasts inches from his face. Men thought with their dicks: it was universal. A woman was much harder to trap.

She arched her bare foot and slid it along the tiled floor toward him, toes pointed, harem jewelry gleaming in the softly shimmering lights. The movement slid her thigh free from the billowing silks draped from her hips. A bead of sweat trickled over her skin.

The bulge at his crotch got bigger.

"Come here," he rasped. "Dance closer."

She did, and he bid her closer still, until she was dancing between his spread thighs. The whisper of silk against her skin, the brush of hair over her back, the scent of her own skin, oiled and perfumed and hot, all turned her on.

The lights flickered again.

Remember he's an Imperial. A gutless killer. A filthy, soul-rotted rapist.

The lights beamed brighter.

The Imperial had his hands on her waist now as she gyrated in front of him. Her breasts bounced around an inch or two from his face, and his eyes were huge. Hell, she could probably rob him blind at this point and he'd barely notice.

Callie bent backwards at the waist, arching her breasts away from him and curving one hand over her head to touch the floor and support her own weight. This put her scantily-clad crotch right in his line of vision, covered only by the jeweled thong and some very thin silk.

The Imperial made a strangled grunting sound, and Callie smiled. She raised one leg, slowly, sensually, sliding her foot up over his boot, his calf, his thigh. His pants were of the specially created material the Empire used on its high-ranking soldiers and officials. Every inch of it recorded and transmitted what he was doing. It had certainly recorded his location and physical state -- including his sizeable erection.

Probably, it was taking pictures of her near-naked pussy too.

She ran her foot up over his hip, the belt carrying his laser pistol, and slid it around his waist, using it to anchor herself as she uncurled her spine and slid onto his knee.

He was breathing fast now. She straddled his thigh, and that damned clever fabric was probably taking samples of her sweat to transmit her ID to the Empire.

His hand slid up her bare ribcage to her breast, and cupped it.

"Mmm," Callie said, inching closer. "That'll cost you a little more."

"I'll pay," he said hoarsely, and as his mouth descended on hers Callie thought, *You certainly will.*

He was a good kisser, enthusiastic and skilled, his tongue tracing her lips then plunging inside. His hand tightened on her breast, and Callie let out a little gasp that was part pain, part pleasure, as the metal links and coins bit into her flesh.

Don't, don't, she willed herself. Filthy, soul-rotted rapist, remember? Don't enjoy it. Don't get excited. Not yet. One little blast won't be enough.

She needed to store it up. Build up the pleasure, and then let it explode.

Thankfully, she'd had a lot of practice.

The Imperial had one hand on her breast now, and one on her hip, pulling her closer, grinding himself against her. The metal links of her panties slid between her labia, teasing and rubbing her sensitive flesh.

She gasped, and the lights flickered again.

The Imperial lifted his head. "Something wrong with your power?"

What the hell, maybe it could work in her favor. "It comes and goes." Much like herself.

"Maybe I could," his hand slid inside her bra and fondled her nipple, "call in a few favors. Get it fixed for you."

"Mmm," said Callie. "We'd be ever so grateful, my lord. I'd be ever so grateful."

"How grateful?" he pressed, and she licked her lips lasciviously.

His breathing came faster. Between her thighs his cock leapt, pressing the metal links deeper between Callie's pussy lips and abrading her clit. "Very grateful," she moaned, and the music faltered for a second.

"Could be quite a job," the Imperial murmured, pinching her nipple and thrusting his crotch against hers.

Callie's hand slipped between them and tabbed open his pants to free his cock. She wrapped her hand around it, then purred, "Quite a job indeed."

His eyelids sank closed, and he thrust into her hand a few times. "Oh yes," he murmured. "Ah fuck, yes."

Callie angled her breast toward his mouth like a mother feeding a baby, and he obediently took the nipple between his lips and sucked. She fisted his cock, rubbed her hand up and down and smeared the drop of moisture at the top all over.

"Yes, fuck yes, touch the head. Like that. Yes," he hissed, his breath hot against her breast.

He's a murderous son of a bitch, she reminded herself. Brainwashes and tortures the innocent. Forget how good his mouth feels sucking your tit. Remember to hate him.

But it was difficult, when what he was doing felt so good.

"You like that, my lord?" she asked.

"Yes. Oh yes. Stroke my balls."

She did, using both hands now. One rubbed up and down his shaft, the other caressed his tight balls. He moaned, and she used the tip of her nail to gently score the delicate flesh.

Around them, the music and dancing and life of the club throbbed on.

He thrust hard into her hand. "Ah, fuck! Fuck, Boudicca!"

She dropped her head to his and ran her tongue around the shell of his ear. "Do you want to?" she asked. "Fuck Boudicca?"

In answer he scrabbled at the metal links between her legs, freeing her pussy for his cock. In seconds he was inside her, pushing deep, moaning in pleasure. Callie rocked her hips, using her hands to free her other breast and guide it toward his mouth. He suckled her greedily, thrusting up with short, sharp movements.

"Oh yes, let me suck you. You have such sweet little nipples. You taste so good," he gasped.

Evil, murdering bastard, she reminded herself as the lights flickered again. Evil, murdering bastard who has to pay women to fuck him. Soul-rotted rapist. You're not turned on. You're NOT.

But it was hard, when his cock was inside her, pumping so deliciously into her, and his mouth was so hot on her breast. She began to rock her hips faster, squeezing him with her internal muscles, moving her legs so she was kneeling astride him and using the position to bounce up and down on his cock.

"Ah yes, oh fuck, oh yes," he gasped, clearly not caring in the least that everyone else in the club could see him swiving one of the dancers. But then they were used to it. From every corner, every curtained alcove, came the sounds and scents of couples frantically fucking.

"Mmm," she purred encouragingly. "Mmm, that's nice. Oh yes, just like that. Fuck me harder. Oh yes."

He seemed to like this, so she kept up a steady patter of mindless encouragement, trying not to notice how with every movement, the chains between her legs rubbed her clit. "Fuck me like that, baby. Your cock feels so good inside me. You're so hard. Oh yeah, you're fucking me good. I'm so wet for you. I want to feel your big cock come inside me. Mmm, I want to suck your come off your cock."

Below her, the Imperial thrust so frantically she was sure he was going to come, but then he started shoving her off him. "Yes, yes," he gabbled, "in your mouth. I want to come in your mouth. Suck me off, Boudicca."

Obediently, she slid to her knees before him, secretly grateful she wasn't going to have to take any more stimulation. Already she could hear the other patrons grumbling about the shoddy power in this place.

She'd barely leaned forward to take him when he grabbed her by the hair and shoved his dick in her mouth. She sucked him deep, tasting her own juices on him and licking them off, reclaiming them, even as she fisted his shaft and stroked his balls.

Go on, suck it down, all the way, deeper, deeper, I don't care if you fucking choke.

Callie flinched, but didn't stop. She felt him quiver, and then with a cry of, "Oh fuck yeah," he came down her throat, his seed sticky and salty.

Callie remained where she was, licking him clean, making sure no traces remained. Of course, he'd be covered in her saliva, but by the time she was gone that wouldn't make any difference.

Swirl your tongue around the head. That's it. Please me well enough and you won't die today.

She kissed his balls and looked up at him. *I won't, but you will.*

He was slumped back in his seat, a look of bliss on his face.

"Was that good, my lord?" she asked, widening her eyes.

"Oh yeah. That was very good. In fact, Boudicca, I'm half inclined to take you back to my room."

She cast a rueful glance at the club, at the half-naked girls dancing, at the badly-concealed man in the corner getting his cock sucked by a guy with horns. "But I have work to do tonight, my lord."

"Fuck that. I'll pay."

She stood up slowly, and began to rearrange her breasts in their metal bra. They were swollen, her nipples tight, needing release, but now that he'd got his rocks off the Imperial didn't seem interested in easing her torment.

Which made it a lot easier to bear.

"No," he said, as she tucked one breast back into the metal links, "leave them out."

Callie thrust her bare nipples in his direction and he licked his lips. She slid onto his lap, rubbing her hip against his naked cock. "Oh my lord," she said, "did you mean it? About taking me home?"

"Well, back to my room," he said.

"Do you live here, sir?"

"No, I live in Carnalis," he said, with an air of importance. "I'm out here inspecting the new training facilities."

"Carnalis!" she said, feigning excitement. "Oh, sir, all my life I've dreamed of going there."

"Hmm," he said, lazily tweaking her breast. "Well, Boudicca, please me well enough and I might take you back with me."

She smiled happily, but inside she wanted to grab his balls and squeeze until there was nothing left. This toe-rag was married, and she doubted he had the slightest intention of taking her anywhere after tonight.

"That would be so exciting," she gushed. "All my life I've wanted to see the Emperor's palace."

"I'm a regular visitor there."

I bet you are. "Is it as glorious as everyone says?" The Imperial nodded blithely. "I've heard the Throne Room is just amazing. And the Hall of Pleasure."

"Oh yes," he said, tweaking her nipple in a proprietary way. "The Hall of Pleasure. I've been there many times."

Liar, she thought. You're a middle man, nothing more.

"And the Emperor's harem, my lord? Are they really so beautiful as everyone says?"

"They are," he said, smiling indulgently.

Callie ducked her head shyly, and said, "As beautiful as me, my lord?"

"Well, you are very pretty," he said, but before he could go on she babbled over him.

"Do you really think so, my lord? Enough for the Emperor's harem?"

"Well, I --"

"Because I'd so love to be an Imperial Concubine, sir!"

At that he laughed. Callie's hatred didn't increase, because she already despised him so much her body ached with it.

"Now, Boudicca," he said patronizingly, "You're very pretty and a very good dancer, of course, but the Emperor's Concubines are something special."

"I could be something special, sir. Take me back to your room," she nuzzled his neck, "and I'll show you."

His cock swelled against her hip. "Hmm," he said, and she knew he was planning to take her there, swive her all night, then go home without her.

"And if I impress you, you could recommend me to the Emperor," she said. "I'm sure he'll be very pleased with you for bringing him a new Concubine," she added, laying it on thick.

For a moment, she could see his resolve waver, and then he said, "Well, of course Minister Carbon and I are on very good terms..."

"Minister Carbon, sir?"

"He's the selector for the Emperor's harem."

Minister Carbon. *Thank you, sir.* George could find Minister Carbon as easily as finding his own feet, and all she had to do was seduce him into getting her an audience with the Emperor. That was all she had to do.

Her heart beat faster with excitement, and the lights flickered again.

"This place is a dive," the Imperial said to her. "Come back to my rooms with me."

"I can't wait that long, my lord," she moaned, rubbing her breasts against him. "I want you again right now. We could take a room upstairs...?" She squirmed against his cock, and added in his ear, "The things I want to do to you aren't things I could do in public, my lord."

"What sort of things?"

"I want to rub my tits all over your cock, my lord. I want to get on all fours and have you swive me like an animal. I want to rub your come into my tits. I want to suck your dick while you tongue my pussy. I want --"

In a flash, he had her on her feet and was dragging her toward the stairs.

Callie smiled.

He locked the door as soon as they were inside, then in a hoarse voice told her to strip naked and rub her tits on his cock.

She did, using every technique she knew to make him hard. She took his hand and slipped it between her legs, but all he did was slide his finger inside her and say, "Do you want my cock in you, Boudicca?"

"Mmm," she hummed against his balls. "I want to feel your cock in me, my lord. Thrusting hard into me. I want you to fuck me all night, my lord."

He grunted, and told her to stand in front of the mirror, bend over at the waist and grasp her ankles.

"Should be easy for a dancer like you," he said, and she smiled and did as he said. Keeping her legs straight and her ass in the air, she bent over as he'd commanded.

"Spread your legs," he said, his voice thick. Peering between her own ankles, she could see him palming his cock, dark red and stiff, the head bulging.

"Tell me how much you want my cock."

"I want it so much I can hardly breathe, my lord," she gasped, and it was nearly the truth.

"I'm going to fuck you all night, Boudicca," he said, and fed his cock into her wet, hungry pussy.

This time she didn't hold back. The Imperial had to hold onto her hips as he thrust into her, and she gave up holding her ankles to brace herself on the floor.

"Ah yes. You're so wet and tight," he grunted. "Feel how your pussy grips me, Boudicca. You love it from behind, don't you?"

"Yes, I love it," she moaned, which was also the truth.

He did have a reasonably proportioned cock, and he knew how to use it. She made herself suppress the waves of pleasure coursing through her, forced herself to hold back even as she faked moans and gasps.

It needed to be a good one to take out all the sensors in this room.

She couldn't rub her clit in this position, or she'd lose her balance and fall over. Instead all she could do was moan, "Oh my lord, touch me. Feel how wet I am for you. Let me come on that big hard cock of yours."

Eagerly, he slipped one hand round to stroke her clit, and Callie nearly moaned with relief. She was so turned on it wouldn't take long. "Oh yes," she gasped, not faking any more. "Oh yes! I'm going to come!"

"Yeah, come on my cock," he commanded, and Callie glanced up to see how close her pile of clothing was. Two strides. One second to get there, another one to draw the blade, and then --

"Oh God yes! I'm coming! Yes, oh God yes!"

Behind her, the Imperial was gasping, "That's it, baby, oh yeah, come on my cock like that --"

Her orgasm exploded, and so did the lights in the room. Dimly, she was aware of people screaming, of the Imperial jerking behind her and shouting something, but all she really knew in that one blissful moment was the overwhelming release flooding through her.

Then she was pulling away from him, taking those two swift strides to her clothing, grasping the metal frame of her bra and withdrawing the slim blade concealed in the wiring. She whirled to stab at the Imperial --

-- only to thrust at empty air, at the same time she heard him gasp and thud to the ground.

Quickly, she dropped to her knees and grabbed at him, feeling an arm, his chest, getting ready to strike, but then she realized he wasn't moving.

"Sir?" She shook him, momentarily torn. Stab him anyway, and run like hell -- which was after all, the original plan -- or check to see if he was still alive? What on earth could have killed him? All she'd done was blow anything with an electric circuit, and --

Wait. High-ranking Imperial. The highest she'd ever fucked. Chances were he had some fancy bionic upgrades. She'd swived men with bionic eyes and ears, who had of course become blind and deaf the moment her orgasm triggered its own radioflash.

She put her hand on his chest. No heartbeat. She turned her cheek to his mouth and nose. No breath -- but the faint acrid smell of electrical burning, charred flesh. The sonofabitch had bionic organs. Probably his heart had blown.

"Natural causes," she muttered, and stood up. People were still running around screaming downstairs, and it would be the work of a moment to get dressed and slip out unnoticed in the chaos.

Outside, the building was dark, and several others in the street had lost their power too. Callie walked on bare feet down the strangely dark alley, quiet without its constant bombardment of adverts and music, and ducked out onto the main thoroughfare.

By the time someone discovered the dead body of the Imperial agent, Callie was streets away.

Chapter Two

The drumming was back.

Edward didn't sleep much these days, but even if he'd wanted to, the drumming would have kept him awake. Like a heartbeat, like a jackhammer, like the beat of the executioner's drum. Filling his head, a strong, insistent beat, so loud he was amazed no one else could hear it.

He'd heard it first in Riyadh, a desperate thrum coming from a hot, steamy club. Astonished no one else could hear it, he'd moved closer, closer, until the scents of opium and sex filled his brain and the pounding was so loud it drowned out his thoughts.

Then the club suddenly went black, silent -- dead. Someone started screaming.

The drumming stopped.

Then again, in New Kyoto, only this time the drumming escaped before he could track it down. Across the sea it fled, and he followed, drowning himself in the endless water. Salt filled his mouth, his lungs, pressure crushed him, but nothing ended the drumming inside his head.

* * *

"Mmm, oh yes, George, that's amazing! Oh yeah, eat me!"

Callie paused outside the door and sighed. Sounded like George had upgraded the language files on his pet sexbots.

"Does she taste good, baby? Does she? Mmm, I want you to lick your come out of me, George."

Two female voices, both of them technically human-sounding, but Callie knew much better. She tapped in the current security code, let the retinal scanner flash over her eye, and pressed her thumb to the plate. The door flashed, and she went in.

"Miss Calliseppiterranoia Filoxidopulos," announced a rather grave voice, as if she was entering a ball. But instead of elegant couples, the room was filled with machinery and electrical components. Callie spied parts of a troop transport, agricultural machinery, some kind of dental equipment and several replica body parts.

Among the arms, feet and disembodied eyeballs were scattered breasts of various colors and sizes, several disturbingly realistic hairy pussies, and a couple of large penises. Some of them had balls attached, some didn't. One seemed to have a set of hips, partially covered in synthetic skin, and one was embedded with tiny sparkling lights.

"George," Callie said, ducking under a trailing wire, "why would anyone want to fuck a sparkly penis?"

George didn't answer immediately, being occupied with two female sexbots bouncing around on top of him. One rode his penis, her hips moving in a realistic way. Her breasts were huge, but not so obscenely big as they had been last time Callie visited.

The second 'bot knelt over George's mouth, grinding her bald pussy down on his face.

"I don't believe this," Callie muttered. "George, you're giving head to a machine."

"Practice," he mumbled, as the 'bot writhed in apparent ecstasy.

Practice for what, Callie didn't know, since as far as she was aware George had never been with an actual flesh and blood woman.

"She seems to be enjoying it," she said, watching the 'bot squeeze her own breasts and gasp joyously.

"I'm getting better." George had one hand working the 'bot's rather large clit. He was rubbing it as if he thought he could bring it out in a shine.

"Sure. Only..." Callie tapped her fingers against her lips. "George, not to be cruel, but... what exactly have you based this programming on?"

"Oh yes!" the 'bot began to scream. "Oh yes! Oh yes!"

"Granted," Callie went on, "every woman is different, but without having ever actually licked one out, how can you possibly create an accurate simulation?"

George said nothing for a moment or two as the 'bot continued to scream and writhe, then he said, "Fellatia, desist," and she subsided. "Go and wash up," he added, and she obediently stood up and walked to the sink in the corner.

The other 'bot continued to bounce around on George's balls, but after a glance at Callie, who stood with her arms folded and her head shaking, he told her to desist too, and she followed the other 'bot. George glared at Callie. "I can't have sex with you watching me."

"That wasn't sex," she said, "that was live porno." She glanced at his cock, still standing upright, shiny with whatever lubrication the 'bots used. "George --"

"What?" he said, defiantly.

"You need to get yourself a girlfriend."

He glared harder and stood up. "Thanks for the advice. I'll just go out and get one, shall I? Perhaps spend a few credits on one at the store? Maybe swap a couple of Imperial hacks for one?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean? Go around swiving the enemy like you do?"

She flinched. "Hey. You know I don't enjoy it."

He gave her a knowing look as he pulled on some pants and flicked a few switches at the big bank of screens on the facing wall. They each showed newscasts, one of which zoomed into full size, complete with sound.

"...mass electrical failure, causing the power to several buildings to completely vanish. Curiously, the failure also affected systems not connected to the main power, such as personal communications devices and bionic upgrades..."

George tabbed the sound back down again. "Sounds to me like you enjoyed yourself plenty," he said.

"Any chatter about the dead agent?" Callie asked, ignoring that.

George shook his head. "Not a word. I take it you did kill him?"

"He was certainly dead." She peered up at the many screens. "Bionic failure. I hadn't realized he'd have so many systems upgraded."

George let out a bark of laughter. "Excellent," he said. "You could take out a whole squad of soldiers if you came hard enough."

"Perhaps I should take my own advice," Callie said, glancing at the sexbots, "and practice."

"I wasn't suggesting --" George began, concern on his thin face.

"Relax. I'm not going to gangbang a whole squad." His shoulders relaxed. "Just one minister."

His shoulders tensed. "Callie..."

"His name is Carbon. What can you tell me about him?"

Still eyeing her warily, he slid into a chair and began tapping buttons and touchscreens faster than she could see. "Minister Carbon." A picture came up on one screen while information flashed over another. "Lizardene, which means he has reptilian skin and a forked tongue."

"Could be fun," Callie murmured, studying the middle-aged man with tough, scaly-looking skin. His eyes were slitted and yellow. Not the most attractive man she'd ever seen.

"Minister for the Interior and Imperial Relations," George went on.

"I just bet he is," Callie said.

"Residence: Carnalis, age... Why are you going after him?"

Callie stepped closer and scanned the information whizzing past until she found what she was looking for. George's search engines had trawled everything from Imperial databases to confidential files to gossip pages.

"There," she said, stabbing the page with her finger. "Minister Carbon denies rumors that he is the head recruiter for His Imperial Majesty's harem."

"So?"

"George, you know as well as I do that when a politician denies something, it's as true as the sunrise."

George blinked hard, then turned to face her. "You're going after the guy who recruits for the Emperor's harem?"

"Yes."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Callie, why? I know you have this insane quest for vengeance and everything, but --"

"It's not insane," Callie said quietly. "The Emperor must be stopped. As long as he is alive the world cannot be free."

George was silent a moment, then said, "Be that as it may --"

"No," she snapped. "Not 'be that as it may.' That 'may' not 'be' anything! He's murdered millions of people! We had one dissident in the village and the Emperor killed five thousand people for it! He actually ordered the men to rape as many women as they could find. Did you know that? 'Find the pretty ones and bring them to me,' he said. And they thought they'd be spared but he just used them up and threw them out. He tossed them on the Traitor's Terrace when he was done with them. Some of them were still alive. He chained them amongst the rotting corpses and let the birds eat them anyway." Her chest was heaving. The words felt as if they'd been ripped from her.

George was silent, then he said, "How did you escape?"

She kept her eyes on the screen, on Minister Carbon's reptilian face. His yellow eyes were bright, his nose sharp, his smile wide. He looked like the dinosaurs she'd seen in the Sahara. Big monsters with enormous jaws that ripped into smaller animals and tore off chunks of flesh, then trampled on the remains.

Her fingers traced the small, faded scars on her arms and neck. "Who says I did," she said.

* * *

Mongolia was freezing, snow and ice biting into Edward's flesh. The drums still pulsed inside his head, although by now he could almost convince himself it was the pounding of his own heart.

Almost.

Angelica had been married to his uncle, which technically made her his aunt. But her age was closer to Edward's own, and for the time he'd been included in the claustrophobic circle of his uncle's court, he'd counted Angelica among his friends.

Now they were both free -- although in Edward's case, free was a relative term.

He found Angelica and her Revolutionary lover Jack, canoodling in a warm, cozy cabin, isolated from the nearest town by a snowstorm so vicious it burned Edward's skin.

He barely noticed.

He paused outside the cabin's door. Jack and Angelica were in the habit of fucking like rabbits, and much as he was fond of them both he was in no mood to join them.

The murmur of voices from within sounded more like conversation than sex, however, so he knocked on the door.

"It's Edward," said Angelica. "Let him in."

"Frightens me the way you do that," said Jack, but he opened the door.

"Your Highness," he said. "Come in before you freeze."

"I'm not cold," Edward said absently, then frowned. "And don't call me Highness."

"He frequently still calls me Majesty," Angelica said from her chair by the fire. The warm flames played over her dark, gleaming skin.

Edward stamped the snow from his shoes and brushed ice from his shirt. Neither Jack nor Angelica spoke, and he glanced between them. Did they hear it?

"Edward, how far have you come?" Jack asked.

He shrugged. "Libby dropped me off in town."

"That's five miles away. You walked here like that?"

Edward glanced down at his clothes, borrowed from Libby's mate Swann since his own had been ruined by the sea. He wore loose cotton pants and a shirt, and leather shoes.

Belatedly, he realized this wasn't appropriate clothing for a snowstorm.

"Oh," he said. "Yes. I'm frozen."

He wasn't. Hadn't felt the cold in years. Or heat. Even the seawater filling his lungs had barely hurt.

Only the drums made an impact.

"You should be frostbitten," Angelica chided, reaching out and touching his hand. It was cold, but not terribly so.

"Should I? I apologize. Next time I'll remember."

Angelica frowned at Jack as he came to sit beside her. The gods had seen fit to bestow upon her second sight, but in payment they'd taken her first sight. She could see into the past and the future, but was totally blind in the present.

But she clearly didn't need second sight to see something was wrong. Edward usually made a better job of appearing to be normal, but the drumming -- the drumming --

"Can't you hear it?" he said, and they stared at him.

"The storm?" guessed Jack doubtfully.

"The fire?" said Angelica, equally doubtful.

"The drumming," he said.

There was a long pause. The fire crackled. Outside, the wind howled.

"Perhaps my hearing isn't as good as yours," Jack said finally.

"Angelica?" Edward asked, desperate.

She cocked her head and regarded him with unseeing eyes. Finally she held out a hand, and Edward slid to his knees in front of her.

"Drumming?" she said.

"Inside my head. It's quieter now, but it was... it --"

"Shh," Angelica said, and placed her warm fingers on his temples.

The drumming roared to life, and Edward realized that for the first time in seven years, that persistent beat had distracted him into forgetting the burning, icy fire inside his chest where his heart used to be.

Angelica let out a shaky breath, and he realized that she was feeling the fire inside him.

"My God," she breathed, "how do you live like this?"

"I don't have much choice," he replied.

Her face tightened in pain, and Jack frowned. "Sweetheart, perhaps you ought to let go," he said. "You don't want to get caught up in... I mean, it's a lot of... well, I mean Edward is..."

"Living a constant agony of endless despair," Edward said drily. "You can say it." He reached up and removed Angelica's hands from his face, but remained holding them. "Did you hear it?" he asked.

She trembled slightly. "The screaming?"

He flinched. "No. That's nothing new. The drumming."

Slowly, she nodded. "Where's it coming from?"

He dropped her hands and ran his hands through his hair in frustration. Where was it coming from? Why now? What was it for?

"Riyadh," he said, "then New Kyoto, then... I don't know. I lost it. Frankly, I'm glad, because it's driving me mad."

"More mad than the constant screaming of a soul in an agony of endless despair?" Angelica asked, one eyebrow raised.

He didn't know what to say to that.

"Edward..." Angelica began, frowning. "The drumming drowned out the screaming."

He swallowed. "Yes," he said, his voice low.

"It dulled the pain."

He stared at her, because nothing ever dulled the pain, and yet --

-- and yet the drumming had.

"When was the last time you thought of her?" Angelica asked softly, and Edward closed his eyes.

Annique. He'd thought of her every hour of every day, with every heartbeat. He'd felt the terrible, howling, tearing pain of her death with every breath and welcomed it, because without it he was terrified he'd forget her. And remembering that she was dead was infinitely better than forgetting she'd been alive.

"The drumming made me forget," he said hollowly.

Jack and Angelica were both silent.

"I have to make it stop."

"Why?" Jack asked, and Edward gaped at him.

"Why? Why? You think I want to forget her?"

"I think," Jack began sharply, but then Angelica squeezed his hand and he fell abruptly silent.

"You think I should move on?" Edward said.

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you wanted to. You don't get it, do you? I don't want to forget her. It might be a howling, screaming pain, but it's Annique, and I deserve it."

"No one deserves that," Angelica said.

"She died because of me," Edward said, the pain rising inside him, drowning out the drums. "Because of who I was, and what I did, and because I couldn't protect her." Jack opened his mouth to speak and Edward went on, ruthlessly, "And not just her. Thousands of them. Millions. I can hear them. Screaming. Every day, and every night, constantly. They're dead because of me. Because I raised them up then dropped them flat. I failed every one of them. I killed them all."

They were both, wisely, silent. Silent enough that he could hear the drumming begin again.

"Can't you hear it?" he demanded, and they looked at him as if he'd gone mad.

Maybe he had.

There will be blood. The words of Angelica's prophecy came back to him. *There will be sacrifice. And there will be freedom.*

"I have to stop this," he said, whirling for the door.

"How?" Angelica asked.

"Find the source of the drumming," Edward said, his hand on the latch. "And destroy it."

Chapter Three

The drumming led him over the ocean, the endless wastes of black water, their roar doing nothing to drown out the sound. With fury adding a heated beat to the drums, Edward sped through the Pacific Deeps and over the New California Sea before reaching land and hopping from one island to another. The peaks that had once been mountains rose from the water, twinkling with the lights of small towns and villages.

New Vegas rose up like a glittering sea monster, thumping with savage energy and light and the relentless sound of drums.

It was here. The pounding was as strong as it had been in Riyadh, in New Kyoto. Louder than the screaming, it filled his head and drove him onwards, up the hills and through the streets until he reached the biggest, brightest, loudest building in this very big, bright, loud place.

"Sir, you must be on the list," said the hulking creature at the door. Some sort of shifter, Edward expected, perhaps a bear or a wolf.

He turned his gaze on the shifter and said, "I am on the list."

The creature didn't even blink. Not a complicated mind. "Yes, my lord," it said, and keyed in an entry code on the door.

Inside, music thumped at deafening levels, lights stabbed and everywhere the scent of sex drifted. The club was upmarket, but all that meant was that the patrons were discreet about swiving in corners.

The beat in his head got louder and louder. The heavy thumps separated out, their pattern becoming clearer. He was almost there. How could no one else hear it? It

was such an oppressive sound, louder and heavier and more insistent than anything he'd ever heard in his life.

He brushed past well-dressed men and women and some creatures whose gender seemed to be indeterminate. A woman covered in fur gave him a lascivious look, and a man with horns tried to dance with him. Edward walked by as if they weren't there.

With every step, the beat increased, until his every movement was in time with it. *Nearly there. Got to be here somewhere.*

He was so focused on finding the source of the torturous beat that he almost failed to notice the acrid scent of a Lizardene. And not just any Lizardene, but the degenerate cold-blooded monster responsible for filling the Emperor's harem with unsuspecting slaves.

Walk on, he told himself, but he couldn't, because intertwined with Minister Carbon's scent was that of a woman. A woman with slick heat between her thighs, whose skin was warming that of the chilly reptile.

He closed his eyes, uttered a short prayer for endurance, then turned and marched toward the couple. They were in a secluded alcove, screened with curtains and guarded by more shifters like the one at the door.

Edward paused, and heard her throaty moan, followed by wet sucking sounds.

"Oh yes," he heard the Lizardene sigh. "Stroke the other one, yes, that's it. Very nice, Boudicca."

The woman made the throaty sound again. Her mouth was full, Edward realized, as she sucked down the minister's penis. Or probably more accurately, one of his penises. Some Lizardenes, in common with their reptile ancestry, had two.

The drumming was almost unbearable, but Edward gritted his teeth and glared the dull-minded guards into submission. He slipped past the curtain to stand unobserved for a moment or two. The woman kneeling on the floor in an expensive gown had her back to him, and Minister Carbon's eyes were closed.

His scaly skin gleamed in the alcove's low lighting, his forked tongue flickering over his lips in appreciation for the woman's blowjob. His silk pants were open at the crotch, but the skin there was concealed by his lover's thick red hair. Glossy curls spilled over his thighs, and Edward wondered if the scaly bastard could even feel their silky caress.

"Bet you've never sucked off two cocks at once, have you, my beauty?" murmured Carbon. "How'd you like to take both of them inside you? Two cocks stretching out your little pussy. Wouldn't you like that?"

Edward's tenuous control snapped. "Those evil little spines on your stubby cocks would tear her apart," he growled, and both Carbon and his unfortunate lover jerked with surprise.

"Who the hell are you?" Carbon snapped. "Guards!"

"He didn't mention that, did he?" Edward said. "When he gets inside you he'll sprout spikes that'll rip you to shreds. Survive that, and you'll spend the rest of your life as a dull-eyed sex slave for a megalomaniac."

Her eyes were wide, her lips puffy and red and wet with saliva. Her expensive gown was open at the front, revealing creamy little breasts that already bore the scratches of Carbon's claw-like hands.

The drumming was so loud he could barely think.

"Guards!" Carbon yelled again, reaching for a laser pistol in a discreet holster beneath his jacket. The girl tensed, but didn't look as shocked or frightened as she ought to. In fact, she looked furious.

"Put it down," Edward said, but while Carbon was an evil bastard, he wasn't stupid or small-minded, and Edward couldn't dull-eye him into submission. The pistol remained pointed steadily at him.

"I think you should go," the girl said to Edward. She looked like she was ready to kill him herself.

"Hey," he said sharply, "I'm rescuing you here."

She snorted disbelievingly, a sound totally at odds with her glamorous appearance. "I don't need to be rescued." She closed her eyes momentarily, then opened them and gave him a smile so sudden it was like a different person had taken over her body.

"It's very kind of you, sir, to rescue a maiden in distress, but I can promise you I'm not in any danger."

Edward watched in disbelief as she reached out to Carbon's twin cocks and fondled them. "We were just getting to know each other better."

It's none of your damn business anyway, Edward tried to tell himself, but the drumming in his head drowned out even his own thoughts. He lunged forward to grab the girl's hand and Carbon fired, the laser burning into Edward's arm. He crashed to the ground with her, the air hot with the scent of burning flesh.

But Edward didn't notice, because the instant he touched her, the drumming stopped.

He stared at her, into her wide, expertly painted blue-green eyes, red curls falling over one temple, creamy skin flushed with fear, or maybe anger. Her breasts rose and fell against his chest, her pink nipples hard. His cock hardened at all her softness beneath him.

Inside his head, there was silence.

"It's you," he breathed, stunned.

She spat at him. "Get off," she snarled, wrestling him away. She was surprisingly strong, and more than that, she knew how to fight a man. Edward was too shocked to fight back, but the instant she lost contact with him the drumming came back, and he lunged for her again.

This time the laser hit his back, a dead-center blow that scorched through his flesh. Edward flinched and rolled to his feet, grabbed the minister's gun and turned it on the bastard.

"Stop bloody shooting me," he growled, and Carbon stared at him.

"But you -- I shot you -- are you a vampire?" he demanded.

"He's a swiving lunatic," said the redhead. "Put the gun down."

Edward glanced at her, then shot Carbon's scaly head with his own laser. Before the girl could react, he grabbed her and yanked her out of the alcove.

"What the hell's going on --" demanded a man in a green suit, but Edward shoved past him, dragging the kicking and spitting redhead behind him, and headed for the large windows that gave a spectacular view of the ocean, hundreds of feet below.

"Stop him, he's insane!" screamed the girl, as Edward fired at the glass and it shattered outwards. Panic erupted, a wall of sound filling in the gaps left by the drumming.

"Oh my God, he's dead!" bawled a voice from the alcove, and the girl twisted away from Edward. He snapped her into his arms without breaking stride, stepped onto the sill of the broken window, and jumped.

Chapter Four

Callie awoke from a hideous dream about a madman destroying her attempt to seduce Minister Carbon by grabbing her and jumping out of a high window into the sea, to find she was chained naked to a wall and the madman was leaning against a high bedpost, smoking a cigarette and glaring at her.

"So, not a dream," she muttered, tugging on her restraints.

"How are you doing it?" he demanded, ignoring her.

"Doing what?" She blinked, groggy and confused. The last thing she remembered was plummeting to her death in the arms of a lunatic. There was a cold shock as the ocean hit her like a fist, and then blackness.

"The drumming." He ground out the cigarette on his own palm and stalked toward her.

He looked... different, somehow. In the club, he'd been an unremarkable-looking man, with features that were totally forgettable. But now he looked sharper, more memorable, and definitely more handsome. The hair she'd thought might have been a brownish color was now a sun-warmed blond, and his eyes blazed a bright blue she knew she would have remembered. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and with each step toward her she could see his fine-boned features more clearly.

He moved like a predator, and a hungry one at that.

"Drumming?" Callie said. He might be gorgeous, but he was completely insane. Callie tugged harder at the chains holding her wrists and ankles spread-eagled, but they refused to give.

He tapped his temple, looming closer and closer until his face was right up against hers. "In here. A drumming noise inside my head. Gets stronger the closer I am to you. Louder. Harder. Fills up my head with noise and won't stop" -- by now they were almost touching -- "until I do this."

He cupped her face in his hands and his ferocious expression softened for a second, like a man relieved of pain.

Then he glared at her, harder than ever. "You're not microchipped. There's no Imperial tech on you anywhere. No bionics. Nothing to cause this damn noise. So, once again. How are you doing it?"

So that was why she was naked. While she'd been unconscious, he'd been inspecting her for -- what? Implanted subliminal drumming devices?

"I'm not doing anything."

"You are. Why?"

"I told you," Callie insisted, "I'm not doing anything." Maybe she ought to play nice with the crazy man, and he'd let her go. "I'm really sorry --"

"You don't know the meaning of sorry," he snarled. "Why are you doing this? What do you want with me?"

"I think there's been some mistake," Callie said as gently as she could.

"You bet there has. If the plan's to kill me, girl, it'll be a lot harder than you think." He snapped away from her, wrenching off his shirt in one swift movement. The air around him crackled with anger.

"See this?" he said, shaking his shirt in front of her face. It was scorched and torn. "Remember that laser? Hit me here," he gestured to his whole and healthy arm, "and here." He turned around to show her his unblemished back, then whirled to face her again.

He held up the palm he'd just ground his cigarette into. The skin was already healing.

"What are you?" Callie asked, fear forgotten. She'd known various species who healed quickly, but his totally human appearance ruled most of them out. "Vampire?"

He bared his teeth. They were straight.

"So you can't be killed," she said. "Fine, because I don't want to kill you. I don't even know who you are."

He was back again, right in front of her, before she could blink. His bare chest pressed the tips of her breasts; his face was inches from hers.

"I'm the man who's been going mad because of that damn drumbeat," he said.

"I'm not causing any drumbeat."

"Not now you're not." His chest was pressed fully against hers now, flattening her breasts. Despite herself, she felt a pulse of arousal at the feel of his bare skin, the rough fabric of his pants against her naked legs. "Touching you is the only way to stop it. Is that your plan? Do you do it to lots of men?"

"Are you even hearing me?" Callie said. "I'm. Not. Doing. Anything."

"Did you do it to Carbon? To get him to touch you?"

The memory of the minister shuddered through her. His dry, scaly, cool skin, like touching a corpse. For once she hadn't had to suppress any arousal to keep the lights from flickering. Sucking him off had been repulsive.

But it had been necessary. Despair washed through her as she remembered the laser blasting through the Lizardene's head. "You killed him," she said.

"He was a repulsive leech who enjoyed raping and maiming women. He deserved death a long time ago."

"Agreed," Callie said, "but I needed him."

Surprise washed over his face at her admission, and Callie cursed herself.

"Why did you need him?"

"I --" Hell, should she tell him? "It's not important."

"Clearly it is, if you were willing to swive someone that disgusting."

He was very close. His body pressed against hers, all the way from her chest to where her legs were spread wide. He nestled between them, and she could feel a definite bulge in his crotch.

She licked her lips. This man might be insane, but he wanted her, and she could use that. Just how hard was he to kill?

Time to find out.

The provocative little cat was playing games with him. He could almost see the persona come over her, from a cautious prisoner to a writhing sex kitten. Just the way she'd tried to blast him in the club. Might have been convincing if it wasn't so damn abrupt.

That damn drumming had been deafening, filling his head and getting louder and louder, right up until he put his hands on her. And now he couldn't stop touching her.

"What's your name, drumming girl?"

She parted her lips sexily and breathed, "Boudicca."

He let out a bark of laughter. "Boudicca? Right. And I suppose you're here to lead the Iceni against the conquering Empire?"

He saw the flicker of surprise cross her eyes, before the wide-eyed sexpot flooded back. "Don't know what you mean, sir."

The hell she didn't. "Don't call me sir."

She flexed her hips against him, and his treacherous body reacted instantly. "Then what should I call you?"

"You, your majesty, can call me Gaius Suetonius Paulinus."

She was ready for it this time. Not by the tiniest flicker of an eyelid did she betray that she knew who that was, but Edward would bet his left bollock she knew Paulinus was the man who'd defeated the legendary Iceni queen.

"It's very nice to meet you, Gaius," she purred, looking at him from under her lashes. That incredible hair flowed over her bare shoulders, such a deep shocking red next to her pale skin. It tickled his chest, the soft waves like the whisper of silk.

"It's bloody wonderful to meet you," he drawled. "Now we're such good friends, your majesty, I wonder if you could tell me why you're filling my head with that damn drumming noise."

She arched her back, thrusting her breasts against his bare chest. She was trying to distract him, and damn if it wasn't working. She'd angled herself to cradle his hips between her thighs, and his cock knew that there was only a thin bit of fabric between her hot, soft pussy and its aching self.

Edward put his face right up against hers. He breathed her air. Her lashes fanned his cheeks. "Have you ever been in the Pacific Deeps, Boudicca? It's a big ocean. Really big, and really deep. One of the oldest and deepest in the world. And I threw myself right into it, down deep until the world was full of darkness and salt water filled my body, and the pressure crushed my lungs. And you know what? I could still hear those fucking drums."

She licked her lips. "I don't know what to tell you."

"That's not the same as not knowing the truth, is it, Boudicca?"

She rubbed her hips against his, and Edward lost his patience.

"What do you want? Do you want me to rip off my pants and fuck you, right here, up against the wall, in chains? Is that what you want?"

She looked up at him, her eyes like the ocean, and said, "That's exactly what I want."

Snarling, he used one hand to tear his pants open and position his cock at her entrance. She was hot, wet, dripping and ready for him. Just before he pushed inside her, he said, "Why? Why do you want this so badly you pulled me halfway across the world for it? What do I have that you need so much?"

She bit her lip and rubbed her pussy lips against the aching tip of his cock. "This," she said, and Edward thrust into her.

She moaned as he filled her, but Edward barely heard it. Instead, he felt the drumming.

No, not drumming. Beating. Thumping. Pulsing.

"It's your heart," he said, staring at her in shock.

She arched her hips, and he felt the pull on his cock. The pulse of her around him. Her heartbeat. It had drawn him across the ocean, nearly killed him, maddened him, eaten at his soul.

There was no more drumming.

There was also no more screaming.

Being inside her ended it all. Edward could barely breathe. As her breasts heaved against his chest, her tongue licked her lips, her pussy tightened around him, he heard nothing.

The silence was deafening.

"Gaius?" she said, and he dragged his gaze to hers. The pulse of her heartbeat quickened, and his cock throbbed in time. She rocked against him, holding his gaze, and Edward dipped his head to taste her lips.

She was sweet and hot, her tongue thrusting to meet him. Not shy, his warrior queen. Her body writhed against his and he began to plunge into her, his hands settling on her hips to pull her closer against him.

Her heart thumped out a rhythm he copied, faster and harder as she gasped in his arms. His hand strayed up to her breast, cupping the softness and thumbing her hard pink nipple.

"Yes," she moaned against his mouth. "More."

Edward grinned, hot and fierce, and pinched the little bud, making her whimper and arch against him. He played with her nipple as he thrust into her, her slick wet pussy gripping him tight and pulling him back in every time he withdrew. Her legs clasped his hips, constrained by the chains. He could unfasten those if he wanted -- they were really for intimidation purposes. He didn't need chains to hold anyone captive.

She was pulsing fast around him now, hot and liquid, her body trembling with the need to orgasm. Edward sucked her lower lip into his mouth and felt the answering pull lower in her body. She was going to come, and then he was going to unchain her

and spread her out on the bed and pound into her until his own orgasm wiped out the silence.

He slid his hand from her breast down to her pussy and found her clit throbbing with need. Massaging it with his thumb, he watched those soft red lips part, then curve into a satisfied smile.

"That's it," he murmured, drumming into her.

"I'm going to come," she panted, tugging hard on the chains binding her wrists. They began to come loose from the wall.

"You're going to come now, and then I'm going to swive you on the bed and you're going to come again," Edward promised, looking into those oceanic eyes of hers. "Then I'm going to put my mouth on you, all over that hot little body of yours, and find all the places that make you scream, and suck and lick them until you can't remember your own name anymore."

"Yes," she choked, and Edward leaned in as he pinched her clit and felt her orgasm start.

"Not that you've told me it anyway," he said in her ear, and she convulsed in his arms, coming hard, her pussy fluttering and contracting around his cock. It was all he could do not to follow her, the frantic beating of her heart tugging him onwards to pleasure.

Her wrists tugged the chains free, and Edward caught them in one hand as her eyes flew open and her hands came down to shove at him.

"Uh-uh," he admonished, flicking the chains in a fast arc that captured both her wrists and bound them together. "We're going to finish this."

She was still breathing hard, her face flushed, her breasts heaving. Her nipples dragged against his chest. Her pussy fluttered with aftershocks.

Her eyes were wide and confused. "It's still light," she said, as Edward slid from her body and quickly freed her ankles.

He frowned slightly, glancing back at the lightmoss in the long trough along one wall. Of course it was light. You couldn't exactly switch it off.

"Did you want it to be dark?" he asked, looking up at her. From here, he had a prime view of her spread legs, creamy white thighs framing wet pink pussy lips, puffy and swollen with arousal. She was wet, so wet, and he couldn't resist leaning in and giving her a little lick.

She gasped, automatically tilting her hips to accommodate him, and Edward grinned, sliding to his feet and swinging her into his arms.

"Personally, I prefer to see who I'm buried inside," he told her, laying her out on the bed and pausing a moment to enjoy the sight of her, creamy white and rich red, breasts heaving, nipples dark pink, eyes flashing green-blue fire. "Because I will be buried inside you, Boudicca. Repeatedly."

Her lips parted, her pupils dilating. Edward kicked his pants to the ground and crawled over her. Her wrists were still bound together, and he lifted them over her head, enjoying the way it made her back arch and her breasts thrust toward him.

"Isn't that what you want?" he pressed, sliding his cock against the folds of her pussy. She undulated against him and nodded, teeth biting her own lip. Edward thrust into her, feeling the heat of her gloving him and holding him tight.

Her pulse timed his own heartbeats. Edward stretched his body out over hers and held her wrists high with one hand, enjoying the feel of her whole body against his. Her hips, her ribcage, her delightful breasts. Her arms above her head. Her thighs, her calves tangled with his.

Her breath hitched as he thrust deep, and one foot slid up the back of his leg, over his buttock, his hip, her leg wrapping around his waist.

The whole world narrowed to just the two of them, moving hot and perfect together. He was drowning in silence, the inside of his head gloriously empty. All he could hear was her breath, her gasps, her moans, the sound of his flesh slapping against hers as he drove into her with the pulse of their mingled heartbeats.

When he came, the silence didn't retreat, but settled around them both like a blanket. He rolled to his back, taking her with him, and she sat up, that glorious hair cascading down her back, and held out her chained wrists.

Silently, he unwound the chain, his body tensing with the expectation that she'd slam the weight of metal into his head and make a run for it. But instead all she did was toss the chains to the floor and slide off his cock so she could take it in her hands.

Chapter Five

She didn't understand why the power hadn't been knocked out with the force of her orgasm. The room was still light, and if this guy had any bionic upgrades that lent him so much strength and speed -- not to mention the power to survive a drop of several hundred feet into a turbulent sea -- they were still functioning.

Once she'd screwed a guy with a bionic cock. It had been almost a shame to destroy an organ capable of going all night.

She straddled the man who'd called himself Gaius, Boudicca's victor, and took his cock in her hands. Maybe she just needed to come harder. Maybe the source of this power was further away.

Or maybe she just wanted more of the hot, desperate pleasure his body gave her.

She stroked his softening cock, massaging it with their combined juices. It was a long, thick organ, just the right size to fill her up inside. The curling hair at its base was dark blond, which made her frown and glance at his head. Yes, blond there too. Blonder than before. His eyes were heavy-lidded as he watched her, but the blue beam was unmistakable. The fine angles and planes of his face, the high cheekbones, the straight nose, the full lips, made him an extraordinarily beautiful man.

"You didn't look like that when I met you," she said.

A smile hitched up the corner of his mouth. "I wore a glamour."

"To make yourself less attractive?"

"To make myself forgettable."

Callie ran her thumb over the head of his cock, and he expelled a harsh breath. "Well, I sure as hell remembered you."

He sat up, trapping her hands between them both, and ran his hands over her shoulders, making Callie shiver. He kissed her, his mouth gentler than before, but no less hot. She slid her hands up to his shoulders, wrapping her legs around his waist and pressing her throbbing pussy against his cock. He was soft for now, but she could easily alter that.

Ducking away, she went to her knees and ran her tongue along the length of his penis. He tasted salty, spicy, a mixture of her come and his, and she slid her tongue down to lick his balls.

He let out a harsh breath, and she kissed the soft sac. Then she moved back up to his cock, wrapping her hand around it and feeling it swell against her palm. She bent and sucked the head into her mouth, and he let out a sharp curse, before burying his hand in her hair and guiding her as she sucked him.

Callie wasn't exactly a novice at cock sucking, but it had been a long time since she'd done it as anything but a means to an end. Here in this room with this half-insane stranger, the outside world seemed a very long way away.

She took him in deep, relaxing her throat and sucking him right down. He let out a groan that vibrated through her and she flicked her tongue over his balls.

"God," he choked, "where did you learn to do that?"

Go on, suck it down, all the way, deeper, deeper, I don't care if you fucking choke.

Callie raised her head and made herself focus on his face. "You probably don't want to know."

A frown crossed his features, and she dipped her head again, her enjoyment dimmed.

Swirl your tongue around the head. That's it. Please me well enough and you won't die today.

She'd trained herself not to flinch at the memory, but Gaius was obviously more perceptive than she'd realized, because he stroked her cheek and said, "Hey. What's wrong?"

She licked her lips. "Nothing's wrong. I'm enjoying sucking your cock."

"No, you're not." He grabbed her under the arms and hauled her up his body. "You were, but now you're not." His hands caressed her back, cupped her buttocks and held her against him. His touch was almost tender.

This was too much. She didn't know how to cope. "Do you want to put it back inside me?" she said, pouting at him, and his frown deepened.

"No. I want to lick you out."

A small thrill ran through her.

"Climb up here," he said, "and hold onto the bed head."

She did, crawling provocatively over his body and letting his lips trail over her breasts, her stomach, her thighs, before she settled kneeling over his head.

"Beautiful," he said, and lifted his face to her pussy.

The first lick was a pleasurable shock. The second made her gasp. Then he used his tongue to part her folds and delve inside her, and Callie found herself gripping the bed head and trembling against him.

When was the last time a man had done this for her? An Imperial Captain of the Guard had given her a few cursory licks, but it was clear he was just doing it so she'd return the favor. A hot-headed young programmer had been only too happy for her to sit on his face, but he hadn't been all that good at it.

Gaius was an absolute master.

With his tongue and his fingers, he opened her up and explored her. He played her like a musical instrument, coaxing out a virtuoso performance. His tongue traced every crease and fold, every crevice and every nerve ending. He thrust it up inside her, mimicking sex, while his fingers spread her juices around and stroked her clit.

He pressed his whole mouth over her and sucked, and then he slid up to work on her clit. Stroking his tongue up one side and down the other, then circling it, while his fingers thrust in and out of her pussy in a precise, insistent rhythm.

Her pulse sped up, and so did his thrusts. He sucked hard on her clit, and she whimpered, feeling her orgasm build.

This was the one. This one. Then she'd take advantage of the darkness to clout him over the head with those chains and make a run for it.

But when the climax hit, she writhed and screamed and didn't run. She let him slide out from under her to position his cock at her entrance and push into her from behind.

She let him fuck her hard that way, and then she stretched out on her side with one leg in the air and let him thrust into her from that angle. Then she pushed him onto his back and rode him hard, while he sucked at her breasts and fingered her clit.

She came, over and over, telling herself she'd run next time. By the time she collapsed, exhausted, next to him, she was incapable of running anywhere.

* * *

Snow swirled around. He remembered that winter as especially bitter, but maybe that was just what being on campaign did to you. Sleeping on icy ground, waking to find his hair had frozen itself to the blanket. Huddling in with his men, sharing body heat and sometimes more. Annique had always told him she didn't mind him sharing his body with other men -- so long as he occasionally invited one of them to their bed.

Annique. His precious wife, tiny and doll-like in her prettiness, but possessed of an iron will and depraved sensuality. Throughout this whole horrible campaign he'd held the thought of her close to his heart, had opened the memory of her telling him she was expecting his child, and used it to keep himself warm.

It was the child that had made him consider the Emperor's offer of peace talks. Foolishly, he'd believed his uncle actually wanted to reach an agreement. Had wanted to believe it. Had seen the future for his son or daughter, living in a world where the Empire was just a bad memory. He hadn't wanted to raise a child in the sick, mad world he lived in.

"Protect her, Carver," he said to his First Sword as he took his leave of Annique. "She's the most precious thing in the world."

Carver, his fangs gleaming, nodded. "My life for hers," he said, and Edward knew it was true. Of all people, Carver was the one he trusted. He'd keep Annique safe.

Besides, what danger could she possibly be in?

He'd set out with a minimal guard, but the men he took were each as lethal as an entire battalion of the Emperor's army. They marched under his personal standard, the golden lion on its red pennant snapping in the freezing air.

When more men wearing red and gold approached, he'd been at first confused. Was there a problem? Had they come to report a change of plans? Was Annique well?

They wore helmets so he couldn't see their faces. That was his first clue. Hand on sword, he challenged them as to their business.

That was when they fired.

His men fought with sword and laser. They fought with fist and fang. They fought with courage and determination.

But they couldn't fight against themselves.

To this day, he still didn't know who the silent squad of assassins were. The Empire liked to tell the story of the Prince's own guard turning against him. Of bodies pumping blood into a frozen field. Of ice forming on the corpses.

Edward lay on the cold ground, the mud already freezing beneath him, his own blood solid with ice on his skin. The bodies around him were all still. All silent. His own men, and the traitors who'd turned on them. It was too cold even for carrion birds.

Half dead, shell-shocked, pinned to the ground by his own frozen blood, Edward felt a faint breeze caress his frozen face. A whisper of perfume.

Annique.

He opened his eyes to see his men rising, leaving their bodies. Wraiths, as insubstantial as the swirling snow. Some of them drifted away, lit by an unseen beam. Some of them darkened as if burned, and sank into the ground.

One of them walked toward him. Except it wasn't a man in armour, it was a woman in a rich gown. She had one hand cupped protectively over her swollen belly. Her loose dark hair flowed in the wind.

She smiled at him.

"Annique," he tried to say, but his face was covered in frost and his lips too frozen to move. He wrenched one hand away from the ground, frozen skin tearing, and reached out to her.

She faded away before he could touch her.

* * *

Callie woke in a strange bed, her body sore and sticky from a night of hard sex, and blinked in the low light.

"Who are you?"

His voice was low, weary. She could just make out his shape in a chair by the bed. The man obsessed with drumming sounds. The man who'd ruined her chance to get close to the Emperor. The man who'd chained her to the wall and then fucked her so hard she could still feel the aftershocks.

"I'm the woman you've been swiving all night."

"You're trying to erase Annique, aren't you?"

Callie opened her mouth, then shut it again. Finally, she said, "Who?"

"My wife."

Well, that figured. "You're married?"

"I was."

"Then --?" His drained tone, the sense of defeat, the pain and loss in his voice. "A widower?"

Her eyes had adjusted enough to see him nod.

"I'm sorry. But I'm not trying to replace your dead wife. I'm not looking for anything more than a warm body."

"I didn't say replace. I said erase."

His shadow moved closer, until he loomed over her. She could see his face now, and it was dark and weary with anguish. "The drumming noise -- your heartbeat -- it drowns her out. I can't hear her screaming any more."

Callie blinked. "You want to hear your dead wife screaming?"

"I need to remember her."

"Well, sure, but do you really want to remember her that way?"

Every line of his body was tense. "I have to. I forget her, and everything was for nothing. No one else remembers. She's a... a footnote in history. They all are. Thousands of them. Written out, sooner or later. Turned into nothing. Someone has to remember."

Callie sat up and pushed her hair from her eyes. Maybe all those orgasms had fogged her brain. "Okay, what are you talking about?"

He was silent a long while, and when he eventually spoke his voice was ragged. "You really don't know, do you? You have no idea what you're doing to me."

She spread her hands. "None whatsoever. Are you going to enlighten me?"

He put his head in his hands, and when he lifted it the low light seemed to catch him in a way she hadn't seen before. "Don't I look familiar?" he said, despair in his voice. "Don't you recognize me? Or has the bloody Empire done such a number on everyone that even my face has been erased?"

She stared at him. How hadn't she seen it before? Had he been wearing a glamour all the time? Last night she'd thought he was a beautiful man, but now he stood before her looking like some sort of god. A god in an agony of torment.

And as she gazed at his impossibly handsome face, everything fell into place, the shadows clearing to show her the shape of the truth.

"You're the Prince," she breathed, and he gave a tight nod. "But -- but that's impossible --"

"I think you'll find it's very possible."

"But you're -- but -- he died! Years ago. His guard turned on him and killed him, and..." She trailed off, as the Prince gestured to the place on his arm where the laser had hit. He was completely unmarked. The whole of his naked body was intact, perfect.

"I was hurt," he said. "I should have been dead. When I saw Annique, I wished I was." The emptiness in his voice, the howling pain, tore at her. "The world thought I was. I didn't see any reason to disillusion them."

"You didn't --?" Callie gaped at him. "You're the swiving Prince! You could have saved us all!" The implications slammed through her. The Prince's Army, slaughtered by the Empire. Every dissident, every protester, put to death.

Her whole town, her family, her friends. The girls taken to the Emperor's palace. The death and blood and smoke and pain and fear and screaming --

She didn't even realize she'd leapt on him, shrieking and clawing, until he grabbed her wrists and forced her arms apart. She kicked at him, slammed her knee upwards, but he was too fast for her and bundled her back onto the bed, facedown, his bare body covering hers. But she was far too furious to appreciate that.

"I'm sorry," he said in her ear. "Whatever it was the Empire did to you, I'm sorry."

"The Empire?" she spat. "What about what you did?"

"Hey, I only met you yesterday."

"You met me yesterday, but seven years ago you led a rebellion that gave millions of people hope, and then you just -- vanished. We thought you were dead. We mourned you. The whole world. And all the time you were -- what? Just hiding? Like a coward?"

His grip on her wrists was like iron. His body pressed her down, solid and completely immovable, but she felt the tremor shaking him. Was it anger, or fear, or guilt?

She swallowed, and chose her words carefully. "You may not be able to fight any more, your Highness, but I can. And I will. While there is breath left in my body, I will do everything in my power to free the world from the Empire's chains."

He was silent a moment, then he eased up and turned her over. His eyes burned into her. "You're going to end the Empire?"

"Or die trying."

The Prince gave her one last long look, then he rolled to his feet. "Well then," he said. "It was nice knowing you."

Chapter Six

The little vixen stared at him from the bed. "You don't think I can do it, do you?"

He ran his hand through his hair. "I know you can't."

"Right. Because that's not pessimistic."

"It's not pessimism. Look -- what is your name?"

She looked mutinous.

"I've been inside you, Boudicca. Give me your real name."

She flinched, but said, "Callie."

"Callie, right. Much better. And what are you?"

She cocked her head, her hair spilling over one shoulder. "Pisces, Gemini rising. You?"

"You know what I mean."

"You want to know what kind of skills I have to take down this all-consuming power? Well, I'm fairly sure I could get through the Emperor's guards, locks and cameras to kill him before anyone could stop me."

Her confidence was breathtaking. "How?"

She gave a feline smile. "How do the lights work in here?"

Edward blinked and replayed that bit of conversation. Then he blinked again and said, "Sorry, what?"

She was already on her feet, peering at the troughs of lightmoss and frowning. "No tech."

"No, it's a special under-sea moss that -- look, what's the point of this?"

"Your Highness," she began.

"Edward," he glowered.

"Edward. I need some tech to demonstrate."

"There isn't any."

"What do you mean, there isn't any? What powers the building?"

"Nothing." At her incredulous look, he explained, "It's lit by lightmoss and candles. Aquatic plants provide oxygen. There's little here that isn't powered by organic life."

She looked around, as if only just noticing the shuttered windows. "Where exactly are we?"

"Las Vegas."

"Then the place should be heaving with tech."

Edward actually smiled. "I didn't say New Vegas, I said Las Vegas. The old one."

"But it's --"

"Under the sea," Edward finished for her. "Yes." He went to the door and laid his palm against it. The wood rippled, then it clicked open. He held it wide and gestured for her to precede him through it.

Callie's eyes travelled over his naked body, then back up to his face. The room contained no clothes at all.

"Now who's a coward?" he said softly, and her eyes flashed green as she marched to the door and through it.

Outside was a large room with a full-height window, which looked out onto a wide street lined by tall, grandiose buildings. One of them had a triangular tower built outside. Another seemed to be in the shape of a pyramid. Sunlight dappled glass. Leaves swayed and rippled.

Everything was under water.

"But --" Callie began, moving her fingers over the thick glass. "That's impossible..."

"I think you'll find it's very possible." He stood and watched her. The light filtering in from the water's surface, high above, touched her skin and hair, bathing her in an eerie glow. Her heartbeat thrummed through him, no longer a pounding drum but somehow part of the background noise in his head.

"The city's underwater, but that doesn't mean it's not lived in."

Something swam by the window, and Edward knew the exact moment Callie realized it wasn't a fish. Scales glinted on the Mer's tail, gills fluttering on his strong neck. His hair danced in the current.

"That's --" She cleared her throat and attempted to sound normal. Edward hid a smile. "That's a merman."

"They prefer Mer. They run this place, and dozens more like it, all over the world."

She stared out, and he knew she was searching for the other Mer swimming through the underwater city.

"But this room," she said, finally turning back and gesturing to the floors, the furniture, "it's not underwater. I mean, it's not full of water. It's sealed."

"There are airlocks. A lot of the city was ruined, but some of it was renovated. The Mer don't stay underwater all the time."

"Of course not," she said, a slightly hysterical note creeping into her voice.

"And there are others here," Edward went on, watching her carefully. "People who don't breathe underwater. People who survived the war."

Her gaze flew to him.

"Not everyone was killed," he said. "Some escaped. The Mer fought for me, although the Empire still doesn't know they exist. They took in hundreds of veterans and their families, sympathizers, anyone who could escape the Empire's cull. They live in cities like this."

She looked at him with a curious expression, as if she couldn't work out what to say to that. "How --"

Someone banged on the door, a series of heavy thuds. Callie immediately tensed, defensive, but Edward knew that sound.

"John," he called. "Come in."

The door opened, and in walked Edward's oldest friend and ally, John Carver. Dark tangled hair, an unshaven jaw and a livid scar on his face from his ill-fated defense of Annique seven years ago. He was shirtless, and his right arm hung heavy and useless at his side. The wires and metal between his hand and elbow looked dull and lifeless.

At his side, twisted so his left hand could draw it, hung a sword. He saw Callie's eyes widen at the sight of it.

"You haven't called me John in years," Carver said. His gaze shot to Callie, grazed her bare body in a disinterested way, then came back to Edward.

"Time for a new name, perhaps," Edward said. He gestured to Callie. "My friend Boudicca here might suggest one."

Callie's eyes narrowed as they took in the lean menace of Edward's former First Sword. Carver's torso was a mess of scars, his bionic arm was crude and ugly, his face permanently dark, angry, distrustful.

To many, John Carver was the former Imperial soldier who had defected to the Prince's Army in the middle of a pitched battle. He was the Prince's First Sword who had turned against him and murdered his wife. He was the Imperial Traitor who had evaded capture for seven years, until his lover had killed an Imperial Concubine and Carver was finally caught and apparently executed in front of the Emperor's court.

Even Edward had doubted him for many years.

"How about Brutus?" Callie said, and Edward laughed.

"Been called that before," Carver rumbled. "My lord, we have a problem."

Edward stopped laughing as Carver raised his right arm. From the elbow down it hung useless, a mass of heavy rods and wires, his hand limp and unresponsive.

"What happened?"

"Don't know. Woke up this way." Carver allowed Edward to examine it, but kept his eyes on Callie as she drifted forward.

"It stopped working?" she asked. "Do... do you know why?"

Her tone was deceptively casual. Edward wasn't fooled.

"What do you know?"

Callie peered at Carver's arm. He didn't allow her to touch it.

"Looks like a radioflash," she said, and when Carver frowned she clarified, "an EMP, electromagnetic pulse. Creates a surge of high voltage, destroys electrical circuits."

Both Edward and Carver were silent for a long moment. The Empire was very aware of the threat of electromagnetic disruption and had instigated crushingly strict laws on the production of anything that could create it.

That hadn't stopped an EMP from destroying a colony in the Pennine Isles several months ago.

Edward cleared his throat. "How do you know about EMPs, Boudicca?"

She chewed her lip. Her gaze flicked guiltily to Carver's face. "Where were you last night?" she asked.

"Is that relevant?"

"Yes. Were you here? In this... building, or whatever it is?"

He glanced at Edward before replying. "Across the street."

Her eyes widened. "Wow. That's got to be the biggest one so far."

Carver's free arm was suddenly at her throat, gripping her neck and lifting her off the floor. Her heartbeat sped up, the drumming growing louder in Edward's head.

"What do you know about the pulse?" Carver demanded.

Callie's panicked gaze shot to Edward, but he wasn't about to come to her defense, not when she seemed to be implying she'd caused it.

"The only people who can cause an EMP are the Empire," Carver snarled, shaking her, but Callie shook her head.

"Not -- true --" she gasped. "Arcadians -- Pennines -- let me go!"

A flash of alarm rippled through Edward. Carver and his shapeshifter lover Nalina had been in the Pennines at the time of the Arcadian attack. It had killed Nalina's father, and nearly killed her as well.

If she wasn't careful, Callie could end up being throttled by Carver.

"Carver, desist," Edward said, and his friend growled before setting Callie down. She stumbled to a chair, rubbing her throat and glaring at him.

"Explain," he said coldly.

"How'd you expect me to explain when my windpipe's been crushed?" she wheezed.

Edward gave Carver a cautionary look and moved to sit beside Callie. Resting his hand on her throat, he urged the bruised flesh to heal. The drumming faded, and peace settled over him.

Callie rested her hand over his as the pain faded. "How --?"

"Answer his questions," Edward said.

She gave him a resentful glance before turning to Carver. "It wasn't intentional," she said. "It wasn't an attack."

"Who knows you're here?"

"No one. I didn't even know I was here," Callie said. "Look. The radioflash -- the EMP -- it sort of happens by accident. I mean, it's a sort of side effect."

"Of what?"

Her gaze flicked back to Edward. "Remember when I was so surprised to see the lights hadn't gone out last night?" she said.

He frowned. "After we -- oh." His eyes widened. "Oh."

"Oh what?" said Carver, clearly annoyed. Carver annoyed was something most people avoided. "Judging by your mutual state of dishabille, I'm guessing you weren't playing tiddlywinks all night. What did you do to set off the pulse?"

Callie's eyes met Edward's. "I orgasmed," she said helplessly.

"A lot," he said, warmth spreading through him.

"Enough to spread the pulse all the way across the street. Usually it only takes out a room or two, maybe the whole building if it's not very big."

His hand still rested on her collarbone. Edward felt his cock swelling and forced himself to calm down.

"You've made a study of it?" Carver said, still sounding pissed off.

Her nipples were hard. "It helps to know what the effect will be."

"The club in Riyadh," Edward said, remembering. She nodded. "Who was he?"

She licked her lips. "Middle-ranking Imperial. I used him to get Carbon's name."

"Minister Carbon?" Carver said. "The one found dead up on the surface yesterday?"

"The same," Edward replied.

"He wasn't killed by EMP."

"No, he was killed by me. You wouldn't have had your orgasm from him, Boudicca," Edward said, eyes still on Callie.

"He was a means to an end."

"What end?"

Her eyes gleamed. "I could take out all the security around the Emperor. I told you I could do it. All I need is to get into his harem and --"

"No." His arousal abruptly doused, Edward pulled away from her. The drumming started up again. "I can't let you do that."

Her eyebrows shot up. "You can't let me?"

"His Imperial Majesty is not a nice man," Carver said. Callie blinked, apparently having forgotten he was still there.

"I know that," she said with exaggerated patience. Carver scowled at her: it was clear there was no love lost between them. "That's why I want to kill him."

Carver was silent a moment, then he started laughing, totally mirthlessly. "And then what?"

She looked nonplussed. "And then I'd try to escape. And if I couldn't," she lifted her chin, "I'd rather have died in the attempt than let him live."

"And then what?" Carver said again.

"And then... either I'd be dead or I'd be free. The important thing is, the Emperor would be gone." She looked triumphantly at Edward. His heart sank.

"And then what?" pressed Carver.

"And then... what do you mean, and then what?" Callie glared at Carver. "Then the world would be free! Do you want me to plot out everything that follows?"

"Yes," snapped Carver, at the same time Edward said quietly, "Yes."

She swung round to him. "What do you mean, yes? Cut off the head, and --"

"And the body will blunder around causing untold damage until some other megalomaniac takes it over," Carver said. "You can't just take out the Emperor and assume the whole Empire will sort itself out. They rule the world. Who's to say some other evil bastard won't just step into his shoes?"

Callie opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Carver gave her a knowing look. Edward closed his eyes.

"You need to plan revolutions, my lady. You can't just expect them to happen."

"I wasn't expecting --" Callie began, half-heartedly.

"You need a command structure."

Edward opened his eyes, but Carver was deliberately avoiding his gaze.

"You need someone to take over. You need a full plan."

Her fingers clenched. Pain washed through Edward.

"The world cannot be free while the Emperor lives," she said resolutely.

"Agreed. But blundering in and stabbing him through the heart won't save anyone."

Edward cleared his throat. "And it wouldn't kill him."

"Kills most things," Callie said, rounding on him.

"Not him."

"Then how do I kill him?" Callie cried, exasperated. "What do I need?"

This time Carver did look at him. Edward looked down at his hands, unblemished, unmarked, even after all the battles he'd fought and the injuries he'd sustained.

"You need me."

Chapter Seven

It didn't matter what she said.

Edward seemed determined to avoid the issue of why he, and not she, could kill the Emperor. In fact, he seemed determined to avoid anything at all to do with the Empire, the Emperor, his past, her past, or anybody's future.

"You're a swiving coward, you know that?" she spat at him, and spun to face the sword she knew Carver would be aiming in her direction. She wasn't wrong. "And don't you defend him. Loyalty only goes so far, before even you have to give up and realize that a man who's sat around feeling sorry for himself for seven years isn't the one who's going to lead us all to glory."

Carver glowered at her, but said nothing.

"Put the sword down, John," Edward said tiredly, "and go and see to your mate."

Carver glared at him. "She's not an animal who needs feeding and cleaning," he said.

"No, she's a woman who's probably wondering where her lover is."

"I left her sleeping."

"And now she's awake."

Callie frowned, because Edward said that as if he knew it for certain. Carver's eyes narrowed a fraction more, but he sheathed his sword and gave a tight nod that looked rather like a salute. He turned to the door, but before he opened it he paused and said over his shoulder, "We had the plan, you know."

Callie glanced at Edward. He looked like granite.

Carver grunted, and left.

"What was that about?" she demanded of Edward, as he leaned against the back of the sofa and rubbed his face tiredly.

"What was what about?"

"We had the plan?"

The granite was back. "It doesn't matter."

The hell it didn't. "He still takes orders from you."

Edward shrugged. "He was my First Sword. My right hand."

"Yes," Callie said, not caring if she sounded malicious. She wanted to needle him. Wanted to break him out of his dull misery. "He was. He's not any more. He doesn't even have a right hand. He doesn't have to do a damn thing you say."

He glanced up. "No. He just chooses to."

"Then he's an idiot too."

A faint smile crossed his face. "He's loyal."

"To a coward."

He leveled a look at her. "Do you think that's the first time I've been called that? That I haven't called myself it? I know what I am, Callie, more than you or Carver or anyone else knows."

"And you're okay with it?" she asked incredulously.

He stared at nothing. Said nothing.

"Edward," she said, moving closer, attempting to reason with him. "Look, I'm sorry about your wife. It hurts to lose someone you love."

"Have you?" Edward said, not looking up. His voice was toneless. "Lost someone you love?"

Hot pain stabbed her in the gut. "This isn't about me."

"Why not? How can you possibly understand --"

Fury boiled up and spewed out of her and she shoved her face in his to make sure he didn't miss her interrupting him. "-- what it is to lose a wife and child? No, I can't. But I can understand what it's like to lose pretty damn near everyone else.

Parents, siblings, nieces and nephews. Cousins, aunts. Grandparents, friends, lovers. Imagine that, Prince Edward. Think of everyone you ever loved. Then think of them slaughtered in front of you. Raped. Slashed into pieces. Burned alive. Think of the smell of blood and shit and burned flesh. Think of the screaming, the horrible, endless screaming."

Edward was silent, his blue eyes burning into hers.

"Have you got that, your Highness?" Callie seethed. She felt as if she were on fire, so angry she could barely see.

"I think I can imagine it," he said evenly.

"Right. Now forget it. Because this isn't about everyone you ever loved. It's not even about you. How dare you be so fucking selfish as to make it all about you? You've been hurt, so you're just going to crawl away and cry, and the rest of the world can just go hang? How very dare you, Edward."

She was breathing hard now, her breasts heaving against him with every sucked in gasp of air. His eyes were narrowed slits of blue, intense and dark, but she couldn't read his expression at all. Was he angry? Hurt? Chagrined? She doubted it. Men like Edward rarely deviated from the state of mind they'd already decided upon.

"Are you done now?" he asked in a quiet tone of voice, as if reasoning with a toddler throwing a tantrum.

Callie lost it. She shoved at him, screaming, and propelled him over the back of the sofa to tumble onto the seat. He was still naked, which ought to have distracted her, but she was so damn mad she couldn't manage to even let that thought crowd her mind. "No," she said, aiming a punch he blocked with his forearm, "I am not done." She punched him again. "I will never be done." And again. Still he blocked her. "So long as the Empire turns the world into a sewer of pain and injustice and despair I will never be done."

He had both her wrists now, so she slammed her knee up, aiming for his groin, but he twisted and threw her off him, onto the floor. Callie shrieked and grabbed him, hooking one leg around his so he fell with her and she could continue pummeling him.

He landed heavy on her and used his weight to pin her to the ground. Callie struggled, then went limp and allowed him to press her hands high above her head. She arched her hips against his and felt the answering swell of his cock.

Edward's grip faltered.

Callie smiled. Then she rammed her knee upwards, and if he hadn't suddenly twisted so the blow landed on his inner thigh, he'd have been singing castrato.

"Nice try," he growled, eyes ablaze.

"Get off me or I'll kill you."

"You couldn't," he said, using one of his legs to trap hers. Callie twisted her hips, but all that did was make his cock stiffen further.

"I've killed plenty of others," she snarled.

"Yes, by coming. Which you did all last night, and look, I'm still alive."

Callie fought the instant thought that judging by the pounding of his heart and the throbbing of his erection, he most certainly was very alive, and scowled at him instead. "Give me one good reason not to break your neck right now," she said.

Edward nudged her legs apart and pressed his cock against her pussy. She was wet, dammit.

"Oh, you're going to fuck me? That's original. A man's never offered to do that before."

"And it's good, is it? All those evil, soulless bastards you swive for the greater good? Great in bed, are they?"

"Make me come, don't they?" she countered, struggling against him, partly because she wanted to escape and partly because his hot, hard body between her thighs felt almost as good as the molten lava filling her up.

"You enjoy it?" Edward said, eyebrows raised. God damn him, he was a handsome bastard. "Tell me, Callie, when the world is turned and the Empire is no more, what are you going to do? Who are you going to find to fuck then?"

She grinned evilly. "Maybe I'll give it all up. No more sweaty heaving about and cleaning come off my tits and gargling to get rid of the taste in my mouth."

The tip of his cock pressed for entrance and Callie couldn't have stopped her hips arching to meet it if her life had depended on it.

"Right," Edward said slowly. Sarcastically. "Because you hate all this heaving about, don't you? I can tell. Your body doesn't want me at all." To prove it, he rubbed himself in her juices, and Callie bit her own tongue to keep silent.

Edward smiled knowingly, and leaned down so his mouth was just -- nearly -- touching hers. "Your eyes are gleaming," he said in a low voice, nearly kissing her. "Your cheeks are flushed. Your breasts are heaving, and with every breath I can feel how hard your nipples are. Your legs are wrapped around mine. Your thighs are parted for me. Your hips are tilted so I can feel your pussy right against my cock. And it's wet. Hot, and wet. So," he lowered his mouth fractionally closer, "very," his breath mingled with her own, "wet."

Callie couldn't remember how to speak.

Edward slid himself inside her incredibly slowly, and with every further fraction of an inch her blood boiled hotter. She was still incandescent with anger, but more than that she was boiling with lust.

When his balls brushed her ass, her breath expelled on a long hiss. "I fucking hate you."

Edward groaned and bit her lower lip. "I'm not in love with you, either." He thrust into her, still pinning her wrists above her head, but with every thrust his hold grew looser, her back arched further, and they both reveled in the drag of her breasts against his chest.

"You have a thing about restraining me," she gasped, pressing her wrists up against his hand.

Edward nipped at her collarbone. "Well, you have a thing about trying to kill me."

"I thought I couldn't?" she replied, gripping him tight with her thighs, desperately glad she hadn't slammed her knee into his balls after all.

He raised his head and looked at her with eyes that were laughing. "I said you were trying."

Callie arched her hips against him. "I'm very trying," she agreed, and Edward groaned out a laugh, releasing her wrists so he could cup her breasts and stroke her nipples. Callie moaned, squeezing him tighter with her internal muscles.

"Are you going to kill me with this orgasm?" Edward panted, feeling her wind tighter and tighter.

"Didn't they used to call it," she sucked in a sharp breath as the root of his cock dragged against her clit, "the little death?"

"*La petite mort*," Edward agreed breathlessly. "God, you talk a lot." He stopped her mouth with his own, and Callie clung to him as his tongue thrust and invaded. Her body bucked and writhed under his, desperate for more, for the final burst of hot pleasure she knew he could give her.

When it came, it made her scream, clutching at him as the waves drowned her. Edward swore, gripping her hips as he pumped hard, exploding inside her and then falling, hard and heavy against her.

Chapter Eight

Callie lay on the floor, unable to breathe, wondering how in the hell she ever used to come and then -- well, come and go, she supposed. Right now she couldn't have moved if her life depended on it.

Edward's face was buried against her neck. "The only time," he murmured, "I get any peace, is when I'm inside you."

Lazily, she bashed his back, enjoying the way his hard muscles rippled under her touch. "Didn't feel very peaceful to me."

He raised his head. "In here," he said, gesturing to his temple. "No more drumming, no more screaming."

"Screaming?"

His eyes were deep and unfathomable. "You're not the only one tormented, you know."

Some of her glow faded. "Yes, I do know. We've discussed this." She shoved at him, and this time he did move. Rolling to his back, he sprawled there, looking like a god, watching her as she got up and stood on legs that shook a little.

"How do you do it?" he asked.

"What, stand up? I don't know, I learned as a baby."

"The..." he waved his hand, "radioflash thing. Did you always have this ability?"

Callie made herself stay still and give no external reaction. Inside, she flinched. "Why is that any of your business?"

"I just wonder if it's related to the drumming. I never heard your heartbeat until a few weeks ago."

"Well, there you are then. I've been doing this a lot longer."

"Every time you orgasm? Since the very first time?"

No, just since it was made clear to me that sex wasn't for my own enjoyment. "Are you always so fucking nosy?" Callie snapped, and turned toward the bedroom. "I need a shower. Please tell me it won't be with seawater."

"There's clean water," Edward said, "in the shower off the bedroom."

She stomped in that direction, finding a large bathroom with a walk-in shower, and turned on the hot water. There was no lock on the door, so she closed it firmly and hoped Edward would get the message.

Of course he didn't. She'd just lathered soap over her body when she heard the door click open and saw his shape through the glass screen separating the shower from the rest of the room.

"Please go the fuck away."

He leaned against the far wall, from where he could see her covered in soap suds. "Callie. I need to know what's going on here."

"I'm taking a shower. I'd prefer to do it alone."

"You're hiding from me."

"Duh."

Edward folded his arms. He had mighty fine arms. "Why am I hearing your heartbeat?"

"For the last time, I don't know! I'm not doing anything. You ever stop to think you might be the one causing it?"

"Why would I --"

"Why would I? You're the most self-centered man I've ever met." She grabbed the shampoo bottle and began lathering up. "You know what, as soon as I'm done here I'm going to get out of your way. We're obviously driving each other crazy."

"I can't let you leave."

Callie threw the shampoo bottle at him. He ducked, of course. "Can't let me? Can't let me? Do I need your permission now?"

"Callie..."

She pointed a soapy finger at him. "Listen to me, your Royal Highness, you gave up being prince when you declared war on your uncle. And you gave up being Commander-in-Chief of the rebel army when you failed to rise from the dead. You never had any authority over me, Edward, and you never will. I'll go when I fucking well want to."

Edward's eyes narrowed. "But -- then we'll never know how to stop it."

"I don't hear anything," Callie said, because he wasn't the only one who could be self-centered. "All I'm getting from you is sex, and frankly I can get that anywhere."

"Callie." He stepped into the shower stall with her. "Please. I have to know how to stop it."

"Why? So you can get back to that lovely screaming? You're a masochist, you know that?"

He reached out and touched her arms, and she wished they weren't both still naked, because he was absolutely glorious and despite what her brain yelled at her, her body still wanted him desperately.

"And an exhibitionist," she added, stepping backwards, away from him, and rinsing the shampoo from her hair. "You didn't even mind being naked when your friend was in the room? Your former First Sword?"

Edward made a dismissive gesture. "He's seen it before."

She paused, swiped bubbles from her eyes, and squinted at him. "What kind of friend is he?"

"The kind who occasionally shared a bed with me."

He said it so casually, as if he were enumerating Carver's battlefield honors. Callie blinked at him, unsure she'd heard him right. Edward's blond hair gleamed in the light, the steam from her shower swirling around him. He was so lean, so elegant, the perfect symmetry of his face begging her attention. Picturing him with Carver made

her shiver. One man blond and tanned, a golden god, the other pale, his hair a dark tangle, gruff and scarred. Two muscular bodies moving together, hard and hairy, sweating and groaning in each other's arms.

"You mean," she began, her voice hoarse, and she had to clear her throat. "You mean, you shared a bed. Like, to sleep. On campaign."

A smile touched Edward's delicious lips. *Lips that had kissed Carver's mouth. Lips that had sucked his cock.*

"Like, to make love," he said. "Like, to kiss and grope and suck and lick and fuck. Like you and I shared a bed last night."

Heat flooded Callie's body, pooling between her legs.

"Didn't your wife mind?" she squeaked.

Edward smiled, his eyes sparkling wickedly. He took a step closer. "It was usually her idea." Another step. "She frequently joined us."

Oh God. Three bodies, entwined. The petite, beautiful Annique, her dark hair sliding over golden skin and pale flesh, two sets of hands on her breasts, her thighs, her pussy. Two mouths licking and sucking at her skin. Two cocks plunging into her.

Perhaps we can share you...

But for once the memory didn't hurt. Annique had invited two men to her bed. She'd wanted them there. Had felt the power and glory of not one man, but two, wanting her desperately.

"You like that idea, don't you?" Edward said, and Callie shook her head rapidly.

"Two men slaking their lust on one abused woman? No. It's a hideous, misogynistic idea."

Edward made a tutting sound. "Misogynistic? You have been with some charmers, haven't you? Annique wouldn't let anyone slake his lust on her. And if anyone tried to abuse her she'd rip his cock off."

Irritatingly, Callie's admiration for his dead wife grew.

"She liked having a man inside her, a man touching her, licking her. Why not two? One to lick and one to thrust. One man behind her and one in front. The combinations are endless."

Edward stood before her now, almost touching, his body hard and so hot it radiated heat. Water ran over his perfect form, highlighting the shape of each glorious muscle.

"I can hear your heartbeat, Callie. It's pounding in my head. Such an almighty sound. You're getting turned on by this, aren't you?"

"No," Callie gulped.

But it was an obvious lie, her body betraying her with every breath. Two men attending to her pleasure. Hell, even one man attending to her pleasure was a thought so impossible she hadn't even allowed herself to entertain it, until Edward plunged his tongue into her pussy and made her come so hard she forgot her own name.

Edward's hand feathered over her shoulder, down toward her breast, and brushed the nipple. She couldn't have stifled her groan if she'd tried.

His hand continued down, the look on his face knowing. He stroked her hip, and she arched toward him.

"Did you ever," she began, voice throaty, "share a bed with Carver, without Annique?"

"Share a bed?" Edward said, amusement sparking in his eyes. "You mean, did I fuck him?"

She shivered under the hot water, and nodded.

"Oh yes," Edward breathed. His mouth was so close to hers. "I fucked him. And he fucked me."

A whimper escaped her throat.

"Oh, you really like that idea," he laughed huskily, curving his hand around to her back and pressing her hips against him. He was hard, very hard, throbbing against her.

"I'm just -- intrigued," Callie gasped.

"Intrigued?"

"I never saw two men together. I mean, without a woman."

He started kissing her neck, and Callie was glad he held her because otherwise she'd have slithered to the floor. Her legs had no strength in them. All they wanted to do was wrap around his waist.

"What do men do?" she blurted.

Edward lifted his head. His eyes shone, but whether it was amusement or excitement she couldn't tell.

"Do? Together? Naked?" She nodded rapidly. "We fuck, Callie." His hand slid down between her soapy buttocks and gently, slowly, began working between them. She quivered as he parted her ass cheeks and smoothed his finger over the puckered opening of her anus. He'd done the same thing last night as he ate her out. The way he did it felt so good...

"Have you ever been fucked this way?"

...better than the last time she'd been taken that way. Some of her glow faded, and Edward noticed.

"Didn't like it?"

She swallowed. "Wasn't supposed to."

A small frown creased his perfect brow. "But... of course you're supposed to enjoy it."

She bit her own lip, then said, "It wasn't for my enjoyment, okay? It was a means to an end."

She began to twist away from him, but Edward held her tight.

"No no," he said. "No. This is something you will enjoy."

"Is that an order?" Callie asked, pushing at him.

"A plea." That stopped her. "Sex should be fun, Callie. It should be something you enjoy. Every time." His hands shaped her buttocks. "Not just a means to an end."

"I don't always have that luxury."

"You do now. Here, with me." He raised his eyebrows. "You can't kill me, Boudicca. Can't blow my bionics, because I don't have any. Can't take out the tech, because there isn't any. There's no agenda."

She began to tremble, barely able to remember the last man she'd been able to swive with no agenda.

"Let me show you how good it can be," Edward said, his lips soft against her ear, his hands gentle on her hips, and she shook in his arms. He caressed her softly, and she found herself nodding.

"Yes?"

"Yes."

He smiled, a genuine smile of pleasure, and Callie managed to smile back.

It's just this once, she told herself. Then I'm leaving. I'll be gone before he even wakes up.

Chapter Nine

The way she trembled in his arms made her seem like a completely different woman. Half an hour ago she'd been screaming abuse, heaping scorn, and attempting to beat the crap out of him. Had Edward not been possessed of preternaturally fast reactions and a lifetime of military training, she might have succeeded.

And now he held her, frightened and hurt, shaking at some unknown terror. As he led her from the shower and dried her body gently with a soft towel, he wondered what asshole had hurt her. She enjoyed sex, that much was blatantly obvious to him, and wasn't shy about it. Hell, she'd been walking around naked while Carver -- a complete stranger, and one with a psychotic reputation -- was in the room.

I wasn't supposed to enjoy it.

His mind went back to last night, when she'd sucked his cock with a grim detachment. Someone had used her, hurt her, and the thought made Edward angrier than he'd been in years.

He swore to himself he'd make Callie enjoy this.

There was massage oil in the bathroom. He laid her facedown on the bed, spread the oil between his hands to warm it, then smoothed his palms over her shoulders. She was incredibly tense, and he worked at the hard muscles in her neck before moving lower, down her spine.

"Why Boudicca?" he asked.

Callie made a soft sound of surprise and turned her head on the pillow. "She was a powerful woman. Unafraid. Defended her people against the invading empire."

"Not entirely successfully."

"Not in the end, no. But she caused merry hell while she was alive."

"Couldn't you have picked someone who succeeded?"

"Such as? Cleopatra, maybe? Killed herself. Joan of Arc? Burned alive. History isn't exactly bursting with women who've fought and won."

He kneaded the knots in her spine. "You know a lot about history."

"I paid attention at school."

"What did you want to be? I'm assuming sexual avenger wasn't on your careers list."

"You assume correctly. I... I wanted to be a dancer."

He swept his hands over the fluid lines of her back. Recalled the way she moved, full of liquid grace. The way she twisted and writhed and undulated under him -- over him, around him -- when they made love.

But something had stopped her. The Empire. *Think of everyone you ever loved. Then think of them slaughtered in front of you. Raped. Slashed into pieces. Burned alive.* Yeah, that'd kill most dreams.

He opened his mouth to ask how she'd survived the massacre, but remembered just in time he was supposed to be making her relax. He massaged her lovely buttocks, then moved down her thighs, stroking and kneading.

She parted her legs ever so slightly, and Edward smiled.

"Your skin is exquisite," he told her. "Smooth, soft, begging to be stroked. A perfect color, like cream." He made an appreciative noise. "I could lick it all up."

A small laugh escaped her. "Don't let me stop you."

Edward laughed too, then bent to taste the skin of her buttocks. Firm and peachy, they rose up, and he kissed one then the other. Callie quivered beneath him.

Edward nuzzled between her ass cheeks, then spread a little of the massage oil there. Smoothed it down the crack, his fingers delving deeper, until he touched the tight ring of her anus. She tensed again.

Edward sighed, and withdrew. He turned Callie over, and she blinked at him, clearly surprised. "But aren't you --?"

"I've seen bowstrings with less tension in them than you," he said, and a little fire sparked in her oceanic eyes.

"Well, I'm sorry if I'm a little uncomfortable --"

He pressed two fingers against her lips. "Hush, love. Shut up."

"Don't tell me to --"

Edward sucked her nipple into his mouth, and she shut up.

Smiling, he moved down her body, licking and caressing, until he'd settled between her legs. He was hard as a rock, his cock riding the mattress as he lowered his head to her pussy, and began to feast.

Callie gave a little moan as he ran his tongue all the way up and finished by circling her clit. He sucked the little bud into his mouth and squeezed his lips around it, rocking his head up and down. She began to fuck his mouth, her hands sliding into his hair.

Edward caressed her thighs, her lovely strong, firm thighs with their beautiful soft, creamy skin. Sliding his hands under her buttocks, he lifted her closer to his mouth and she went eagerly, using the extra space to bounce against him. Her ass was slippery with oil, her flesh sliding deliciously against his hands.

He slipped around to finger her pussy, exploring her delicate folds as he sucked on her clit. She was very wet, her pussy sucking his finger in, and he moved down to thrust his tongue inside her.

Callie let out a whimper, so he drove his tongue as deep as he could into her, covering her pussy with his mouth and sucking. His finger found her clit and pressed down on it, and he felt her orgasm ripple through her. Her pussy contracted around his tongue, squeezing him tight, as her fingers grabbed his hair so hard it hurt.

She gasped, "Oh Edward," and he withdrew his tongue to replace it with his fingers. She was still quivering around them as he went back to suck her clit once more, then lick his way downward in a leisurely fashion.

The folds of her labia were puffy with arousal, red and slick and inviting. He took his time enjoying them, running his tongue over each sensitive petal and exploring

every crevice. By the time he reached the base of her pussy, where his fingers were still thrusting, Callie was moaning softly and twisting her head back and forth on the pillow.

Edward nudged her thighs a little further apart to spread her buttocks, then touched the tip of his tongue to her anus.

She let out a harsh gasp, but didn't tell him to stop. Didn't tense up. He licked again, and this time the noise she made was definitely a pleasurable one.

Edward smiled in triumph and set about rimming her anus, giving her all the enjoyment he could. He knew from personal experience how intensely breathtaking it could be, and he'd honed his skills on Annique and Carver and the other lovers she'd invited to their bed.

Don't think about Annique...

He concentrated instead on how Carver had reacted the first time Edward rimmed him. Having only ever been with women before, Carver had never experienced sex with another man in the bed, and his astonishment at the pleasure a strong, hard body could give him had been incredibly gratifying.

They'd renewed their relationship lately, he and Carver. His First Sword had lost none of his intensity and passion, and although most of it was now directed at Nalina, the two of them often invited Edward to join them.

It was a similar story with Swann of the Mer, whose abuse at the hands of the Empire had led him to hate the touch of a man. But with the confidence and acceptance of his fiery lover Libby, he'd been willing to see what Edward could offer him.

No, he'd hardly been celibate since Annique died.

He'd been a third lover, never the main attraction.

Edward forced away that thought, and concentrated on the woman whose thighs were wrapped around his head. Callie was the only person in the room, her attention focused solely on him and the pleasure he gave her. Pleasure that surprised and confused her. As he began to slide his tongue inside her anus, she made soft, helpless

sounds of excitement, and Edward fought the bittersweet joy of knowing he was pleasing her where others had only hurt her.

They'll get you any way they can.

When this was over, and she lay sated and exhausted in his arms, he'd find out from her exactly what the Empire had done to make her so distrustful of men.

But for now, he had a hot, excited woman in his arms, slippery with desire and writhing under his touch. He had three fingers inside her pussy now, and as his tongue eased inside her ass he reached for the massage oil to lubricate his other hand.

He pushed the tip of his oiled finger gently inside her as he continued to lick. Callie panted with enjoyment. Edward pushed slowly, so slowly, measuring time by her heartbeats. His tongue flickered around her anus, then up to the swollen folds of her pussy, her neglected clit, and back down again.

She whimpered and gasped. Edward gave her clit a kiss, and began pumping his finger carefully in and out of her ass.

"Oh," she gasped.

"Good?" he asked guardedly.

"Oh God! Yes, good!"

He smiled and thrust the fingers in her pussy in time with the one in her ass. She looked glorious like this, her creamy thighs spread wide, her sex pink and pouting and glistening with her own arousal, his fingers disappearing inside her.

He lifted his head and watched her head tossing on the pillow. Her breasts heaved with every breath, her own hands clutching at them. She pinched her nipples, her back arching, her incredible hair flowing around her shoulders.

Edward didn't think he'd ever seen such a beautiful sight.

Carefully, oh-so-slowly, he pushed another finger into the tight ring of her ass. Callie bit her lip, but when she realized he was watching her she nodded vigorously.

"It's good," she panted. "Oh God, I never knew..."

He smiled, kissed her belly and her thighs, then went back to sucking her clit as he pumped his fingers inside her, fucking her with his hands and his mouth. Soon, he

thought deliriously. Soon I'll have my cock inside that tight ass, and my mouth on her sweet little breasts, and her legs around my waist.

But first he wanted to make her come. Make her so limp and heavy with pleasure that she'd be completely unable to tense up when he pushed his cock inside her.

He felt the tremors begin, and sucked harder on her clit as she began to quake beneath him.

"Edward! Oh God, yes! Oh... more... more!"

He wasn't sure how much more he could give her. Angling another finger into her pussy, he thrust hard and fast, and spread the two inside her ass to stretch her further. Then he inserted a third finger, but he'd no sooner pushed the tip inside her than she began to come, gasping and moaning and clamping down on his fingers so hard he thought she'd break them.

He gave her no time to change her mind. Before the orgasm had even died away he was poised between her thighs, legs pushed high and far apart, smearing more oil on his cock and pressing the head against her ass.

Then he was inside her, just the tip of his cock at first, giving her time to adjust. Her breasts heaved, the nipples sharp pink points, her lips bitten and swollen.

"I've never seen anything as beautiful as you," Edward said, his voice hoarse with wanting. His cock throbbed. He needed to be buried inside her, needed it desperately, but he couldn't rush her.

"Flatterer," she panted, fingers clutching the bedsheets so hard he thought she'd rip them.

"Are you all right? Is this okay?"

Her eyes fluttered open, sharp hard green, and met his. She nodded. "It's very okay," she whispered, and Edward smiled in hot relief, pushing a little further inside her.

She moved her legs wider to accommodate him, pulling her knees back against her chest. Edward sank another inch deeper, then another, then he lifted one of her feet and kissed the sole.

"Stop that!" she yelped, a shocked giggle escaping her.

She's ticklish. Edward grinned and kissed it again, and she wriggled, the movement pushing her further onto his cock.

"No, don't," she giggled, and he licked her toe. "I can't help it!"

"Neither can I," he assured her, sucking her toe into his mouth as he sank the rest of the way inside her. His balls pressed against the spread cheeks of her ass and she looked up at him in surprise.

"Forgot where I was?" he asked.

"It feels..." she frowned for a second, and his heart plummeted. "It feels amazing. So full. So good."

Oh thank God. He kissed her foot again, then brought it down to rest on his hip. Gently, he pulled out of her, then pushed back in. Then again. Again. Faster each time. Her ass was so tight, pulling him in, and so hot and slippery.

Her eyes never left his the whole time.

"I could do this all day," he groaned, sinking into her again. "You have the sweetest ass, Callie."

She wrapped both her legs around him and pulled him down toward her. Edward went willingly, feeling the hot, smooth skin of her stomach against him, the curve of her breasts, the hard press of her nipples. He kissed her chest, her neck, her jaw, and finally her mouth, losing himself in her as he arched and thrust.

"Edward," she gasped, clutching at his shoulders, then sliding one hand down between them. He felt her fingers press against her pussy, and pushed them out of the way with his own.

"What do you want?" he asked. "What do you need?"

"Touch me," she moaned. "Stroke me. Please."

He was only too happy to obey. Kneeling back, raising her hips and steadying her with one hand so he could thrust into her, he used his other hand on her pussy. She was so wet, her thighs coated with her own slick arousal. Edward thrust two, then

three, then four fingers inside her with no resistance at all. His thumb rubbed her clit, faster and faster in time with his thrusts.

His cock throbbed inside her, pulsing with the rhythm of her heart.

Callie threw her arms above her head and moaned, "I'm going to come again," and Edward, unable to take the glorious sight of her spread out before him like that, gasped, "Me too."

She squeezed her ass around him, and he erupted inside her, shooting a hot, endless stream of come into her as she shook and screamed and came hard around his hand and his cock.

He yelled her name, he clutched her tight, he gathered her into his arms and trembled with the force of his orgasm. He held her close and tight, breathing into her hair, feeling her heartbeat slow and pulse gently in time with his. He fell asleep to the rhythm of her body.

When he woke, she was gone.

Chapter Ten

"...then he went to bed with us both as if nothing had happened." Libby shook her head. "He's a strange man."

"He's a man with a lot of demons," Swann said.

"Sweetheart, we've all got demons. Ain't no one aboard this boat don't have demons." Libby looked expectantly at Callie. "I'm sure you've got a grudge or two against the Empire, else you wouldn't be here, would you?"

Callie shook her head, her hair blowing in the wind. She stood on the deck of Swann's Mer ship, the *Swift Revenge*, sailing for the floating city of Carnalis in the Southern Ocean. A young Mer had swum her out of the sunken city of Las Vegas while Edward slept, and took her to Swann's amphibious ship.

A pang stabbed her as she thought of the Prince, lying naked and vulnerable in sleep while she crept away. She had no clothes and nothing to bargain with, but the very fact of her nudity had given her the currency she needed to get out. The young Mer had been so grateful for the swift blowjob she gave him that he'd taken her all the way to Swann's ship, instead of simply leaving her on the first bit of dry land he came to.

The taste of his come was still bitter in her mouth. It felt like a betrayal, but how could it, when she hardly knew Edward -- and didn't like what she did know?

"How far to Carnalis?" she asked, and Swann gazed at the endless ocean.

"Few hours." He hesitated. Shared a look with Libby. "Callie -- is Edward all right?"

"He was fine when I left him." She looked up. "Why?"

Another shared look. "It's just... he's been acting a little strange, that's all."

"What's strange for him? The man hears screaming in his head, and he likes it."

"He kept talking about drumming. Last we saw him. He was hearing a drumming sound inside his head."

Me. My heartbeat. Callie shook off that thought and made herself shrug. "Perhaps he's finally gone off the deep end."

"I think he went off it long ago," Libby said. "I never saw a man so willfully tormented. He won't ever allow himself to forget, will he?"

"He's a masochist," Callie said.

"He can't forgive himself," Swann said quietly.

"For what? Giving us all hope and then giving up?"

"Yes," Swann said. "Exactly."

She looked up at him uncertainly.

"I think Edward always knew," said the Mer captain, "that he was the only one who could lead us. He... I don't think he sees the future, but there's something about him. A sort of certainty. I think he knew we were destined for victory."

"Then why did he give up?"

Swann's dark eyes were troubled. "Because he didn't know Annique was going to die. He thought he knew exactly how things would be, and then something happened that he hadn't expected and... and he realized nothing was certain. That the odds were against him. That the Empire always won, and always will."

"That's bullshit," Callie said, but she wasn't sure she even believed herself.

"I think it sent him into shock, and by the time he recovered the war was lost. Hundreds of thousands of people had been executed, and all in his name. They even called it the Prince's Army," Swann said. "That's a hell of a burden to carry around with you."

Callie said nothing, staring out at the waves for a long moment. Finally she asked, "What is he?"

"A shadow of a man," Libby said.

"No, I mean... what is he? You're a dragon shifter, and Swann's a Mer, and I'm a... well, we won't go into what I am. But Edward? He seems to be virtually indestructible, but he's not a vampire." She frowned. "At least I don't think he is."

"He's not." Swann and Libby glanced at each other. "We don't know what he is. Human, to all intents and purposes."

"Oh, come on," she scoffed. "You know as well as I do barely any humans survived the Fall."

"Well, maybe Edward was one of them," Swann said.

He could breathe underwater and survive injuries that ought to kill any other creature. He could see destiny and hear heartbeats from hundreds of miles away. Unless Callie had grossly misunderstood the nature of humans, Edward wasn't one of them.

The *Revenge* took her to the commercial docks of Carnalis, where it registered under an entirely legitimate, if entirely fictional, name. As the Mer crew, in their human form, started unloading cargo, Swann stood at the ship's rail with Callie, giving her directions.

"Just one thing," he said, as Callie turned to go. "Forgiveness, right?"

"Right," Callie said, uncertainly.

"Has to be earned. You sit around moping, you'll never earn it."

"Tell Edward that."

"I frequently do." Swann glanced up at the monstrosity of Carnalis, and a cloud came over his handsome face. "And you can't earn it by revenge."

She frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Killing the Emperor. All the men who hurt you. Won't help. Redemption and revenge... they're not the same thing."

"He won't go after either."

"I'm not talking about him."

For a long moment the noisy, busy docks were silent and still.

"You don't know the tiniest thing about me --"

"I know Imperial abuse when I see it. Empire took me too, Callie. Chained me up and beat me, burned me, starved me. Nearly dehydrated me, which for a Mer is a death sentence. Raped me too. Took me plenty of long years to come to terms with that."

Her mouth was suddenly a desert. "I don't..."

"Maybe you've got it sorted out in your head. You know it's not your fault --"

"Damn bloody right it's not!"

"-- which is very intelligent of you," Swann said, still infuriatingly calm, his voice low. "But you're still after blood, aren't you? This crusade of yours to kill the Emperor. And all those men you've taken out along the way. How many of them hurt you?"

The captain -- two sergeants -- the trooper who killed my mother -- the two who raped my sisters -- the transport driver -- the cell guards --

"Revenge," Swann said quietly. "Not the same as redemption. You can't forgive them, and that's fine because I don't think they're worthy of forgiveness. But who are you really doing this for, Callie? The greater good? Your family, or whoever it was the Empire killed?"

"You have no idea --" she began in a low voice.

"Thousands of Mer died in the war," Swann said in the same even tone. "I have every idea."

She stared at him, shaken, appalled.

"Just something to consider," Swann said quietly, and Callie snarled at him.

"Thank you for the ride," she snapped, and leapt onto the quay and into the crowd before he could say any more.

Anger steamed from her. How dare he? How very dare he? Leveling at her the same damn accusation she'd slammed at Edward? She was nothing like Edward. He sat around like the cowardly dog he was, unable to face his past, and she was getting out there and doing something about it. He wallowed in his own misery, kept company with the pain inside him, and she faced up to hers, obliterated it, smashed it with every orgasm and every dead Imperial --

She stopped dead so fast the man behind her walked into her. "Look where you're fucking going!"

Callie barely heard him. Was that really what she was doing?

This isn't about everyone you ever loved. It's not even about you. How dare you be so fucking selfish as to make it all about you?

"He doesn't know what I'm doing," she said out loud. "He doesn't even know me."

But that look on Swann's face, the cloud in his eyes -- *Empire took me too* -- he couldn't make that up. Couldn't just know it, either.

"Fuck," she snapped, and stomped to the nearest comm portal. Since the advent of communication implants, a lot of people didn't use the public portals any more, but there were still plenty who didn't trust Imperial tech worth a damn if they could help it.

She stepped into the cubicle and tapped in the comm address that would eventually reroute to George. It took a while, being funneled through half a dozen scramblers, but eventually he answered, his image fuzzy and unclear. He did that on purpose, Callie knew.

"Yeah?"

"Swann of the Mer," Callie said without preamble. "What do you know about him?"

George blinked in surprise. "He fought for the Prince, occasionally transports rebels, living with a dragon shifter, I think. Why?"

"Was he ever captured by the Empire?"

George cocked his head. "Yes, he was. During the war. They tortured him for information. Scarred him pretty badly -- on the inside, that is. Mer heal pretty well."

A thought occurred to her. "Edward's not Mer, is he?"

George's eyes flew open. "Edward?"

"Quit pretending, George, you're a terrible actor. I know you know he's alive."

George hyperventilated for a minute or so, then when Callie gave no reaction, wheezed, "Thank God this is a secure connection."

"Yes. Thank God. Do you know what he is?"

George shook his head. "No. Not human. Not vamp or were or shifter of any kind. Not fae, I don't think, not Mer or elf or anything else I know of. Don't even know what his real abilities are."

Callie sighed.

"Callie... have you met him?"

"Briefly. It didn't go well."

"Did you tell him about your crusade for revenge?"

"It's not about revenge," Callie snarled. "It's for the greater good."

"Sure," George said flatly. "Hey, listen, I have something that might interest you. I was, er, thinking about... well, your problem --"

"My problem?" Callie asked dangerously.

"About the radioflash. The EMP. When you... er, you know."

"Orgasm," Callie said. "Not that you'd know what a real female orgasm is like." She regretted it as soon as she'd said it. "George, I'm sorry --"

"I do know, actually," he said, not looking as angry as she'd expected. He was rifling through something at the side of the screen. "Carver and Nalina occasionally drop by. Oh, here it is."

Callie was still reeling from this revelation -- *George isn't a virgin! Why in hell does he persist with those terrible sexbots?* -- when he held up a crude-looking cuff.

"It's only a prototype, but still. I mean, if it works maybe you could try an implant."

"I don't do implants," Callie said automatically.

"Yes, well, you might, when you hear what it can do."

"What can it do?" she asked patiently.

George grinned, clearly pleased with himself. "Suppress an electromagnetic pulse."

"Suppress --?"

"It's... technical," George said, turning the cuff this way and that. "But it was an idea I had. So you don't have to worry about knocking out tech every time you have sex. I mean," he shoved things about on his desk, eyes low, "should you want to have sex. Without killing someone. When there's a lot of tech around."

"Such as Edw --" Callie began, then caught the pink flush to George's cheeks. "Such as you?" she said in surprise.

George shrugged, still not looking at her. "Or whoever. I mean, I've got my 'bots..."

"Yes, you have," Callie said, blinking at him. "'Bots which could do with a dose of reality. Such as you might get from having sex with a real girl."

"It's just an idea," George mumbled.

"It's not a bad one." He stared at her in astonishment. "How about we talk about this some more when I'm not in a public comm box in Carnalis?"

Still bright pink, George nodded. "Yes," he stammered. "Good idea. Right then."

"Thanks, George," Callie said, and signed off.

Well well. George. *Should you want to have sex without killing someone.* Her smile slipped. She could barely remember the last time she'd had sex just for pleasure and not because she wanted to kill someone.

Sex should be fun, Callie. It should be something you enjoy. Every time.

She shoved out of the booth, scowling again. God damn Edward and his bloody sodding hot sex. The man was a miserable coward, and she didn't want to ever see him again.

She shoved into the nearest bar, dark and pumping with music and full of Imperials, some of them still in uniform.

Like fish in a barrel.

Callie smiled, ordered a drink, and when a man in uniform offered to pay she turned to him and said, "Thanks. Wanna fuck?"

Chapter Eleven

The drumming noise was back again.

It had been his constant companion since he woke to find Callie gone, but the pounding had at least been bearable.

He'd dashed to Carver and Nalina's suite, where for once he found them not having sex. They lay together in bed, talking quietly.

"Edward," smiled Nalina, pale and lovely. Her eyes scanned his naked body. "Anything we can help you with?"

"Callie," he said, and both their faces registered incomprehension. He swore to himself and corrected, "Boudicca."

Carver's hand was on his sword. "What's she done?"

"Disappeared. She's not here. The drumming is too quiet."

"Drumming?" said Nalina.

"Never mind. You haven't seen her?"

They both shook their heads.

"Damn." He ran his hands through his hair, wondering why he cared.

The drumming, of course. Nothing else.

Forcing a smile, he looked at Nalina. Her dark hair fell over her bare shoulders, her cheeks pink and her lips rosy. No doubt she and Carver had been warming each other's bodies fairly recently.

"How have you been?" he asked politely, because it had been months since he'd seen her.

She glanced at Carver, biting her lip, and he covered her hand. "Pregnant," she replied, and Edward caught her words as a punch to his stomach.

The white sheets tangled around her body, swathing her soft skin. Her eyes shone. Her lips trembled with an irresistible smile. She --

-- held out her hand, laughing. "Don't look so scared! You've faced armies, you can handle a baby."

Edward's heart pounded. "I'm not scared of the baby, Annique."

"No?" Her expression was teasing. He took her hand, drew her toward him and folded her precious body against his. "You look terrified."

"I am terrified. I love you so much. The thought of anything happening to you --"

"Nothing will happen to me," she reassured, looking up at him with those blue, blue eyes. "I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. But a baby can't."

"Well then," she said, sliding her arms around his body. "It's a good job you're here, isn't it? Nothing's going to harm us, darling, not while you're around."

Nalina's voice. "Edward?"

He bolted from the room, Nalina calling his name as he ran. He felt sick, the pounding in his head worse and worse, stronger and louder. His own heart, threatening to break out of his chest.

"Edward?" Nalina closed the door behind her, tying the sash of her robe as she did. "Are you all right?"

He rested his forehead against the wall, forcing himself to calm down.

"It's not yours," she said, her voice attempting cheerfulness and failing. "You know, just in case you wondered. It's been a while since you were with us. So it's not yours."

He turned his head to look at her, hands still braced against the wall.

"Or maybe it's something else freaking you out," she conceded. Her eyes were fretful, and Edward realized she hadn't told anyone else yet. Hell, who was there to

tell? Her family were all gone, Carver had none to speak of, there was really only Swann and Libby and himself. Maybe Jack and Angelica. George, perhaps.

And that was it. That was the sum total of everyone Nalina had to congratulate her.

Edward wrapped his arms around the first woman he'd been with since Annique died, and clenched his eyes shut as he said, "Congratulations."

"Thank you." Her body relaxed a little. He thought he felt the wetness of a tear against his chest.

"How is... everything?"

"Fine. I'm fine."

"Because it'll be half vampire. Won't it?"

She drew back her head and gave him a look. "It's definitely Carver's baby, if that's what you're asking."

The door opened then, and Carver himself came out, half dressed in his customary shabby leathers, sword belt in place. "Hey," he said. "Are you making my woman cry?"

"No, I'm doing that all by myself." Nalina detached herself from Edward and moved into Carver's embrace, looking up at him with such an expression of love and joy it made Edward ache.

"I have to go," he said.

"Sure you don't want to stay?" Carver said. His hand caressed Nalina's silk-covered shoulder.

"Celebrate with us," she said, as Carver kissed the top of her head.

Edward thought his whole body would shatter with pain. "I can't," he said. "I have to... to go. I have to go find Callie."

Carver gave him a look that was very dark and penetrating. Edward pretended he hadn't seen it. "Take care of her," he said to Carver, who gave a solemn nod. To Nalina, he added, "Take care of yourself."

"You know I will," she said, and he kissed her hand before turning and walking away.

Nothing's going to harm us, darling, not while you're around.

If only that were true.

You could make it true.

The thought stopped him cold, but before he could consider it any more the drumming noise in his head suddenly exploded into a cacophony. The pounding of Callie's heart filled his head up and got louder, louder, until he could barely breathe.

It had never been this loud, not even when she was standing next to him. Edward fell to the ground, hands on his head as if he could squeeze the noise out.

Her heart was pounding, throbbing with panic and pain. Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong.

* * *

"How much?"

Callie smiled. *I'll kill all of them.* "For you, sugar, it's free."

Five minutes later she was in a private alcove at the back of the bar, on her knees with the Imperial's cock in her mouth. Her shirt was open, his hands on her breasts, his breathing hard. And she was bored as hell. He thrust himself into her mouth, and she felt like yawning.

"Oh yeah, suck me like that."

Callie forced herself to focus. She dipped her tongue into the slit at the top of his cock, then lifted her head and said, "You know what I'd really like?"

He pinched her nipples, giving her a leer he probably thought was sexy. "What's that, baby?"

"Your cock feels so good in my mouth." She looked up at him as she tongued the head. He groaned. "But I want it inside me, too."

"No problem, darlin'." He began pulling her to her feet and fumbling with the tab of her shorts. Callie almost stumbled as she stood. Okay, she needed some sleep. As soon as this asshole was dead.

"But I want a cock in my pussy and a cock in my mouth," Callie said, tilting her head down and looking up through her lashes. She licked her lips. "Both at the same time."

The Imperial's eyes went glassy. His cock twitched.

"Do you have any friends, sugar?"

"Garrick!" the Imperial yelled. "Fulson! Get in here!"

Callie unfastened her shorts and was just sliding them sensually down her legs as two more men in uniform appeared. Their eyes widened as they took in her naked body.

"I was just wondering," she said, running her hands up her ribs and cupping her own breasts, "if either of you two strapping young men would like to join us?"

They stared. "Shit, Yevren," said the taller of the two. "What did you put in her drink?"

Yevren grinned. His hands ran up the insides of her thighs. "Just a little Sleeper," he said, and panic flared in Callie. "Damn shame, she's hot for it anyway."

"What did you say?" Callie said, fighting a wave of tiredness.

"Best catch her before she passes out then," said Fulson, unfastening his pants and getting his cock out. "Here, suck this, darlin'."

"You put Sleeper in my drink?" Callie said, outraged and frightened all at once. Hell and damn, she hadn't paid much attention to it once she'd followed him into the alcove. *Recklessness, Callie. Should have had a plan.*

Yevren, the filthy drugging rapist whoreson, pulled her down onto his lap and fitted his cock at her entrance.

"No, let me go," she said, but her struggles seemed frustratingly useless.

"You said you wanted it, baby," he said in her ear as he fed his cock into her.

"Not like this," she slurred.

She struggled harder, but that just made him moan, "Oh yeah, baby. Just like that."

Fulson thrust his cock at her mouth. She kept her lips clamped shut, but he forced her jaw open and shoved himself into her mouth.

Garrick grabbed her hand and slid it up and down his own cock, spitting on her fingers for lubrication.

"Hey, she's feisty," he said. Callie tried to hit him but he grabbed her other hand and held it to his balls. She tried to squeeze but he kept her fingers prisoner with his own.

Panic swelled inside her but she forced herself to crush it. She had a man inside her, she could use this. She wasn't yet so sleepy that she couldn't think.

She ceased fighting and concentrated on the cock inside her and the one thrusting into her mouth. With a little luck, if she gave them what they wanted they'd ease up enough for her to enjoy it. All she needed was a little quake of an orgasm, and it'd be enough to disorient them. And she could kill them.

A wave of dizziness swamped her. Okay, maybe she couldn't kill them. Maybe she could just escape. And kill them later.

She made her mouth a hot, wet cavern for Fulson to thrust into, and paid attention to the hand job she was giving Garrick. Gradually, he relaxed his fingers and let her stroke him.

"Oh hell yeah," he grunted. Well, one of them grunted. She wasn't sure which.

"How's that pussy?" asked Fulson. Or maybe Yevren. No, Yevren was the one inside her.

Oh God, I can't believe I'm fucking three men who drugged me.

"Wet," Yevren panted. "Hot. Tight."

The cock in her hand leapt with excitement. "I'm gonna fuck that pussy so hard."

Callie allowed one hand to slide down Garrick's leg, then over her own body, slipping down to stroke herself.

"Oh, that's hot," gasped one of them. "Are you hot, baby? Do you like that?"

They had the same terrible vocabulary as George's sexbots, thought Callie. At least the sexbots had the excuse they'd been programmed that way.

"Mmm," she moaned, her mouth full of cock. Said cock jerked and emitted a stream of come down her throat, making her choke and writhe.

"Oh hell yeah!" groaned Fulson. "Oh yeah, suck it, baby. Suck it good. Drink my come. Suck it all down. You know you like it, baby."

He tasted stale and nasty. Callie most certainly didn't like it. But she gulped it down and plastered a sexy smile on her face and said, "Oh yeah. I want some more. Who's going to fuck my mouth now?"

Garrick shoved his friend out of the way so fast the other man nearly fell over. "Hey! Don't push me, man!"

"Boys, don't fight," Callie said, grasping both their cocks. "There's enough for everybody."

But as Garrick fed his cock into her mouth she felt the tiredness overwhelm her. No telling what they might do to her once she was out. She had to get out of here before the drug incapacitated her.

Yevren grasped her hips and started bouncing her, hard, which made it damn hard to keep hold of the two cocks in her hands. She was supposed to be sucking one of them, but she couldn't manage it.

Instead she gasped, "Someone suck my tits," and hoped this would steady her a bit more. Not to mention bring on that elusive orgasm.

She closed her eyes as one of the men sank to his knees and began sucking and biting at her nipples. Imagined Edward was there with her, surging into her, driving her wild with excitement. Imagined it was his hands on her hips, or his fingers between her legs. Oh yes, that was a good thought. Edward fucking her hard from behind, his hand doing wicked things to her clit. Pinching and stroking and rubbing with just the right amount of friction.

She sucked hard on the cock in her mouth and imagined it was Edward's.

Somewhere in that endless first night she'd sucked him down deep and he'd groaned out his pleasure, pulling her around to lick her pussy at the same time. She'd sucked and stroked and fucked him, and every second had been glorious.

"Oh yeah, baby, that's good. You're so fucking tight," gasped the stranger inside her, and Callie was ripped back to the present, to three men who'd drugged her, and to the orgasm sneaking up on her.

Thanks to Edward.

But she didn't care about that. She was going to come, and even if all it did was blow the lights, surely that would give her enough time to get out.

Her own fingers pinched her clit, hard, and as Yevren thrust dementedly into her pussy, her orgasm finally swept over her.

In the sudden darkness, three men screamed with pain. Callie, her body weak with orgasm and sluggish from the Sleeper she'd ingested, shoved at them. The two in front staggered away, hands to their heads and chests, but the one behind her remained rooted deep inside her, spasming wildly, clutching at her hips.

His fingers turned to claws, digging deep into the flesh of her hips, making her cry out in pain. "Let me go!"

He snarled behind her, and it wasn't a totally human sound. Great. She'd pissed off a horny werewolf.

"What have you done, bitch?"

"Nothing! Let me go! You're frightening me."

On the ground, Garrick clutched his head, moaning, while Fulson knelt, staring at his limp and unresponsive arm.

Like Carver. No. These men were nothing like Carver. Dark and ferocious as Edward's friend was, he wasn't the sort to drug and rape a woman.

"You did something," Fulson roared, surging to his feet and tearing Callie from Yevren's painful clutches. Her skin ripped and she gasped, breathless with pain.

Her head whipped round to see Yevren in the dim light coming from the alcove's opening. He'd partially changed into a wolf, his face grotesquely elongated, his hands and feet clawed monstrosities. So maybe he didn't have any bionic upgrades. Maybe he was organically strong.

Shit.

"Fucking bitch," he roared, and leapt for her, fangs gleaming in the dark.

* * *

"What was that?" asked Swann.

The deck trembled beneath them. Every Mer on board tensed, and a voice called out, "Lib? You trying to flame grill us again?"

Libby didn't laugh. Neither did Swann.

"That came from beneath us," she whispered, and he nodded. The boat trembled again, and Swann exchanged a swift look with Libby before tugging off his shirt, kicking away his pants, and leaping naked over the side of the ship. He'd take on his Mer form in the water, and discover what was --

It came roaring from the water, a naked blur of speed and fury, and sped over the quay toward the city.

A familiar naked blur of speed and fury. Libby was still trying to figure out what had happened in the last two seconds when Swann's head emerged from the water and yelled, "It's Edward -- go, go!"

She leapt over the side of the ship -- too risky to change into a dragon when so many people were around -- with Swann's crew following her. She flew into the streets after the trail of water and shocked onlookers, catching up to Edward as he shot into a darkened building, its lights cracked and broken. Screams came from within.

Libby raced in, her eyes adjusting from the daylight. People lay around moaning and crying, some of them shouting, barstaff cringing. Edward's form streaked to the back of the room, where a crowd had gathered.

"Trying to kill us all!"

"Swiving Arcadian!"

"Kick her! Harder!"

"Rip her throat out!"

Someone roared, a mighty bellow, and three people went flying through the air.

A sudden silence fell over the stricken bar.

"Call the Guard," someone whispered.

On the far side of the room, someone screamed, and then --

-- Libby could only describe it as a ripple of violence, flying around the crowd, almost invisible, leaving behind broken and bleeding bodies. Most of them hit the floor and stopped moving.

The three beating up whatever creature lay in the corner dropped into fighting crouches. Libby moved cautiously forward, but paused, horror-stricken, when she saw the creature on the floor had red hair and white skin and a dozen badly bleeding wounds. She was Callie, and she reached with an arm that was clearly broken to grasp the ankle of one of her tormentors.

"Get off me, whore," he spat, and the ripple of violence flew at him, encompassing his body in a blur of screams and fury.

When he dropped to the floor, his heart had been torn out.

The other two tried to run, but Edward got them too. Because it had to be Edward. Libby didn't know anyone who could do what this creature was doing -- but she also knew there was a lot nobody knew about Edward.

As the third body, that of a werewolf, fell to the floor in half a dozen bloody pieces, the blur became a man, naked and bloody, dropping to the floor and cradling Callie's broken body.

Libby made her way over, and as she did she heard the scream of Imperial sirens. The Guard were here.

"Edward," she said, touching his bare shoulder.

He didn't look up, just gathered Callie into his arms and got to his feet. Her head lolled, red hair spilling over her bloody skin.

"You're a dragon," Edward said, his voice tight. "Turn this place into flames."

"But --" Libby glanced at the not-quite-dead men that lay groaning on the floor.

"Now," he growled, and then in a blur, he was gone.

Chapter Twelve

"There will be blood. There will be sacrifice. And there will be freedom."

Edward jerked awake to the sound of Angelica's voice. Only -- was he awake? He'd met the seer in dreams before, and still wasn't sure if they'd been her dreams or his.

Angelica stood looking down at Callie's sleeping body. "Such pretty skin," she said. "Like heavy cream."

He knew then that he wasn't awake, because Angelica couldn't see the color of anyone's skin.

"This your dream, or mine?"

She glanced at him. "Is that important?" Her hand smoothed Callie's vibrant curls. "It will end in fire, and pain, and blood," she said.

She'd told him that before. Or had he told her?

"Hasn't there been enough already?"

Angelica twirled a curl of Callie's hair around her fingers. "There has been too much. But there must still be more, or everything that has passed will be in vain."

"Who else must be sacrificed?" Edward asked, exasperated.

"You must give up what you love," Angelica said, stroking Callie's cheek.

Edward looked at the sleeping woman, her body healing from its horrific injuries. The maddening pain of the drumbeat, of her heart, of the panic and fear and white-hot burning rage filled him.

"I hardly know her," he said.

Angelica gave him a knowing look. "Have you never loved before, Edward?"

Annique.

He hadn't even thought of her first.

"She's already gone," he said.

"Gone? She is dead, Edward. But she's not gone. She lives forever in your head, screaming and screaming. A tortured soul in the heat of death."

He flinched. "I can't --"

"Can't what? Forget her? Edward, you loved her. I know you did. You won't forget her. But you have to let her go."

Nothing's going to harm us, darling, not while you're around.

"I failed her. I failed them all."

Angelica was silent a while, stroking Callie's soft red hair. Candlelight flickered across her smooth skin.

"You must have the ending you choose," she said finally.

Edward frowned, because that wasn't what he'd expected. "But there will be an ending?"

Angelica smiled, a sudden fierce expression. "Blood, sacrifice, and freedom," she said. "Choose what to give up."

I can't -- began the familiar voice in his head, the litany of pain that had been his constant companion for so many years.

Could he? Could he let go of Annique and live in peace? Could he fight, knowing what might be lost? Could he sacrifice the memory of the woman he'd loved, truly loved, and let down so appallingly?

Could he move on?

Angelica turned to go, moving away from the bed and out of his line of sight. Before she left, she said, "It's her heart, isn't it? What you're hearing?"

Dully, he nodded, staring at Callie on the bed.

"Perhaps that's significant," said Angelica, but when he jerked around to look at her, she was gone.

Callie woke to the sound of timbers creaking and the faint scent of the sea. She lay in a bed, soft and warm, and unless she'd dreamed the whole encounter with the three raping, drugging Imperials, someone had healed her while she slept.

She ached in a faint, irritating way, as if old injuries were making themselves known, and when she opened her eyes the soft light of a lantern made her wince.

Sitting by the bed, tired and rumped and more godlike than ever, was Edward.

All I'm getting from you is sex, and frankly I can get that anywhere. Had he seen her with those men? Seen her fucking and sucking and plotting to kill them, all the while despising her for being such a whore. Disgusted by her inability to take care of herself.

Should have checked that drink. But she'd been too angry, too shocked, too hurt to pay attention to anything but her own blinding need for revenge.

She closed her eyes, flinching, and willed tears not to come.

Edward said nothing, and she despised herself even more. Her throat burned with thirst, but to get a drink she'd have to open her eyes and look at him, and right now she just couldn't face that. She was on the brink of crying, and Callie never let anyone see her cry.

Finally, she opened her eyes again, to see him holding out a cup of water, and this time she couldn't stop the tears. Turning away, she pressed a hand to her face -- a hand which had been a broken and bloody mess last time she'd looked at it.

"Drink," Edward said, his voice a little gruff. "You need water."

She reached for the cup and he folded her fingers around it gently. His compassion was killing her.

"The men who drugged you are carrion now," he said, watching her.

She swallowed. "You mean they're dead?"

"That's what carrion usually means."

"Yes," Callie said. "Usually."

She raised her eyes to his, and knew she had to tell him. *My revenge was just as personal as yours.*

But when she handed the cup back he took her hand and just held it, eyes closed, throat working. His other hand stole to her chest, pressed against her heart.

"Your heartbeat drew me," he said.

"I swear I'm not doing it --"

"I know," Edward said heavily. His hand slid over her chest to her neck, her jaw, her cheek. He cupped her face and looked at her, eyes deep and blue and endless, and Callie felt herself falling into him.

She raised herself up and pressed her body against his, his hard, warm, glorious body. He felt so wonderful in her arms, so strong and kind, the only man capable of giving her honest pleasure.

Her lips touched his, a soft kiss of thanks. At least, it began as a soft kiss, but turned into more. Her arms twined around his neck, her breasts pressed against his chest, and her skin drank in the feeling of his.

His mouth was warm, soft, gentle. When she opened her eyes and looked into his, he looked back with tenderness.

Callie lay back on the bed and beckoned to him to follow her, and he did, fitting the length of his body against hers and kissing her, holding her tight, stroking her. A man who wanted to be with her, wanted to give her pleasure, and more importantly a man she wanted to give pleasure to.

He was shirtless, barefoot, and she made short work of the loose pants he wore. Naked, he pressed against her, his body so warm and hard, wonderful in her arms. His hard chest, his strong arms, his neat waist and strong thighs tangling with her own. The crisp hairs on his body abraded her skin.

Still he kissed her, an endless kiss, as if he'd drown from the lack of it. Pressing against her hip, his cock throbbed, and she parted her legs to drape one thigh over his hip and feel the heat of him against her wet pussy. They lay side by side, wrapped around each other, moving soft and slow, and when Edward slid inside her Callie clutched at him, shuddering with the rightness of it.

Neither of us can ever achieve what we want, she realized, meeting his bright blue gaze. He can never be free of his wife and I can never be free of the Empire. The world can never be what we want it to be. And yet, right now, I don't care.

"Callie," he murmured, the first word either had spoken since she kissed him. His hands grasped her buttocks, pulling her closer to him as he sank deeper inside her. He was hot and hard, and her body melted for him.

He surged into her, one hand finding her breast and caressing the soft flesh. He stroked her nipple, teasing the sensitive bud until she gasped.

"Are we -- is this Swann's ship?" she panted, and Edward nodded, kissing her neck. "No tech?"

"Not for a hundred miles. Come as hard as you want, sweetheart."

He smiled at her, and Callie sank into the heat of it. His hands on her body, his cock inside her, his warm eyes, all wound her higher and higher until she broke, twisting in his arms, molten pleasure flooding her body.

Edward rolled her to her back, rearing above her and thrusting hard into her. Boneless with pleasure, she welcomed him into her body, gazing at the perfection of him above her, marveling at the glory of him inside her.

He clutched her hips, gasping, and when she felt him shudder inside her she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding him to her as he gasped out her name and came deep inside her.

Afterwards they lay together, lay like lovers, close and warm and quiet. Dozing in each other's arms. Stroking idly. Kissing softly. Listening to the creak and sway of the ship.

"I need to tell you something," Callie said.

"Is it that you're a virgin? 'Cos I don't believe you."

She smiled against his shoulder. "Not since Devyn Mallet got me drunk at my cousin's wedding when I was seventeen."

His fingers tightened ever so slightly on her arm.

"Calliseppiterranoia Filoxidopulos didn't die a virgin," Callie said softly.

"Callisep -- did your parents hate you?" Edward said, outraged.

She laughed. "My mother thought names were better by the syllable. Took me years to learn how to spell it." She paused. "Boudicca is easier."

"Where did Boudicca come from?"

She took a deep breath and felt Edward's stir of appreciation as her breasts swelled against his ribs.

"I told you about my village." He nodded. "Everyone I knew." Her voice remained steady. "The Emperor ordered it because we were harboring a dissident. I heard the transmit when I was hiding with my nieces. He ordered everyone to be slaughtered. Those were his words. He told his soldiers to rape -- actually told them. And to save the pretty ones for him."

She forced herself to think about Edward's warm body lying next to hers, about the strength of the muscle in his shoulder, the smoothness of his skin, the crisp brush of the hairs on his chest as her fingers kept stroking him.

She willed her mind away from the dark, damp utility shed where she huddled with two terrified little girls, trying desperately to keep them quiet, hoping with all her might they hadn't seen what had become of their parents, wishing with every atom of her being that the soldiers would pass by and leave them alone.

"He liked to take girls from the provinces," Edward said, his voice anchoring her in the present. "Said they were charming and unspoilt."

"Not by the time he got his hands on them, they weren't," Callie said. "And certainly not by the time he was finished with them. He passed them around amongst his friends. Made a game of it. Who could humiliate and degrade them more. Beat and starved them, whipped them like horses. And when he got bored of them, he threw them out onto the Traitor's Terrace. Regardless of whether or not they were actually dead. That's why I asked about the carrion. Turns out when they're hungry they don't always wait for you to die."

Her voice didn't wobble once. Edward remained still, silent, his breath the only sound in the room. Callie couldn't breathe, her whole body trembling as Edward's

fingers found the faint scars on her arms and neck. Traced the barely perceptible indents and bumps.

"And yet you live."

"I think Callie died that day. But Boudicca survived. She let a bird take her away and then she killed it, and ate it." The meat was raw and disgusting, but she hadn't eaten in days. Her body rebelled, but the blood smearing her face, her arms, made her stronger. "She stole clothes and food and sold her body for what she couldn't get any other way. And then one day she saw an advert for a sexbot tester, and figured if a machine could wring an orgasm from her, it could get one from anybody."

She remembered George's face, his stammered explanation, his shock at her utter detachment. The heaps of part-finished sexbots, like the bodies on the Terrace.

"And did it?" Edward asked softly.

"It did. And then it -- it died." Ceased to function. Her first radioflash. And that was when she realized the gods had given her a talent. A tool for revenge. So she began to use it. She closed her eyes and willed away tears, because she was ashamed of what she'd done, of what she'd become. "There was no army to join. No underground movement. Just a handful of dissatisfied people. And me."

Edward said nothing, just held her tight. Callie waited until she was sure she wasn't going to cry, then tilted her head up to look at him. "I lied," she said. "To you, and to George, and to myself. I told myself it was to bring down the Empire. To make sure the things that happened in my village would never happen to anyone else. I told myself it wasn't personal. But every fuck, every target, every single time, it was all about revenge."

Edward murmured, so softly she almost missed it, "The world cannot be free while the Emperor lives."

Despair washed over her. "Then the world must live in chains."

"Or the Emperor must die."

She snorted. "And who will kill him? You've already said I can't do it, and --"

"I will," Edward said.

Callie opened her mouth. No sound came out.

"I will free the world of its chains." Edward stared at the wall, his face grim, and Callie wondered what he was looking at. "And I will be free." He looked at her uncomprehending face. "I've chosen my ending."

* * *

"Sweet merciful crap, you brought her here?"

Edward pushed past George into his cramped workroom, Callie following him. Behind him walked Carver, his arm slung possessively around Nalina's shoulders.

"I seem to remember you saying the same thing about me," she said.

George watched in horror as they were followed by Swann and Libby, then Jack and Angelica. "Oh God, you brought the Empress," he moaned, locking the door and slamming about twenty bolts shut on it. "Here! The dead Empress!"

"I'm not the Empress any more," said Angelica. "Neither am I dead."

"But you're here!"

"Yes, I am here."

Edward motioned them all to seats, most of which had to be fashioned from half-constructed pieces of tech, and said to George, "You have a dampening field up, right?"

"Ever since Carver brought a wanted fugitive here, yes I do," George said, wringing his hands. His personal sexbots, Cunnilingua and Fellatia, leaned against the wall with their arms around each other.

"Good," said Edward. "What I have to say... well, it will probably be heard by the world at some point. If we all survive this."

George let out a wail.

"Which, according to my aunt's prophecy, we will." He glanced at Angelica, who bit her lip. "Either that, or we'll fail horribly."

"Cheering," muttered Callie.

"Fifteen years ago," Edward continued, ignoring her words but placing a hand on her shoulder, "the Empress confirmed a prophecy."

“The younger brother shall rule the Empire as it should be,” Angelica whispered.

“But,” Callie looked confused. “You’re an only child.”

“I am now,” said Edward. He listened to the beating of Callie’s heart, and not the screaming inside his head. “Before my parents married my mother had a youthful affair, and my sister Morena was the result. She was raised far from Court and very few people knew about her. My uncle believed the prophecy related to himself.”

“He was --” Callie began, then saw the truth on the other faces around her. “He wasn’t older than your father, was he?”

“No, he was not. It’s my belief he had my father killed. In fact, it’s a mathematical certainty.”

“How so?” asked Angelica.

Edward took a deep breath. He’d never told anyone this before. Had never discussed it with anyone in his family. And yet he knew. He knew it as he knew he had arms and feet and eyes. “The ancients believed their rulers were living gods,” he said. “Perhaps they were right.”

A heavy silence fell over the room. Even the bleeping of George’s machinery seemed muted.

Callie’s hysterical giggle broke it. “I’ve been sleeping with a god?”

“Not just you,” Carver muttered.

“A god?” Angelica said. “And... does that mean your uncle...”

Edward nodded.

“Which is why only you can kill him,” said Jack.

“And why I know for certain he killed my father. And if he would do that, it’s not a stretch to believe he would kill my mother, my sister, my wife.” He looked at the faces around him, before settling on Angelica’s. “You said there must be blood,” he said, “and sacrifice, but that there would also be freedom.”

Angelica nodded slowly.

He turned to Callie, her heart pounding beneath her skin. "You said there were only a handful of dissatisfied people," he said. "I count at least eight."

"Seven," Carver rumbled, his hand sliding protectively over Nalina's stomach.

"Eight," corrected George, and everyone stared at him. He swallowed, his hands twisting against themselves. "I hid behind my machines before. I didn't fight. I was -- I was frightened. But I won't hide this time."

Edward blinked, admiration rising in him.

"You still can't count," Swann said, and Edward frowned. "There's sixty-seven men on my ship, and I don't expect it'll take long to find several thousand Mer who'll fight for you again. Your Highness."

"Not to mention all the dissidents who live under the water in the Mer cities," Jack added.

"Probably half the slums of Carnalis would rise up, given a sliver of a chance," Libby said.

"And I still have a harem of escaped rebels wandering around somewhere," Angelica put forward.

This time Edward stared.

Callie's hand covered his, and she looked up at him. "I told you you weren't the only one," she said softly, and the drumming of her heart filled his head until he didn't want to hear anything else.

He saw Annique's face, and she was smiling at him.

"We always had the plan," Carver said, and Edward's face split into a fierce grin.

"There has been plenty of blood spilt," he said. "But there must be more, or it will all have been in vain. We make the world we live in, we make our own endings, and we will make freedom. The end, whatever it is, is coming."

Chapter Thirteen

"This is as close as I can get us," said Libby, who, having been a thief in her younger days, was well-versed in how to sneak around grand palaces unannounced. She pushed back the grate in the storage room. It was filled with the dildoes and clamps and toys used in the Hall of Pleasure next door.

As they had sneaked through the palace, George rewired whatever security devices they found. "No sense in blowing them and causing alarm before we need to," he said.

"How will we find our way to the Throne Room once the power's gone?" asked Swann.

"You follow me," Angelica said. "I did live here for fifteen years."

"Yes, but it will be dark --"

"And I will still be blind."

They chattered nervously. Callie, who'd never been in any fight more organized or formal than a quick down-and-dirty scuffle while she killed an Imperial or two, imagined this was probably how soldiers felt on the eve of battle.

She held Edward's hand. He'd said nothing when she took it, but clasped her fingers tightly.

She knew as well as he that an attempt to kill the Emperor could just as well result in his own death.

"Everyone's in position?" Edward asked Carver, who nodded.

"Mer surrounding the city. Slum Army marked with sashes, and ready to fight when the lights go out. Empress's harem poised to attack barracks."

"Nalina?"

"Safe on board the *Revenge*," said Swann. "Other side of the globe."

"Well, then," Edward said, and squeezed Callie's hand. "First Rank, into position."

There was a slight pause, and an embarrassed giggle from Libby, and then Callie couldn't see what was happening as Edward pressed her back against the wall and kissed her so soundly she forgot her own name.

"This day will shake the world," he whispered.

"It's certainly shaken me," she whispered back, her knees weak.

Edward smiled, and lifted her wrist against the metal strut of a shelf. She felt the rope against her skin a second too late.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"If you come too soon, everything will be for nothing," he said, tying her in place. "I can't risk you touching yourself."

"I can restrain --" Callie began, but was cut off by Edward's mouth. As he held her against his body, someone slid a rope around her other wrist.

She ripped her lips from Edward's and glared at the culprit. "Carver!"

He tipped an imaginary hat to her and gave a mocking grin. "My lady."

Edward slid her shirt up and began fondling her breast, turning half away so she could see what the others were doing. The room contained three women and five men, and just the thought of the combinations possible made Callie's heart pound.

No one had fully undressed, aware of the need to be ready to run as soon as the radioflash hit. Swann leaned against one wall, his pants unfastened to reveal his cock, which Libby sucked as she knelt on the floor. Callie watched in fascination as Libby's lips swallowed the thick organ, her pink tongue darting out to trace invisible paths up and down its length. Her hands caressed Swann's balls, and he rocked his head back, panting harshly.

Beside Libby knelt George, his hands cautious as he stroked her breasts through her shirt. Libby reached down and flicked a few catches open, releasing her breasts into George's waiting hands, and he gave a little sigh and explored them happily.

Jack sat on the floor, Angelica on his lap, kissing her deeply as his hands roamed under her skirt. Callie's head fell to one side as she watched the beauty of them moving together, his skin pale against hers, her body fitting to his in the most perfect way possible. He tugged down her bodice, revealing one round breast, the nipple already tight with wanting.

"Suck it," she murmured. "Oh yes, please..."

Callie felt her breath coming faster as she watched. Edward molded himself against her side, his thumb and finger rolling her nipple, sending pleasure shooting down to the pit of her stomach.

"This has to be the biggest one ever," he murmured, his voice soft, his breath warm against her ear. "You need to take out the whole building."

"I don't need six extra people to do that," Callie said. "I could take out a whole building just from you."

His eyes flashed warmly at her. "Later, we'll explore this," he promised, and Callie's breath caught in her throat. *Later*. Later, if they were successful, Edward would have a revolution to head, an army to lead, an empire to run. He'd have little time for a whore whose only talent was destroying electrical tech.

And if they didn't succeed... Well, she didn't want to think about that.

Carver moved to kneel behind Angelica, smoothing his hands over her shoulders and murmuring, "My lady."

She smiled. "Carver. Welcome to the party."

He gave a feral grin. Earlier, Callie had watched him saying goodbye to Nalina, with absolutely no hint of worry that he wouldn't see her again. Nalina had simply asked him, slightly wistfully, to remember the woman bearing his child while he was off swiving other women in the name of the revolution.

"Were my memory erased," he promised her, "I would never forget you."

Edward had given Nalina a very swift goodbye and told her he'd see her soon. Even his practiced calm couldn't hold strong, and it had taken Callie a minute to remember why. He'd said goodbye to Annique that way.

Now Carver knelt on the floor, Angelica between his thighs, her back against his chest as he kissed her neck and fondled her breasts. George had restored his bionic arm and given him the prototype cuff he'd designed for Callie. If it protected Carver's bionics from the radioflash, it was worth considering for Callie to wear in the future.

The future...

Angelica's bodice was open at the front, her skirts pushed up above her thighs. Between them Jack knelt, her hips lifted in his arms as he feasted upon her pussy. Angelica gave little cries as one man expertly caressed her breasts while another speared his tongue inside her.

Callie felt her own pussy growing wet. She wore a skirt, as did Libby, all the better to gain quick access. Her thighs rubbed together in an attempt to relieve the growing ache.

"Enjoying the show?" Edward asked. He switched his attention to her other breast.

"It's very stimulating," she replied on a gasp.

On the other side of the room, Swann had slid to the floor, Libby lying between his legs vigorously tonguing his balls, while George lay beside her, sucking on her nipples. Libby took his hand and guided it between her legs, where, judging by her moan of pleasure, he evidently wasn't completely clueless about what to do.

"You touching my woman?" panted Swann.

"Looks like I am," George mumbled.

"Circle her clit. She likes that."

George did, and Libby let out a squeak. Both men smiled.

On the floor, Jack lay back and pulled Angelica over him, lifting her skirts so Callie could watch her sink down on his cock. She couldn't help a whimper as Jack's

thick, hard member disappeared, inch by inch, into Angelica's wet, pink pussy. Angelica's head was thrown back in delight, her hands clutching at her lover's shirt.

"Is it good?" Carver asked, kneeling behind her and stroking her hips. "Does he feel good inside you?"

Angelica nodded rapidly as she began to rise and fall on Jack's cock. "He always feels good. Fills me up... oh God yes."

That was what Callie needed, that thickness plowing into her. Filling up her wet, aching pussy. She pressed her thighs together again, but Edward made a tutting noise and slid them apart.

His hand remained on her bare thigh, caressing with maddening lightness.

"Lib," Swann gasped as his dragon lover sucked his penis down, "stop, or I'll come too soon." Libby raised her head and looked at him with glazed eyes. "Let me lick you," he whispered, and she scrambled up with a speed that was almost comical.

He had her on her knees, and lay beneath her so he could grasp her buttocks and raise his head to her pussy. She was very wet, her folds pink and plump with arousal, and when Swann ran his tongue from top to bottom, she let out a long moan.

George sat beside her, hand on his cock, which was swollen and seeping moisture. Libby jerked her head at it. "Over here," she said, "let me suck it."

George obeyed even faster than Libby had, and soon she had Swann eating out her pussy while George fed his cock into her eager mouth. The sight was so erotic it made Callie whimper.

"You want that?" Edward asked her. "You want a mouth on your pussy?"

Callie bit her lip.

"I think you do," he said softly in her ear. His fingers continued to draw patterns on her thigh, higher, higher... then lower. Bastard.

"I think you want to feel a tongue between your legs. Parting those plump little folds of yours... mmm... tasting the slick moisture there... dipping inside to feel how wet you are, how tight you are, tasting you deep inside."

Callie's teeth drew blood on her own lip. Carver glanced over, his eyes a vampiric yellow.

"You like that?" Edward said, then noticed Carver. "Oh, I see. You want to be bitten too. You've been bitten before, haven't you? You know how good it can be. How hot, and intense, like an orgasm fizzing through your blood."

Callie squeezed her eyes shut. That was exactly how a vampire bite felt.

"But we can't let that happen yet," Edward whispered.

"Bastard," Callie replied, opening her eyes to see Edward grinning at her. His fingers danced higher, lower, higher...

He glanced at Carver, who flowed to his feet in one easy movement. The front of his pants was heavily tented with his erection.

On the floor, Jack and Angelica moved together, mouths clashing, hands stroking and clutching, apparently oblivious to anyone else.

Edward opened his own pants, and Callie's eyes were rooted to the sight of his cock, thick and hard, standing proud. He pressed it against her thigh and she gasped at the heat of it. Then she gasped again, because Carver had done the same thing. Two cocks rubbed against the bare skin of her thigh. Desperately, she twisted her hips to get one of them -- either of them! -- between her legs, but neither man obliged.

"You wanted to know what men do together," Edward breathed in her ear. "Shall we show her, John?"

Carver gave Callie a darkly sexual look before turning away and taking a bottle from one of the shelves. Palming his cock, he said to Edward, "Which way do you want to do this?"

Edward grinned wickedly and put the bottle aside. His hand caressed Carver's. "Why don't we start off slower?" he said, sinking to his knees.

Carver did the same, and then the two men kissed. Callie watched, her mouth dry, as Edward cupped Carver's dark head and closed his eyes, kissing him deeply, tenderly. He'd told Callie how important Carver was to him, how much he trusted the

man, how they'd often shared a bed. But she wasn't prepared for the raw love between them.

Edward eased Carver to the ground, his hand sliding down to take Carver's throbbing cock and caress it. The vampire moaned, and began stroking Edward.

Not to be outdone, Edward slid down his lover's body and began licking his penis. Carver's head fell back, his lips parted, his eyes opening wide with shocked pleasure. His hands buried themselves in Edward's thick, pale hair.

Callie's toes curled inside her boots. Her clit throbbed. If someone touched her now she'd explode.

She directed her gaze away from the two men, to see Jack and Angelica had changed position. Now she knelt on all fours, her skirts pushed right up so Callie could see Jack hammering into her. His hands were on Angelica's breasts, his lips on the back of her neck, and she gasped with every thrust. Her own hand slipped between her legs to touch her clit, and Jack moaned, "Oh yes, that's nice."

Callie dragged her gaze to Swann and Libby. He was seated against the wall with Libby in his lap, her legs spread wide as she rose and fell on his cock. Her neck twisted as she turned to kiss him, and his hands covered her bare breasts. Between their legs lay George, his hand on his cock as he licked and sucked at Libby's pussy. Occasionally his tongue darted down to Swann's balls, making the Mer moan and thrash.

As she watched, Libby gave Swann one last hot, wet kiss, then leaned forward and gently pushed George's hand away from his cock. She stroked it, then dipped her head and began sucking.

"Oh yes," gasped Edward suddenly, and Callie's attention snapped to him. He knelt over Carver, his cock in the other man's mouth, his lips inches from Carver's own thick organ. The vampire was sucking hard on Edward's penis, his hands kneading and stroking Edward's buttocks. He parted them, his fingers slick and sticky, and began stroking Edward's puckered hole.

When his finger delved inside, Edward moaned long and low. "Yes," he said, "oh yes, Carver, fuck me there."

Carver didn't need any more provocation. He slipped out from under Edward, fast as lightning, and grabbed the bottle of lubricant to smear more on his cock. Then, with a knowing glance at Callie, he positioned Edward for maximum visual effect as he slowly sank his cock into the other man's ass.

Edward's fingers curled into fists, his eyes squeezing shut. His breath came in little pants. Carver's hand smoothed over his back, stroking gently, and then slipped around to fondle Edward's swollen, pulsing cock.

"I can hear you, Boudicca," Edward said, his voice choked with passion. "Your heart is beating like a drum."

"Can you blame it?" she replied, her own voice strained.

Edward opened his eyes and looked around, at Swann and Libby and George, at Angelica and Jack, and finally at Callie, straining against her ropes, her nipples pink and tight and her skirt rucked up to show her throbbing, wet pussy.

"No," he said, his eyes on her as Carver began to thrust into him. "I can't blame it at all."

She watched the two men moving together, Carver so dark and menacing, his body a mass of scars but his movements so tender and passionate. Edward, golden and blond, every line of his body elegant and powerful, on his knees and gasping as another man pumped into his ass.

"Edward," she said, and he looked up at her, eyes blazing sapphire blue. "I want you inside me. Soon. When I come, I want you inside me."

He smiled at her. "I want that too."

As they fucked right in front of her, Callie became aware that the other participants were reaching their own climaxes. Swann, his cock gloved by Libby's pussy, his balls licked by George's eager tongue, gripped his lover's hips and roared with passion as he came copiously inside her. Callie watched his come trickling from Libby's pussy, to be caught on George's tongue.

"I was nearly there," she panted, clutching at him. "Nearly there."

George stood up, his throbbing penis at Libby's eye level. "I'm sure I can help you out."

Libby licked her lips, then licked George's cock. He growled in a most un-George-like fashion and hauled her to her feet, Swann's cock slipping from her with a pop, and kissed her, hard. Swann remained where he was for a moment, breathing hard, his cock still twitching. Then he came up to his knees and turned Libby around so her pussy was directly in front of his face.

He reached between her legs and fed George's cock inside her. Then he began licking them both.

On the floor, Angelica was gasping out her climax as she rode Jack, her back to his chest and his hands between her legs. He kissed her neck, her back, any part of her he could reach, as she quivered and shook above him. When she finally subsided, he held her in his arms and kissed her cheek, and Callie's heart ached.

"Your Majesty," Edward gasped, Carver still thrusting rhythmically inside him, "perhaps you could attend to Callie?"

Angelica blinked, her body still heaving, and nodded. Jack, still buried inside her, glanced at the threesome fucking their way to mutual climax on the other side of the room, and said, "It's possibly only you and I who'll still be hard, Edward."

"You take the back, I'll take the front?" Edward gasped, and Jack nodded. He kissed Angelica once more, then helped her to her feet and led her over to Callie.

"Bet you're dying for relief," he said, and she nodded frantically. "If I slide in the back way, can you hold off?"

She nodded again. Aside from Edward's delicious penetration, she'd never much enjoyed anal sex. It would be interesting to see how she fared this time.

Jack loosened her bonds, allowing her to move away from the wall slightly, then eased in behind her. Angelica handed him the lube, and he began stroking it into Callie's ass.

"You're so wet around here," his fingers brushed her throbbing pussy lips, "I might not need much."

"Careful," Edward warned. "Don't let her come just yet."

"Jack's an expert," Angelica assured him, her rosy lips and cheeks proof of this. She reached out, but not for Callie. Her hand brushed Carver's ass as he thrust dementedly into Edward, and she stroked some lube between his buttocks.

Sweat broke out on the vampire's forehead.

"That's it," she murmured. "Come, Carver."

Carver suddenly jerked out of Edward, his hand fisted around his own cock, and a stream of come shot over Edward's firm buttocks. Gasping, shaking, he rubbed his own cock, and more come spread over Edward's golden skin.

"Oh God," Edward moaned. "I've missed that."

Callie, her own anus probed by Jack's careful fingers, watched as Carver lovingly massaged his own seed into Edward's buttocks, then leaned down to lick some of it off.

"Stop," Edward moaned, "you'll make me come." He rose up, turned around, and clasped Carver to him in a tight embrace. Their cocks rubbed against each other as they kissed, long and deep, and Callie forced herself to think of blood and death and other gruesome things to keep from coming.

The lights flickered.

"She's nearly there," Jack murmured, just as Libby's ecstatic cry filled the room.

"Oh fuck yes," she screamed, her body writhing in George's arms as he slammed into her, his own face contorted with pleasure as he came inside her. On his knees, Swann covered Libby's pussy with his mouth, sucking George's balls as he did.

Edward stood up, holding his cock at the base, squeezing tight in an effort, Callie knew, not to come. Carver wiped up his own come, then handed the wipes to Swann, George and Libby, who were liberally coated in the sticky stuff.

"Be ready," he said to them, and jerked his head at Callie. "Come and help, but be ready. She's going to come, and the whole city's going to blow."

"Possibly the whole world," Callie moaned, trembling, as Jack began to push his cock inside her ass. Edward watched her the whole time, his hand moving to cup her cheek, his eyes warm.

"Is it good?" he whispered, and she nodded, shaking.

"Angelica, you're a very lucky girl," she managed, and the former Empress smiled.

"I know I am."

She knelt beside Callie, and George moved to do the same. Swann and Libby stood over them, their hands moving to stroke her breasts. Angelica and George caressed her bare thighs.

Behind her, Carver slid next to Jack, and she felt his fingers on her neck as he searched for a pulse.

Her whole body was wound up so tight she thought she might literally explode, shattering into millions of pieces.

Then Edward kissed her, his lips gentle, his eyes tender.

"This day will shake the world," he said. "Everyone will know your name, and the part you played." He smiled against her mouth. "My warrior queen."

With that, he slid his cock inside her. Carver's teeth penetrated her vein, and George's fingers brushed her clit, and the hands and mouths and cocks all over her made her tremble and shake.

Edward's cock pulsed inside her. His teeth gently bit down on her lip.

And Callie came like a volcano, her whole body flooding with pleasure so intense she wouldn't have been surprised to learn she was on fire. Hot, molten joy spread through her veins, burning through her skin and tearing wild cries from her mouth.

She shattered, her body made of stars, each one flaring into light and bringing every cell in her body to life.

When eventually the heat and the light and the galaxies of pleasure receded, she found herself slumped in Edward's arms, shaking uncontrollably, while around her six

people stared with expressions of varying astonishment. Their faces were lit by a flickering torch held aloft by Carver. The room was otherwise in darkness, and through the door she heard people screaming.

“Try programming a sexbot to do that,” George muttered, and Callie managed a weak laugh.

Edward smiled, and helped her to her feet, tugging her clothes into place. Everyone else was dressed, not to mention armed, and she wondered just how long she’d been spasming with uncontrollable joy. Seconds? Minutes? Weeks?

“Is everyone ready?” Edward asked, and Callie grasped his hand, kissed his lips, and whispered so only he could hear, “Thank you.”

He squeezed her hand in reply, his eyes warm.

To the rest of the room, she said, “I’m ready.”

“Then we go,” said Edward, and opened the door.

Chapter Fourteen

The palace was in chaos.

Edward hadn't been there for several years, but little had changed. Apart, that was, from the heaps of moaning people whose bionics had abruptly failed them, and the terrified screams of those who'd survived.

Edward led his small band, the light of Carver's torch flickering on the sad remains of the palace's huge array of tech. As they passed a window, he saw the whole city in darkness, the sea glittering all around, and heard screams echoing from the dark docks. The Mer had risen from the sea.

In the South city, fires were already breaking out. Libby's hastily pulled-together Slum Army was making itself known.

Fire, blood, and pain.

He glanced at Callie, walking by his side. The orgasmic flush had fled from her cheeks, and she was chalk-white. In the torchlight, her hair gleamed like a river of blood.

He wanted to touch her, to tell her that when this was over he wanted to be with her, at least get to know her better, spend more time with her, maybe fuck her senseless several times a day. He wanted to tell her that Annique had smiled on him, her screams silenced, that she lived now in his memory. That he had chosen the life he wanted to live, and that it was a life, not a wretched agony of despair and guilt. That in freeing the world, he was freeing himself from the past.

When this is over...

But a terrible cloud of foreboding hung over him. The best-laid plans, he knew all too well, could still fail.

Grimly, he marched on, aware of Callie with every beat of her heart.

They reached the Throne Room, its jewel-encrusted doors hanging open. From within came the sound of pitiful moaning.

Edward paused, and in that moment felt Callie's hand touch his. She looked up at him, her eyes like the ocean, and he read her hope, her resolve, her trust.

He shoved at the nearest door and it clattered to the floor, the sound deafening in the empty room.

"Who's there?" asked a frightened voice from within. An elderly male voice. Like the Emperor, if he'd suddenly become old and frail.

Callie's brow creased slightly. Edward smiled.

"Trap?" she mouthed.

"Trap," he said aloud.

"I don't know what you mean --" quavered his uncle, and Edward kicked the door aside, striding in, taking an arrow hit to his chest and never breaking stride.

"I do," he said. "A trap, Uncle, is a device, stratagem, or trick for catching the unaware." He wrenched the arrow from his chest, flung it aside, and continued toward the figure huddled on the tall throne. "Unfortunately for you, I'm not unaware."

The whimpering sound came from a woman, her back spasming as some bionic failure ate at her innards. She wore the remains of a ruby harem collar, its destroyed electronic probes having taken half her neck with them.

Edward slit her throat with his sword.

"You," rasped the Emperor, this time in genuine tones of shock.

"I'm as aware as I've ever been. Maybe more. Yes," Edward concluded as he reached the throne and snatched up the crossbow the old man held. "More, I think." He looked at the ancient weapon, admired its craftsmanship for a moment, before breaking it over his thigh. "Never let it be said you're not a paranoid old bastard."

The light in the room grew stronger as Carver advanced, torch held high. Edward watched his uncle, saw the realization come over his face, the denial, the shock. He saw the Emperor recognize Carver's scarred face, the face of a man he'd had blown to pieces by laser fire. Saw it as his gaze ran over Libby, who he'd once tricked into his harem. Saw the stricken expression as Angelica came into view, his wife, back from the dead.

"My wife," he murmured, his voice strangled.

"Not any more," she said, and the Emperor suddenly jerked something on the arm of his throne.

"No --" Edward shouted, but the old man had already shot downwards, through whatever sly trapdoor he'd hidden there. He heard the thump as the Emperor landed, and then the slice of steel as a booby-trap slashed into place.

He leapt toward the throne, and Callie screamed. "No, you can't!"

He glanced back over his shoulder before he dropped down the tunnel. "Won't kill me," he said. Then, as an afterthought, "Just don't follow me."

"Edward," Callie yelled as he dropped into darkness, bracing himself against the bite of steel.

Metal scored his arms, legs, ribs, as spikes built into the walls of the tunnel ripped into him. One of them impaled his arm, and the pain forced all the breath from his body, before he yanked it free from the wall and fell further.

This time it was metal bars in a grid across the tunnel. Metal bars with spikes. And flames issuing from small holes.

"Swiving bastard," he yelled, and heard a faint laugh in reply. Gritting his teeth, Edward grasped the grate, the flames searing his palms, and ripped it away. It clattered below him, falling only a few feet before it hit the floor.

Edward dropped down, rolling as he met the stone slabs of the chamber beneath the Throne Room, and ducked a second arrow fired in his direction.

"You, sir, should be dead," growled the Emperor.

"And yet I live." Edward flexed his scorched palms and winced, grateful for the darkness.

"I watched you die. I watched your pretty little wife torn to bits, and then I watched you hacked into pieces."

Edward's burnt hands curled into fists. "If you saw me die, sir," he said evenly, "then I must be a ghost. And a ghost cannot harm you."

A woman whimpered then, and for a terrible second Edward thought it was Annique, torturing him from his memory, but then a light flared into life, a torch on the wall, and a sight more terrible than Edward had ever expected rose before him.

His uncle stood strong and unafraid, his demonic eyes gleaming with malice. But that wasn't what frightened Edward.

The Emperor held Nalina in a tight grip, her throat exposed, a keen blade already scoring a red line across her white flesh. Her hands were heavily bound, her mouth gagged, her eyes flashing panic and anger and warning.

Nothing's going to harm us, darling, not while you're around.

The throbbing pain of the metal spike still embedded in his arm, and the burned flesh of his palms, all faded to nothing when compared to the searing, breath-stealing pain in his heart.

Nalina was a tiger shifter. She could rip out a man's heart with her teeth. But now -- now that she was pregnant, she was vulnerable, and the Emperor knew it. Knew Edward would die before he ever saw a child hurt, before he allowed a pregnant woman to be harmed.

Knew he had Edward right where he wanted him.

The firelight gleamed in the old bastard's eyes, and white-hot fury roared to life inside Edward. With every inch of blood trickling down Nalina's neck, his determination not just to kill his uncle, but to obliterate him, grew.

"I was going to be merciful," he growled.

"Wrong audience, boy. I never cared for mercy."

A snarl bubbled at the back of Nalina's throat, and the sound reached out to Edward, joined with his own fury, strengthened it.

"She's feisty," the Emperor said.

"She'd enjoy killing you."

"She tried once." The Emperor thrust his hips lewdly against Nalina's. She struggled in disgust, and more blood welled from her throat.

"Stay still," Edward said. "Don't give him what he wants."

"She already has, boy. She's got you standing before me, ready to put down your sword."

I don't need a sword to kill you. Edward tossed his weapon to the ground.

"You took my wife from me," he said, his voice low and even.

"You took mine from me!" the Emperor snapped.

Edward laughed mockingly. "No, sir. Angelica could not be taken when she was so willing to go. She plotted this with me. Guided me through the palace. She's been on my side for years," he added, twisting the knife. "All throughout the war, she was for me. Your wife. Liberating rebels under your nose. The same rebels who are now fighting for freedom in your very palace, sir."

The Emperor's face twisted with something like disgust. Something like it, but not quite.

His nostrils flared with anger. His mouth twisted with cruelty. But his eyes... his eyes were full of pain.

And Edward realized. "You love her," he said, astonishment overtaking his fury. "Oh my God, you actually loved her. Your own wife, all this time, and she hated you."

The Emperor's jaw trembled, but whether it was despair or fury Edward couldn't tell.

"All these years she wanted so desperately to get away from you. And you got crueller and crueller. To spite her? You knew what she was doing."

"She never even looked at me," the Emperor whispered. "Never even tried to love me. She hated me from the start."

"You threatened to kill the man she loved, and her entire village," Edward snapped, voice hardening, and the light came back into his uncle's eyes.

"Yes, I did, didn't I? And every rebel she took into her harem, who later mysteriously vanished -- for every one of those I destroyed another town. Hundreds of innocents for the one life she'd spared." His face twisted with cruel pleasure. "No one can hide from the Empire, sir," he said. "We see everything. We know everything."

"Not everything," Edward said softly, hatred solidifying inside him. "Revenge, sir, is a dish best served hot. And this revenge is molten."

The Emperor opened his mouth, but then a door burst open behind him and before he could turn Carver's murderous howl filled the air. The vampire's sword came crashing down onto the Emperor's back, and the old man's blade scored a line down Nalina's chest.

"No," Edward bellowed, rage and shock crashing inside him. He caught Nalina as she fell, her blood coating his hands, and with every atom of his being willed her to heal.

"My lady," cried Carver, falling to his knees beside her, as the Emperor rolled aside, yanking Carver's sword free from his back and laughing demonically.

"Can't kill me, little leech," he cackled, and then he was gone through another hidden door.

Edward felt ripped in two. As the room filled up with people, the need to heal Nalina warred with the desperate desire to rip his uncle into pieces.

"The Mer told us you'd been taken," Carver wept, grasping Nalina to him.

"Hundreds were killed," Swann said grimly to Edward. "He knew you were coming, sir."

The fury roared back to life in Edward. He pressed his hand to Nalina's stomach, and somewhere between his power and his refusal that it could be any other way, he felt the strong heartbeat of the life inside her.

"Can you heal her the rest of the way?" he asked Swann, who nodded.

Edward leapt to his feet, swiping up his sword, and was halfway out the door when he saw Callie's face, pale and striped with tears.

"Don't die for revenge," she whispered. "Don't die, Edward."

He grabbed her to him, crushed her against his body and kissed her hard and fast.

"I loved my wife beyond all measure," he told her, "but she is a ghost, and ghosts are not worth dying for." A glimmer of a smile flickered on her face. "I have chosen my ending," he said, and flew from the room.

Shocked into stillness, Callie stood and watched Edward tear away from her. On the ground, Carver knelt with Nalina in his arms, Swann using whatever strange power the Mer possessed to heal her. George stood fretting, Angelica knelt with her hands over her face. Callie didn't know if she was attempting to use her second sight, or if she was just weeping.

The only person standing and useful was Jack, the Revolutionary. He touched Callie's arm and said, "Aren't you going to go after him?"

"What can I do?" she said.

Jack's hand pressed against her chest. "You are his heart," he said, and she stared at him for a full second, before snatching up the Emperor's discarded knife and hurling herself through the door.

It led down a rocky passage, straight to the sea by the scent of the cold air whistling through. At the end was a portcullis, ripped from the rock and thrown, twisted, to one side. Bloody handprints marked it. Edward had torn the metal from the rock with his bare hands.

Callie stepped out onto the rocky overhang, hidden on both sides by a towering cliff and from above by a high cave ceiling. The bright moon illuminated a solitary figure standing by the edge, looking down, and Callie's heart crashed in her chest when she realized who it was.

The Emperor.

Edward was nowhere to be seen.

Terrible grief welled up inside her, and a sob escaped. The Emperor turned and saw her, and a cruel smile twisted his mouth.

"Little rebel," he said. "Come to mourn your lover?"

Her hand gripped the knife. Pain ate at her. So far, so close, and now it had ended like this?

"I smell him all over you. Hot little honey, aren't you? Hmm, think I'll add you to my harem, since Edward kindly broke you in for me."

The knife turned toward the Emperor, almost of its own volition.

"He's not coming back," the Emperor said. "I tripped him over the cliff. Fell on his own sword. Dropped into the sea. The sharks will eat him now."

"No," gasped Callie. Edward, her beautiful brave Edward, dying alone in this cold, harsh sea.

The Emperor moved closer, his expression gloating. "Oh yes. Man can't come back from that. Only a vampire could survive, and flesh of my flesh is no vampire."

Wait a minute.

"No, the only bloodsucker here is you," Callie whispered.

"If it's blood you want, darling, I'm sure we can spill some of yours," leered the Emperor.

A shadow rose from the sea. Hope leapt in Callie's heart.

"You've spilled enough of mine already," she said. "You don't remember me, do you? But I remember you. You killed everyone in my village, you took me prisoner, you beat and raped me, and then you left me to be eaten alive by carrion birds."

The Emperor shrugged. "You might need to be a little more specific."

Callie smiled coldly. "You gave me a talent, sir, although you never knew it. You made me into the instrument of your own destruction."

He laughed. "What, you're going to kill me? If my rebel nephew couldn't do it with his sword, then how's a whore with a knife going to accomplish it?"

"Like this," Callie said, and lunged, her knife sinking into his belly, so deep that blood welled out and coated her hand.

He stared down in shock and pain, but then his head lifted, and he laughed. "You can't kill me, little girl."

"No," came a voice from behind him, "but she can distract you long enough that I can."

With that Edward swung his sword, and the Emperor's head tumbled to the ground, sliced clean from his neck. A second later, his body toppled down.

Callie stared at Edward, his body soaked, clothes clinging to him, blood pouring from a dozen wounds. A massive slash on his shoulder had nearly severed one arm.

He stared down at the bisected body of his uncle, then swung his sword in a heavy arc that ended with the tip pushed right through the old man's body.

"The fish rots from the head," he said, leaning on the sword and breathing heavily.

Then he fell into her arms.

* * *

Snow swirled around.

Edward lay on the cold ground, the mud already freezing beneath him, his own blood solid with ice on his skin. The bodies around him were all still. All silent. It was too cold even for carrion birds.

Half dead, shell-shocked, pinned to the ground by his own frozen blood, Edward felt a faint breeze caress his frozen face. A whisper of perfume.

Annique.

She walked toward him. Except she wasn't alone, and she was no longer the mournful, pregnant figure of his dreams. Here walked Annique as he'd first known her, young and vibrant and bursting with life.

She walked hand in hand with Callie, both of them dressed in flowing gowns, their hair streaming out behind them. Black and red, a stark contrast.

Annique reached out to Edward, and this time he reached back, taking her hand and rising to his feet.

She smiled, and placed his hand in Callie's. Her ghostly lips brushed his, and then with a smile, she faded away.

Edward looked at Callie, at her blood-red hair and creamy skin and eyes like the ocean, and she smiled at him. Edward smiled back, and dawn arose, the sun breaking across the ocean and the rocky shore.

Her heartbeat pulsed, strong and vibrant.

He held her hand, and walked with her into a new, free world.

Cat Marsters

Cat lives in a village in southeast England, which, while not quite a fairytale setting, is nonetheless very pretty and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of AD 1087. She shares a house with only slightly batty parents who hardly ever tell her to get a real job, and a musician brother who knows there's no chance she'll ever get one if he doesn't. Cat doesn't have children but she does have cats, who are her babies in every sense except the biological one.

Cat has been writing all her life, but in order to keep herself rich in shoes and chocolate, she's also worked as an airline check-in agent, video rental clerk, stationery shop assistant, and laboratory technician. She's aiming for a fairytale cottage, and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Visit Cat's web site at <http://www.catmarsters.com>.