

KISS ACROSS TIME SERIES
BOOK THREE

"A thrilling exploration of battle, self-loathing, trust, and soul-shaking love that time cannot erase."

~Rhonda for Vampire Romance Books

KISS CHAINS ACROSS

TRACY COOPER-POSEY

Kiss Across Chains

by

Tracy Cooper-Posey

The

Kiss Across Time Series

Book III

About *Kiss Across Chains*

When dying becomes an act of love.

It is four years since Taylor and Brody almost lost Veris during the First Crusade. Now they know how to control time jumps, they have settled into a very nearly perfect, nearly human life, raising their daughter Marit.

When Brody defies Queen Tira to protect Marit, the three of them

jump back three days in time to collect evidence the queen set up Brody for a drug bust in retribution. The jump sends them back to Brody's personal nightmare: Fifth century Constantinople.

While Brody survives as a flogged slave, Taylor masquerades as the wife of an aristocrat and searches for Brody to release him. They must wait for Veris to find them before jumping home and Taylor watches each brutal chariot race, wondering if *this* will be Brody's last. Brody once died in the Hippodrome and he is human this

time, too....

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Copyright Information

Author Note

In Sixth Century Constantinople, the chariot races held such power over the city and its citizens, it influenced the military, politics and religion. The Emperor himself was drawn into the eternal question of whether the Greens (*Prásinoi*) or Blues (*Vénetoi*) would win.

Chariot races became the source

of cheating, bribes, curses, mechanical tampering, gang warfare, street violence and murder until they finally culminated in 532 AD in five days of riots and burning, known as the Nika riots, when the Blues and the Greens worked together in a failed attempt to usurp the emperor himself.

Chariot racing fell into decline after the riots, never again to achieve the huge popularity and influence it had held for the centuries since Greece and Rome had pushed it to the fore.

But the Nika riots don't take place until forty-three years after

the events in this book.

Chapter One

For eight years Taylor overlooked the fact that Veris and Brody were not absolutely immortal. A near-perfect human life kept getting in the way. On their daughter Marit's third birthday, though, death walked through the door. Taylor didn't recognize because it arrived by limousine.

Alexander was bouncing the copper-headed, smoky-eyed,

slender and bubbly Marit on his knee while Brody cut up her barbecued lamb chop. Taylor ate her meal before it went cold. Veris scraped the barbecue down. The swimming pool behind the safety fence lapped peacefully at the brickwork, already glowing eerily blue with the underwater lights.

Around the deck, toys and bikes lay scattered like flotsam.

The sun was setting over the hills in a spectacular range of reds, golds and pinks, promising more heat tomorrow. It was a rare hot day in early December, a warm snap when it was nice enough to sit

outside and soak up the sun. At this time of year, the sun didn't blaze and sizzle, which would have made it too uncomfortable for the non-humans around the table, as it would have in mid-summer.

Domestic sounds and sights. A perfectly normal family if one overlooked the fact that Marit had two fathers and neither of them was human.

Veris put the barbecue tools away, then sat on the bench next to Taylor and pushed her champagne glass toward her. She swallowed her mouthful and took a sip then turned her head toward him for a

kiss. He was smiling as he ran the tip of his tongue over her lips before plunging it inside and making her breath hitch. "I love you, Mrs. Gallagher-Gerhardsson," he murmured against her lips.

"Back at you, Väinämöinen," she said in Norse.

"Old Norse sounds like such a tongue twister," Alexander observed clinically, wiping off Marit's chin with the damp cloth always kept close by for such occasions. "I wouldn't want to have to learn it without the advantage of acquiring it as you do, Taylor, when you arrive in the appropriate time

and location.”

Taylor forced her gaze away from the heat and promise in Veris’ eyes to look at Alexander. “I have to work on keeping the language once I get back. It’s not that easy. I have to let some of them go, unfortunately.”

Brody handed the small fork to Marit. “Here you go. Now try again. They’re smaller pieces this time.”

Alexander stopped his bouncing so that Marit could eat.

“Thank you, Daddy,” Marit said happily in old Gaelic, gripping the

fork in her fist. She smiled at Brody, showing a row of small, even teeth, then focused on her plate and eating.

“She’s a replica of you, Veris,” Alex said softly. “For all she has Taylor’s hair and eyes, she looks like you and she has your drive and relentlessness.”

Brody stroked Marit’s head as she bent over her plate with a gentleness that spoke volumes.

Alexander let out a breath. “Perhaps you should take her?” he suggested to Brody.

Brody shook his head. “Unless

she is a burden, you're welcome to keep her for now," he said.

Alexander stroked Marit's hair in an eerie echo of Brody's movement. "You know I never tire of Marit."

"We know," Veris said.

Alexander looked up quickly. "I'm sorry. It isn't resentment. Or envy."

"We know that, too," Brody said. "Or you would not be sitting there."

Alexander breathed out. "You see much," he agreed.

“As much as you did,” Taylor added. “All those years ago.”

Alexander smiled. “I also see that Veris neatly sidetracked the conversation by putting a lamb chop in front of Marit and creating chaos.”

Veris grinned. “Guilty as charged.” He dipped his finger into Taylor’s champagne glass and licked it. “It’s not a subject we’re used to talking about openly, Alex. And the little one absorbs way too much.”

Alexander looked down at Marit on his knee. “How good is

her Arabic?" he said, speaking in Arabic.

"Why are you changing languages again?" Marit asked, looking up at him with her big dark grey eyes, her mouth liberally daubed with barbecue sauce. She had spoken in Arabic.

Brody laughed out loud.

Alexander rolled his eyes, then kissed her forehead, the only part of her he could reach that was clean. "To test my language skills," he told her in English. "Finish eating. Then we have birthday cake."

She grinned at him and went back to eating, content.

Alexander gave a weak smile at the others. "Open allusion will have to do. You said the first few times you went back, nothing of consequence happened. It wasn't until you went back for an extended stay that dire consequences occurred. Why?"

Taylor glanced at Veris. They had explored the facts of their time travelling in depth. Veris had spent hundreds of hours working on the physics theory of what they did and was their resident expert.

Now Alex was asking why the first few times they had travelled back in time there had been no dire consequences to history. It wasn't until they had travelled back to the first crusade that they had realized that their time travelling was creating ripples that actually changed history.

Veris shook his head. "That wasn't the first time we changed anything," he said. "The first time was further back. Four-sixty-two," he added softly.

Alexander's eyes widened.

"How do you think the little

one was conceived?" Taylor added.

Alexander's mouth rounded into a silent "oh." Then he added, "But there were times, you said, when nothing happened. The first few times."

"We weren't interacting with anyone from those times," Brody said. "We were there for a few short moments only, in most cases. We were barely controlling the travelling then. There were a couple of flips that were absolutely in the mind. Personal memory only. The first Taylor and I experienced was one, because that was Camlann."

Alexander frowned. "I don't quite follow."

Brody rubbed the back of his neck, looking suddenly uncomfortable. "In my real timeline I was only thirteen when Camlann took place, yet we both flipped back and experienced it as adults and I was a warrior. But in my real time line I was—" He glanced away. "Well, I wasn't a warrior."

Veris straightened up, pushing Taylor's champagne glass across the wooden table with a damp squeak. "I think that trip was exactly what the queen was talking about.

Shared personal memory. Only Brody was sharing something that his father used to talk about all the time. Talk about, sing about, write about. The glory of Arthur's court. That was what Taylor was at the concert for – to find Arthur's bard, Inigo Domhnall. They both tapped into the source and that's what they got, a flip back to Camlann."

"Finished!" Marit declared, dropping her fork onto the plate and wriggling onto the deck, ready to take off and run.

Veris was faster. He caught her around the middle and snagged her up and onto his lap. "First, let's

clean you up, missy.”

Taylor handed him the damp cloth and he washed her hands and face clean as he continued to talk, even as Marit wriggled and tried to get free. “Then Taylor tried to flip back with me,” Veris continued, not at all distracted by Marit’s squirming. “She’d already been primed on how to flip back from her experience with Brody. So we flipped, but when I thought about Camlann, I was thinking about when I left Norway to join the Saxons to sail to the Hyperborean wastelands and how much I didn’t want to go. So we flipped back to

Norway.”

“I want to go ride,” Marit told Veris. She spoke Old Norse.

“Let me see your face,” Veris told her, using Norse, too.

She held up her face for inspection.

“Hands.”

She held up her hands.

“Kiss your mother, then you can go.”

Marit grinned, kissed Veris, then Taylor, then walked over their laps and leaned over to kiss Brody. Then she jumped to the deck and ran

over to a plastic molded tricycle, jumped onto it and pedaled off across the deck.

All the adults watched her for a moment.

Alexander stirred and turned back to the table. "I want to learn how you do it," he said simply.

They stared at him. Brody snorted. "You'll have to cut Taylor open if you want that secret. We don't know how she does it. She just does."

Veris drew a circle on the wood with the dregs of Taylor's champagne. "After witnessing the

horrors of our last flip back in time, you really want to risk it yourself?"

Alexander sat up. "You mean... you've not travelled since then? It's been over three years!"

"Tiny trips," Taylor told him. "Now we know how to control the flips. Short trips, where we knew we would not meet anyone. A cottage in the Welsh mountains. A villa in Tuscany. But they're hardly time travel if you can't mix with the people. So we just...stopped." She glanced at Marit, who had already moved on to super-sized Lego building blocks. "We didn't want to be away from Marit for too

long.”

Alexander laid his hands flat on the table. “I understand the consequences. I want to learn how.”

“You want children that badly, *mo chara?*” Brody asked.

Alexander blew out a breath. “It’s not just children,” he said. “If it were, I could find a wife and adopt dozens of children so badly in need of love and care, the matter would be solved inside months.” He waved a hand in dismissal. “Yes, I would like my own children. There is a difference, but the

difference is infinitesimal and beyond dispute, as you well know, Brody."

Brody inclined his head.

Alexander sighed. "I want to dip back into the past again. To sample it."

"You have your memories for that," Veris said sharply. "They're virtually perfect."

"They're not the same as being there."

"Being there will change them," Veris replied. "Einstein's theory of relativity doesn't go on a holiday

just because you've lived through it once already. You go back there, you stand a real chance of fucking up your own future." He sat up and forward. "We were dumb lucky. Maybe not—Taylor held us together when Brody and I were going to walk away from each other and screw up all our futures, and our child into the bargain, because we were playing out our lives all over again." He shook his head. "It's not worth it, Alex."

"Marit isn't worth it? Taylor isn't worth it?" Alexander asked softly. "You got both of them because of it."

Veris remained silent.

“He has you there,” Brody said. “Personally, I’d do it all again to be sitting right where I am.”

“Fuck,” Veris said, with a sigh. He grimaced. “Me, too.” He picked up Taylor’s hand, the one with the split-and-combined engagement ring with the left and right sweeping half spirals of green and blue gems. Now the ring was nestled on either side by a split wedding band. One side was studded with blue gems, the other with green. Veris kissed the back of her hand and sat back again. He looked at Alexander. “Good luck to

you, my friend," he said. "I don't know how it works, despite years of study. Taylor is the key. That is all I can tell you. Brody and I provide the direction, she provides the...power. Drive." He shrugged. "Magic. Whatever. If you can find another Taylor, then you can have your time travel."

Alexander nodded. He showed no signs of disappointment. "Where there is one, there may be another."

"The queen certainly seemed to think so," Taylor said.

"She thought it was a mental

quirk,” Veris said, with a sneer.

“She remembered it as a memory sharing,” Taylor reminded him. “But if she had never stepped outside the room she travelled to, she wouldn’t know it was real.”

Alexander held up his hand, a making-peace signal. “This sounds like an old argument.”

“It is,” Brody agreed. “Please help me change the subject and get these two off time travel before they hit Einstein and Newtonian physics and *before* I reach the point of wanting to shoot my own brains out.”

Alexander laughed.

Marit ran over to Brody's side and tugged on his arm. "Someone's coming. Big cars."

Brody swept Marit up into his arms and stood up. "Did you go all the way up to the side fence again, Marit? We told you not to."

She nodded. "Lots of cars," she said urgently, tugging on his arm.

He frowned. "How many?"

She held up her hand with all fingers spread.

Brody exchanged a look with Veris.

“On a Sunday?” Taylor murmured. “Either she miscounted, or something is happening.”

“Band business?” Veris suggested, keeping his tone light.

“There *is* no business at the moment,” Brody said. “After the tour, we’re all taking a deep breath, perhaps even a permanent one.”

Mia emerged from the sunroom, the white highlights on her black Chucks glowing in the last of the sunlight. She wore black jeans and a tight black tee-shirt and her hip-length hair was tied back in a leather band. She looked so utterly

unlike a cook and maid that sometimes Taylor was caught by surprise when she saw Mia around the house. But there was no mistaking Mia's efficiency, or her loyalty toward Taylor's family. Taylor had been happy to find out Mia also held a black belt in at least two different forms of martial arts. She was utterly devoted to Marit and the pair of them spoke Spanish nearly all the time.

Mia was frowning as she strode over to the table. "There's some folk in the library, demanding to speak to the three of you," she said in her husky, had-too-many-

cigarettes voice. "I told them it was a family occasion, but they were insistent. I'm sorry."

"How many people, Mia?" Veris asked.

"I couldn't count them all in the time I had in the room. I got up to eleven before I had to turn and leave." She grimaced and shifted her feet.

Brody tilted his head, studying her. "What is it?"

"They're vampire," she said simply.

Taylor was the only one to react.

She drew in a sharp breath. "How long have you known?" she asked.

"Since my third month working here," Mia said. She shrugged. "You can't live here and *not* figure it out. Same with figuring out about the three of you, although you came clean on that up front. But you didn't say anything about the other, so I didn't. But the folk in the library, they're scary fuckers. Especially *her*."

Taylor drew in another breath. "Tall, skinny, dark skin and black eyes?"

"Yep."

“Tira,” Brody muttered.

“Who?” Alexander asked.

“The queen is here,” Veris said.

“The mountain has come to Mohammad.”

“Yeah and he came in five white stretch limousines,” Mia added dryly.

“Oh, sweet lord,” Alexander breathed. “Now what?”

“You will all come inside. Now,” said a male, flat voice from behind Mia. Six tall men in suits stepped out onto the deck and moved swiftly to stand in a loose

circle around them where they sat at the big barbecue table.

Marit nestled tightly into Brody's side.

"I guess we're going inside," Veris said mildly, picking up Taylor's hand.

Alexander stood aside for Mia and they all moved into the house. Brody stopped at the stairs. "I'm putting Marit down to sleep," he said, attempting to head off toward her bedroom.

One of the six vampires shepherding them stepped in front of Brody. "All of you," he said.

Marit, perhaps sensing the menace around them, tucked her head even more tightly into Brody's chest and tightened her arms around his neck. She said nothing.

Brody simply stared at the strange vampires. Silently, he turned and followed Alexander and Mia into the library, with Veris and Taylor coming last.

Tira had not changed from the last time Taylor saw her. She was still a tall, exceedingly slender, dark olive-skinned woman with black eyes that seemed older than the rest of her put together. She sat in Taylor's favorite chair, while

everyone else stood around her.

But Tira was not watching them as they entered the big two-floor book-lined room. She was studying Marit with a hungry, eager expression on her face.

“Look at me, child,” she said as soon they were brought to a halt in the middle of the room.

Marit gave a little squeak and hid her face against Brody’s neck.

Something passed over Tira’s face. Annoyance. She looked at Brody. “Make her look at me,” she demanded.

“I know what you want to see,” he told her. “It won’t do you any good, my lady. Marit is adopted.”

Tira’s hand on the flat, polished wood of the chair tightened. “That is not what I have heard, Braenden of the Gaels. I will see her face. Either you will show it to me or I will arrange to see it for myself.”

Brody locked gazes with her.

Taylor could feel his temper rising almost like a temperature gauge and wanted to reach out and soothe him. Now was not the time to stir the queen. Not over this. She realized that she was clutching at

Veris' hand compulsively. But Veris' grip was no lighter.

Finally, Brody sank to one knee and whispered in Marit's ear. Marit's arms unlocked around his neck and she let him lower her to the ground. He straightened her jeans and tee-shirt, then she turned around to face the queen, her eyes narrowed. Brody kept his hands on her waist, his hands looking large against her tiny body.

The queen jerked forward, her fingers clenching the arms of the chair.

"It's *true*," she breathed. She

snapped her head to look at Veris. "She is a replica of you and the woman." She pushed herself to her feet, causing everyone else in the room to stir around her. That seemed to make her realize where she was. "Everyone get out," she snapped. "Gregor, stay here. Peter, too. Everyone else, out. *Out!*"

The room began to clear as the people shuffled out of the room, out to the limousines ranged outside. The front door opened then closed, leaving Tira and Gregor, a seven foot vampire with a wild black beard and startling grey eyes, and Peter, a perfectly normal

looking man in a suit and tie, standing on either side of her. Tira was wearing a collarless and sleeveless white dress that stopped at her knee, and looked effortlessly elegant. Compared to the jeans Taylor and Brody wore and the scuffed and old leather pants Veris wore, Tira look very much like a queen.

But Taylor wasn't about to let herself feel inferior because of clothing. Not for a moment.

Tira looked them over. "You know the secret of real time travel," she said. "The proof of it stands right there." She pointed at Marit,

who backed up against Brody. Brody murmured quietly to her.

Taylor's heart squeezed. There was a note in the queen's voice as she spoke that was alarming.

Tira shook her head. "You have had the key to time travel for years, yet you have not shared this with me, your queen." She looked at Veris. "I expected more from you, Northman. You of all people I would have expected to understand the strategic importance of this matter."

Veris remained silent.

"This should have been reported

to the council and you know it!" Tira railed, fury abruptly pouring from her.

Veris cleared his throat. "You can truthfully report ignorance, my lady. They cannot gainsay you on that."

"They knew of it before me!" she shrieked. "Someone in my own district, someone *you* confided in before *me*, went tattling to the Council behind my back! Now they are demanding an explanation from me. From *me*!"

Taylor could feel her body wanting to shrink back from the

queen's anger. Only Veris' rock solid presence beside her and Brody's unmoving body in front of her kept her where she was. She didn't turn her head to look at either of them because she knew they would be thinking the same thing as her. None of them had confided in anyone until Alexander. Alexander would not speak to anyone about the travelling. He was as cautious about the subject as they.

Who knew about their travelling? Who had found out?

Tira turned to look at Taylor with narrowed eyes. "This all

started when you messed up their lives, human. You're the key."

Brody stood up, bringing Marit with him. "Her name is Taylor." He handed Marit to Alexander and turned back to face Tira again. "I suggest you use Taylor's name, my lady, as she is both bonded and married to us." His seemingly casual steps had placed him on Taylor's other flank, opposite Veris.

Tira's big mouth with the thin lips turned down. "Yes, yes, this polyandrous marriage ceremony you arranged for yourself in Tibet. Gregor filled me in on it. You three have been busy while my back was

turned. A human marriage that is very nearly legal and off-spring, too. But you have failed in the one condition we agreed to, eight years ago. She is still human." Tira pointed at Taylor with a long fingernail.

"We still have some years yet before that condition is to be met," Brody replied. "And the married is quite legal."

"In Tibet, perhaps, but not everywhere," Tira replied, with a small, dry smile. "You will not distract me from the subject with your legal finesse, Braenden. Taylor is the key to your time travelling."

She stepped closer.

Brody stepped smoothly out in front of all of them – Veris, Taylor and Marit in Alexander’s arms – so that he was facing the queen alone.

“Brody...” Veris rumbled warningly.

Tira smiled. “You don’t want to do this. You have no idea the depth and degree of wrath you bring upon your head if you dare oppose my will.”

Brody crossed his arms. “Yeah, I kinda do, actually. But you don’t seem to have any clue about what you’re doing here, either.” He

leaned forward a little. "Let me clue you in. Don't get between me and mine, Tira. Not if you value your skinny black arse."

She drew herself up to her full height, a thousand years of power squaring her shoulders. "I am your queen," she said with utter assurance and the flatness of superiority.

"And I'm a father," Brody shot back. "I outrank you."

Tira laughed. "How cute."

"Just try me," Brody said, his voice more flat and far more sincere than Tira had just managed.

Her smile faded as she studied him. She switched her gaze to Veris. "Explain to him the danger he's risking, Northman."

Veris shook his head. "I regret, my lady, that on this occasion I agree with Brody. You're threatening my family. If Brody wasn't saying it, I would be. He just happened to say it first and used less syllables than I would. It comes out the same way, though." His face hardened. "Don't push me. You'll regret it."

Tira glanced from Veris to Brody and back again. Finally, she studied Brody carefully. "Very well, Brody

of the Gaels," she said, stepping back. "When you are ready to give me the key to time travel, you know where to find me."

She turned and walked out of the room, her head perfectly straight, her shoulders square and still. Tira did indeed walk like a queen.

Her two men, Gregor and Peter, fell in behind her.

Everyone else remained motionless until the front door closed softly behind them.

Veris was the first to move. He turned to Mia. "Mia, go home.

Pack. Buy a ticket to any country where you would like a holiday and go there for two weeks. You're on salary, of course, but go and enjoy yourself until we tell you it's safe to come back to this house and start work again. Do you understand?"

Mia pursed her lips together. "I could help. With Marit. Taking care of her, I mean."

"It's not going to be safe here at all," Veris told her. "We won't be here in an hour, ourselves."

"I'll come with you," Mia said. "You'll need help, anyway." She

shrugged. "I don't like people who try to tell me what to do any more than you do. Having to go cool my ass off on some beach while you're in danger...it'd just piss me off, you know?"

Taylor slid her hand under Veris' elbow. "Let her come."

Veris shook his head. "I won't bring another person into danger."

"It's my choice," Mia said, "and I can help."

Brody put his hand on her shoulder. "Fine, you can help. Veris, pull the stick out of your ass. Mia's a woman, not a china doll.

She can make her own decisions. Mia, pack a bag and if you can pack something for Marit while you're at it, you'll have my gratitude. Marit, go with Mia, *an bhfuil cuma cad é a deir sí, le do thoil.*"

Marit looked at Brody with big, serious eyes. "If I do whatever she says, what if she tells me to jump off a cliff?"

Mia picked her up. "You're causing mischief, *mi un poco inteligente*. You know very well I would do no such thing."

Marit grinned. "But you *could*," she said in Spanish, "and then I

would have to jump, because Daddy said so.”

Mia rolled her eyes and looked at them over her shoulder as she turned toward the archways. “I’ll be fifteen minutes, max,” she promised. She tapped Marit’s chest as she headed for the foyer and the wrought iron stair case. “Even *if* I told you to jump off a cliff, missy smarty pants, you know very well that both your daddies have given you a much older rule, a higher order that says you have to preserve your innards first and foremost.”

Marit began to argue in clear

and well-constructed Spanish and their voices faded as they climbed the stairs.

Alexander turned to face the three of them: Veris, Taylor and Brody. "Have I been marked by the queen, do you think?"

Brody grimaced. "Do you want to risk her wrath by assuming you are not?"

"Who spoke to the council?" Alexander asked. "If we gave her that name, then perhaps we would draw her sting."

"No, we wouldn't," Taylor told him. "She wants time travel. She

wants *me*. Telling her we don't know how it works won't appease her. She wants a secret, something she can give to the council to get them off her back and make herself look powerful and knowledgeable again."

Alexander nodded. "So I understood. I thought perhaps a consolation prize might work. I clearly do not know the queen well enough. Then my next assumption may be wrong, too. I had assumed I would be better on my own. Safer." He raised a brow. "Now I begin to wonder how determined Tira will be to restore her reputation."

“Very,” Brody said flatly.

Veris crossed his arms. “You’d better come with us, Alex. You were never a fighter—”

“I do know which is the sharp end of a sword,” Alexander objected.

“But it wasn’t your life’s trade as it was ours,” Brody added gently. “There’s no reason for you to have to pick up a weapon if we’re around.”

Alexander was frowning. “You think I cannot defend myself?”

Veris shook his head. “We object

to you *having* to defend yourself. This isn't your fight. We won't have you break with your faith's moral code because of us."

Brody swore and reached under his tee-shirt for his cellphone, clipped to the band of his jeans. He pressed the screen and stared at it. "Bugger!" he muttered and thumbed out a fast text message. He looked up at Veris. "Band trouble," he said. "A break-in on the bus. Cops want us all there to check it over and see what's missing." He put the phone back on his belt. "I'll be as fast as I can."

Veris caught his arm. "We all

go,” he said. “From now on, we all move together. Everywhere.”

For a moment Brody looked like he wanted to protest. Then the line between his brows smoothed out and he nodded. “I’ll get the limousine organized,” he said quietly and left, moving fast.

Taylor caught Veris’ eye. “Coincidence?” she asked, her heart thudding unhappily. She didn’t like how the business with the band’s coach had suddenly occurred right at this moment.

Veris shook his head, frowning. She could see he was mentally

groping, looking for answers where there were few or none yet to grasp. "Let's hope so."

Chapter Two

Only Brody called the million dollar-plus luxury tour coach the band used to travel around North America a “bus” -- a lingering trace of his British roots. The coach, when it wasn’t in active use, was kept in a shed in the warehouse district in downtown L.A.

The limousine carrying the five adults and Marit pulled into the big, brightly lit shed forty minutes after Brody got his text message. It

wasn't the first vehicle there. The driver nosed his way through a dozen police sedans and other cars already parked in the empty half of the shed. On the other side, the big, long coach with its dark, wild paintwork under the overhead arc lights sat silently while at least two dozen people stood or walked around it, most of them studying the detailed, endlessly fascinating artwork. The theme was appropriate for a death metal band — death, dying, blood, gods, demons, violence, the mystical, power, sex. The glories of music were intertwined throughout the

ageless themes and the band's logo and name ran across both sides. No one was left in any doubt when Nocturnal Rain rolled into town.

"Keep Marit in the car," Veris told Mia. "We'll be as quick as we can."

"We?" Brody repeated, pausing from his slide across the seat toward the door.

"Yes," Taylor said flatly. She pushed Brody toward the door.

Brody shook his head, but he slid out of the car and straightened up to his full six foot height. Taylor glanced at Veris as she eased out

behind Brody. "There are too many people for simple theft," she said softly, in Old Norse.

"Speak English or don't speak at all," Brody growled, not even looking at them. He was watching the commotion around the bus.

Veris glanced at Brody, a brow lifting. Taylor agreed. It wasn't like Brody to snarl like that.

"Let's go sort this out," Taylor said, moving forward. Veris shut the car door behind her.

Brody followed her lead.

They were met halfway across

the grey-painted concrete by a group of six law enforcement types. Three of them were uniformed cops. The other three wore suits, two of them badly. The third wore a suit that looked tailored and pristine. He walked right up to Brody, his eyes narrowed. "You must be Brody Gallagher," he said. He didn't push out his hand for a handshake, Taylor noted.

"I must be," Brody agreed. There was a fine line between his brows. "And you must be...?"

"Lieutenant Brixton, Southwest Division."

“They pulled you all the way out here for a theft?” Veris asked.

“Something like that,” Brixton said. He had pleasant looking eyes that gave away nothing. “Mr. Gallagher, we’re told that each of you in your band have your own lockers and beds on the coach. Is that correct?”

Brody glanced toward the coach again. Emerging from the far side, Taylor saw the other three members of his band walking in the middle of a cluster of uniformed cops and detectives.

“I’d like you to step aboard the

coach and identify your locker for me," Brixton told Brody.

Fear touched Taylor. "What department is yours, Lieutenant?" she asked. "You didn't say."

Brixton gave a tight smile. "No, I didn't." He stepped aside so that Brody could move forward. "If you don't mind, Mr. Gallagher? It will just take a moment."

"Which department?" Veris insisted.

"Vice," Brixton said shortly.

Brody turned to face Brixton squarely. "What's in the locker?" he

demanded.

His abrupt movement made four of the cops travelling with Brixton jerk for their weapons, only to abort the movement.

Taylor's breath hitched and hurried on.

Brixton dropped any pretense at pleasantness. His face hardened. "Your fellow band members have all confirmed the locker is yours, Mr. Gallagher. That's enough for the judge. Your confirmation is a formality. As the locker is yours, you should know what is in it well enough."

“Nothing that deserves this carnival,” Brody said flatly. Angrily.

Veris moved up to Brody’s side. “Brody, shut up. Now.”

Brixton pulled a notebook out of his inner jacket pocket and flipped it open. “We were expecting to find a certain amount of cocaine and cannabis in all the lockers and we did, in amounts usually considered for personal use. Your stash was something else entirely.”

“My stash?” Brody breathed, his tone choked.

“Brody, shut the fuck up,” Veris

muttered, shaking his arm.

Brixton seemed almost happy as he looked down at his notepad and began to read. "Amphetamines, most of the social drugs, including Ecstasy, and the biggest bag of cocaine we've seen in a long time. Good quality stuff, too. Injectable, water-soluble high-grade cut. Then there's the heroin. Pure white and uncut. A half-pound of the stuff, we figure. That right there will get you ten years at least, because that amount will be seen as possession with intent to distribute."

Taylor stared at Brixton, astonished at the righteous fury in

the man's face. He was enjoying himself with this vicious taunting.

Brody was breathing hard, his hands fisted.

Veris leaned close to Brody's ear. "Do not say a single word," he murmured, his tone hard.

Brixton shut his notebook with a snap. "Of course, we'll have all the official weights and measures properly listed on your arrest sheet for you," he finished as he put the notebook away again.

"What has Brody ever done to you, Lieutenant, to deserve your malice?" Taylor asked.

Brixton sneered. "People like you, with your undeserved wealth and fame and your superior holier-than-thou attitudes...you think you live above the law, that you can get away with anything you want because of who you are. Well, you can't." He clicked his fingers. "Brody Gallagher, you're under arrest for the possession of illegal substances, with intent to distribute. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be

appointed for you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?"

"This is bullshit," Brody growled as two of the uniformed cops stepped forward.

"We'll sort it out," Veris promised.

"Do you understand your rights as they have been explained to you?" Brixton demanded as the cops shoved between Taylor and Veris and yanked Brody's arms back.

"Daddy!" Taylor heard, muffled, from the limousine. There was a

pounding on the windows.

“Oh, god,” Brody moaned. “She can see me.”

The cuffs were ratcheted onto his wrists with a loud, horrible sound of metal against metal. Brody drew in a sharp, harsh breath, his gaze focusing inward. “Veris...” he breathed.

Veris gripped his shoulder, his expression alarmed. “Stay focused.”

Taylor glanced from one to the other man, her heart hammering. There was something happening to Brody that she didn’t understand, that Veris knew and she didn’t.

After so many years, there was something they had failed to share with her and it was threatening Brody now.

The uniforms were dragging Brody toward a marked sedan. Another one opened the back door. The inside of the door had no handles and was lined with wire caging. There was more caging between the front seat and the back. The back window was also caged in. The back seat was slashed and stained. So was the floor.

One of the cops with his hand on Brody's arm used his other hand to push down on the back of

Brody's head to make him duck as they tried to fold him into the back of the car.

Taylor drew in a shuddering breath.

Abruptly Brody threw himself backwards, out of the grip of the cops. He pushed on the side of the sedan with his boot and shoved harder, giving himself impetus. "I'm not going into that." He was breathing raggedly. Hyperventilating.

Brody, who had faced down Saracens, Fatamids, French, Germans and more across a dozen

wars and even more battles, looked like he was having a full-on panic attack.

“Oh yes, you are,” Brixton declared and waved.

Three more police surrounded him. Brody stood half-a-head higher than most of them, but they had numbers on their side. They hustled him with sheer body-weight toward the car.

Veris cupped his face in his hands briefly, then pushed his hands through his hair. Taylor saw that his hands were trembling, but other than those telling signs, he

looked utterly unmoved. He shifted on his feet, a subtle movement that put him close to the nose of the sedan, a strategic position from where he could help Brody if he had to. But for years Brody and Veris had chosen to move inside the rules of human society. Veris could not act now unless he broke with that decision.

Brody was staring at the inside of the police cruiser, his black eyes wild and glittering with an emotion Taylor had never seen in them before. *Fear*.

The cops got him within two feet of the cruiser before Brody

reacted again. He reared back with a roar, the back of his head connecting squarely with the nose of the detective who had a grip on Brody's neck. The detective squealed and fell backwards, blood streaming from his broken nose, temporarily blinded by pain.

Brody wrenched himself sideways, pulling himself out of the grip of the man on his right. He kicked him in the stomach, sending him staggering back five or six tottering steps, past where Veris stood at the hood of the cruiser, to turn and drop to his knees, his hands to his stomach, noisily trying

to breathe.

The third cop was staggering backwards as Brody had unexpectedly rammed into him with his lunge sideways. Brody turned and kept moving into him, until the cop tripped over and fell onto his back. His head rapped painfully onto the concrete. Brody landed on his chest with one knee, driving the wind out of him.

Then Brody stood and wrenched at the cuffs on his wrists, twisting them and pulling them apart with his arms. A normal human wouldn't be able to break them, but Brody wasn't normal, or human.

He growled deep in his throat, straining at the twisted chains. They gave with a low shriek of stressed metal and gave way.

Brody turned his head, questing, looking for escape. His hair had escaped the band he normally wore it pulled back in and now it spilled over his shoulders and back in long black wavy locks, completing the wild, angry man impression.

Taylor kept still. She didn't know if the beast in Brody was loose or not. She didn't know what was happening. For the first time in eight years, she didn't know Brody at all and she was touched by fear.

“Now,” Brixton yelled.

Guns fired. But not normal guns. Taylor saw red darts shoot towards Brody. But they had wires attached to them. She realized her perceptions had been stepped up. Events were moving very fast, but she was processing them fast enough to see them happen almost in slow motion.

The Taser darts, four of them – *Four!* her mind whispered in shocked wonder – hit Brody in the chest and abdomen, burying through his tee-shirt, deep into his flesh. He jerked, but didn’t start shaking like she had imagined

Taser victims might. He looked down at the darts, his brows rushing together.

“Right,” he declared. He reached for the darts and plucked them out, two at a time and tossed them away. Then he rushed at Brixton, his bloody hands out.

“Brody, no!” Veris yelled.

Taylor’s voice wouldn’t work. The fear had her by the throat.

Brixton’s eyes widened.

But the fact that Brody was going for Brixton protected him. The cops wouldn’t try to shoot him

because they feared they might get Brixton.

Instead, they simply piled themselves on top of Brody. It took nine of them and three night sticks wielded with fierce determination before Brody was subdued. The only way they subdued him was to render him unconscious.

But Taylor stopped watching long before they reached that point. She rushed to Veris and deliberately turned her face into his chest. There was no comfort to be found in Veris' arms for he trembled as badly as Taylor did.

“He will survive this,” Veris told her under the sound of the shouting and the cries. “He will survive and we will put him back together again. As long as he survives, that is all we need.”

* * * * *

Alexander tapped on the scarred duty officer's door and waited.

When a feminine voice called out “Come in,” instead of the masculine tones he'd been expecting, he instantly adjusted his expectations and stepped through

the door and shut it.

“You asked for a word with me, Lieutenant Stevens?” he said and tried not to stare. Lieutenant Sydney Stevens was beautiful. Not just pretty. Not just attractive. Not just sexy in a twenty-first century, applied and studied way. She was bone-deep, genetically-gifted, glowing with perfection beautiful.

Alexander had grown up in a land famed for beautiful women—doe-eyed creatures with silky black hair, thick black lashes and allure in their eyes so potent a man could drown in their power. Poets had written songs and books about the

fame of the women of the east and the temptation they represented. Theirs was a dark attraction. Spice and honey. An addiction that could kill a man with its potency, for the women of the east had spent centuries honing their charms.

But Sydney Stevens was light and ethereal flame against the centuries of charm that Alexander had steeled himself against. She slid past his shield and the impact was like a blow to the chest. Not just the chest; his groin stirred—for a human. This one wore a gun strapped across her shirt.

Alexander shoved the touch of

confusion and arousal deep into the back recesses of his mind and painted a polite expression of enquiry on his face as the blonde, classically beautiful detective Sydney Stevens looked up from her computer screen. Her arched brows came together. "You're not the Nordic giant that was with the perpetrator, earlier," she said, standing up.

She was tall for a woman and slender. The tailored pants and business shirt hid most of her feminine charms, but couldn't hide the width of her hips, or the fullness of her breasts. It made the

gun belt strapped over her shoulders look all the more alien.

“If you are referring to Dr. Gerhardsson, he is attending Mr. Gallagher in a professional capacity, in the lock-up’s aid station. I am representing the family’s interests at this moment.”

Detective Steven’s eyes narrowed. “They must trust you a great deal, Mr...?”

“Dr. Alexander Karim,” he told her. “And yes, they do. Is there a reason you wanted to see us, detective? Are you in charge of Mr. Gallagher’s case now?”

“As it happens, yes. Lieutenant Brixton has been....” She frowned again. “Temporarily reassigned.”

“That sounds dangerously close to an admission that the lieutenant was overzealous and has been slapped back into place and off the case,” Alexander said, probing.

Her expression didn't change by a millimeter. “If you try to get me to agree I said so in court I will lie my face off, Dr. Karim, but yes, he was.”

Alexander hid his surprise. “Is *that* why you asked to speak to us?”

“No.” She moved back around

to her side of the desk. "I've been speaking to detectives on the scene of the arrest and I've read a couple of early transcripts of reports from the scene. I *was* going to tell you to get yourself as good a lawyer as you could afford and fight the arrest, but that was before I heard that Gallagher had made bail." She looked up at Alexander. "So then I wanted to speak to the people who could scrape together over seven hundred thousand on a Sunday evening. I have an idea that good lawyers aren't going to be a problem for you."

"Probably not." He pushed his

hands into his pockets. "You wanted to speak to us to...what? Measure the opposition?"

"I was merely curious," the detective said. She sat back in her chair. "I've spoken to every detective and officer that was part of the arresting party and nothing adds up properly. Gallagher didn't resist arrest until they tried to put him into the cruiser, but he had no history of claustrophobia that he admits to and there's nothing on record."

"If you're asking me for insight, you know I will answer none of your questions, detective,"

Alexander told her gently.

She smiled ruefully. "I know," she said. "Although I wish it were possible."

"That's an odd notion, coming from a detective," Alexander returned. "What about your fine ideas about due process?"

Sydney Stevens sat back in her chair. "Due process doesn't always give a detective the full story. It just gives facts. I like the connective tissue behind the facts. The emotions that join the facts together. The tendons."

"A remarkable idea for a police

officer.”

“A forward idea, certainly,” she agreed coolly. “One that often gets results.”

“It’s a brave idea to promote, especially for a woman detective to try to champion.”

She smiled and her face lit up with joy. “Yes, I’ve been told that. Frequently.”

Alexander found he was holding his breath as the warmth from her smile washed over him and left his skin tingling in its wake. “What other revolutionary and shocking ideas do you have up

your sleeve?" he asked, fighting for a calm countenance.

She stood up once more, giving him another look at her long legs as she came around the desk. She reached for the handle of her office door behind him and he understood that the interview was over.

But she didn't open the door.

"Where were you born, Dr. Karim?"

"I...er...Israel," he said truthfully, giving the modern name for his place of birth.

Detective Stevens reached out and gently pushed aside the opening of his casual collarless white shirt, to reveal the heavy, stylized gold fish symbol charm hanging from the chain on his neck. "The secret symbol of persecuted Christians, yet you have the look of a Muslim."

"I was born into the Muslim world," he told her.

"You converted?"

"Yes."

"Yours has not been an easy road, then." She gave him a small smile. "I know something about

battling odds, Dr. Karim. I daily have to fight to be taken seriously, just to begin. As for getting ahead, well..." She gave him an impish grin. "I tend to side with the underdog as a result." She opened the door. "I have a feeling that there are dynamics...facets to your friends well worth exploring." Her face and expression took on a dreamy, distant expression. "The reports drop such interesting hints." Then she blinked and the professional was back in place. All levity was gone. "They're the underdogs, Dr. Karim, and all their money and influence is worth spit

this time. Tell them that. Tell them they need the best lawyer in the world because even though the department fucked up royally on this, the heat coming down from elsewhere will make all that go away. Memories will get hazy, reports will get lost or misinterpreted or completely fabricated. Tell them to cover their asses, or just plain take cover.”

Alexander stepped out the door and turned to face her. “But you’re the lead detective on this,” he pointed out.

“I’ll be doing my professional duty on this, Karim. I won’t drop

the ball. But I won't be throwing it so hard it leaves bruises, either. I'm not Brixton." She started to close the door. "And we never had this conversation."

"That's a pity," Alexander replied.

"Why?"

"I have a feeling that there are dynamics and facets to you well worth exploring...if only we had ever had a chance to meet and talk."

She shut the door without responding. But not before Alexander caught a glimpse of her

gorgeous green eyes widening in surprise.

Alexander rested his hand flat on the glass a moment before moving on. It was a promise.

* * * * *

“I’m fine, I tell you,” Brody said tiredly, his head rolled back against the back of the big chair. His hands were resting loosely on his thighs. It was about three in the morning and Taylor’s energy was flagging. She could feel sleep trying to claim her despite the crisis, but the fact that Brody looked tired bothered

her enough to stop her from simply relaxing and letting sleep take her.

The room was the main one of a small suite of a major mid-priced hotel chain on the outskirts of L.A. The furniture was anonymous, but comfortable. Mia and Marit were asleep in the small bedroom next door.

Veris let go of Brody's wrist, where he had been monitoring his heart rate and got to his feet. "Taser burns healed?"

"Yes," Brody said flatly. He wore one of the hotel's toweling robes and was still slightly damp

from the shower. They could no longer see the angry red marks through the blood-stained holes of his tee-shirt, for which Taylor was grateful.

Alexander pressed his hands together. He was sitting cross-legged on the end of the smaller queen-sized bed. A king-sized bed sat empty, next to it. "You were in deep distress, my friend. We are concerned."

"Yup," Brody said, not moving.

Taylor sat up from the curled up ball she had been in on the padded luggage rack. She knew what she

had to do. Injecting all the disgust and scorn she could conjure into her voice, she said loudly: "Oh leave him stew in his own self-pity party. He's just being an egotistical princess."

But Brody still didn't move.

Taylor bit her lip, looking at Veris. He looked as concerned as she felt as he looked down at Brody.

Alexander sat opposite Brody, frowning, his rolled up sleeves pushed back past his elbows, looking like he could pull a medical answer from thin air if he just

concentrated hard enough.

Taylor realized that both Veris and Alexander hoped the answer was physical. They both wanted Brody to be fixed with a pill or a treatment. They wanted to make him better without having to dip inside the black pool they'd glimpsed inside him earlier tonight.

So it was up to her.

She rose to her feet, feeling the pull of tiredness across her back and behind her eyes and in the strain of holding her head up. She walked over to Brody's chair, picked up his hands and put them

on the arms of the chair. Then she straddled his hips with her knees. It put her head at almost the same height as Brody's—or would, when Brody was sitting up straight.

Taylor slid her hands into his hair and under his head, feeling the soft locks between her fingers. She lifted his head, forcing him to look at her. His black eyes, with the thick lashes and brows, focused on her.

“I don't know what happened there tonight, Brody,” she told him softly. “Veris knows some of it, clearly. Enough to try to protect you. But there's something in your

past you haven't told me about. Something big—"

Brody's eyes blanked out on her. She saw it happen. His gaze turned inwards and fear washed over him.

Veris' hand came down on her shoulder. "Don't, Taylor," he said.

In that second she put it together. The handcuffs, his resistance to being forced into the back of the cruiser. Veris' attempt to protect him. "God, I am so stupid," she breathed. She stroked Brody's brow. "This goes back to when you were a slave, doesn't it?"

Brody shuddered. "Sixteen

hundred years," he whispered. "It haunts me still."

Taylor drew Brody's head to her shoulder and wrapped her arms around him, as far as she could reach. He was trembling, a fine movement that worked through his body.

"Can you talk about it, Brody?" she murmured. "Can you tell me like you told Veris?"

"Even I don't know this story," Veris said softly, just behind her. "I just know that he was enslaved when the Saxons swept through Britain during the first waves of

occupation after Camlann. Brody was thirteen or so and he stayed a slave for seventeen years until he died and was turned by another slave." Taylor heard Veris' cat-like steps as he moved around the chair until he could see her face. "Now you know what I know," he said bleakly.

"I have always known that much," Taylor said.

Veris stroked the back of Brody's head with a gentle touch. "I have chosen never to probe further."

"Because you feel guilty for

fighting on the side of the people who enslaved him,” Taylor told him.

Veris dropped his hand. He took a breath. Then another. “Right through the gut.” He glanced at Alexander. “I’m sorry for dragging you through these intimacies, Alex. I hadn’t planned on them.”

Taylor glanced at Alexander, where he sat. He had propped his head on his hand and watched with open interest. Now he shrugged. “Forgive me for being fascinated. The persistent remains of human psychology in you, after so many centuries have abused you, is a

wondrous thing.”

“You make it sound like a blessing,” Brody ground out against Taylor’s shoulder.

“But it is,” Alexander said, sounding surprised.

Brody lifted his head to look at him. “I’ll trade you a day in the slave pits in Constantinople, Alex. Then talk to me of blessings.” His voice was hoarse.

“Constantinople?” Veris said sharply.

Brody pushed himself back against the chair once more. “That’s

where I was taken and sold. Sold a few times, until I shot up to my full height and they suddenly realized I'd make a great chariot driver."

Veris sank onto the edge of the bed that Alexander was sitting on. "Chariot racing," he breathed, looking ill. Then his gaze dropped to the floor. "*Miklegarth*," he muttered. It sounded like a curse, but Taylor jumped, for she recognized the Old Saxon rendering of "Constantinople".

What was it about Constantinople and chariot racing that would cause Veris such distress?

Veris lifted his head again to look at Brody. "What year?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Brody replied.

"What year were you taken there, then?"

"I don't know," Brody replied. "Not for sure." He shrugged. "It took forever to get there, anyway. Many of us died on the way."

Veris winced and looked at Taylor. "You were right. The guilt bites deep."

"For something you had nothing to do with?" Brody asked.

Veris shrugged. "You are not the only one carrying a burden, it seems." His stance and his words were casual, but his gaze slid away from Brody's face, proving that Veris was more affected than he was choosing to show.

Brody's mouth lifted in a small smile. "And you two keep wondering why I love you. Then you say something like that, or do something like this." He trailed his hand down Taylor's hair, which hung around her hips these days. Unlike Mia, she left her hair loose as often as possible, because Veris and Brody loved to stroke it and

slide their hands into it, or hold her head still with it as they plundered her mouth or other parts of her body.

Brody's fingers slid into her hair, rubbing up against her scalp, making her shiver. But he didn't take his kiss.

"Veris," he said, his voice thick. "Come and kiss her." Brody bent her head back and her lips up in offering.

Taylor moaned, her body abruptly turning hot, her blood slow and thick and languorous with heat and need.

Veris' mouth covered hers and his tongue drove deep inside. She could feel the pressure of his canines against her teeth, even with their lips between them. It was a familiar touch, one that reassured her.

When Brody's hands touched the bare skin of her stomach, she sighed into Veris' mouth as her pulse accelerated. "I don't think I should be the focus tonight," she breathed against Veris' lips.

He licked her upper lip. "Neither do I." He smiled as he turned his head to Brody and slid his hand into Brody's long locks

and tilted his head back. Brody's breath escaped with a harsh sigh as Veris bent over him and kissed him, his lips hard against Brody's.

Taylor's body tightened and thrummed as she watched the two men kiss, one dark haired, one pale. She still thrilled at the sight of them together, even now, eight years after meeting them and three years of their very special marriage later.

With a gasp, she remembered Alexander and looked over at the queen-sized bed. It was empty. Alexander had discreetly withdrawn, probably to the other bedroom. She had not heard the

main hotel room door open and close and Veris had been insistent that no one go anywhere in public alone.

With a sigh of relief, Taylor pulled off her tank top, then her bra. Her breasts were already swollen, the nipples hard with excitement. She reached between her thighs and pulled Brody's robe undone and opened it up. It didn't surprise her to find his cock rampantly erect and throbbing. She trailed her forefinger along the length of him.

At her first gentle touch, Brody groaned, the sound pulling from

deep within him. He was more than ready. He was powerfully aroused.

“You like the idea of being used by us, don’t you?” she murmured and slid her tongue along Brody’s extended neck, as Veris continued to raid his mouth.

His hips lifted, his pelvis thrusting with a little compulsive jerk.

Yeah, he liked it.

Taylor lifted herself from the chair and stripped away the rest of her clothing. As she wriggled out of her jeans, she found her gaze pulled

back to Veris and Brody. Their heads together, their mouths pressed against each other.

Taylor's body burned at the sight.

Naked, she pressed herself up behind Veris and undressed him as he leaned over Brody, until he was as bare as she. Taylor could see his shoulders lifting with his accelerated breathing.

She stroked his stiff and jutting cock, making him moan into Brody's mouth.

Veris pulled Brody to his feet, away from the chair, so that Veris

stood behind him. Brody's robe was tossed onto the chair.

Taylor circled the two men as Veris pulled Brody's hair aside and licked his way along the line of Brody's neck, following the great artery. Brody had fed tonight, after they had left the station. Veris always found Brody especially arousing after he had fed.

Veris made a breathless sound, like a groan without sound, as he ran his tongue over Brody's renewed pulse. He slid his arm over Brody's shoulder, pulling him up against his chest.

Brody's eyes closed in pleasure.

Taylor leaned over to the nightstand between the beds and reached into her purse and withdrew the small tube of lubricant that she carried with her, always, and pressed it into Veris' spare hand. Then she lowered herself to her knees and ran her hands down Brody's thighs to his ankles and separated them, forcing him to spread his feet wide.

Brody gripped the back of the cast-aside chair for balance, his eyes wide open as he stared down at her. Excitement glittered in his eyes and his expression was hungry. He

knew what she intended. His cock was throbbing. Jerking against his abdomen.

Taylor circled the heavy velvet skin of his testicles with her finger.

He hissed.

Veris' hands griped Brody's hips. "She teases. I take." His voice was hoarse with building pleasure.

From her low vantage point, Taylor was able to watch Veris nudge his cock, slick and gleaming with lubricant, into Brody one slow inch at a time. Brody curled his fingers over Taylor's shoulder, his breath shuddering, as Veris took

him.

Taylor waited until the moment Veris was completely inside Brody, then she plunged her mouth over Brody's pulsating cock, pushing it deep into her throat, as she cupped and gently rolled his balls in her hands.

Brody cried out, his fingers clamping on her shoulder. His hips thrust, driving his cock deeper into her mouth.

Taylor accepted it, letting her lips slide over the shaft and back up again, to tease the oh-so-sensitive head of his cock and the underside

with her tongue. She could feel her own body tightening, tingling with pleasure, but that wasn't the point here and now. Brody was.

He was trembling, gasping. Veris and she knew exactly how and what Brody liked best and with both of them concentrating on him, Brody was helpless to do anything but explode.

Brody's cock swelled and pumped in her mouth, warning her, but Taylor just smiled both mentally and around his shaft and kept working her lips and tongue at the delicate flesh.

Brody thrust his hands into her hair and clenched desperately. "Agh, Taylor!"

He came in hard, surprisingly hot spurts that Taylor took and swallowed silently. Brody's cum, like Veris', wasn't salty or bitter. It was neutral, without semen or active biological matter. But it tasted different from Veris'.

She swirled her tongue in the shallow divot of the eye of his cock, and let him go, sitting back.

Brody was still breathing hard. He straightened up, studying her with his eyes narrowed as Veris let

him go. "No," he said softly. "You don't get off that lightly," he said, his voice a dangerously low growl.

He reached for her.

Taylor was still on her knees. She threw herself backwards, twisting out of the way, which put her on her hands and knees facing the opposite direction. It was a bad move. It made her far too vulnerable, because Brody was vampire and wouldn't hesitate to use his speed and strength against her in private.

Even as her hands landed on the dark green carpet, Brody's arm

curled around her waist from behind, his fingers spreading out over her abdomen. "Got you," he growled.

His cock pushed into her folds, finding her pussy entrance with unerring aim, and slamming home with a hard, deep thrust.

Taylor gasped at the sudden, unexpected possession, adjusting to it.

"You're hot. Wet," Brody muttered against the back of her shoulder. "Anyone would think you were ready for me."

"I was waiting for Veris," she

said. This was an old game, an old joke.

“I have better fish to fry,” Veris growled.

Taylor turned her head to look over her shoulder and saw Veris standing over Brody. His eyes were narrowed and his cock was still hard and beating upright. “Yes, do him again,” she said. “Make him scream.”

Brody closed his eyes and thrust into her, his hand shifting to dip into her cleft, bumping up against her sensitive clit. “That’s what I planned for you, wife.”

“Together, then,” she whispered, as her climax stirred and leapt at his touch.

“You might have to hurry,” Veris gasped as he claimed Brody once more.

Taylor moaned, her hips thrusting backwards. “No... problems.” Her climax swirled and gathered as Brody’s fingers stroked and massaged and his cock slid in and out of her, stroking the inside of her pussy and all the nerve endings there. She could hear Brody’s labored breathing as Veris took him, and the little catches in Veris’ breath, the erotic hitches and

gasps. That drove her pleasure steaming toward the peak.

Taylor managed to hold in her scream, in deference to Alexander in the next room and the people sleeping there. But she screamed with a clamped jaw and her vision faded for a moment.

Brody's guttural climax was muffled against her back, but the power of his hard, deep thrusts as he came told their own story. His fingers dug into her shoulder as he strained against her, his pelvis grinding against her ass.

Veris groaned just once, but the

groan was cut off quickly. He, too, remembered Alexander.

* * * * *

Alexander kept his back to the door, his butt on the floor and concentrated on the sound of the sleeping people on the bed to the left of his crossed feet. If he focused on the rhythm of their breathing, then he could block out the sounds of passion, love and eroticism he could hear through the paper thin door at his back. The door might block noise for normal humans, but for a vampire, it was useless. He

could hear everything, if he chose to.

If he was polite, if he was decent, he would choose not to eavesdrop.

A good Christian wouldn't listen.

Problem was, he wasn't a good Christian. His whole body was wracked with desire and envy. With need.

Once upon a time, he had thought himself in love with Taylor. That moment had long gone. His admiration and respect for Taylor was limitless, yes, and he

loved her in all ways except romantically. He could even lust after her and understand why Brody and Veris crossed time and fought so doggedly to keep this human woman in their lives. But he was not in love with her.

Alexander brought his knees up and rested his elbows on them. Then he leaned his forehead on the heels of his hands and made himself face the other facts as cleanly as he acknowledged his lust for Taylor.

Because it wasn't just lust for Taylor. He wanted all of them.

He had watched Brody and Veris kiss and the truth had exploded in his mind like a fireworks display.

It wasn't simple lust, either. He wanted what they had. Lust *and* love. The whole nine yards. Until Alexander had met Veris, Taylor and Brody, a ménage belonged in the realm of the pornographic and that was all. It had never occurred to him that a ménage could be something so beautiful, so wonderful and full of love—and so erotic, too. These three had opened his eyes.

Now, he wanted what they had.

Only the Christian church called what they had a sin and them sinners. Never mind that Alexander was already a condemned abomination because he was vampire...

Alexander pulled out his Ichthys pendant and looked at it. Why had he chosen the secret symbol and not simply worn a cross?

He put the pendant back inside his shirt, hauled himself to his feet and stretched out on the second empty bed. He might as well get comfortable. He could be here a while.

Brody carried Taylor over to the bigger bed, while Veris pulled back the covers. Brody tucked her under the sheets and blankets. "Sleep," he murmured. "You're very tired."

She kept her arms around his neck. "Stay for a while," she said. "Please?"

Brody settled down next to her. Veris drew the blanket over them both, then slid under the sheets with them, settling down behind Brody. He propped his head on his hand, so that he could see them

both.

Brody sighed, curling his hand over Taylor's waist and drawing her up against him. "This is where I was meant to be," he murmured. "Between the two of you."

Veris kissed his shoulder. "I'm starting to think, Brody, that you and I were just the dress rehearsal for the three of us."

Brody brushed Taylor's hair from her face and back over her shoulder, nodding. "We had to learn how to survive together in order to make the three of us work." He laughed softly. "We're

both so fuckin' stubborn, we needed a thousand years to do that."

Sleep was pushing insistently at her mind, but Taylor struggled to clear it away. "You're ready, aren't you?" she whispered. "Ready to turn me."

"I'll never be ready for that," Veris said gently. "But I know I never want to lose you. Ever. Not even for the sake of watching you live a normal human life. If that means I must find a way to turn you, then I will. But I'm hoping you will let Brody do it. He sees it as a gift. I do not...not yet, anyway."

“Brody?” she whispered.

“I will,” he said, “If you want me to.”

Her eyes closed and she struggled to open them again.

“But not right now,” he added. “Sleep, Taylor. We have enough to worry about right now. When all this fuss is over, we’ll talk about it again.”

She felt his lips on her temple and realized her eyes had shut again.

“Wake up, Taylor,” Brody told her. His arms were around her and

her head was resting on his shoulder.

“You just told me to sleep,” she complained.

“That was six hours ago.” Brody chuckled.

“Mummy! Come and eat! There’s pancakes!” Marit’s high, sweet voice sounded very happy, like she had already eaten more than her share. Taylor groaned.

“There is also crisp bacon, just as you like it,” Veris murmured by her ear. “And coffee.”

“Coffee!” She tried to move.

Veris laughed. "I'm not sure whether I'm sad or glad I missed out on a coffee addiction. The smell is divine, but the lengths people go to for their daily hit is astonishing."

Taylor paused from struggling out of the sheets and blankets to kiss Brody. He looked normal. Peaceful. She stroked his cheek. "Good morning. Did I sleep on you all night?"

"You know I don't mind."

"You know I love it, that's why you don't mind."

He smiled. "True."

She smacked his chest lightly.

Veris held out a robe for her so she could slide into it without flashing the entire room as she climbed out of the bed. As she tied the robe closed, he grabbed the lapels and pulled her close for his own good morning kiss. His was much more thorough and arousing. By the time he let her go and pushed her toward the table, Taylor was breathing hard and thinking about tugging him into the bathroom.

Mia had already poured her a cup of coffee and was pushing the cream over.

Taylor sat down. Hunger beat down her arousal.

For now.

She was through a full pancake and two strips of bacon and her first cup of coffee when Brody asked her for his cellphone.

“In my handbag,” Taylor told him. His cellphone had been part of his personal effects she had signed for and collected at the station at one in the morning just before they’d headed for a random hotel on the outskirts of L.A.

Taylor settled back to sip her second coffee and nibble on a third

strip of bacon, while she and Mia between them coaxed Marit into eating a bit more bacon and a bit less maple syrup.

Veris was working on his big laptop and Alexander was reading over his shoulder.

“Oh, sweet lord,” Brody breathed, where he sat on the still-made queen-sized bed. He spoke softly, but the room was almost silent and there was something in his tone that made every adult turn to look at him.

Taylor found herself on her feet. There was a stricken look on

Brody's face as he stared at his cellphone.

Veris pushed back from the desk. "Tell me," he demanded.

Brody held out the cellphone. Veris took it, turned it around and read it. His face hardened. "Fuck," he said.

"Veris," Taylor said and glanced at Marit, who was watching him.

He sighed and handed her the phone. She took it, almost afraid to read whatever it was. She looked down. Brody had been reading an email. It was quite short. The email address was unknown to her. There

was a quote. The whole email simply said: *"While the State exists, there can be no freedom. When there is freedom there will be no State.* Lenin (1870 - 1924), 'State and Revolution', 1919"

There was no signature, but none was needed. Taylor knew who would send such a pointed quote to Brody of all people.

Tira.

Taylor handed the phone to Alexander, feeling a little sick. "Is this a warning or the formal slap on the wrist?" she asked.

Brody spun to face her, his jaw

slack with shock. "Last night was Tira's doing?"

Taylor pointed at the phone. "That seems to imply it was."

Veris crossed his arms. "You told her to leave your family out of it, Brody. So she did. She made it very personal indeed."

"But...so fast?" He licked his lips as if they were dry.

Alexander put the phone on the desk. "Vampire speed. An army of clerks at her disposal. She has been researching you all for days, if not years. She knew of your activities, your intimate information, when

she arrived last night. This could have been arranged in minutes, or even prearranged and executed with a couple of calls when she left."

"I would have done it that way," Veris growled. "Given us no time for a pre-emptive strike."

"That's what you were planning, wasn't it?" Taylor asked. "A pre-emptive strike?"

"It's one thing I had thought of," Veris agreed with a growl. "But the call from the police cut right through any plans at all." He swore softly, with a sideways glance at

Marit. “It was a strategically brilliant move she made. Fast, ruthless and it gave Brody exactly the right message.”

Marit, perhaps sensing the strained atmosphere, climbed down from her chair and clambered onto the bed where Brody sat. She threw her arms around his neck from behind and rested her head on his back.

Brody drew her around and into his lap. “Come here, munchkin.”

Taylor sighed. “So she planted the stuff on the coach?”

“We’ll never be able to prove

that in court,” Veris said. “We’ll just look stupid if we try. A death metal band member that doesn’t do drugs? They’ll laugh us out of court.”

“We could prove it if we taped her doing it,” Taylor pointed out patiently.

Everyone but Veris looked puzzled.

Veris exploded. “No!” He shook his head. “Absolutely not! We can’t fuck around with it that way. Not this close to our real time selves. G o d *knows* what we’d do to history.”

“Time travel is time travel. This close, any ripples we set up would be miniscule at best. The risks are negligible. You’re just panicking because you’ve never thought of using it this way.”

“Time travel?” Brody repeated. His frown disappeared. “You mean g o *back* and tape her?” He straightened up.

Mia stood up. “I’m going to take Marit for a walk down to the indoor pool and the amusement park. Marit?” She held out her hand. “Let’s get some juice, huh?”

Marit’s puzzled expression fled.

“Sure!” She crawled out of Brody’s lap and hurried over to take Mia’s hand.

Mia picked up a room key. “Text me on my cell when it’s a good time to come back, Taylor, okay?”

Alexander stood. “I’ll go with them.”

Taylor nodded. “Thanks, Mia. Alexander.”

Veris crossed his arms as the door closed. “I’m not panicking,” he said flatly.

“Yes, you are,” Brody shot back. “Taylor’s right. If it looks like a

duck and sounds like a duck, it's a fucking duck. What difference does it make if we jump two days or two millennia? We go back, tape her planting the stuff and stash the tape somewhere safe. Come back here and collect the tape. *Voilà*. Proof for the courts."

"The courts will want to know how we got the tape," Veris insisted. "Where it came from. We can't tell them we jumped back in time. We have to show a clear line of logic demonstrating how the evidence was collected and stored. It's called the chain of evidence and if it's broken the evidence is worth

snot in a court of law."

"Christ, you're trying to teach *me* the laws of evidence?" Brody cried. "We're talking about forty-eight hours! Something can sit in sealed locker for forty-eight hours."

Veris hesitated. "Okay," he agreed.

Brody pushed his hands through his hair. "Yes, it *can*," he pushed. "My barrister days are dusty, but I know that much. As long as the seals are good, you're covered. Find a barrister, a lawyer. Check with them. Who do you know, Veris? Someone high up. Know any

appeal lawyers? Judges? Anyone who will take a call from you right now?"

Veris frowned. "I know one or two."

"Call them. Ask them."

"Which one?" Veris asked reasonably.

"All of them," Taylor replied. "Consensus of opinion rules. We don't do this unless they all agree."

Brody held out his cellphone. "Here, use my phone."

Taylor pushed it away. "Think Tira won't be tracing it?" she asked.

“Use the hotel phone,” she told Veris.

He nodded. Twenty minutes later he put the phone down and sat back. “It’s unanimous,” he agreed heavily, looking down at his notes. “Two copies, one sealed and unbroken and identical to the working copy, both dated and witnessed, will cover us.”

“So why do you sound so unhappy about it?” Brody demanded. “Is it that you don’t like me being right for a change?”

Veris looked up. His expression was rueful and there was a

pinched, painful look in his eyes. "You know that's not it," he said. He stood up. "If we do this...if we go back two days to catch Tira planting the stash in your locker—"

"If?" Brody repeated.

"If we do it," Veris continued firmly, "then you stay here, Brody. I won't jump with you."

Chapter Three

“Like fucking hell I stay here!” Brody exploded off the bed, his hands clenched, the tendons in his neck standing out. Fury radiated along every line of his body. “It’s my life she’s screwing up. It’s me the fucking cops tried to stuff into an oubliette.”

Veris didn’t move despite Brody’s anger. “And it’s your black Irish temper I’d be taking back with me,” he said softly. He shook his

head. "Look at you."

Brody's chest was heaving. "How are you going to find your way back without my memory?"

"It's only two days. I'll manage," Veris told him. "I was here two days ago, too."

Brody shook his head. "I want to go." He looked at Taylor. "Don't leave me sitting here and worrying."

Taylor stood. "You did say we shouldn't split up, Veris."

Veris looked at Brody. "You're going to make her feel guilty for

you? That's cheap."

Brody shook his head. "It's true, this time. Last time we jumped it was a fucking disaster that was averted by a gnat's whisker. I won't be left sitting here on my hands while you two jump back into god knows what."

Veris closed his eyes. "Fuck." He sighed. "There's other reasons you shouldn't come. Reasons I can't speak of."

Brody snorted. "Like what?"

Veris rolled his eyes. "Obviously, when I say I can't speak of them, I *can't speak of them*."

His tone was impatient.

Taylor knew, suddenly, what Veris wouldn't say. The time travelling they did was a function of their combined talents. She provided the push, the power. But Brody and Veris, or just Brody or Veris, provided the direction and that direction came from whatever they were thinking of—whatever was strongest in their minds at the time they jumped.

Veris was afraid that Brody's experience with the police had dredged up his fears and memories of his time as a slave and it would color his thoughts when they

jumped.

Worse, if Veris even raised the subject in discussion, it would keep the matter in the forefront of Brody's mind. That was why he wouldn't discuss it, why he was dodging behind the "couldn't" excuse.

Taylor cleared her throat. "Veris is right, Brody. This is something he can't discuss."

Brody spun to face her. "You know of this conspiracy, too?"

Taylor saw surprise skitter over Veris' face before he got his expression under control.

“Yes, I know what Veris is talking about,” she told Brody. “You’ll just have to trust him. Us. You really don’t want to know about this.”

Brody’s face hardened. “For my own good, huh?”

Taylor hesitated. “I would never be so condescending,” she replied.

“Then tell me this mysterious something isn’t you two trying desperately to avoid any mention of my enslavement,” Brody shot back. “Just in case my fragile mind can’t handle the strain.”

Veris sighed and threw himself

into the big armchair that Brody had been sitting in last evening. "Well, fuck," he muttered, sounding disgusted.

Taylor tried to ignore the guilt digging at her. "I'm sorry, Brody. Although it's not the vulnerability of your mind that is the issue. You steer the jumps. If you're subconsciously worrying over that it could affect the jump."

"Which is why you should stay right here with Marit," Veris finished.

Brody pushed his hand through his hair, staring at the wall. For

long minutes he was silent. Then he got up and came and sat next to Veris, so that he was looking at Taylor. He picked up Taylor's hand.

"Here's what I think," he said. "I'm not so good with the philosophy and fifty dollar words, like you two, so just shut up and listen while I get it all out." Again, he looked far away, marshaling his thoughts. "We all need to go together. Alexander and Mia can watch Marit. Alex adores her and Mia is devoted to her so we know she is in good hands no matter what happens. But it's important we all jump. We've always all

jumped on the big jumps and it would be wrong to change that now." He grimaced. "I got us into this mess by telling Tira to come after me, so it makes sense I should jump back and clean up my own mess, now. I don't like the idea of sitting around here waiting for you two to do all the heavy lifting for me."

He rested his hand on Veris' knee. "Here's the other thing. I don't want to screw up the jump. Of course I don't. I just want to go back two days, nail Tira's ass to the legal wall and get back to our lives. But you often talk about fate and

blind corners and not counting on life going the way you plan on it happening. Okay...so maybe we just hit a big corner. But if the jump goes screwy, so what? We're together, the three of us. We'll figure it out. We did the last time. We'll do it again."

"'Screwy' can cover a lot of territory," Veris said. His voice was hoarse.

Brody shrugged. "I just know I don't want any of us flipping back in time without all of us doing it together. It was the lack of one of us that nearly killed us, last time."

Veris dropped his head.

Brody curled his hand around the back of Veris' neck. "I don't say it just to stir your guilt."

"You say it because it's the truth," Veris whispered. He lifted his head and looked at Taylor. "You have as much right to say yes or no here as either of us. More, really. Do we jump all together and risk fate?"

Taylor shrugged. "Hobson's choice," she said simply. "Of course we all go. I prefer this to be the simple in and out it should be, but the idea of being stuck in history

somewhere without both of you is frankly terrifying."

Veris nodded and looked at Brody. "The orator of the people." He grimaced. "You even sold me." He kissed him and stood up. "Taylor, if you get Alex and Mia back, I'll put some preparations in place. Brody, do you still have what it takes to put together a power of attorney for Alex?"

Brody looked affronted. "Listen to the professor. You'd think he was the only one who ever earned a bloody degree."

* * * * *

Alexander's normally placid expression became even more serious when Brody explained what they planned and the legal preparations and arrangements they had put in place.

"Of course I will care for her – as if she were my own! But this is a simple hop back. Two days in time and you will be gone long enough to tape the stash being planted, then store the tape correctly, yes? A few hours at most! This extraneous preparation is ridiculous. Panic inducing."

"We've learned to expect the

unexpected,” Veris said quietly. “We won’t do this without making sure Marit is cared for, no matter what happens.”

Alexander ran his fingers through the black curls of his hair, frustrated. He picked up the form Brody had just made him sign. “I will take great joy in tearing this up in eight hours’ time.”

“I will enjoy watching you do it,” Taylor added.

* * * * *

They settled on the big king-

sized bed together. Alexander hovered over them.

“From a medical viewpoint, it looks alarming,” Veris warned him.

“Yes, yes,” Alex said. “You’ve briefed me on the symptoms. The lack of them. I have saline, blood, glucose. I know what to do if this extends beyond the simple jump you plan.”

Veris grinned as he settled on the bed. “It probably won’t and all this fuss is for nothing. Marit, come here and give me the biggest kiss ever.”

Marit laughed and crawled into

his arms and kissed his cheek wetly and noisily.

“Do what Uncle Alex says, hmm?” Veris told her, pressing her nose.

Marit nodded, her eyes wide. “You’re going back in time again, *Far?*”

Brody clear his throat. “Never try to fool smart kids,” he muttered.

Veris glared at him and scowled. Then he gave Marit a hug. “Just a quick trip,” he promised. “There and back.”

“To help *Athair* with the queen,”

she added wisely, looking at Brody.

Brody sighed and pushed his hand through his hair with a helpless gesture.

“You were saying?” Veris asked. He hugged Marit again. “You be very careful of the queen, okay, munchkin? She isn’t a friend of ours right now.”

Marit nodded. “But Uncle Alex and Mia are.”

“That’s right.”

Marit climbed over to Brody and hugged him. “*Ádh mór*, Daddy.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Brody

told her. "I'm sure your luck will be luckier than everyone else's."

Marit squeezed Taylor hard. "You have to bring them back, Mummy," she murmured in her ear.

Taylor brushed Marit's hair out of her eyes. "I will," she promised. "Just for you."

Marit nodded, her expression serious. Then she smiled and kissed her and climbed off the bed and took Alexander's hand. She looked very small next to Alexander. Very small and very determined.

Taylor turned to Brody and

Veris. "You know we could probably do this without the kissing."

"Let's not screw with the formula," Brody said.

"Not kiss you?" Veris protested. "Wash your mouth out." He slid his arm around Brody's waist. "The security tapes at the coach shed show evidence of tampering two days ago, at three in the morning. Taylor, you were asleep. Brody, you were in your music studio, writing. I was keeping Taylor company that night and reading. For obvious reasons, we're going to use my memory as the beacon. We need to

jump to about two hours before that, so we can cross town to the warehouse district and be in place when they arrive and tape them doing the deed. Brody, you need to meditate, go neutral and let me guide the jump." He took a breath, slid his other hand under Taylor's hair and brought her face toward his. "Ready?" he asked everyone.

Taylor's heart was thundering. "No," she confessed. "But let's do this anyway."

Brody took a breath and let it out. "Facing down Saracens was easier," he said, with a crooked smile. "Let's go." He wrapped his

arms around them both and glanced at Alex, Marit and Mia. "See you in a while."

Marit waved.

Veris kiss Taylor, his lips hard and demanding.

Taylor pressed into the kiss, her mind leaning backward through time. She felt them move.

* * * * *

"Taylor, wake up."

A hand shook her gently.

Taylor woke groggily, feeling

the ache of not-enough-sleep behind her eyes. “What is it?” she whispered. “Marit?”

Then memory aligned with consciousness. She sat up in her bed at home and looked around. Veris was putting books on the bedside table as he lowered his legs to the floor. He was in the suit trousers and shirt he would have worn for his professional affairs that day, but the trousers were wrinkled from sitting on the bed next to her.

“Oh god, we made it,” Taylor murmured, deep relief flooding her in a hot-cold wave. “We actually made it.” Until that moment, she

hadn't realized how much she had assumed the jump would go wrong.

The bedroom door opened and Brody hurried it. "We're here," he said. "Two days ago. I just checked on my computer."

Veris looked at his watch. "Twenty-past midnight. Let's go," he said, standing up.

"Wait," Brody said, digging out his cellphone. "I'm going to send Alex a delayed text message. Tell him we made it."

Veris grinned. "I'm going to change and then I'll get the old video recorder. They can't claim

that is digitally created."

"Meet us out the back in five," Brody said. "We can use my Mustang to get to the warehouse."

* * * * *

"Isn't that Gregor?" Taylor asked, pointing at a tall black shadow moving against the side of the big shed across the road from where they huddled in the shadows between a warehouse and a row of commercial shop fronts.

"That's him," Brody agreed, bringing the video camera

viewfinder up to his eye. The camera started to hum with the soft sound of actual film moving through the guts of it as he filmed.

The side door of the big shed opened and closed quickly.

“He’s inside,” Veris confirmed. “Brody, keep filming. Taylor, you stay out here for the reasons we discussed earlier.”

They couldn’t speak of the reasons aloud, for it would be caught by the video’s soundtrack, but Brody and Veris could move much more silently and faster than she could, which meant they were

naturally sneakier than she could ever be. Combined with their ability to see in the dark and with the video camera set to record at low light levels, the camera would pick up everything that happened and so would Veris and Brody. Taylor would just stumble around, blind and slow.

She nodded. "Be careful." She crouched down against the side of the building, making herself small and insignificant.

Brody was already hurrying across the deserted road, the camera to his eye. Veris followed him, a hand on his back, guiding

him. At the door, Veris eased it open and they slid inside.

Taylor wrapped her arms around her denim-encased knees. This didn't feel like a time travelling jaunt, yet for this first time ever she was actually borrowing her own earlier body, just like Brody and Veris took over earlier versions of themselves. When she got back to her real "now" would she remember being extraordinarily tired two days ago, because her sleep had not been restful?

She rested her chin on her knees. They had stopped travelling

not just because of Marit, but because they had become afraid of the consequences. The last time, when Veris had almost been lost to them, had scared all of them so much they had by mutual and unspoken consent found petty excuses and ways to avoid jumping, now they knew what caused the jumps.

Just little, safe leap frogs here and there. Nothing too taxing. Nothing dangerous. Nothing adventurous.

Taylor sighed and shifted her chin, returning to Brody's almost angry insistence that he come with

them.

"So maybe we just hit a big corner..." Had he been chaffing at their avoidance, too?

If Brody and she itched at the absence, then what of Veris, the Viking who had roamed Western Europe for nearly a thousand years before civilization and Brody had semi-domesticated him? Surely he must be feeling some sense of wanderlust? Or was four years, in Veris' terms of time, a mere inhalation? A heartbeat?

A hand touched her shoulder, then another quickly covered her

mouth as she sucked in a startled breath. She looked up, into Brody's eyes.

"It's done," he said simply. He looked fiercely happy. "We got it all. Let's go duplicate the tape, seal it up and jump home."

* * * * *

The television production studio was owned by a friend of Brody's, who sleepily told Brody to knock himself out when he said he wanted to duplicate a tape of one of his song clips and hung up midway through Brody's thank-you.

Veris shrugged. "Send him a bottle of Courvoisier and real French truffles. He's a gourmand. He'll forgive you."

The duplication of the tape took barely ten minutes, for both Veris and Brody were at ease with the professional equipment. Sealing the second tape and dropping it into the overnight vault at the bank took another thirty.

Forty-five minutes after that, they eased around the back of the big house in the Hollywood Hills and crept into Taylor's bedroom just as the sun was coming up.

Brody threw himself onto the bed, jubilant, as Taylor stretched out, her whole body throbbing with weariness. He rolled on his back and looked at them both as Veris settled next to her and tucked her into his side.

Brody took a breath and let it out. "Thank you," he told them.

Veris nodded. "Let's get back home, first. We don't want the other occupants of the house in this day to wake and find us here before we jump. It'll cause confusion when we leave and our earlier selves take over." He looked down at Taylor. "Are you up to it, Taylor?"

We could stay for a while and let you sleep. We can find a private moment later to jump."

She shook her head. "I would rather go now," she confessed. "Get it over and done with. It's been a tough twelve hours and the next twelve probably won't be any easier. We should let Alex and the others know we're fine, too."

Veris kissed her gently. He didn't say anything, but she saw it all in his eyes. His pride and love.

She felt Brody's hand on her hip and looked up. He cupped her jaw, his gaze gentle. "I'm sorry...I've

been so focused on getting us out of this, I never stopped to think how this was impacting you. How it must have looked to you. More secrets from our dark pasts come to slap you around, hmm?" He grimaced.

Taylor let him draw her into his arms and wrapped her arms around him. "Just take me home, Brody," she whispered against his neck, as Veris pressed up behind her. Veris' big arms wrapped around the both of them.

Taylor lifted her mouth up to Brody's. "Take me home."

Brody kissed her and she leaned into the jump, taking them all with her.

Chapter Four

The stench and noise told Taylor they hadn't made it home. She clung to Brody with desperate strength, for they were standing now and the solid strength of Veris was no longer at her back.

"What happened? Where are we?" she asked Brody, now noticing the humid heat around them. It was dim, too, with the drip of water that made her think of caverns. But there were walls in the

dimness that looked man-made, even though they curved downwards and gleamed dirty white.

“Is it safe to let you go?” she asked.

Brody was holding her as tightly as she held him. His hair, she realized, was as long, if not longer, than he wore it at home. But it seemed tangled where her hands touched it.

“Not yet,” he growled into her neck. Then, with a deep exhalation, he said, “*Dia orainn.*”

“Why must god help us?”

He pulled away from her, just enough to look her in the eye. His hair hung matted on either side of his face and, shockingly, his cheeks wore a day's growth of dark beard. "Because no one else will." He held up one hand. A three inch thick metal band circled his wrist. "We're in Constantinople." He licked his lips and swallowed. "I'm human, Taylor."

She stumbled backwards a step, almost tripping over something. She turned to look behind her to see what it was and realized it was her own garments. She picked up the hem, as Brody steadied her.

Taylor laid a hand on his chest and felt the heat and quick, steady beat of his heart. It was true, then. Acid fear rushed through her. "But, if you're human..." She looked around, feeling like the walls were closing in on her. "...then you're also a slave," she finished.

There was a sound of steps behind them, echoing on the walls. The flare of light reared against the sloping walls. Brody glanced at the leaping light and back at her. "I am," he agreed. "And from your clothes, you are most definitely not a slave."

She glanced down at herself.

The garments were softly folded and pleated, sweeping in elegant curves over her arms and pinned at her shoulders. What she could see of her hair was curled and felt like it was pinned up at the back of her head to dangle at her neck. There was a heavy necklace at her neck and equally elaborate earrings in her ears that swung with hefty arcs each time she moved her head. A thick bracelet coiled around her wrist, enameled and glittering in the little light showing in the cavern.

Her dress was white, clean and glowing, but the garment over the

top was rich with embroidery and dazzling colors. The name for it came to her. It was her *stola*.

Brody, in contrast, wore a simple tunic, belted at the waist with twisted cloth, and it was far from clean. His only adornment was the metal slave bands on each wrist.

“You have to go,” Brody insisted.

“Go where?” Taylor asked. She looked over her shoulder. The cavern ended in a blank wall.

Brody pointed toward a narrow passage she had not noticed,

hidden in the shadows, with even darker shadows showing at its mouth. "That way. I'll stay here and distract them."

"Distract who?" Taylor demanded.

"That is the guards who come now," Brody told her. "They have found me missing from my usual spot and seek to find me."

"But where is Veris?" Taylor whispered anxiously.

Brody began to shepherd her toward the tiny passageway. "In this time and age? He would be in Britain."

"Britain?" The word squeaked out of her and she turned to Brody, horrified.

"He will come straight here as soon as he realizes what has happened. He will put it together."

"But it took you...you said it took ages to get here when they took you as a slave. Months and months, you thought!"

Brody's lips thinned. "They were transporting hundreds of us," he said softly. "Veris will be travelling alone and he will let nothing get in his way. Our job will be to survive until he gets here and

that is all.” He tried to smile but it was a weak expression. “Once he is here, all we have to do is be within reaching distance of each other and we can jump out of here. There are no other complications, this time. We just have to wait for Veris to get here.”

“But that could take weeks!” she cried softly.

“You! Celt!”

Brody stiffened. “Damn,” he muttered.

The torches, actual hand-held flaming balls of rags soaked in oil, illuminated a handful of men

striding toward them. They wore longer tunics – *chitons*, her contemporary language mind supplied – with dalmatics over the top in various shades and colors and patterns. Most of them were dirty and ragged. None of them wore cloaks – *chlamys* – and every single one of them had filthy feet inside their sandals.

All of them were heavily armed, with at least a sword and knife apiece. Most carried spears, extra knives and several carried bows over their shoulders.

The leader was a big man with

wide shoulders, a heavy gut and narrow eyes that glittered with anger.

“Oh, ho! What’s this? You’ve got yourself a split tail, now, have you?” he said as he planted his feet wide in front of Brody.

Brody remained silent. Taylor realized there was nothing he could say to defend himself. He was a runaway slave, apparently caught dallying with a woman.

She was from the higher classes, if her dress was anything to go by. That might work in her favor. Taking a deep breath, Taylor

stepped out from behind Brody, squaring her shoulders. "You dare interrupt me," she said, mustering all the imperiousness she had heard Tira use and injecting it into her voice and posture.

"By all the holy gods...." one of them breathed.

"My lady Ariadne," the big man in front said. He gave a stiff nod of the head. "Well, this puts a different light on the matter, doesn't it?"

Taylor felt her hauteur slip a little. Who the hell was Ariadne?

The big man gave an oily smile.

“We wondered who slipped Braenden here out of his chains. It never occurred to me a pretty smile and a piece of gold did the trick.” He grabbed Brody’s wrist. “But we need him back in his cage, rested up for tomorrow’s race if you’ll be excusing us, my lady.”

He yanked hard. Taylor heard Brody’s grunt of pain as he staggered forward and remembered from when she had travelled with Veris back to when he had been human, in old Norway, that Veris had felt pain and all sensations at almost twice the intensity he had felt them as a

vampire.

Brody would be experiencing that phenomenon, too.

One of the other guards, the one that had prayed to the gods when he had seen her, stepped forward. He was young, with shaggy blond hair that reminded Taylor sharply of Veris. "I'll escort you home, my lady," he said.

Taylor almost laughed. The lad barely came to her shoulder. But he had a flat Roman sword on his hip, a dagger in his belt and another knife hilt peeped from his sleeve, where he held the single torch up

to light the way.

And he knew where she lived.

She watched Brody being pulled and yanked along, the guards all holding swords on him.

Survive until Veris gets here. Her heart squeezed hard.

“I am ready,” she told the boy guard, who swept her into the dank passage Brody had been insisting she take in the first place.

* * * * *

Basilides. A dour, Greek version

of Robbie Coltrane having a permanently bad day. Brody had no trouble remembering the head guard's name. It was emblazoned in his mind and came to him almost at once, despite the novel sensations shooting through his body. Pain seemed to be amplified. So did sound. The air brushed over his skin, making every hair stand upright on high alert.

His heart was a runaway steam train trying to cope with it all.

Basilides was having a whale of a good time tugging on the chains they'd threaded back through his bracelets as soon as Taylor's back

was turned. He seemed to salivate as he described all the punishments they could hand out for a runaway.

Brody listened with half an ear. He was too busy dealing with the changes in his body, even though trying to run away was one of the direst crimes a slave could commit.

They were back into the populated areas of the slave quarters. Caging was interspersed with rough wooden bunks. Fire pits with cook pots were added punctuation. Everywhere, guards kept watchful eye upon the slaves in their short, dirty tunics as they went about the meager business of

their daily lives.

His memories were fitting back together now he was forcing himself to dredge them up. This was the lowest level of one of the furthest wings of the training facilities associated with the Hippodrome and it was linked to the Hippodrome by an underground passage. For races, the slave chariot drivers that Genesios the Money Lender owned and kept in this basement cavern could simply be herded along the passage to the Hippodrome. They didn't need to see daylight until they were pushed into their chariot for their

race.

A particularly hard wrench on his wrist brought Brody to a halt and a half spin around to face Basilides. "I do believe you were not listening to me, boy," Basilides said, his face mere inches from Brody's.

Brody stared at the man. In his memory, in the numerous times over the years when he had dared to probe the memories, Basilides had always seemed to loom over him like a giant. Yet now Brody realized with a start that Basilides was shorter than him by at least an inch, if not more. He could look

over Basilides' shoulder.

He saw a slave sitting up on one of the higher bunks, a concerned look on his worn face.

Evaristus. The unacknowledged leader of the slaves. The man – the vampire – who would turn Brody sometime in the future. Evaristus watched him now and Brody knew he was silently coaxing Brody to back down. To submit. To give them what they wanted so that Brody would live to fight another day. It was an old song Evaristus had long sung. Brody had listened to it for at least fifteen years.

Brody returned his gaze to Basilides' face. "I was listening," he replied.

Basilides pushed him to the ground and spat on him. "If we didn't have a race tomorrow, I'd do more. You might have been sprung by a lady with coin and a taste for bartered flesh, but you still look me in the eye too squarely for a slave. You need humbling." He pushed his dirty sleeves up his arm. "Bring me the lash!"

Something locked in Brody's chest, making his heart hurt and his breath wheeze out of him. He looked past Basilides again.

Evaristus was clutching the sides of the bunk. Pity etched his features. Fear stabbed into Brody as memories of other times similar to this one returned to him in a rush.

Hands were scrabbling at his back, pulling at his hair. His tunic ripped, then was torn from him.

More hands pulled on the chains at his wrists, pulling him down flat onto the cold, hard, sandy floor. Hands wrenched on his ankles, holding him still and flat.

Memory told him what was coming, but the shock of the first

blow drove all thought from his mind except for the agony of pain. A small voice whispered in his mind. *Why did Veris not warn me of these feelings?*

Then the second blow landed and even the small voice vanished. The pain overrode everything, became everything.

* * * * *

After seventeen lashes, Basilides lowered the lash reluctantly, his chest heaving with effort. "Throw him in the cage for the night. Water rations only. Maybe that will cool

his temper and make him biddable for the morrow. If he doesn't win his race he can have another twelve lashes just for losing the purse."

The guards holding Brody down loosened their hold on his wrists and ankles, but Brody didn't move. Blood trickled from his bruised and torn back.

"Throw some water on that mess, too," Basilides said, pointing to his back. He dropped the lash, stepped over Brody's still body and walked away.

* * * * *

“Gilmárdal! Quickly! Staunch it!”

Veris blinked, refocusing. He looked down into the open wound in front of him and the ancient instruments inserted into it, then up at the man opposite him.

“Hurry!” the man insisted.

Greek, Veris realized. He lifted his hands to clamp the pulsing vein and realized they were bare. *Ancient Greek*, he amended and realized where he was. He adjusted mentally. “Right,” he said. “Let’s get this finished.” He looked for something that would work as a

clamp and sighed when nothing presented itself. "As quickly as possible, anyway," he added, delicately clamping the bleeding vein with his finger and thumb.

Two hours later, he stepped out of the treatment center and plunged into the spring. It was supposed to be sacred, but all he cared about was washing the blood from his arms, for it reached as high as his shoulders. There was no one else in the spring, for it was night and all the visitors to the Sanctuary of Asclepius had gone for the day. Besides, Pergamum had been steadily losing its majesty and

popularity for nearly two hundred years. The Christians had seen to that. Statues of saints that wept blood and created miracles had stronger appeal than Greek temples filled with doctors that used science and practical medicine.

Veris floated in the water for a few minutes, gathering his thoughts, then climbed the steps back to the stone seat where he had left his tunic. Cydones was sitting next to it.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you, Northman?” Cydones said.

Veris picked up the tunic. “Yes.”

“You pleaded with us, when you came here. You begged us to teach you all we knew. You said you’d had a bellyful of war.”

“All of that is true. I will be back, Cydones. But I must go to Constantinople for a while. I have friends in trouble.” He slid the tunic on and pulled his hair out of it. It slapped wetly against his back, almost to his waist.

“How could you know that?”

He bent to slide on his sandals. “I just know. I can’t explain it.”

“The same way you just knew how to perform an operation we

have never seen done before?" Cydones asked.

Veris stood up, keeping his face neutral. For a long moment, he couldn't think of anything to say to cover this major gaff. Then he settled for a partial truth. He looked Cydones in the eye. "I couldn't let the patient die, could I?" he said simply.

Cydones considered him for a moment. Then he smiled. "I wouldn't have, either," he agreed. He got to his feet. "I hope you are wrong about your friends."

Veris shook his head. "I'm not."

“How will you get there?”

“As fast as possible.”

“When will you leave?”

Veris stood up from fastening his other sandal. “Now,” he said simply. He held out his hand. “I *will* be back, Cydones. I have to be.”

“Pergamum will still be here when you do, Northman.” Cydones gripped his upper forearm. “Perhaps you can teach *us* something, instead.”

* * * * *

There had been hostels and inns operating in Pergamum time out of mind, catering to the tourists and sick that sought help or rest in the famed city. There weren't as many operating now as there might have been when Pergamum was at the peak of its power and fame as a city of healing, but Veris had found one that didn't fleece as badly as the others and was willing to charge a long term rental for a room where he could come and go with minimal interference.

He changed into a longer tunic and dalmatic, added a cloak pinned at the shoulder and a sword about

his waist. He left a month's rent in his room and cleared it of valuables, including all the coins, which he put in his wallet on his hip. There were half a dozen hidden weapons on his body, but he still felt naked stepping out onto the road without a shield against his side.

He wasn't travelling as a mercenary this time. It wouldn't serve his purposes to walk through the double rampart walls of Constantinople as a for-hire dogsbody. He needed to look like someone with influence and power...at least until he had sniffed out what had gone wrong and

found Taylor and Brody.

Then he travelled through the rest of the night, walking silently along the deserted road, heading for the tiny mining town north of Pergamum. Soma had the virtue of being small and having caves and pits of coal dug from the hillsides. The people of this time called coal 'black stone' and found it useful for their fires. Veris had found the porous countryside useful for another reason.

He arrived in the tiny town as the day was beginning to start and found someone who was keener to acquire coin than keep horseflesh.

He bought their horse for less than the going rate and was trotting into the rising sun before breakfast, already heading out of town again.

He retraced steps he had taken the night of walking from Pergamum to recall and found the cave just north of Soma with no trouble. It lay untouched since he had left it covered with grasses and overhanging branches and landfill over the mouth of it. It lay far off human paths, too far for even the curious to accidentally find.

He lit a torch and went inside while the horse munched contentedly on wild grass.

Inside was a virtual Aladdin's cave. Decades of pillaging and raiding, while never settling down in one spot meant Veris had acquired a small fortune he had not been able to drink and dribble away on dice and women. He had stored it away, instead. Occasionally, he had sold pieces off to eager collectors, always at very good prices and always for gold or gold coin and no other, for other currency tended to lose its value over the long term.

He had relocated his hoard to Soma when he had decided to study at Pergamum, because he

wasn't certain where his life would take him after that. The row of chests sitting beside the cart he'd used to bring them here contained a collection of coins, precious gems, objets d'art and other prizes of war. Most of them made Veris sick to look at them.

All or some of them would help him win through to Brody and Taylor now.

He shrugged off his cloak, then the dalmatic and threw them both over the low sides of the cart. In the flaring and flickering firelight of the torch, he picked up a pair of gem-encrusted sheers from one of

the chests and grabbed a hunk of his hair and started to cut.

* * * * *

Taylor stood in the middle of the opulent room, afraid to move. The young guard had walked her through the streets of Constantinople and it had been more than eye-opening—it had been nearly overwhelming.

There were thousands of people on the streets. It had been shocking. There were so many people squeezed behind the high rampart walls of the city it made New York

look placid.

These were not just people of Greco-Roman ancestry, which she might have expected, but people of every possible race and color, all dressed similarly, or in variations of the same sort of vaguely Roman style, with the excessively colorful layers on top. Her mind reeled.

There were definitely the haves and the have-nots. Thanks to her time spent in Jerusalem during the first crusade, this fact wasn't the shock it might have been. Brody's situation already had her braced for the ugly truth. Taylor – or Ariadne – was one of those who were well

off. Brody was a slave, who had nothing. Then there were poor classes, who scraped by and working classes, who did okay.

When the guard stopped in front of a grandly ornate columned and statue-filled white marbled palace-sized building and bowed and backed away from her, Taylor realized with horror that Ariadne wasn't just well off. She was far beyond that.

There was a shout from inside the building and guards and women in the same flowing white elegant robes as herself, but not nearly as elaborate or elegant, came

tumbling and running down the long flight of stairs at the front, calling her – Ariadne's – name with voices filled with panic and delight. They surrounded her and began shepherding her up the stairs. Questions battered at her.

“Where have you been?”

“What have you been doing?”

“Where did you go? Two days we've been looking for you!”

“Mercy, the master will be relieved!”

Slowly, as Taylor was shuffled through elegant room after

stunning room after more breathtaking room into yet another one, she realized that she was being taken directly to see “the master,” and that the flood of questions weren’t designed to let her answer, but for everyone to vent their relief and dismay at her disappearance and sudden reappearance.

She was deposited in the middle of the floor she now stood upon and the servants, as she finally surmised them to be, departed to get the master.

Taylor swallowed her growing fear as she looked around the sumptuous decorations and

paintings. Finally, she was beginning to understand what was meant by Byzantine elaboration. Nothing was left plain and unadorned. Filigree and gilt covered everything. Brocade and marble was everywhere. It was rich, ornate and stunning.

There was a murmur of voices. A pad of footsteps on marble. Then a flash of movement from the far corner of the room. He was coming.

She straightened up, adjusting the veil on her head as she had seen the women wearing them in the streets.

The man that came toward her was short. Only about five ten, very nearly her own height. He was richly dressed, of course—as well dressed as any of the men she had seen so far. He wore boots rather than sandals. The boots had soft soles and would be warm on all this marble. He had pale brown eyes, but they were looking at her sharply.

He took her chin in hand, looking at her.

Then he glanced over his shoulder at the servants who had followed him in. “Everyone leave,” he said curtly. “Leave me alone

with my wife."

My wife.

Taylor shuddered.

The servants all vacated the room again, leaving them alone.

He was staring at her hard. His hand dropped away from her.

"You are not Ariadne," he said softly. "You look so very much like her, but you are not her."

Taylor considered for a second whether to bluff, or not, but the certainty in his voice told her a bluff would fail. "I'm sorry," she said. "Your servants hurried me in

here before I could explain. They didn't give me a chance to speak. Even the guard that brought me here was convinced. I've been trying for an hour now to find a way to tell people I am not Ariadne, but everyone is so convinced I am her, they don't even question it."

"Have you?" he said sharply.

"Have I what?" Taylor said.

"Found a way to tell anyone?"

"I don't know how!" Taylor said. "No one even questions whether I'm anyone else. They just assume I am your wife. It's very

strange!”

He seemed to relax. “Good,” he said.

“*Good?*” Taylor replied, astonished.

He whirled away, troubled, then back to face her. His expression was that of a man skewered by a dilemma. “Do you even know who I am?”

“I arrived in Constantinople this evening,” Taylor confessed. “I know nothing of this city.”

He wrung his hands together. “I see I must beggar myself then. Do

you have a name, dear lady?"

"Tyra..." She hesitated, then added with a smile, "Gallagher-Gerhardsson."

Matthew frowned. "A most unusual name. Irish Celtic and... Nordic?"

"Yes," she agreed.

He bowed slightly. "I am Matthew. They call me Matthew of Antioch, although it has been years since I left that city."

"Ariadne is your wife," Taylor concluded. "And from what your servants were saying, I have

guessed that she is missing.”

Matthew pursed his lips, his expression growing darker. “They believe she is merely missing. I know that she has been taken and why.”

“Taken? Why would they take her? For money?”

Matthew looked affronted at the idea. “For the races,” he said, as if it were perfectly obvious.

“What races?” Taylor asked blankly.

Matthew looked at her as if she were stupid. “The chariot races, of

course.”

“They would take your wife hostage over racing?” Taylor tried to keep any incredulity out of her voice. She was in a different time and culture and she knew she was missing a big chunk of information. Byzantium wasn’t a subject she had studied in her trips through the history books and she was feeling that lack now.

Matthew narrowed his eyes, studying her. “Now I really do believe you arrived here this evening, if you would question such a thing. Yes, they would do this. I am the owner of a string of

chariots and drivers. They wear the green and we're winning so far this year. The blues would do anything – *anything* – to ensure we lose."

"They...would kill your wife, if you let your teams win?"

Matthew sat on a nearby divan with a heavy exhalation. "One of my colleagues, two years ago, also a businessman with a string of highly successful chariots, had a beautiful wife he doted on. I don't know what happened to her, but she was found floating in the Golden Horn one day, half her body eaten away by fish. My friend sold off his chariots. He lives in Sicily now."

Matthew looked at her. "I could speculate, Tyra. I don't think it would be a difficult exercise."

"But this is outrageous!" Taylor protested. "Surely there is a governing body, some sort of regulating agency that controls the races? Someone you can appeal to?"

"You mean the emperor, perhaps?" Matthew asked.

Taylor caught her breath. "Do you have access to the emperor? Can you appeal to him?"

Matthew smiled dryly. "I could. But he favors the blue and spends

pots of gold on making sure they win each week. I wouldn't expect any appeal to him to be received with sympathy at all."

Taylor hissed out her frustration.

Matthew's smile broadened and he stood up again. "I prefer to approach this with more finesse than the bull-at-the-gate strategy you have in mind. Now I have met you, there is an alternative."

"And that is?"

"With your agreement, you continue to pretend to be my wife Ariadne in public, especially at the

races tomorrow. That will confuse whoever is holding Ariadne and give them less power over me. If they think they have no leverage, the threat is lifted."

"But what of Ariadne? What will they do to her?"

"I will do what I have been doing all along," Matthew said firmly. "Use all my resources to find her. If you appear in her place tomorrow, it might cause enough of a stir amongst the blues that her location is revealed to me."

Taylor considered. "And when I am not parading as your wife?"

“You will need to stay close to the house as my wife would, but you are free to take advantage of the amenities here and enjoy the benefits as she would.”

“I may need to move around the city on errands of my own,” Taylor pointed out.

Matthew considered this. “As long as you travel as my wife would travel, with a full complement of servants and escorts and bring no shame on this household or my reputation, then you are free to do what you will.” His eyes narrowed. “No late night sallies to the slave quarters.”

Her heart quickened. He had been informed where they had found her, then. The servants of this household were, of course, loyal to Matthew and not her.

Should she agree to this charade? Where else would she find protection, shelter and an instant identity as a rich, landed woman with means to help Brody? She just had to learn the ropes in this culture so she could figure out how to move outside them. "I supposed, then, yes, it is an arrangement I can work within," Taylor said hesitantly. *Brody, hang on*, she mentally begged. *I'm coming*

for you.

Matthew nodded. “Good,” he said, sounding pleased.

Then he backhanded her across the face with a blow so powerful it knocked her to her knees and blinded her with the pain.

Chapter Five

“You want him fit enough to drive that chariot tomorrow, don’t you? Then let me feed him the slops. It’s little enough, after what Basilides handed out.”

Brody fought to bring his mind together. Evaristus. That was Evaristus speaking. About him, he realized.

Time passed.

“Braenden!” The voice was

hissing in his ear. "Braenden, you stubborn git, wake up!"

Brody forced his eyes open, although he didn't want to. It was easier to float.

There was a wall in front of him. Bars in front of the wall.

Cage. It was a cage.

"Look at me, Braenden."

Brody turned his head slowly, but even slow was a mistake. It brought all the pain slamming back into his body. He groaned and closed his eyes again. *That* was why he had preferred to float. While he

was floating, the pain hadn't bothered him. Now it was a raw, throbbing thing in his brain and body, stealing thought and breath.

"Come over to this side, so I can reach you," Evaristus whispered. At least it sounded like a whisper. "I can help with the pain."

Brody forced himself up off the floor of the cage and shuffled over slowly, trying to find a comfortable position on the bars on the bottom of the cage. Evaristus pushed cloth through the holes in the bars. "To sit on," he said.

It gave some padding.

The man pushed a small tin cup through. "Eat," he encouraged. "It's the only food you'll get until just before race time tomorrow."

Brody sipped and almost gagged, but made himself drink the disgusting thin soup. It had the virtue of being hot.

"Turn and let me get at your back," Evaristus whispered.

He turned, still drinking.

Evaristus began to smear something onto Brody's back. It was cool and that helped. Whether it would help with the healing, that was another matter. This was about

491 A.D. as far as Brody could remember and calculate. Medicine had been basic back then and he was human and vulnerable to infections and more...the whole shooting match.

He pressed his head against the heel of his hand. Where was Veris? What was Taylor doing? What had he got them into? How had this happened? He had been happy to return home. The pall of memories of this place had been momentarily lifted by the satisfaction of defeating Tira and getting out from under the charges. He had relaxed.

Brody paused, with the cup

halfway to his lips. *He had relaxed.*

Evaristus reached through the bars to pluck the cup from Brody's hand, disrupting his chain of thought. He tugged at Brody's elbow so that Brody turned to lean a shoulder against the side of the cage. Evaristus sat with his shoulder against the outside, facing Brody.

Across the way, a guard was hauling one of the younger slaves from his bunk. The boy was lithe, lean and with the wholesome good looks the guards often went for. The slave protested but the guard just cuffed him around the head

and dragged him away.

Brody shivered. He remembered those days all too well. Until he had shot upwards and filled out across the shoulders, he had been a favorite of the guards. Even now, they still went for him occasionally, but Brody fought them every time and he had enough muscle and determination to make their fun times expensive and often painful, so they hesitated before choosing him. It took more than three of them to make a night with Brody worth it.

He bowed his head. It was throbbing. A headache. He hadn't

had one of those in over sixteen hundred years.

“We’ve known each other ever since they threw you in this pit,” Evaristus said, his old voice soft and soothing. “You were so young, so fragile, I never thought you’d last this long, Braenden of the Celts.”

Brody rested his head against the back of the cage. “Thanks to you, I did.”

“But you are not you,” Evaristus said.

Brody lifted his head to stare at Evaristus. “What did you say?”

Evaristus stared at one of the bars as he ran his forefinger down its length. "You are not Braenden. Not the proper one. I watched you confront Basilides and your reactions are not those of the Braenden I know. He would never have the courage to bring himself so close to Basilides. Being a slave has worn him away. You're like Braenden, if he had spent time being normal and happy. Yesterday, you were the Braenden I know. Last night and today you are this other Braenden who is a stranger to me."

Brody tried to quell his

rampaging heart, before he remembered that he no longer had any control over it. It was going to beat itself to death in his chest and there was nothing he could do about it. He tried to weigh out the pros and cons of time ripples and consequences and couldn't factor them fast enough. Evaristus was waiting for an answer and he needed an ally. Nothing but truth would do.

Brody swallowed. Hard. "I know what you are, Evaristus," he said softly, and pushed his tongue up under his upper lip.

Evaristus leaned back, as if he

was repelled. He gripped the bars of Brody's cage hard and for long moments he did not speak. "That is not possible," he said, at last. "There is no way for you to know that."

"One way," Brody told him. "On some day in the future...I don't know when, because I don't know what day this is, or even what year, exactly, but someday I think not long from now, you will turn me."

Evaristus opened his mouth to speak, then swallowed. Then, "I wouldn't turn you. Not you."

“You do it because I am dead and it is the only alternative.”

Evaristus crossed his legs and stared at Brody through the bars of the cage. Brody could see his mind working hard. “Then who is it who faced Basilides this evening?”

“Me,” Brody confirmed, “But a far future version of me.”

Evaristus pressed his fingertips together. “You’re from the future,” he breathed.

Brody nodded.

“You lived so long that time travel became ordinary fact?”

Brody grimaced. “Not exactly ordinary.”

Evaristus considered him again. “But you are vampire...why are you not healing like one?”

“I’m borrowing my younger self’s body and Braenden was human. I am human in this time. I can be killed just as easily as any human.”

“Then go back to your time and leave Braenden to heal, alone and without complications,” Evaristus declared in a furious under voice.

“I can’t,” Brody said. “The woman I was found with tonight—

she must travel back with me. I must reach her again before I leave."

"Ariadne, Matthew of Antioch's wife?" Evaristus snorted. "Better to ask the gods to grant you eternal riches, boy. You won't get near that one again. Not now you've been caught sullyng her once. Matthew will lock her up good and tight and throw away the key."

"What are you talking about?" Brody asked, wincing as his head began to pound anew.

"I listened to the guards tonight, after they'd finished beating you.

The woman in the cellar with you was Ariadne, Matthew of Antioch's wife. Matthew owns a string of green chariots and he's being pressured to lose right now. If you think you're ever going to get near his wife, then the beating they gave you knocked your brain loose. That, or the long life you've lived gave you far more confidence than you deserve." Evaristus snorted. "You're a slave, boy. You have no rights, no freedom and no one cares what you want. They just care that you win that race tomorrow, so if you don't lie down and get some sleep and let your body recover

enough to control your team of four, you're going to find out exactly where you stand in the hierarchy that is Constantinople." Evaristus got to his feet and gave a sour smile. "I will give you a hint. It's nowhere near the top."

* * * * *

Strong, slender hands lifted Taylor up off the cold marble floor, sometime after Matthew had left her at his feet with blood oozing from the corner of her numbed mouth, her eye streaming involuntary tears. She was glad of

the veil that covered her head as she lay, too stunned to react to his sudden backhand blow. It had taken her completely by surprise.

“Harlots seek the company of slaves,” Matthew had intoned, standing over her. “As my wife, even popular, handsome chariot drivers should be considered beneath your notice. This is the first and last warning I will give you, *Ariadne*.” His boots shifted on the marble. “Do not make a mockery of my name, or the entertainment I will supply will make you wish you had never sought distraction in the slaves’ pits.” His voice came from

close by her face. He was bending down, speaking close by her ear to ensure she heard him properly. “Do we understand each other?”

Taylor nodded, her chin scraping against the cool marble.

“I do not hear you,” Matthew said.

Taylor lifted her chin. “Yes, Matthew,” she said, working hard to keep her tone meek and obedient. As Ariadne, she had shelter, money and position in a city that was powered by rank and privilege. She had to do whatever it took to cling to her status so that

she could use it to help shield Brody until Veris arrived in the city and they could return home.

Matthew said nothing more after that. She heard his soft boots on the marble as he walked away and the sound set off trembling in her as she realized she was safe for now and she lay, trying to recover, unable to get up, until the hands curled around her arms and waist, lifting her.

Two sets of hands. Two people. She tried to apologize when her knees buckled and the hands had to hold her steady, but there was no response to her murmured words.

She was led through the opulent rooms, into an apartment of smaller, more intimate rooms that interconnected, but were distinctly feminine in décor, from the swags of cloth to delicate colors adorning the furnishings. There were cushions and cloths softening sharp corners and surfaces.

Ariadne's rooms, Taylor guessed.

She sank down onto a divan as the servants on either side of her stepped back. There was a tinkle of water, then a cool cloth pressed against her throbbing cheek. Of course, ice and ice-making

machines were ten centuries into the future.

Taylor looked up at the woman standing over her for the first time. She was dressed plainly – for a Byzantine – and had greying hair and fine wrinkles around her eyes. Taylor judged her to be in her late fifties.

“I am Kale,” the woman said. Her voice was beautiful – low and modulated in a way that made Taylor want to keep on listening. “What am I to call you when you are not playing the part of my mistress?”

Taylor drew in a slow breath. "You know I am not Ariadne?"

Kale lifted Taylor's chin, turning her head with clinical detachment as she assessed her cheek and eye before reapplying the damp cloth. "The others serve the master. I serve Ariadne and did even when she was a child. I came to this household with her when she married him. Of course I would know you are not her, even if I did not listen in doorways for the sake of my own skin." She smiled briefly at Taylor. "One learns a great many things, listening around corners."

"I am sure," Taylor said dryly.

She hesitated. "You are a slave?"

"Of course." Kale dropped the cloth into a bowl of water resting on a low table next to the divan. "I was given to Ariadne on the day of her birth."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Kale seemed genuinely puzzled.

Taylor adjusted her answer. "I'm sorry about what is happening to Ariadne."

"I know you are, or you would not have agreed to help. For that, I am happy and pleased to help you

in return.”

“Oh.” Taylor digested that silently while Kale softly dabbed at her face. It wasn’t helping much, but Taylor wasn’t going to tell Kale that. “There are races tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes, indeed.” Kale smiled. “I like the races.” Pleasure showed on her face.

“You like the greens, of course,” Taylor added.

Kale’s smile faded. She glanced over her shoulder and her gaze skidded away from Taylor’s face. “I...yes, of course I do,” she

muttered.

Taylor's heart jumped and her stomach squeezed. "You're a blue fan," she breathed.

"No!" Kale replied stoutly.

"Yes," Taylor said just as firmly.

Kale squeezed the cloth in her hand, her knuckles whitening, her lips thinning. "My mistress," she whispered. "Her father...you must understand."

Taylor frowned. "Pretend I arrived in Constantinople just this evening, Kale. Pretend I know nothing about chariot racing, the

blues, the greens, any of it. Explain it to me."

Kale tilted her head a little to look at Taylor with an odd frown plucking at her brows. "You really are a stranger to this city?" she murmured.

"Yes."

"But you speak as one of us."

"I have a gift for languages and an ear for accents. Tell me, Kale."

Kale lowered herself onto the divan next to Taylor. "Ariadne's father is Isaac Eudoxia," in a tone that implied the name explained

everything.

“And he is...?” Taylor coaxed.

“Oh!” Kale shook her head in bewilderment. “He is a general in the army. He is very powerful.”

“The Byzantine army?” Taylor clarified.

“Well, yes,” Kale said simply.

Taylor thought it over. “Kale, does Ariadne’s father support the blues?”

Kale pursed her lips and nodded.

“And so does Ariadne,” Taylor concluded. “While her husband

owns green chariots." She spread her hands over the soft delicate material of her robe. "But it isn't the same faction of blues that has taken her now, is it?" she asked of Kale. "There must be many blue factions, just like there are soccer, I mean sport—never mind." She smiled at Kale. "It can't be her father who has conspired to have taken her hostage, surely?"

Kale shook her head quickly. "The general is in Isauria." She wrung her hands together. "I sent word to him," she added in a barely audible whisper. "As soon as Ariadne disappeared." She bit her

lip. "Did I do wrong?"

Taylor touched the woman's worn hand. "No, Kale. You acted for the very best reasons. *You* didn't do wrong, even if it turns out badly, so don't listen to anyone who tells you otherwise."

Deep relief spread across Kale's face. "I will not," she agreed and stood up. "But you must rest now, before the races tomorrow. You must sit beside Matthew and play Ariadne so the Blues are thrown into confusion and dismay. That is the plan, is it not?"

"Yes, that is Matthew's plan."

“And your plan, my lady?” Kale asked as Taylor stood up.

Taylor touched her swollen cheek. “There is a slave – a chariot driver – I must find.”

Close to midday the next day, travelling as fast as the horse would let him coax it, Veris came across a village huddled off the road that led to Panormos. It was a place only for watering horses. There was a gesture for an inn next to the watering troughs—a window cut into the side of the nearest hut and cups strung on twine. No doubt the wine would be well-watered and kept inside, under strict control of

the owners.

But there were some rough, scrubbed tables and stools near the window and on the largest table, someone had set up a game of dice. From the numbers of backs and heads bent over the game as Veris pulled up his cart by the troughs, he judged the owner of the game had a good scam going.

A head lifted from amongst the players as he climbed down to the ground. Thick, wavy black hair, in need of trimming. Olive skin. Intelligent brown eyes assessed him as he adjusted his cloak.

Hispanic, Veris judged, and a very long way from home.

The man bowed back over, returning to the game. Veris led his horse to the trough, watching the game with little interest. He knew they would try to draw him in. He was dressed too well and carried goods in his cart. He was a fat target for a bent game.

There was a cry and a chorus of moans and everyone around the table straightened up, generally despondent, as coins changed hands. Then Veris got his first look at the con man running the game. He was a tall, greying man with a

surprisingly happy disposition. He was scraping coins into his purse and commiserating with the losers. He got up and stretched and held out a copper coin to one of those that lingered. "Here, buy yourself a drink," he said, in a loud and congenial tone. "I'm going to get myself one, too, before I start another game. It's thirsty work, out here in the sun."

He clapped the man on the back and they headed over to the bar window to join the others, who were drinking cup after cup of the wine the locals were selling through the window.

Meanwhile, the olive-skinned man remained at the table, picking up the dice and cleaning up. Veris focused on the wide leather cuffs stitched around his wrists.

After a few minutes at the bar window, the tall man patted his current mark on the shoulder one more time, then wandered casually over to the drinking troughs, where Veris was standing at his horse's head. "Good day to you."

"And to you," Veris agreed.

"You would be on your way to Panormos, then?"

"As this road leads there and

nowhere else and I came from the south, that would be a good assumption."

The man grinned. "I like you!"

Veris made himself grin back.

"Why don't you come and join my game?"

"I'm not really one for dice," Veris prevaricated, making himself sound meek. "I'm just a businessman."

"You've played before, haven't you?"

"Certainly. But I don't play well."

The man's smile broadened. "This is just a friendly game," he assured Veris.

Friendly, my ass. Veris pretended to give the man's proposition some thought, then shrugged and gave in. "Very well, then. Just for a few minutes." He hitched the horse and gave her some feed.

Then he settled at the table with the tall man, who introduced himself as Baradaeus. He didn't introduce the brown-eyed man with the sharp gaze, who stayed at Baradeaus' elbow, further confirming his slave status. Veris kept his current name, Gilmárdal.

He pulled coins out of his purse, making sure Baradaeus saw how many coins were still in it, and slapped them on the table. "Let's play," he declared.

* * * * *

An hour later, a small pile of coins sat on Baradaeus' side of the table and very few in front of Veris. Veris had figured out the scam. The dice were being switched by the slave and Baradaeus got to use weighted or shaved dice when he needed them. It was a simple ploy, but for unsophisticated farmers it

was invisible.

Veris reached into his purse for more coins. "I'd like to keep playing, but I'd like to increase the stakes."

Baradaeus gave a small laugh. "You're a glutton for punishment, then. This is just a friendly game, remember!"

"And we're all playing nice and friendly-like," Veris agreed. He pulled out a dozen gold solidi and put them on the table.

Baradaeus drew in a sharp breath, staring at them. "Bezants. I don't think I can match them." But

he didn't look away from them.

"Yes you can," Veris said. "Put up your slave against them."

The slave's soft inhalation was his only reaction. Veris looked at him directly. "I presume you have no objection to this wager?"

The man hesitated for a brief instant, his gaze flickering toward Baradaeus. Then he shook his head. Veris saw hope flare in his eyes.

"Good," Veris said. He looked at Baradaeus.

Baradaeus shook his head. "This game is too rich for me," he

declared. "I am a simple man, with simple tastes." He started to rise.

Veris slapped his knife down on the table. "I suggest you sit down and play, Baradaeus."

The tall man sat back down, his mouth opening in surprise. Sweat popped on his temple. "How dare you!"

"I dare, because you play a crooked game. If you do not play me now, I will take great delight in telling all those men over there that you cheated them of their money. There are nine men and one of you, Baradaeus, and you look like you've

not done much fighting in your lifetime. They will be very angry when they learn you've taken their money dishonestly. I don't like your chances when they set on you."

Baradaeus licked his lips, glancing at the men standing around the bar window, drinking from the cups. They were all physically strong—around this part of the country, the men worked the land, or were miners, smiths or cartwrights. They were able to handle themselves physically and every man from an early age learned how to defend himself with

a knife at the very least.

“I’ll play,” Baradaeus said at last, his voice strangled and weak.

“I thought you would,” Veris said, with a smile.

Chapter Six

“What is your name?” Veris asked as he sliced away the leather stitching that had been holding slave’s leather cuffs permanently about his wrists.

The slave looked at Veris, surprised. “Rafael,” he said.

“Do you prefer to speak your mother tongue?” Veris asked, dredging up the smattering of old Hispanic he could remember.

Rafael winced. "Not the way you speak it," he said in Greek.

Veris shrugged. "It has been a while," he confessed. He climbed into the cart. "Hurry up," he said. "My time is limited and this stop has put me behind."

Rafael hesitated. "Up at the front?"

"Why not?"

"That's not where slaves are supposed to sit."

Veris lowered the reins. He turned to look down at Rafael. "What did you think I was doing

when I took those cuffs off? Adjusting your clothing? You're free, Rafael. You're not a slave anymore. I don't own slaves. I never have and I never will. But I do need your help with some work I have to do in Constantinople. You need my help because you don't have a thing to your name but the clothes on your back. So will you get into the god-damn cart, already?"

Rafael's face crumpled and he reached for the cart, to hold himself up. He took a deep breath. "Constantinople?" he said, his voice shaky. He climbed up and settled

next to Veris on the bench.
“Whatever you say, my lord.”

“Call me Veris,” Veris said shortly as he got the cart underway. “I’m no lord. And keep an eye on the road. You have a good memory, or Baradaeus wouldn’t have had you involved in his crooked little dice games. You have to remember the way to Constantinople.”

“Yes, Veris.”

Veris glanced at him. “No questions? Just ‘yes Veris’?”

“Thousands. But you said you were in a hurry.”

“We’re going to be sitting on this plank for the next two days at least. I think Baradaeus and whoever owned you before that has killed too much of your natural personality. I’ll start first, then. Where were you born, Rafael? How did you become a slave and how did you end up in Asia Minor?”

Rafael stared ahead, silent. He remained mute for so long that Veris thought he was refusing to answer. Then finally, he cleared his throat. “This is a story you care to hear...Veris?”

“It was not an idle question. Why?”

Again, Rafael paused overlong before answering. “No one has asked me these questions before.”

“Ever?” Veris frowned, staring down at the horse’s back as it worked. He was keeping it to a steady canter, which was asking too much of it, but walking pace would have killed his own nerves sooner when he knew that Constantinople –and Brody and Taylor–was a mere twenty minute flight away in modern terms. Three days at this ancient pace was bad enough.

He looked at Rafael when no answer emerged. Again.

Rafael's expression was one he recognized with a jolt. He had seen it on Brody's face from time to time. It was the expression of a man appreciating freedom. For Rafael, it was just hitting him for the first time.

"Take a deep breath," Veris advised. "Several of them."

Rafael clutched at the edge of the bench, his knuckles whitening, the tendons in his pale wrists tightening. He breathed heavily as Veris advised, choking a little as he battled his emotions. Veris stayed silent, giving him as much privacy as he could.

Finally Rafael lifted his head. He kept his gaze on the road ahead. "It has been nearly fifteen years, I think. This morning, when I rose from my sleep, I would never have predicted that by nightfall I would be a free man."

"Such is life, Rafael. There are kinks in the road so we can't see too far along. It makes life interesting."

Rafael turned his head. "Or are the turns in the road to disguise what is coming so we are not dismayed by it?"

"You don't strike me as a pessimist."

“I do not understand that word.”

Veris explained the meaning.

“I see. Life is teaching me to be a pessimist. Behind every turn in my road, so far, has been nothing joyful.”

“Until today,” Veris pointed out. “Yet despite the grimness, you have chosen to keep stepping around the corners, haven’t you? Doesn’t that mean you keep hoping for good, not bad, each time you reach a bend?”

Rafael grinned. “True. I suppose I’m not a true pessimist, or I would

have given up and killed myself years ago, knowing that nothing but bad awaits around every corner.” Then he blinked. “This is a very strange conversation to be having.”

Veris shrugged. “What conversation would you rather have? You’re intelligent, able to reason and self-aware. Philosophy is an interesting subject at any time and you have a subjective viewpoint that always fascinates me.”

“Filos...?” Rafael screwed up his eyes. “You are a scholar?”

“Of several sorts,” Veris agreed. “Philosophy is the word you’re trying to repeat. We were discussing it, although you weren’t aware of it.”

“We were?” Rafael rubbed at his wrist thoughtfully. “Pessimists, yes?”

“Yes.”

“You started talking about something else, to take my mind off myself.”

Veris smiled. “Yes.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It is the kind thing to do, when

someone is feeling emotional pain. It gives them time to recover.”

“Emotional pain?”

“You were hurting.”

Rafael considered it for a moment. “Yes,” he said simply.

Veris nodded. “That is emotional pain.”

Rafael turned on the seat to study Veris. The silence lengthened again.

“You have a question?” Veris finally prompted.

“If I may?”

Veris nodded.

“You are a Northman, are you not?”

“I am.”

“You are a long way from home.”

“As are you,” Veris pointed out.

“Not from as far away as you.”

“You have the shoulders, the wrists....and you have a sword and knife. You carry yourself like one. You are a fighter, no? A soldier?”

“I was, once.”

Rafael nodded. “Fighter.

Scholar. Yet you come from Pergamum, as the road leads nowhere else but there. You weren't there as a patient. You're not sick. Are you a doctor, too?"

Veris sighed. "Sort of."

"You're driving a cart loaded with goods that you're happy enough to defend on your own, so you're not just a soldier, you're a very good fighter." Rafael lifted his hand. "Fighter, scholar, doctor." He held up three fingers. "Have I missed anything?"

Veris grimaced. For a reason he couldn't pin down without deeper

thought, he was reluctant to lie to Rafael. Perhaps it was something to do with his recent status as slave, which reminded him vividly of Brody. Veris' prevarication emerged awkwardly. "I'll point anything else out if I remember it."

Rafael cocked his head, studying Veris. "Then, exactly how old *are* you?"

* * * * *

Twelve hours later, Taylor stared defeat in the face. Again.

Matthew hurried into the same

room she had been hauled into the night before, to face her once more. Only this time, Taylor had Kale at her side and the head guard of Matthew's household, Bardas, standing with spread-footed ease, his hand on the pommel of his sword, to her right. Two of his guards stood behind them.

Taylor straightened herself up as Matthew strode into the room, a roll of papers in his hands and a frustrated look on his face. "I hear Bardas found you strolling about the city with a single slave at your side, and in the Hippodrome area, too!" His jaw clenched in sudden

fury. "Is it not enough that I must punish you for disobedience the evening before, but you must force me to repeat the lesson the very next day?"

"I took my slave with me," Taylor pointed out. "I am armed. I was well veiled and covered and spoke to no one."

Matthew's hand clenched, crimping the book he held in his fist. "You are supposed to be here, preparing to accompany me to the races this afternoon!"

"I will be suitably ready in plenty of time," Taylor assured

him.

“That is not the point!” Matthew bellowed. “I have had three different people report to me on your presence near the Hippodrome! *Three!* You are supposed to care for my reputation, *wife!*” His face, with the clean-lined jaw and high cheeks, was suddenly red with choler and white lines bracketed his mouth.

Taylor sank to her knees and bowed her head, knowing she had to restore his dignity somehow. She had to repair the damage. She’d had no idea the speed gossip could

spread in a city without phones or Wi-Fi, or that something as simple as walking through streets with only one slave could be seen as such a brazen act. She'd screwed up badly.

"I beg your forgiveness, husband," she said as contritely as she could manage. "When I saw the beauty of the day and the sun, I forgot, for a moment, my proper place and wanted only to enjoy the fresh air. I will not forget again."

She heard his indrawn breath, just before his hand caught her chin and lifted it. The red in his face was fading. He nodded. "I can

understand the need for air and freedom. But you're young. You've time to learn to override these impulsive acts of yours. Go and prepare for the races. I need you by my side today, more than ever."

Kale helped Taylor to her feet and hurried her away. Taylor realized she was shaking. She had been expecting another blow. She had been braced for it. She shuddered in Kale's hands.

"He's a kind husband, most days," Kale whispered approvingly.

Kind or not, his insistence on Taylor maintaining his reputation

had robbed her of her chance of finding Brody before the races began and letting him know where she was and whose life she had fallen into.

The ache to touch him and reassure herself that Brody was alright was like a heavy weight in her chest.

And where was Veris now? Had he even reached what would become Dover in the centuries ahead, to find some cockle-shell little boat to cross the treacherous Channel to the mainland?

Chapter Seven

The entourage that Matthew considered the minimum necessary to accompany them to the Hippodrome was large enough to teach Taylor why her attempt to steal out of the house with a single slave had been met with such dire disapproval.

As Matthew beamed his approval at her state-occasion-like clothing, accessories and make-up that Kale had spent three hours

fussing to get right, Taylor stared, her jaw descending, at the fifteen or so people ranked behind Matthew. There were armed guards and slaves in festive wear—four of them designated to do nothing more than carry the corner poles of a large square parasol to keep the sun off her and Matthew at all times. Other slaves were carrying food and beverages, cushions and clothes.

“Where is everyone going to sit?” Taylor murmured.

“In my family section, of course,” Matthew replied.
“Ready?”

Their parade through the streets of Constantinople was another eye-opener for Taylor, as the armed guards made sure everyone was cleared out of their way and there were no obstructions to slow them down. They were like a cruise ship cutting through water. Nothing stopped them. People stopped to watch them pass and some begged for money or favors. One of the slaves dipped into a purse occasionally, when Matthew nodded, and handed out bronze coins here and there.

Taylor realized that if the beggars had stopped her and asked

for money she would have had none to give them. Would they have beaten her for the lack? No wonder Matthew had been so angry with her for travelling without armed escort. Finally, she was beginning to understand it wasn't just his reputation he had been concerned about. Walking down the street alone wasn't something she could do here, like she could in L.A. or New York, even as crime-riddled as sections of those cities were. Her position in society here made it simply impossible. She was too noticeable.

So how on earth was she going

to reach Brody?

* * * * *

Because it had been centuries since he had experienced it, waking from sleep caught Brody by surprise. He felt almost dizzy and disoriented as he tried to figure out what had happened. Then he put it together, as he felt the hard planks of the bunk beneath his side and a hand on his shoulder, shaking him.

“Braenden.”

His recent memories reassembled themselves, along with

the fluttering edges of panic, until he thought of Taylor, out there somewhere in the city, alone. Veris, god knows where in Europe, busting a gut to make it here.

In one indrawn breath, Brody tamped all the panic back down inside him. He had to hold it together for them.

He rolled over carefully, feeling the crusts of dried blood strain on his back. Evaristus was clinging to the ladder that was nailed to the end of the bunks with one hand while he shook him with the other. Brody had the top bunk, about fifteen feet up from the dirt floor.

They'd pulled him out of the cage sometime very late in the night, or very early in the morning. It had been getting close to dawn and the cavern had been silent except for the whispers of sleeping men and the two guards who had unlocked the cage. They had told Brody he could have the one bunk remaining, at the top of the tier...if he had the strength to climb up there himself. Otherwise, he'd just have to sleep on the dirt for the night. From their expressions and jeers, they'd expected him to simply lie where they'd dragged him and sleep.

Instead, Brody had forced himself to roll onto his belly and get onto his hands and knees. The effort had taken a good minute or more and he'd stayed on his hands and knees, swaying, gathering strength for the next step. From there, he'd staggered to his feet and over to the ladder.

The climb had opened the wounds again, but he had been smiling to himself when he lay down on the bunk. Sleep had dropped over him like a blanket.

Evaristus hissed as Brody sat up. "You look worse than when I left you last night," he said softly.

“I’m fine,” Brody told him truthfully. “But I need clothes.”

Evaristus dropped a tunic into his lap. It was startlingly white and clean. “Your driver’s tunic. Don’t get it dirty or they’ll whip you for it. They want you looking bright as a gold coin for the race, so clean up before you put it on.”

Brody lifted the tunic and spread it out so he could look at it. It was short and would be a tight fit. Memories washed over him, sending a sour soup ablaze in his stomach and his heart rampaging. He swallowed. “You know that, subjectively, it’s been nearly a

thousand years since I controlled a team?" he said softly.

Evaristus scowled. "Then you'd better dig down into your memories and figure out how you do it, boy, because if you don't win this race, they're going to flay your hide off you for lack of a purse."

Brody could actually hear his heart in his ears. He put the tunic down, his breath coming more quickly, and glanced at Evaristus. The man looked angry, but there was concern in his gaze, too.

"I spent ten centuries pretending this place didn't still

have the biggest piece of my soul locked up in a cage. Because of that, I dragged the two people I have most loved in my long sorry life right back into the pit with me."

"The woman?" Evaristus asked, the frown between his brows deepening. "Ariadne?"

"She only looks like Ariadne, but yes, that's one of them." Brody handed the tunic back.

Evaristus slung it over his shoulder. "And the other?"

"He's coming, I hope."

"That's the difference,"

Evaristus said, nodding. "Between you and the Braenden I knew before."

"What's the difference?"

"You have hope."

Brody drew in a breath as surprise circled through him. He nodded. "Yes," he agreed.

"They gave it to you, I think. The two of them."

Brody nodded again. This time he knew the answer. "Yes," he said with utter certainty.

Evaristus grinned and started climbing down the ladder. "There's

food," he called. "Get washed. They're busy with race preparations. You could steal more than your share today and get nothing more than a smile out of them for your cheek. Hurry!"

Brody eased himself toward the ladder. With this body, hurrying wasn't possible but he'd try. For Veris and Taylor, he'd try.

Then his mind turned to the races that lay ahead and his memory supplied highlights of what might be in store. His gut tightened in worry.

For Veris and Taylor, he'd hang

in there.

Veris and Taylor.

He kept their names in his mind. They became a mantra as he faced each new and horribly familiar challenge the day provided.

* * * * *

The Hippodrome reminded Taylor sharply of the Roman Coliseum in the movie *Gladiator*, except that this amphitheater was an elongated oval in shape and the entertainment on the sandy floor

below was racing, not hand-to-hand combat. But in all other respects, it was similar. There was even an emperor overseeing the entertainment.

Taylor glanced over toward the shaded box where the small man sat attended by slaves, servants and guests. Men dressed in overblown garments were talking and drinking around him, but he was watching everything that happened below. He was more interested in the races, not the company he kept.

Taylor remembered that the emperor was a blue man and would be of no assistance to Matthew, a

green owner.

What did Brody drive? Was he a blue driver or a green driver?

There had been two races so far and each of them had turned Taylor's guts to cold entrails and made her heart lurch with sick revolt, even though everyone around her had been disappointed that the races had both been clean, unexciting events, where the winner had been clear.

"They're a model of propriety today," Metrodora complained, adjusting her veil and reaching for her wine glass again. Metrodora

was the wife of Kousinos Dalassena, a friend and business associate of Matthew and Metrodora mentioned her father, the Emperor's tax collector. Her father seemed to raise Metrodora herself on the social ladder in a way that Taylor didn't understand, but she took note that even here in Constantinople, a man's occupation and social standing was critical, while the wife was merely a child-bearing accessory that came with useful familial ties and associations.

Dalassena now sat at the front of the family box with Matthew.

Metrodora and Taylor had been

given small chairs at the back of the box, higher up and further away from the front. Metrodora had not seemed to mind, or even notice the disparagement. She had nodded her head at Taylor and taken her seat, and immediately began issuing a stream of orders to her own retinue of slaves and servants, while Taylor watched, stunned, as Metrodora skillfully rearranged the hot corner Taylor had been left with, turning it into a cool oasis of shade and refreshment. The slaves had constructed a smaller shade cloth over the pair of them, poured well-watered wine that was still

cool and handed them both a cup, placed a small table in front of them, laid a cloth and covered the cloth with plates of fruit, small pastries and other delicacies for them to nibble upon.

“It’s not like you to linger without comfort, Ariadne,” Metrodora teased. “But then, it has been a while since I saw you. Has Matthew worn away your love of the finer stuff of life?”

Taylor sipped the watered wine and leaned forward to steal a grape, giving herself time to compose an answer. “Not at all,” she answered. “I was enjoying the sun for a while,

first.”

Metrodora’s smile widened. “I don’t see any of your own people here but Kale. You are travelling light.”

“Today, yes,” Taylor agreed, adding Metrodora’s statement to the pile to be considered later. Ariadne had other staff of her own? Other slaves?

But the races began then and Taylor had been fully occupied with her horror at the danger and brutality of chariot racing.

Blue and Green were not the only factions in the city. There were

also White and Red teams, but they were minor and barely rated notice. Blue and Green were always the favorites. There could be many teams in a race, which in part was what made it so dangerous.

Only the strongest drivers could control four horses at once. The four-horse chariot races were the most keenly watched of the two types of races generally held on a day of races. The other type of race was the two-horse race. The biggest purses were at stake for the winners of the four-horse races and the biggest amounts of money were spent on wagers predicting which

chariot would win.

All this Taylor had learned in the course of two races.

The extent to which a chariot driver would go to ensure he outraced his opponents, she learned within one race. Underhanded football strategies had nothing on chariot racing. She had sat gripping the arms of her high-backed chair, at first astonished, then outraged, then simply horrified at the manipulations and outright attacks upon other drivers' chariots in order to disable them and gain ground.

There were no rules in chariot racing. The first past the winning post after five laps was the winner. If the winner managed to do it with style and verve, he also became a hero of the people at the same time.

In the very first race of the day, the winning driver had destroyed his nearest competition by ramming the extended hubs of his chariot wheels into the spokes of his opponent. The wheels of the other chariot had disintegrated in spectacular fashion, to the delight of the crowd. The horses had fallen to their knees with piteous whinnies, while the driver had

been thrown from his chariot up against the stone walls of the arena. He had fallen to the sand floor and lain motionless until the finish of the race when men in short off-white tunics had hurried to huddle around him, then hurried back to the small door they had emerged from, the driver between them.

The winner of the race was announced by a man standing on a high platform close to the emperor's box, speaking in crisp, clear sentences that reached Taylor despite the lack of an amplifier.

It was then she dared risk her first question to Metrodora. "What

about the injured driver?" she asked.

Metrodora lifted her brow. "He wasn't very good, was he?" she said, as if she was agreeing with Taylor.

Taylor schooled her expression to neutral. "I mean, will his injuries be taken care of?"

Metrodora shrugged. "In the slave quarters, I suppose. Yes." She peered more closely at Taylor. "Are you quite all right, Ariadne? You've gone pale."

Taylor nodded. But the thought that wouldn't go away was making

her clutch more tightly at the chair with each heartbeat.

Brody died as a slave. He died as a chariot driver. He died driving chariots.

He could die again.

If they must stay here for months waiting for Veris, then it was probable he *would* die again.

Metrodora waved to one of her slaves. "Wine. Quickly!"

A cup was thrust into Taylor's hand and Metrodora lifted the cup to Taylor's lips. Taylor sipped and thrust it away. "I am all right.

Truly.”

This is one of the penalties of knowing the future. One of the prices of time travel.

She sat up from the slump she wasn't aware she had fallen into and readjusted her veil and robes. Then she smiled at Metrodora. “Do you know who is in the second race?” she asked, deliberately shifting the subject and the focus away from her.

Metrodora wrinkled her forehead, then called for the slave who had the races memorized. The second race had not included

Brody, and Taylor had been able to relax and let the excitement of the race wash over her and pass on, while she calmed and sipped her wine.

Now at the end of the second race, which had been as ruthless as the first while still disappointing the audience for lack of spectacle, Taylor had gained some equilibrium. She thought she could deal with the racing with detachment and objectivity – enough to let her get through it and pretend she was Ariadne, the daughter of a general and a native of Constantinople.

Even after the driver had received his laurel wreath and been led away and the sand raked over to remove the detritus from the race in preparation for the third race, Metrodora was still musing over the lack of excitement in the day so far, a small furrow between her brows as she glanced around the Hippodrome. But then her frown disappeared and a smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

The smile caught Taylor's attention, for it screamed sensuality and secrecy.

She glanced in the direction that Metrodora was looking, but could

not see who was the focus of her gaze. Someone certainly was, though.

“Who is it that has the ability to bring such a soft smile to your lips?” she murmured.

Metrodora’s gaze snapped to Taylor’s face. Then she sighed. “Leontius,” she breathed back and nodded her head while barely moving it.

“He is not known to me,” Taylor said, taking a risk that Leontius was someone that Ariadne knew well.

“I know,” Metrodora agreed, to Taylor’s relief. “He would not be

known to anyone of our station. He is a dock worker. A freedman's son." Metrodora bit her lip and smiled guiltily.

Taylor puzzled out the unspoken implications. If this Leontius was the son of a freed slave, then he was just barely above slave status himself. He was the lowest of low classes and certainly not a person that Metrodora could be seen with.

"But he makes you happy," Taylor finished softly.

Metrodora sighed. "Yes," she admitted in a whisper.

“Can you not go and speak to him, at least?” Taylor asked.

“Heavens above, no!” Metrodora replied, alarm lifting her voice into a squeak. “My husband would want to know where I was going and I would have to take at least four slaves with me. It would be impossible.” But she stared wistfully toward the distant Leontius as if she wished she had wings and could fly over to him.

Her yearning sounded exactly like Taylor’s dilemma. She couldn’t reach Brody without bringing a small army of slaves with her that would hamper every step and

report back to Matthew.

“You’re just not considering this clearly because it’s Leontius,” Taylor told Metrodora in a hushed tone that wouldn’t travel. “How do you normally acquire something you want, if you want to reach it discreetly?”

Metrodora gave a small, choked laugh. “I bribe someone to bring the thing to me, of course.” Then her eyes widened. “A bribe,” she repeated. She pulled one of her rings off her finger and called to one of her slaves. “This is yours to keep or sell for what you can get, if you follow my instructions

carefully and completely.
Understand?"

Taylor sat back, her heart
thundering.

Bribery. She didn't need money
at all.

As she listened to Metrodora
outline the instructions to the slave
to smuggle the beloved Leontius to
the corridor at the back of the box
so that Metrodora could steal a
quiet moment with her dock-
worker lover, Taylor absorbed the
methodology for future use.

The chariots for the next race
were being arranged at the starting

line. Taylor turned her head toward the fuss, pretending an interest she didn't have, while she attempted to squash the hot flare of hope and excitement grabbing at her chest and making her eyes water. She clutched at the metal goblet in her hand, making the gems in the base dig into her flesh so the little pain would anchor her.

She had to hold it together and think this through very carefully. Neither Veris nor Brody were here to back her up or help her.

Then she really focused properly on the drivers...on the third from the starter's favored

position at the center post.

Brody.

He was standing in the chariot with his arms outstretched, the eight reins from the horses wrapped around one wrist, his fingers curled around the leather. The whip was in his other hand and he was using it to lightly touch the back of each horse, getting them to settle down and ready themselves.

Taylor gripped the arms of her chair. Inarticulate sound roared through her mind. She was dizzy with it and the chair arms were the only thing keeping her vertical.

“Brody,” she whispered.

Metrodora gripped her wrist.
“Ariadne? Are you quite well?”

“How do I stop the race?”
Taylor asked, unable to tear her gaze away from Brody, who was staring up at the race starter, now.
“It mustn’t go on, he can’t be in it, how do I stop it?”

Metrodora gave a small laugh.
“Stop a race? Heaven’s above, why would anyone want to stop a race? I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

Then it was too late. The gilded leaf dropped with a heavy thunk to the “start” position and with a roar

of the crowd, the horses reared and snorted as the whips were applied, dug in their hooves and took off, spraying oiled sand.

The race had begun.

Chapter Eight

There was a coppery sweet taste in her mouth that made Taylor want to spit or throw up. She fought back the need because she didn't dare look away from the chariots circling the far end of the elongated track. She couldn't breathe. Her chest was locked by a hard band wrapped around it, that tightened each time she saw Brody's chariot rock or sway or get knocked by one of the others.

He was in second place as he rounded the end marker.

Taylor's sight—all her senses—narrowed down to a pinpoint focus upon Brody. She heard none of the raucous cheers and bawdy comments of the people in the boxes and seats around them. The blasting heat of the day ceased to touch her. She was in a zone of silence, muffled from the world.

She could see every detail of Brody's face and body as clearly as if he was standing next to her. He was concentrating fiercely. He wore the tiny furrow he got when he was absorbed in his music, or

working on one of their weapons in the small workshop in the basement, determined to make whatever it was he was wrestling with come out right.

The muscles in his arms and shoulders and chest were rigid with the effort to control the horses.

Every few seconds, he glanced at the other drivers, his long hair whipping out behind him as his head turned. He was jockeying for a better position, to take advantage of the turns.

Behind him, two of the chariots clashed, their wheels locking. One

overturned, sending the driver rolling across the sand. The chariots behind the two swerved and moved around the melee, hurrying to catch up with Brody and the other leading two chariots.

They turned at the end, completing their third circuit, and Brody eased forward on the inside, separating himself from the third chariot by a good length as they came down the back stretch. It put Brody and the lead chariot ahead of everyone.

Dimly, Taylor could head the crowd cheering happily. This wasn't the blood and guts they

were used to, but a good challenge for the lead was apparently just as entertaining.

The leader, a driver with dark skin who looked shorter than Brody, didn't like the idea, though. As they were rounding the far end for the second time, he edged his chariot toward Brody's, getting closer, crowding him to the inside edge.

The fallen chariots were just around the corner, a six foot high barrier of wood, metal and horseflesh directly in Brody's path, and the leader was going to drive Brody right into them.

Taylor had no breath to call out and no strength to do anything other than sit and watch as Brody's horses rounded the deep curve, heading for disaster, hemmed in by the leader's chariot and horses.

At the last minute, Brody hauled on the reins. She heard him calling to the horses to slow, to stop, as the animals tried to skid to a halt before they rammed into the barrier in their way.

The lead chariot shot past the carnage, using the outer half of the track, but that was what Brody had been waiting for. As soon as the chariot moved past him, he urged

his horses forward again, steering them around the fallen chariots and inserting himself in front of the chariots that came behind.

He chased after the leader, racing in a big curve around the outer rim of the starting post, while the leader used the inside curve. Now Brody had the outside track as they raced down the back stretch for the final lap. He crowded the leader against the turning post as they rounded the far end, forcing him to slow or cannon into the chariot wreckage. This time, Brody shot past, down the outside stretch. He was in the lead and there were

no more turning posts for the other chariot to gain an advantage. The next post was the winning post.

The audience went a little crazy, chanting and cheering, but Taylor couldn't hear them, except in a disconnected way. She was watching Brody as he drove the chariot down the final stretch toward home. He was scanning the tiers as he drove, his focus shifted now that he knew the race was won.

He was looking for her. She knew it as well as she knew the scar at the base of her thumb.

Taylor didn't think it was possible for her body to feel any more stress or excitement, but a silvery hot wave shimmered through her, all the way up to the top of her head, leaving her feeling both hot and cold at once.

She realized she was on her feet.

See me! she begged silently as Brody's gaze tripped across the family boxes one after another.

Just as he rounded the curve, he saw her. She knew it, for she saw his shoulders lift as he drew in a deep breath and his gaze locked on hers. Taylor rested her hand over

her heart.

His attention was pulled from her as his team of horses rounded the starting post and crossed the finish line. Brody had won.

Abruptly, Taylor's hearing returned to normal. The crowd was chanting. "*Braenden! Braenden! Braenden!*"

Handlers were hurrying out from the tunnels that served the arena, to grab the horses' ropes and lead the chariots back into the service areas, where the horses would be released, watered and fed and the chariots repaired.

Brody's chariot was the last to leave the arena. As the winner, he was led to the foot of the emperor's box. The emperor tossed him a laurel wreath, with a smile and a closed fist that he raised into the air.

Brody was a blue driver and apparently a favorite of the emperor's...and the crowd.

With more cheering and applause, his chariot was led toward the same tunnel the others had disappeared into.

Taylor saw then that the back of Brody's white tunic was spotted

with patches of fresh red blood.

The roaring sound was back in her ears. She sank down onto the hard stool, only now recalling Brody's quick words in the tunnel just before they had been separated. *"That is the guards who come now. They have found me missing from my usual spot and seek to find me."*

The guards had punished him for his transgression last night. They had beaten him.

Taylor watched Brody disappear into the tunnel and the heavy gates close behind him, sickness washing over her.

“Ariadne, the heavens help me now, *will you look at me!*”

It was Metrodora’s voice, in a low, controlled and urgent whisper. Metrodora was plucking at her arm, trying to gain her attention and may have been doing so for some minutes.

Taylor turned to look at her. “I... do not feel quite myself,” she said.

Metrodora’s eyes widened. “You’re milk white!” She glanced around quickly, her hand on Taylor’s wrist. “Now is not the time to faint.”

Taylor shook her head a little.

“Not faint...”

Metrodora's eyes widened even further. “Oh my sweet lord. Kale, quickly!” she called in a soft voice designed not to carry too far.

Kale's arms were under hers and she was being lifted. Jostled.

“No, don't bounce me,” Taylor tried to say, but her gorge was rising swiftly.

Cool shade slipped over her, a blessed relief. Then a door was opened and closed.

A bucket was thrust in front of her.

Taylor allowed herself to recall the blood on Brody's back and how it might have got there. How terrified he had been about being pushed into the enclosed back seat of the police car.

In the eight years she had known Brody, he had fought most doggedly for three things; her and Veris, and personal freedom. All else came second, until Marit had been born and had been added to the first list.

Now he had no freedom at all. He couldn't even raise his hand to acknowledge her.

Brody had been a vampire so long that human pain, any pain, would be a shock. *They had beaten him until he bled.*

She had done nothing to help him.

Taylor fell to her knees and was violently sick, to the point where her vision greyed out and her balance left her. Kale held her upright, keeping her veil and hair back.

When she finally sat back, black spots danced in front of her eyes, and her cheeks were wet with tears.

Kale silently used a corner of

her robe to wipe her face clean. "The chariot driver you wanted to find. That is him, is it not? Braenden?"

Taylor nodded.

"He is one of the most popular drivers in the city," Kale said, gently wiping. "Everyone loves him. The businessmen like him because he makes them a lot of money each time they bet on him. The women...well, they like him because he is who he is." Kale lifted Taylor's chin and looked at her, her brow lifted.

Taylor knew what she was

carefully not asking. Kale wanted to know if Taylor was merely a groupie, a fan who wanted to use her privileged position to gain access to him.

Taylor cleared her throat. It burned and throbbed. "He is my husband," she told Kale.

Kale let her robe drop and made a slow fuss of putting it back to order. "Well, then," she said finally. "There will be maids and matrons crying into their bolsters tonight at that news."

Horror bloomed in her chest. "No one must know!" Taylor

whispered.

Kale nodded. "Not while you pass as the Lady Ariadne, at least."

"Or until I get him out of that pit," Taylor added.

"Get him out?" Kale repeated. "He's a slave. Where else is he supposed to be?"

Taylor got tiredly to her feet. Her answer would take ten centuries of human evolution and ethics to explain and she keenly felt the ticking of the clock. How many more races would Brody survive?

"He's not a slave," she told Kale.

“He’s not supposed to be there.” It was the best she could do for right now. She looked around the tiny room they were in. A shelf with a hole in it told her the function of the room, as did the rich biological aroma. A candle was burning on a shelf and was the only source of light.

Kale looked wise as she dropped the contents of the bucket down the hole, and rinsed it with water from a second. “Is that why you came to Constantinople? To free your husband?”

The truth would require another long answer, but the core of that

answer was that Brody had pulled them here because despite sixteen centuries of freedom, he still hadn't shaken off the bonds of this place.

"Yes, I need to set him free," Taylor told Kale. "Then we can go home."

Kale smiled as she opened the door to the privvy. "You're as much of a dreamer as my mistress. She was always chasing adventures, too."

* * * * *

The aftermath of an adrenaline

spike was something else that Brody had forgotten after so many centuries. He eased himself off the platform of the chariot, unsure whether his shaky legs would be able to support him.

The choice was taken from him after three steps, when guards grabbed his arms and reattached the chains. They hauled him down the steps into the wide bricked passage that led back to the slaves' quarters, by-passing groups of other slaves and guards coming along the passage toward the Hippodrome for later races.

The passage had many off-

shoots and by-ways turning off it, for there were many chariot owners with slave quarters that reached the Hippodrome directly via underground passages.

The people travelling the passages thinned as they moved deeper, until they turned into the tunnel that led directly to Genesios' cavern. The guards didn't speak as they walked, but they weren't jostling or hitting him, either. That probably meant they were pleased he had won the race.

When they reached the big cavern, Basilides was standing by the cooking fire, his arms over his

big barrel chest,. He watched Brody approach with a scowl on his face.

There was something cooking in the big pot on the fire, rich with spices and even some meat. The smell of it made Brody's stomach grumble and cramp, and his mouth water. He carefully didn't look at the pot.

Evaristus was sitting on one of the second tier bunks, cross-legged.

"I hear you won your race," Basilides growled.

Evaristus grinned.

"You heard right," Brody

answered. He tried to hide any tiredness or weakness in his voice. Basilides would take advantage of it if he revealed it.

“It proves the power of a good beating,” Basilides went on. “Next time I won’t spare my arm.”

Brody made himself shrug indifferently. The chains at his wrists rattled softly.

Basilides’ face darkened. “You arrogant pup! You’ll wish you’d never been born by the time I’ve finished with you!” He waved to the guards standing stoically next to Brody, holding the ends of his

chains. "Go about your business. Don't you have anything better to do?"

The guards unhooked the chains and headed back toward the Hippodrome tunnel, leaving Brody standing alone in front of Basilides.

Basilides circled him. "You've ruined your tunic," he declared. "There's blood all over it." His hand thumped against the back of Brody's shoulder, sending him staggering a pace or two forward. "You're ever careless. You need a lesson." He lifted his voice. "Bring my whip!"

Evaristus was suddenly there. Brody didn't see him climb down from the second row of bunks. He rounded the cooking pot and lifted his finger. "Might I suggest eating first?"

Basilides looked affronted. "Why would I eat first?"

"Not just you. All of us. Then you get the pleasure of anticipating what is to come, while he gets to anticipate...what is to come. All throughout his meal, he will be thinking about it. It will occupy his entire attention."

Basilides was uneducated, but

he was not stupid. He grinned. "A fine idea," he declared. He sent Brody a smile that was full of evil intent. "After you eat, Celt." He walked away, looking very pleased with himself.

Brody shuddered, cold fingers rippling down his spine.

Evaristus gripped his arm tightly. "Come and eat. You need strength. Have you forgotten about the need for nourishment after so many years without it?"

"I'd forgotten so much my head is exploding with what I now have to remember," Brody told him.

Evaristus drew him toward the fire and the cooking pot where the other slaves were gathering and sharing out the meal. He pushed a small wooden bowl into Brody's hands.

A watery stew was ladled into the bowl. No utensils were provided.

Evaristus drew him over to the edge of the cavern, between the end of the bunks and where the square cages sat in a long row. Three of the cages were occupied, the slaves inside watching the food being dispensed with greedy longing.

Brody and Evaristus squatted on the floor of the cavern in the shadows cast by the tall wooden bunks. Brody sipped the gruel until the food itself was cool enough to handle with his fingers.

Evaristus pushed his bowl over to Brody. "You'll need it," he said, "And you know well that I do not." He sat back and wrapped his thin arms around his knees. "Basilides will have forgotten about beating you by the time he has eaten his fill. If he does remember, he will be too full to stir himself."

Brody nodded, sipping at the stew.

“It seems you remembered how to drive a team after all.”

“It came back to me.” The entire days’ events so far had been a series of memory-evoking triggers. From pulling on the tight driver’s tunic, to walking around to the nose of each horse and talking to them in Gaelic to settle them and pat their noses, before stepping onto the platform of the chariot. When he had stopped struggling to remember and let himself move through the day with a superficial calm, the knowledge had returned, just as he had needed it.

He had correctly wrapped the

reins about his wrist by letting his mind go blank and his body take over and go through the motions, instead of reaching deep for the old memories of how he had once held the strapping. When he was done, with the reins in his hand, it had felt right.

There had been a secondary advantage to keeping his mind in neutral, too. It had also kept the fear at bay.

He had let himself float around the first circuits of the race the same way, until the jolting of Euripides' cart against his had jerked him out of the daze. Then

the old strategies and tactics had dropped into place like his brain had changed gears.

He had known he was going to win the race from the beginning of the fourth circuit, when Euripides had let him take the outer edge of the track too early.

That certainty he remembered from before, too.

The certainty, the understanding about race strategy and that he had won the race by the second-last circuit had given him half-a-lap of freedom to scan the stands. He had known Taylor

would be there, but seeing her and confirming that she had seen his race both terrified and reassured him in one great indrawn breath.

He didn't want Taylor to see this side of his life, but having her here was changing it, making it different.

"I saw Taylor today," he told Evaristus. He could still see her white face. The way her hand had clutched at her heart.

"That be the one who looks like Ariadne, Matthew's wife? The one you were caught dallying with?"

"The one I came through time

with,” Brody murmured, reaching for Evaristus’ bowl.

Evaristus thought about that for a while. “And the other one, who you must wait for before you leave again? Who would that be?”

“Veris. A...Northman.”

“He doesn’t sound like one from his name.”

“It’s the name he uses now. You know how it goes.”

“Then he’s vampire, too?”

Brody nodded.

“If he comes from the north, then you’re going to be here a

while yet, aren't you?"

"He comes from Britain."

"Even worse," Evaristus declared. He grinned. "It's a good thing you've got hope."

Chapter Nine

They arrived in Panormos later that afternoon, far earlier than Veris had reckoned the journey would take, which was a bonus.

Panormos was a small harbor that did a roaring trade for there was a steady stream of foot traffic from across Asia Minor that wanted to avoid the longer journey by land to Constantinople. Fast, hardy boats could make the trip from Panormos across the strait to Constantinople

in a day and a night, with decent winds, where the journey by land around the Horn could take five days.

Inns had set up to cater to passengers passing through, along with associated brothels and businesses, including money-changers, milliners and tailors, ironmongers and more.

Rafael, a seasoned traveler, stared at the noisy cosmopolitan stewpot with wide eyes in a way that made Veris laugh. "If you think this is distracting, you will love Constantinople," he told Rafael. "Panormos is but a flea on

an elephant. Constantinople is a three ring circus, all year round."

Rafael frowned. "What is an elephant? And what is a circus?"

Veris laughed again. "Don't worry about it. Let us say that Panormos is nothing to get excited about. The best is yet to come."

Rafael considered it. "Okay," he said, testing out the word he'd heard Veris use and had demanded he define, which had flexed Veris' language skills, for the word was anachronistic for this century—it had slipped from him when he had been thinking hard. The real

definition of the word involved twentieth century events, politics and concepts. He had given Rafael the cultural use of the word as an equivalent to 'alright' or 'yes' instead and omitted the etymological roots.

Veris nodded toward the harbor. "There's our ship," he declared. It was an open, two-masted merchant ship with frame and canvas shelters at the rear end and a high prow at the front for pushing through waves. It had clean lines and sturdy construction that reminded Veris sharply of the vessels he'd used when he'd

travelled to Britain and then back to the mainland. Northman ships had once thrown fear into the hearts of men when they had been spotted on the horizon. Now their designs were copied by sea-farers everywhere.

Rafael lifted a brow. "It looks very small," he said, sounding nervous.

"It's safe enough," Veris assured him. "Trust me. Let's buy two places."

But the captain wasn't willing to set sail on the evening winds, even though he already had two other

passengers booked, which gave him a full compliment. He was an old and experienced sailor and he looked at the sky with a troubled eye and shook his head, telling Veris he would start out tomorrow.

Veris pulled the old man to one side and got out his purse. He started laying out gold Bezants, very slowly, placing them in front of the man so that the last of the sunlight made them glint. When he had laid out ten of them, Veris picked them up and started to put them away again.

The man caught at Veris' wrist with a sigh and nodded. "We go,"

he said. "But it will not be a nice sail, no?"

Veris shrugged. "I want fast, not smooth."

The old man grinned, showing a row of missing and broken teeth. "It be *very* fast," he said, his Greek strained.

"That is all I ask."

The captain, Reshef, sent his boy over to one of the nearest inns to collect his other two passengers, a man and his wife, a well-veiled woman with lots of baggage and a personal slave. Veris and Rafael began loading the contents of Veris'

cart onto the ship where Reshef indicated, even though stevedores could have been found to handle the cargo if they had wanted to avoid the labor themselves. But Veris was just as happy to evade the prying eyes and fingers of strangers in amongst his possessions and the work was done just as quickly and more efficiently if he did it himself.

Within the hour, they were underway, Panormos falling behind them, the lowering sun to their left and a damp breeze blowing in their face.

Reshef sniffed the breeze, scowled at the scudding clouds on

the skyline and muttered under his breath before bellowing commands at his two man crew, who scurried to let out the big square sail and the smaller sail in front. Reshef was controlling the speed of their crossing. He didn't want to head too smartly over the horizon into the unknown with a night's worth of travel ahead of him.

Veris joined him at the prow where the old man stood with both legs spread against the rocking of the boat in unconscious balance gained from years at sea. "Phoenicia runs in your blood, no?" he said in Arabic.

Reshef looked up sharply. "Almost completely," he replied, his Arabic pure and clean. "My family has always been sailors."

"Phoenicians were all superior sailors," Veris agreed. He nodded toward the horizon. "You fear what lies ahead."

"I do," Reshef agreed easily. "I prefer to meet it in daylight, but it's coming too fast." He grimaced. "You insist on a fast crossing. It may be faster than either of us like. Faster ...or slower than honey on cold day."

Slow, because the ship had

foundered, Veris interpreted.

“I know something of the sea,” Veris told the old man, who was still staring moodily at the bad-tempered horizon.

“Northman, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Thought so.”

“If it’s coming too fast to pick your meeting ground, wouldn’t you be better to speed up, anyway? Race through it as fast as grace allows?”

“And Hades be damned?” Reshef spat over the side. “Well,

you wanted speed..." He laughed and switched back to Greek and began to call out instructions, setting the sheets for maximum speed.

Veris yanked off his dalmatic and rolled up the sleeves of the robe beneath. Reshef would need a third and fourth hand before the night was through, if his dour face was anything to judge the coming storm by. Veris went back to where Rafael crouched against the bulwarks. Rafael's face was grey.

"We're doomed!" Rafael cried.

Veris stared at him, truly

stunned. "Why do you say that?"

"These waters will kill us all in this little boat!" He unclenched one white knuckled hand from the gunnels long enough to point to the waves beyond as the ship cut cleanly through them.

Veris grinned. "These are just waves, Rafael. These are nothing." If he was sick at the sight of relatively calm waters, tonight was going to give him hysterics. Veris touched his shoulder as he handed him his outer garments. "You need to bear up, Rafe." He leaned down so he could drop his voice. "It's going to get bad, later. If the others

see you panicking, it'll infect them like a sickness and the last thing we need is hysterical passengers. It's not unheard of for sailors dealing with a bad storm to drop passengers overboard if they get in the way."

Rafael's eyes widened for a moment. Then they got infinitely wiser and older. "No matter what happens, you want me to pretend all is well. Yes?"

Veris shook his head. "You don't have to go nearly that far. But stay out of everyone's way. Including mine. It's going to get bad before it gets better and you're not a sailor."

“You are a sailor as well?”

“I suppose that’s one of the professions I forgot to mention.” He grinned. “The good side of this, Rafe, is we’re going to get to Constantinople in record time. The wind from this storm is blowing in our favor.”

“You have my felicitations,” Rafe said dryly. He clutched at the gunnels as the ship tilted sharply up the side of the big seventh wave and gasped. “If this really is just normal, I hope you judge what is to come is worth it, my...Veris.”

Veris thought of Brody and

Taylor somewhere in the city that lay on the other side of this sea. He knew that both of them would be working with the mistaken assumption that he was somewhere in Britain, months away from finding them.

He cursed that he and Brody never discussed this part of their lives. Brody had always sheered away from talk about his enslavement. The topic was *verboden*, for it stirred up all too human pain and panic in Brody. Veris had never pushed to resolve the issues Brody still carried after so many decades, figuring there was

still time. There was always more time.

It had been a shock to Veris to learn that Brody had been a chariot driver in Constantinople—a nasty shock. He knew something of the death and carnage that featured in the Hippodrome. Byzantines liked their entertainment strong and bloody, which stirred neither disgust nor pleasure in him. In ten centuries, nothing had changed except that now the blood and carnage was fake and issued via Hollywood. Twenty-first century citizens would be appalled at the comparison, but Veris had a longer

perspective.

Brody had been part of the real entertainment that Byzantines enjoyed and now he was once more.

“Facing this sea *i s* worth it, Rafael,” Veris said.

Rafael nodded, his worry clearing as he studied him. “Very well, then,” he said simply.

Veris clapped him on the shoulder and moved forward to help the crew with reefing in the sails. It was exacting work and it had been nearly a hundred years since he had done it. Plus, the storm

that they were racing to meet was pushing up higher and higher waves that made the deck heave more sharply by the hour.

It wasn't until the sun slipped beneath the horizon and full darkness clothed the sea that Veris finally noticed the symptoms of blood hunger in himself and by then, they had reached a point of urgency.

* * * * *

They lost the spar around midnight. Veris heard the wet, slow cracking of timbers and for one

small moment despair clutched at his heart, because he knew instantly what the sound meant.

He looked up into the dark, peering through the driving rain and wind, trying to spot which of the masts they had lost. The front sail was sagging and billowing.

“Cut the braces, don’t let it drag us broadside to the waves!” the captain shouted. “Hurry!”

The captain’s two crewmen leapt to comply for they understood the danger of the ship being pulled around until they sat side-on to the waves rolling across

the sea, giant walls of water whipped up by the wind. If the impact of the waves did not break the back of the ship in the first place, they would be swamped and would quickly founder, in the second.

Veris moved over the heaving deck to the front mast and climbed up to where the ropes from the broken cross-spar were pulling across the sail. He pulled his long blade from his boot and sawed at the ropes. It took far longer than it should have, for he was weakened by the need to feed, which was now a steady, throbbing siren song in his

mind and chest. His vision kept losing focus, as his instincts were prodded by the close proximity of prey and their hot, coppery blood scent.

It was a battle to stay on top of the animal, to stay in control, but there were not enough humans in this ship for him to feed and not have it go unnoticed.

After an age, the ropes parted and the broken spar slid down the canvas and was free. It dropped into the sea and was gone.

Tired and weak, Veris lowered himself hand over hand back down

to the deck. The two crewmen were re-rigging the mainsail, following Reshef's bawled orders. Unlike his vision, Veris' human hearing did not diminish when the hunter's instincts were dominant, because it was a useful hunting skill. So as he stood recovering from the climb, he listened to Reshef's fast Arabic and his gut tightened.

Rafael was making his way along the sides of the ship, heading for Veris, clinging to the gunnels with white knuckles, but his expression was dogged. Veris could smell vomit on him and above all, the sweet smell of his blood,

beating in his veins.

Veris shook his head as Rafael reached him. "You need to stay out of the way." He was shocked at the hoarseness of his own voice.

"You should eat," Rafael told him, lifting his voice above the wind and the waves. "I have some food. You look unwell!" He drew in a sharp breath as the ship's nose lifted up high over a wave front and clutched even harder at the gunnels. He swallowed, his throat working hard.

The spicy sharp scent of adrenaline was almost arousing.

Veris closed his eyes, fighting for calm. For peace. He thought of Brody. An image of Taylor's big grey eyes swam into his mind.

A measure of calm returned. He looked at Rafael. "You need to stay away from me," he said. "Until we're on land and I can...until I've eaten."

Reshef was screaming more orders. Veris turned away from Rafael's puzzled expression and pushed himself into movement. Human movement. He worked his way up the deck and planted himself in front of Reshef. "You cannot turn this ship around," he

said. "We have an agreement."

"I have only one sail now. I am the captain," Reshef declared. "You will kill us all with this mad insistence on reaching Constantinople. We will put into land, the nearest land we can find, until this blows over."

Veris lifted his arm, pointing toward the full, straining mainsail. His arm felt heavy and hard to lift. "We're already running ahead of the wind. If you try to turn in any other direction but this one, you'll risk losing the one sail you have left. You're better to keep running ahead and ride it out."

Reshef shook his head mulishly. "Your gold coin will be no use to anyone at the bottom of the sea, Northman. I would rather live to spend it."

"*You will,*" Veris assured him. "I've sailed bigger seas than this with a smaller sail. You have to trust me."

Reshef shook his head again and called out an order. Veris couldn't translate it. The wind seemed to be too loud and Reshef's words were all snatched and gone before he could hear them.

A heavy hand came down on

Veris' shoulder and then he understood that Reshef had decided to rid himself of a troublesome passenger, after all.

* * * * *

Bribery was a slippery art, Taylor discovered. It required, to begin, a careful selection of the appropriate subject, which was where her plans to bribe her way to Brody began to unravel. She had no idea who to pay off. Kale was a house slave in a patrician household and no better an advisor. The driver slave pits were

unknown territory to her.

Taylor turned to Metrodora. The woman was used to bribing her way into freedmen's' arms. The slave pit was just one step further.

Metrodora, though, when Taylor carefully outlined her ambitions, drew back with horror. "A *slave*?" she said in the same tone that people in the 1950's might well have said "A *black man*?"

Taylor sighed. "I'm not asking for your assistance, Metrodora. I merely seek information. I do not understand the way things work at the Hippodrome. Who controls the

drivers?"

"Oh...he is a chariot driver?"
Metrodora's interest perked.
"Which one? Tell me!"

Taylor didn't want to give Brody's name, but in order to find out who she needed to bribe, she needed information. She was going to have to give some to get it. "The Celt. Braenden," she told Metrodora.

"Oooh, he is certainly worth a bribe or two," Metrodora agreed, her eyes sparkling. "Genesios the Money Lender owns the chariots he races, although he has nothing to

do with the drivers, of course.” Metrodora tapped her pink lips with her fingertip, thinking. Then she smiled. “Here is how I would do it. There will be a slave master and a master at arms. They’re the two key people, but the master at arms is the one you must be most certain of, as his men will do the fetching and carrying, so save your biggest bribe for him.”

“Who are these two people? What are their names?” Taylor asked.

“I have no idea,” Metrodora told her. “But I know exactly how to find out.” She stood up and waved

her personal slave forward. "I'm going to go to the markets. There is all sorts of information to be had, there. Invite me for cakes later this afternoon, Ariadne."

"I will," Taylor promised, as Metrodora hurried from the room.

Kale stepped forward to clear the low table of the early morning meal they had been eating.

"I will need you to deliver the bribes, once we know who they are to go to," Taylor told her.

Kale nodded her head. "Yes, mistress."

Metrodora returned just after the noon meal with two names and a parcel. The parcel contained a bolt of silk cloth the color of cherries that she laid on the table in front of Taylor. "The silk merchant at the west end of the bazar has been taking my husband's wagers for years. He shuts down his shop on race days and takes his entire family to the Hippodrome. He is devoted to racing. I thought he would know exactly who you needed to speak to."

"He did?" Taylor asked, running her fingertips over the beautiful silk.

“The slave master is Basilides. The master at arms is Oresme. I had to buy this entire bolt of cloth to get the names, but he did tell me something else.” Metrodora grimaced. “You will need to speak to Oresme yourself, Ariadne. He has been approached by slaves with offers from their owners before and he has always said no. You will have to find a way to make him say yes.”

“He is an honest man?” Taylor asked, her heart sinking. An honest man could not be bought, no matter what price was offered.

“Every man has his price,”

Metrodora replied. "At least, that is what my husband always tells me. If you speak to him directly, you will be able to determine what this Oresme's price is."

Taylor gave a tiny shrug. "Where can I find this Oresme? When?"

"He is a Christian. You will find him at the Cathedral every Sunday."

"Then tomorrow, I will attend Mass."

Chapter Ten

Taylor had only a little difficulty in getting Matthew's permission to attend the cathedral mass the next morning. He seemed distracted but amenable. "I will give you alms and an offering for the church," he told her. "Ask Kale to remind me."

"You will not attend with me, my husband?" Taylor asked, for they were in one of the public rooms of the house and surrounded by slaves she did not know.

“I have business in the city.” He waved her away impatiently and Taylor withdrew, secretly pleased to not have him dogging her every step.

Aware that she needed to uphold Matthew’s reputation even in this outing, she consulted with Kale on the appropriate clothing and the correct number of household staff she should take with her and by the time they set out for the cathedral, Taylor felt confident that Matthew would have no reason to consider she had besmirched his reputation yet again.

It was a pleasant fifteen minute walk from Matthew's house to the cathedral, through the labyrinth-like streets of the city.

People were gathering and talking along the sides of the streets in groups, their heads close together with an intensity that seemed unusual for casual gossip. Kale sent one of the other slaves off to investigate. The man rejoined them after five minutes, at the end of the block. "There was a storm at sea the night before last and much wreckage has washed up against the wharves and jetties. It has been a fruitful morning for the

beachcombers. They think at least two ships were lost.”

St. Sophia’s Cathedral was a magnificent building, with the great dome that seemed to beckon everyone from across the city. Taylor had not studied Byzantine history, but she knew enough from cross-references throughout history that nine centuries from now, when the Turks invaded the city, the cathedral would be turned into a mosque and lose none of its majesty in the transition.

What she had not been prepared for were the large number of people gathered in the public

square at the doors of the cathedral. Her first fleeting impression was that it felt like the same sort of crowd that gathered at the front of one of Brody's concerts—badly and oddly-dressed people lingering in groups, watching others go by and calling out insults and comments.

Then she saw and understood what was happening. These were the poorest and most desperate people in the city, gathered at the front of the cathedral where the richest and most affluent came to pray. The poor came here to beg for handouts from the rich as they passed into the cathedral.

Matthew had anticipated this. He had given Kale alms to dispense.

It was a direct and practical charity system that worked in place of social security or unemployment insurance, which didn't exist in this day and age.

Taylor turned to Kale. "You have the money?" she asked.

Kale nodded. She was already loosening the ties on a pouch at her waist.

"The families with children. Give them money first. After that, I'm sure you can discern who is the

neediest.”

“You don’t wish to give to your usual beggars?” Kale asked carefully, glancing at the two guards standing on either side of them.

“I suppose, yes, that would do,” Taylor agreed.

The guards stepped up in front and behind her, while Kale moved ahead and wended her way through the crowd. It was clear Kale was practiced at this, for she wove first in one direction, to find her intended recipients and dispense coins, then she would

head off in another direction without hesitation, to find another. After nearly a dozen such stops, Kale's purse was empty, and they were much closer to the cathedral itself. Kale tucked the purse away and returned to Taylor's side.

The group of slaves and guards, with Taylor in the middle, approached the grand entrance to the cathedral. There wasn't anyone begging right at the front of the cathedral steps, but there was a large group of well-dressed people milling about, talking amongst themselves, many of them standing under parasols and shade cloths

held by slaves.

Taylor looked at Kale, raising her brow. Kale scanned the clusters of people, then moved her head toward a group of men and nodded slightly.

“Go,” Taylor told her.

Kale moved ahead, toward the men. There were five in the group, surrounded by others that were slaves or servants, judging by their clothing. Kale pushed past the servants, who came from lesser households than her, and stood at the elbow of one of the shortest men in the group. The short man

had black hair that was silver on the sides, deep olive skin that was pitted from acne long gone and a bulbous nose. He was quite slender and wore a short roman-styled sword on his hip and a leather breast plate under his cloak.

His shoulders were square and his bearing very upright. Even in this century, Taylor could spot his military background in his posture.

He cocked his head as Kale spoke in a low voice. She had caught his attention.

Then he looked around at Taylor with a frown. After a few

seconds while he was clearly weighing the advantages of speaking to her, he adjusted his sword belt and excused himself from the circle of men and walked toward her, Kale trailing behind him.

“My lady Ariadne,” he said. “I would not deign to speak to the wife of a green man, but your father’s loyalty to the blues is well known. I am aware of your own... alliances.”

Taylor understood what he would not say in front of her servants. He knew she had been caught in the tunnels with Brody,

and that she was not above dallying with blue chariot drivers. If her father was a blue man, her own loyalties most likely lay with the blues and not with her husband's green preferences.

"It is that alliance I wished to speak to you about," Taylor told him.

His eyes narrowed. "Then we have nothing to speak—"

"But we do, for I have something you most desperately seek," she added quickly as he started to turn away.

Oresme paused, smiling. "I am

an old soldier, madam. Even one as young and fresh and pleasing to the eyes as you does not provide incentive enough for me to jeopardize my post."

"But you've already done that."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "You speak in riddles. A typical woman."

"I was merely being discreet." She smiled at him. "I have no wish to embarrass you." She glanced up at her own head guard. "I am just going to step over here a pace or two, out of hearing. Stay here, yes?"

The guard hesitated, then nodded reluctantly.

She tucked her hand under Oresme's elbow and turned him and walked him the promised few paces, out of hearing of her household and his group of people. She was taller than him by nearly an inch, but she didn't let that diminish her estimation of his power. He was the head of security of one of the biggest slave pits in the city. He had to be a wily and dangerous man to control the guards and slaves in his care.

Oresme turned to face her once more. "Now. Explain yourself, if

you can."

Taylor smiled at him again. "I was in your slave pit *** nights ago, Oresme. I reached deep inside, in the furthest tunnels and associated with Braenden, who was free and without chains. Surely, you cannot tell me you have not suffered any consequences from that night? You are responsible for these slaves, and one was virtually free and clear of the pit."

Oresme's face hardened. "What of it?" he asked. "The slave was punished and from the look of your cheek, madam, so were you."

Taylor took a slow breath, pummeling the memory of the blood on the back of Brody's tunic into the inner recesses of her mind. "I refuse to believe," she replied as calmly as she could, "that at the very least Genesios did not heap disapproval upon you for letting a slave have the run of the tunnels, and a woman, too."

Oresme's breathing shallowed and increased. "If you seek to curry favor with me, madam, you go about it in exactly the wrong way."

"Have you not wondered *how* I accessed the slave pit, Oresme? Has it not worried you how I slipped

past your guards so easily, and how Braenden reached me without a single guard noticing?"

Oresme's jaw worked as he considered her questions. "And again, I ask, what of it?"

But his *I-don't-care* attitude was false. His growing anger told Taylor that he did care. Very much so.

"I will tell you who helped me that night and how I made a laughing stock of your guards," she said.

"Who helped you? One of my men *helped* you?" Oresme drew in a breath, struggling for control.

When he was contained once more he considered her anew. His jaw flexed again. "You'll tell me for a price," he guessed.

"You'll bring Braenden to my chambers tonight, via the servants' entrance. Kale will show you the way from there."

"That is a steep price," he judged. "There are many other matrons and maidens, too, who have asked that price and been prepared to pay handsomely for it and I've turned them all down."

"But none of them know what I know." Taylor took a deep breath.

She was in this now. She had to keep riding the bluff out. “My husband is not attending mass today because he has business in the city...with Genesios. I thought I might invite Genesios to dinner tonight. Do I have reason to, Oresme?”

Oresme studied her, his face impassive. “No, there’s no need to invite him to dinner,” he said flatly. Anger flickered in his eyes. “Tonight, then.”

He nodded shortly and turned and walked away, his cloak flicking her robe as he whirled.

Taylor returned to the protection of her guards and slaves. She was shaking, but she didn't know if it was the aftermath of fear or excitement for the coming night.

* * * * *

Close to eleven p.m. by Taylor's internal clock -- long after the slaves had extinguished all but the most essential lamps and Matthew had bid a stiff and formal goodnight before going to his own chamber -- there was a whisper of sound that was not wind, and Taylor stirred from her sentry duty

to peer down the corridor, her heart leaping.

She had begun her vigil standing at the beginning of the long, wide passageway that ran through the center of the house and connected most of the formal rooms to the slave's quarters and work rooms. Everyone called the passage the processional, because of its width and elegance. Brody would be brought this way to reach her chambers and so she had stationed herself at the turn from the processional to the entrance to her quarters, to watch and wait in the darkness.

Eventually, she had slid from her feet to her butt, as one hour had turned to two, then crept into the third.

Then the whisper of sound. She knew that sound. She had heard it the night they had arrived in Constantinople.

Chains.

Taylor peered down the almost-dark processional, watching for movement, her heart thundering now. Oresme was going to abide by his word. In a moment or two she would see Brody and would be free to speak to him and above all, touch

him.

Taylor fought to reign in her agitation and her joy. Neither of them would help her if something went wrong. Brody was not yet in her chamber.

She climbed to her feet and waited.

The chink of chains must have been unintended, for the first confirmation she had of Brody's arrival was the dark shape of men gliding down the processional soundlessly. They were shadowy and impossible to identify except by size and height, which told her

that Oresme was not among them.

Kale hurried around them and came toward Taylor. "All of these men are to be allowed in your chamber?" she asked in a harsh whisper.

"Just the Celt," Taylor murmured.

Kale hurried back to the swiftly moving group and spoke in an undertone to the leader.

By then the group had reached Taylor. They were all wearing hooded cloaks, she realized, which disguised their features and had let them pass through the city streets

without remark. The leader dropped his hood to look at her. He had a scar down one side of his face, and the eye on that side was milky and blind. "We put him in your chamber, remove the chains and withdraw to take up guard at the doors and windows. We won't give him the run of the place. He's too clever. No offense my lady."

She sighed. "Agreed," she murmured, and stepped aside.

They moved passed her, pushing the taller figure between them.

Brody.

Her heart thudded painfully.

Taylor followed the group into the interconnected rooms that made up her quarters. They stopped in the middle of the first room, at the very edge of the area where the rugs were spread across the floor and cushions were scattered around the edges. Delicate, sheer curtains hung from the ceiling to separate the area from the divans further on, and to shield it from anyone who might be able to see in the unshuttered windows. It was a place for relaxing.

The leader turned and spoke shortly to his men. They tugged on

the chains they were holding, unlocking them from the cuffs around Brody's wrists. Both chains and cuffs had been hidden under the cloak.

Another chain had been looped through a collar around his neck.

Then the cloak was stripped from him and the guards departed as promised, leaving Brody standing alone, staring down at the cuffs about his wrists.

Taylor gritted her teeth, holding back any sound she might make, for Brody looked terrible.

In the few days since she had

last seen him, his physical condition seemed to have deteriorated badly. In the dark tunnels, just before they had separated, she had noticed the unkempt state of his hair, but little else, for she had been busy dealing with the fact of their arrival in Constantinople and Veris' absence.

Now, she realized that the wild, tangled locks were in keeping with the rest of him. The tunic he wore was barely worthy of the name. It was a simple shift of rough cloth. It was filthy and the ragged hem was barely long enough to preserve his modesty. It would give him no protection against cold, cuts,

scrapes or more. One shoulder had ripped open and had been roughly knotted together again.

His body was similarly covered in dirt and sweat. Where there was not dirt, she could see bruises, cuts and scrapes.

He has been beaten. More than once.

She remembered the blood she had seen seeping through the snowy white driver's tunic they had made him wear. That tunic had been much more presentable, even smart. Of course if he had got blood on it, someone probably would

have found it offensive and taken it out on him.

“Brody,” she said, moving toward him. “What do you need?”

He lifted his head to look at her, his dark gaze drilling into her. “Do *not* touch me!”

The fury and repulsion in his tone was enough to make her stagger backwards, shock deluging her like a bucket of ice water.

“You don’t mean that,” she said firmly.

“I haven’t bathed in the four days we’ve been here, and god

knows how long this body went without clean water before that. I *sweat* and there is blood and more on my body that I won't burden your conscience with." He swallowed. "Right now, you are the most precious...the most beautiful thing I have beheld in my entire life —" He looked away and Taylor saw him swallow. Hard.

He looked back at her again. In the moonlight filtering through the curtains, she could not see the nuances of his expression, but... were his eyes shining?

"I didn't know where they were taking me," he said, his voice low.

Of course they wouldn't tell him. He was a slave. They would just bundle him up and tug him to where they wanted him.

Brody shrugged, a tiny move of his shoulders. "There was some trouble yesterday after the racing. I thought...well, it doesn't matter. I thought wrong."

Taylor knew exactly what he had been thinking. The trouble had centered on him. He had assumed he was being taken away to be dealt with conveniently in some lonely place where there were no witnesses.

Then it occurred to her with the impact of a too-close thunderclap: Brody was human. That meant blood, sweat...*and tears*.

Her step towards him was involuntary and he took a step back in reaction.

Taylor lifted her hands up, palm out. "A bath," she declared.

"Do we have that much time?" he asked doubtfully.

"We have all night," she assured him.

The expression on Brody's face was infinitely wise. She had never

seen Brody show his years as much as he had in that one moment. Perhaps it took being human once more to feel the weight of centuries of being non-human. He looked tired and old. "They'll come for me long before dawn," he told her. "As soon as they get tired of waiting, or they get bored or if it gets cold out there, they'll be back."

"That wasn't what I agreed to."

"You're a woman. Do you think they care what you agreed to?"

Taylor wanted to scream a protest over that, but she couldn't. Attitudes were different here and

now. She considered it from Brody's perspective. "You may be right, but I have Oresme over a barrel and he knows it."

"You bargained with *Oresme*?" Brody shook his head. "I didn't think that snow pea had a price. I'm impressed."

"I have a feeling he's a man who stays bought." Taylor walked around Brody and turned to look at him. "However long you're in my rooms for, nothing else happens until you have bathed. Let's take care of that." She held out her hand.

After a long moment, he lifted his hand and slid it into hers.

His hand was warm.

Chapter Eleven

There was water standing by from earlier in the evening. It was still warm. Taylor had already earned a reputation for requiring hot water at all hours of the day.

She placed the big bathing bowl on the tiles and slid the hassock close by. She would need to stand on it to reach higher than Brody's head. From the shelf nearby, she unstopped the jar of unguent that foamed on contact with water and

was lightly scented and placed it next to the bowl. "This is supposed to have some medicinal properties that I have yet to discover," she told Brody, "but it makes great soap."

She lifted the heavy urn of hot water and climbed onto the hassock with some difficulty, for the hem of her robe got in the way and she needed both hands to lift the urn. Then she looked at Brody where he stood by the window. "Your shower waits."

Slowly, he padded across the tiles, his bare feet making no sound. He seemed to be weighed down by heavy thoughts. Even his

movements were slow as he stripped the tunic from him. He hesitated before he stepped into the bowl, then he gingerly placed his feet on the broad base. In the moonlight the copper wrist bands flashed as he moved.

His head was bowed again.

Brody's posture, his silence and introversion worried her. Taylor considered him as she lifted the urn and slowly poured a third of the urn over his head, turning the spout so all his hair was properly wetted.

Of course coming back to this

time would have an impact on him. She had seen for herself the awful after-effects Brody's enslavement had delivered, sixteen centuries into the future, so returning to Constantinople would be a terrible trauma.

It was just that the Brody standing before her was so different from the man she knew and loved. The Brody she knew devoured life. He laughed a great deal – usually he threw his head back and let his laughter loose with a bellow that shook his shoulders. He did everything with gusto – music, reading, dancing, making love.

Over the last three nights, in her lonely and luxurious bed, Taylor had lain awake hoping that Brody's enthusiasm for life, plus sixteen centuries of living and the undying love of two people would give him the resiliency he needed to survive the slave quarters a second time.

Now, as she put down the urn and poured some of the 'soap' onto his hair, she wondered if her hope had been a way of trying to console herself for not reaching him sooner, or if she had underestimated the intimidation and soul-destruction that came with being a slave.

As Taylor reached out to plunge

her fingers into the wet, tangled mess of knots and filth, to lather the soap and distribute it, Brody's chin lifted and his hand gripped her wrist. "No," he said flatly, his voice low.

"But surely you want clean hair?" she asked reasonably.

"I'll do it," he told her. "I won't have you touching me. Not like this." He glanced toward the divan sitting a few feet away, where piles of thick folded cloth sat. They were adequate towels. "Sit down, Taylor. Relax. You must have waited up for me to arrive, so I know you're tired." He grimaced. "I remember

what tired is like, now. It's not fun."

The tears that stung her eyes were hard like bullets and she blinked furiously, trying to hide them. It would hurt to shed them and it hurt to hold them back. This wasn't Brody, this sad, defensive man. It really was Braenden, a slave with no hope.

He detached her fingers from the gracefully curved handle of the urn, taking it from her. "Sit," he told her.

Taylor stepped down from the hassock slowly, her own gut

instincts at war with Brody's quiet command. She moved over to the divan, but didn't sit. Her mind was racing.

Brody had set the urn on the floor next to the bowl and was lathering the soap himself.

He had turned away from her.

A single, scalding tear did slide down her cheek and it seemed to burn all the way down. Pain was tearing at her throat.

As she watched Brody silent wash himself, she twisted her fingers together helplessly, mentally reaching for something,

anything that might fix this. If only Veris were here. He would know what to do. He had nearly ten centuries of medical expertise and research lodged in his memory and his whole long lifetime's worth of folk-remedies and plain common sense.

Veris *knew* Brody. He knew him inside out and upside down, in a way only possible after centuries of intimacy. Taylor had known Brody a sum total of eight pathetically short years...not nearly enough to help him now his past was catching up with him.

She swallowed back the hard,

hurtful mass in her throat and looked toward the windows, where the carved stone privacy trellis was dappling the gauzy curtains with moonlight and shadow. Veris was so far away that it could still be daylight where he was.

Taylor was quite alone. She was scared, human and lacked the experience that so many years of living had given Brody and Veris.

But Brody needed help. Unlike the first time he had lived through this, she was here. Miraculously, she was here to help.

Taylor watched Brody pick up

the urn to rinse the suds away, as the cool voice of reason whispered in her mind. *It's all up to you, Maggie Taylor Yates. You're the one that has to do this. There is no one else.*

The pain driving her pity tears dissolved as she realized how fundamentally alone she was. There wasn't an Internet around to consult for moral support or stupid questions, nor was there anyone she could confide in. They would burn her as a witch or stone her to death if she breathed anything of the truth. She had to provide her own cheering squad...and Brody's, too.

If it was up to her, so be it. She would die if she had to, to release Brody from these awful chains—both the mental and the physical ones.

As Taylor realized and accepted the situation and her own role in it, calm returned. If the worst thing that could happen would be to die to help him then the matter was very simple. She would do whatever she had to. The rest of it was simple problem solving. She was a Ph.D. and had spent her entire professional life using her mind to solve problems. This was no different.

Taylor drew in a breath and let it out, locking down her determination.

Then she picked up the big folded cloths she had been using as towels and walked back around Brody to face him. She laid one on the tiles in front of him and shook the folds out of the other and held it out. "Do you want help rinsing?" she asked, keeping her voice light and breezy, like she might have used at home in Los Angeles.

Brody lifted his chin to look at her sharply. His dark eyes swept over her, from top to toe.

That was a look she had seen many times before, that full length assessing sweep. Her breath caught. Normally, that look was followed by a kiss or arousing caress, or if he really liked what he saw with that all-encompassing gaze, Brody wasn't above pressing her up against the nearest wall, or bending her over the closest table top and taking her, hard and fast.

"I'm fine," he said shortly and lifted the urn for the last time. He poured the remaining water over his head and returned the urn to the floor. The handle clinked wetly against the metal cuff around his

wrist.

Normal, Taylor thought. He had responded to her being normal, being Taylor of the twenty-first century, not Tyra posing as Ariadne. Of course, those sorts of reminders would pull his mind back toward their time, to when life was infinitely better than now.

She could do normal. It was safe enough, in the middle of the night and the security of her private chambers.

Taylor mentally switched language channels. She was more practiced at it now, and the flip to

English came more easily than it once did. With a heft of the cloth in her hands, she said in English, “Step out onto the towel and I’ll wrap this around you. I refuse to let you put that tunic back on.”

Brody drew in a long slow breath, staring at her. “Why English?” he asked, in English.

“There’s no local word for ‘towel’ here and now,” Taylor replied lightly. “Come on, move your ass, Gallagher. You wanna eat, don’t you?”

His stomach immediately growled, loudly enough for Taylor

to hear it. She grinned. "That sounds completely fucking weird coming from you."

Brody stepped out onto the towel she had laid down for him, streaming water. He stared at her, suspicion growing in his eyes. Then he registered what she had said properly. "Food?" he repeated.

"Lots of it. Kale warned me you would probably be hungry and that the food they give you isn't the greatest, so I have some put aside for you."

His stomach roiled and rumbled once more and Taylor smiled as she

wrapped the sheet around his waist. She hurried over and picked up another one from the divan, then tossed it to him. "Dry yourself off, then come and eat."

She hurried through the dividing curtains into the area she had mentally tagged the living room. There were more divans, soft cushions and low tables. The area was designed for lounging around.

The large tray of meats, cheeses, fruit, bread and wine had been left on the table, under a cloth covering. Taylor carried the heavy tray over to one of the low tables crouched next to the biggest and widest

divan and removed the cloth. She poured a glass of wine from the decanter, then moved even more quickly through to the area where her bed was located. It was hidden behind painted dividers with carved fretwork at the top—for nothing in Constantinople, not even the mundane, most workaday tool—went without a single filigree or curlicue of some sort. Adornment was the heart and soul of Constantinople, right along with the richest, deepest and most varied range and hues of color that Taylor had ever seen in all her travels through history.

Moving as fast as her fingers would go, Taylor searched for and found all the metal pins and brooches holding her hair up in its convoluted up-do. She dropped them into the pewter tray that sat on three legs, next to her bed, that served as a nightstand.

As soon as her hair was loose, she bent over from the waist, brushed it all forward and ran her fingers through it, straightening out the curls and waves as much as she could, and getting rid of any sign of fifth century styling.

Then she stripped her belt and robe and jewelry and dropped

them all on the embroidered gilt cover over her bed. Almost naked, she bent and unfastened the ties that kept her sandals wrapped around her ankles, and slipped out of them.

Now she was completely naked.

She picked up the cloth that lay over the table by the window, after shifting the little statues and candles that sat on it. The cloth itself was almost pure white, and apart from a simple border around the edges, completely free of Byzantine decoration.

She wrapped the cloth around

her body like a sarong, and tucked the corner in tight. Brody had seen her hundreds of times wearing a bath towel in a similar fashion, and more than a few times had untucked the corner and unwrapped the towel with a deep growl of appreciation. He would remember.

Then she grabbed the small jar of scented almond oil and poured some into the palm of her hand. Kale had been forced to show Taylor how to remove the heavy accentuating eye makeup a high-born woman wore. Most of the make-up was kohl-based and

impossible to remove if one didn't know the trick. Taylor carefully dabbed her fingertips into the tiny pool of oil and quickly spread the oil over her eyes and face, the thinnest of layers. Then she carefully wiped away the oil with a cloth, bringing with it any makeup and dirt that has settled there. In four days of caring for her skin in this way, Taylor's face had become softer, with the tiny lines she had noticed starting to show around her eyes disappearing. Her skin felt wonderful.

"Taylor?" Brody called softly.

"I'll be right there," she replied

and dropped the cloth onto the now-bare table top.

She walked back into the living room area. Brody stood by the coffee table, looking down at the food there. He wore the bath sheet around his hips, which meant that on his long legs it came down to his ankles.

“Help yourself,” Taylor told him and slid onto the divan behind the table. She patted the cushions. “Why don’t you sit while you eat? It’s more...comfortable.” She had been about to say ‘civilized’, but here and now that word had too many connotations. Brody didn’t

think of himself as civilized, not deep in his heart. He thought he was only pretending to be a reasonable man, despite everything she and Veris had tried to do to convince him civility wasn't a genetic trait, but acquired through hard lessons, just as he had acquired it. This jump back to Constantinople would be bringing that belief into question once more for Brody.

So she patted the cushion again and smiled at him encouragingly.

Brody was studying her. "You look different," he said flatly. He spoke English still, to her relief.

“I cleaned off the gunk,” she said. “I wanted to get comfortable, too.”

He circled around the coffee table and sank onto the cushions, then turned his attention to the big tray of food once more.

Taylor picked up the glass of wine and held it out to him. “It’s very good,” she told him.

Brody reached out for the glass, staring at it with a peculiar intensity. He curled his fingers around the thick base and took it, watching the dark red contents move inside.

“You don’t want it?” she asked. “They don’t drink beer here, I’m afraid.”

Brody let out an unsteady breath that sounded like a tiny laugh. “I’ve never tasted wine,” he said. He looked at the tray of food. “Or eaten meat like that.”

Taylor rode out her shock and dismay as she coupled up Brody’s personal history with this astonishing fact. He had been ripped out of Britain when he was thirteen and shipped here to Constantinople, where he had lived the life of a slave until he had died at thirty years of age, and been

made a vampire.

It was entirely possible that he had failed to taste wine before he was thirteen, despite watered wine being considered a perfectly safe and nutritional drink for children. In all his long years as a slave, wine would have been a luxury denied him. Once he was made a vampire, the opportunity to taste or sip anything passed.

Brody had spent his whole human life eating the poorest of food and that was his only memory.

Taylor picked up an apricot from the tray, and the paring knife

that sat beside it. "Oh, you're in for a treat," she told him, slicing it in half and removing the pit. "Here." She held the apricot halves out to him on her palm. "Before you drink the wine and ruin your taste buds, try this."

He picked up one half and bit into it. Taylor watched, fascinated. Brody eating food seemed quite ordinary and human, but at the same time it felt strange.

Brody's brows lifted as he chewed. He swallowed and the corner of his mouth curled up. "Apricots. That's what your mouth tastes like. Finally, I've figured it

out.”

Taylor’s heart squeezed. “I didn’t know you were trying to.”

“Taste is a human memory that doesn’t last all that well,” Brody told her. He frowned. “It’s probably a good thing, too. We’d go mad with the knowledge that we could never taste richness like this ever again.”

Taylor cut a slice of the hard, aged cheese. “If you think apricots are rich, you’re going to love this.” She held it out to him.

Brody reached for the cheese with no hesitation this time. As he

ate, Taylor sliced and prepared mouthfuls for him. In between he sipped the wine. His first mouthful made him grimace. “*This* is what people have spent centuries addicting themselves to? It’s... weird.”

Taylor laughed. “Wine is a great drink. You have to drink it properly though.” She taught him how to let the wine settled on his tongue and the flavors seep into his taste buds, then draw in a breath over the top so the bouquet would hit the back of his throat.

“I’ve heard all this before,” Brody told her. “From dozens of

people, some of them wine freaks with cellars the size of our house in L.A. But it never really registered until now. I guess because I knew I was never going to taste wine I just didn't take it in." He took another sip as Taylor held out more lamb for him to eat, and a little absorbed frown appeared between his brows.

It was the same look of concentration he had been wearing, driving the chariot.

Taylor shuddered and dismissed the thought. Instead, she plied him with more food. "You're not used to alcohol," she told him. "And you haven't eaten properly for four

days at least. Eat more, then finish the glass, or you'll be drunk before you know it."

"Or asleep," Brody replied. "I haven't had a lot of that lately, either."

Brody sleeping. It was another oddity. Taylor steered around the conversational minefield by handing him the knife and standing up. "I'm going to comb your hair out before it dries in those knots. You should keep eating."

She found the comb that Kale used to untangle her own hair, then settled herself on the divan behind

Brody to comb his hair while he ate. The oil lamp was next to her and for the first time she saw what the shadows and darkness in the bathing area had hidden.

Brody's entire back was a mass of bruises, cuts and raw wounds. Most of them were long, straight marks running diagonally across his back. They ran from his shoulders down to where the bath sheet wrapped around his hips.

Taylor covered her mouth with her hand, holding in any sound she might make, because she knew it would be a sound of horror or despair.

Chapter Twelve

Taylor's silence and stillness gave her away. Brody swiveled to look at her and he instantly put down the wine and the handful of bread he held and turned back to her. "Don't look like that," he said softly.

She removed her hand from her mouth. "Your back!"

He gave a tiny shake of his head. "I don't even feel it right

now. It's days old."

She moaned. "They *did* beat you for escaping the cavern, then. I'll kill him, Brody. I'll fucking kill him."

He frowned, puzzled. Then his frown cleared. "Who did you put the squeeze on to get me here?"

"Oresme...who paid off Basilides."

Something flickered in his eyes and Taylor nodded. "Basilides, then. That's who gets to answer for this."

Brody curled his hand around

her neck and his fingers were warm against her flesh. She shuddered at the contact, because it was familiar and dear, yet strange to her because of the heat.

“Don’t do *anything*. Those two schemers spent years arranging affairs to suit themselves. You’ll just make yourself their target if you push things more than you have. They let you have this night because it’s a feminine whim. They think it’s harmless. If you were to threaten them in anyway....” He shook his head.

“I’m not going to sit around and let someone get away with doing

that to you," she said flatly. "No one gets to do that to anyone, anymore."

Brody shook his head again, his gaze boring into hers. "Here in Constantinople at this time, they *do*."

"How can they do that to another human being?" she asked helplessly.

"I'm a slave," Brody said flatly. "I'm not human to them."

"You're not a slave. Not anymore," she said as firmly as she could.

Brody tilted his head to look at her. Silently, he held up a hand and turned it so she could see the metal cuff properly.

“This is temporary,” she replied flatly. “You know it comes to an end and soon, if I have anything to do with it.”

Brody shifted on the divan so he was facing her properly instead of twisting to look at her. It brought his knee up to lie bent across the cushion. “I had forgotten that, somewhere in the last few days. We *do* get to jump out of this, don’t we?” And he smiled.

Taylor drew in a shaky breath. That smile meant he had returned to the Brody she knew.

She rested her hand on his shoulder. "Back to Marit and your music."

"Smog and clean sheets, traffic jams...*Críost* and showers..." He sighed, rolling his head and stretching his shoulders.

"Spain kicking Ireland's ass in the World Cup Finals," Taylor added, hiding her grin, for Ireland's national soccer team was one of Brody's guy things. He followed international soccer with keen

interest. But Ireland was not the strongest team in the league and he was constantly disappointed.

Now his mouth and eyes opened in mild surprise. "*Spain?*" he replied with disdain. "That'll be the day." He lifted the damp ends of his hair from his shoulders, pulling it away with a twist of his wrist, winding it into a thick strand, then tossed it back over his shoulder and out of the way.

The mannerism was so familiar, so *Brody*, that its appearance now made her eyes sting with weak tears of relief and happiness. She

hid them, blinking furiously, and threw the challenge back at him. "Ha! The day Ireland wins against Spain, I'll buy you that Tessler you were drooling over." Sports cars were another of his passions. He had been thinking about trading in the Maserati for a while now and the Tessler had caught his eye.

Brody grabbed a handful of the hem of the cloth tied around her and tugged. "*Deal, mo bhean álainn.*" His voice was abruptly deeper and thicker.

The cloth unraveled and crumpled around her hips. Brody made a growling sound in his

throat. “Most beautiful,” he repeated in English and pulled her toward him, his hands on her hips.

Taylor’s heart skittered as he tossed the white cloth aside and pulled her so she was lying on the divan and half tucked under his body. He kicked his own sheet aside and leaned over her. In the low lamp light his eyes were very black. “You’re good for my soul, Maggie Taylor Yates.”

“*Tá tú go maith do mianach, freisin.*” It was the Celtic version of ‘me, too.’ Taylor lifted her head and kissed him.

The lingering traces of wine in his mouth and on his breath were almost shocking, but it was a minor thing. Brody passively accepted the kiss for a mere heartbeat, then he took control by pulling her up hard against him and driving his tongue into her mouth.

It was an explosive kiss. A groundbreaking one. All the tightly held emotions Taylor had been storing inside her for the last four days, for lack of someone to share them with, all of them drove the kiss, making it one of the most intense moments in her life.

Brody almost tore his mouth

from hers. His chest was heaving. "My god!" he breathed. "Veris was right! Kissing you while I'm human is poetry and gourmet food all rolled into a single symphony."

Trust Brody to find an apt and unusual analogy for what he was feeling. Veris, the trained academic, had used statistics for comparison.

Taylor stroked her forefinger along the line of Brody's cheek. "Wait until you come. It's even better."

He blinked, then chuckled. "Ye're a wanton, Maggie," he told her, letting himself revert back to

his natural Irish accent.

“And you just hate it, don’t you?”

He smiled as he bent to kiss her again. “Uh-huh. Especially while I’m without the canines, my sweet one. I can kiss you as hard and as deep and as long as I want, and not have to worry about ripping your flesh apart as I do it.”

“I noticed their absence,” she murmured against his lips. “Kiss me again.”

His kiss was longer this time, and heady. Taylor blinked as he released her mouth and trailed his

lips over her chin and down the length of her neck. She was breathing hard and aroused as hell. It had been four days without a single caress or kiss from either of them, and Taylor was used to multiple erotic encounters each day. One or both of them would find a way to raise her pulse, leave her trembling, or have her squirm and scream in ecstasy. They took pleasure in leaving her in a limp state at least once per day.

Brody closed his mouth around her nipple and Taylor gasped and clutched at his head, her fingers sliding through his damp hair. Her

clit and pussy were throbbing with urgent need. It had been *far* too long. She twisted on the divan, trying futilely to relieve the ache.

Brody pinned her thigh down, his body heavy and hard on top of her. Even human, he was strong, directing her body where he wanted it so he could deliver the most devastating stimulation. The thigh he was not holding down he scooped up with one arm under her knee, spreading her open for him to toy with as he wanted.

He nibbled his way down her belly, making her abs quiver. Taylor's grip in his hair tightened

convulsively as he neared her mound. "Brody..." she whispered desperately. "Don't wait."

He gave a low growl. "You taste ambrosial," he told her, his lips moving against her flesh, very low down on her abdomen. "Better than you've ever tasted before. One doesn't hurry luxury." He slid his tongue into the top of her crease, probing and finding the swollen nub of her clit.

Taylor's hips lifted in reaction and she closed her eyes, letting herself drop into the power of the climax building in her, instead of denying it or trying to hold it back.

Her breathing hastened and hitched in her chest as Brody's tongue stroked and his lips caressed her clit. He slid his hand under her ass and lifted her pelvis up higher. It also kept her mound steady, defeating any thrust or rise of her hips.

She gripped the divan, a moan escaping her.

Brody thrust his fingers deep into her pussy, spreading them so the knuckles would rub against the sensitive walls.

Her climax hit her with an impact that stole her breath and

made her sight fade for one shining moment. Taylor arched off the cushions, her fingers digging into the fabric, gritting her teeth together to stop the scream that was pushing from inside her. She couldn't alert the household to her midnight visitor by screaming aloud.

She dropped back onto the cushions, panting, and Brody surged over the top of her. He planted his hand next to her head and impaled her with his cock in a heavy single thrust that stilled all Taylor's movements as she accepted him into her. She sucked

in a breath, her body trembling around him. It had only been a few days, but it seemed much longer since they had shared this primary intimacy.

“I love having you inside me,” she whispered, looking up at him.

Brody paused, his cock lodged as deeply inside her as he could drive it, looking down at her with his dark eyes. “No man could ever tire of this, not with you. I’m glad I screwed with history just enough to bring you into our lives.” It wasn’t the first time Brody had made this confession to her—well out of the range of Veris’ hearing, for Veris

would have an embolism if he heard that Brody considered the near-disaster he had created when they had first met one of his finest achievements.

Brody eased from her body and thrust once more, slowly and deeply. Then again. He growled, the tendons in his neck and shoulders straining. “*Íosa Críost*. I can feel...*everything*.” His thrusts hastened and the little furrow appeared between his brows once more. “Too much...” he muttered.

Taylor wrapped her leg over his hips. She could feel the orgasm take

his control, making him quiver and thrust in shallow, quick movements. His eyes closed. "Aaaggh!" he growled, the sound pulling from deep inside his chest. His hot seed spilled in her and this time Taylor could feel it...the heat of his essence.

Brody froze, staring down at her, his muscles straining. He swallowed.

Taylor smiled at him. "That came from your toes," she observed.

He gripped her hip, shifting her on the cushions a few inches. "That

was just the opening aria," he assured her. "Then there's the rest of the opera."

His cock was still a rigid shaft inside her.

Taylor caught her breath as he began to thrust again, for the music analogy confirmed what his earlier gesture had told her.

Brody was back. Now, she just had to keep him here.

* * * * *

Brody made love with a fierce relentlessness, taking her again and

again. His need might have lingered for hours except for the fact that he was human in this here and now. Once his human body had been fed, watered and the first hot driving edge of his need had been satiated, the next most critical biological priority asserted itself: Sleep tried to claim him.

Brody fought it off with a shake of his head and by grinding the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. "It's barely past two a.m. I just got here. I won't waste this night by sleeping it away," he growled, reaching for her.

"Your body will shut down on

you whether you want it or not," Taylor warned him as his lips trailed between her breasts. "You're sleep deprived and your biorhythms are naturally low right now."

"Shut up and kiss me," he demanded.

But exhaustion was a force Brody could not ignore, bargain with or work around. Barely fifteen minutes later, he yawned mightily, his lips brushing over her hip bone, then lifted his head and swore softly.

Taylor drew him up to lie

alongside her on the divan. "Just rest for a few minutes," she suggested. "Even a catnap of five minutes might refresh you enough to keep going for a few more hours."

Brody rolled onto his side and tucked her up against him. "This feels..." he murmured, his voice thick with sleep.

"Strange," she finished, agreeing with him. "It's usually me who gets to fall asleep in your arms."

"I don't even know if I snore," he whispered.

Taylor muffled her laughter because the heavy exhale that he gave told her he had fallen asleep already. He had been fighting it off too long and as soon as he relaxed it took him.

She turned under his heavy arm so she could see his face. His eyes were closed, the thick black lashes resting against the pale flesh of his high cheekbones. He was a beautiful man, and when he was completely relaxed like this, it showed far more easily than when his wariness and guard was raised as it was so frequently when strangers were around.

Taylor only realized she had drifted into sleep herself when soft sounds and movement on the other side of the room alerted her to intruders. She jerked awake as Kale hurried across the room, carrying a lamp. Kale's face was impassive as always, but barely three paces behind her were Brody's caped and hooded guards.

Taylor shook Brody awake, cold fear washing through her. She had only just drifted off herself, so Brody had been asleep a few minutes only. It could barely be three in the morning.

The guards had returned too

early.

Taylor shook Brody harder. "Braenden. Wake up *now*," she called in the ancient Greek they used in this time. She shook him a third time, then slid out from under his heavy arm and grabbed the white cloth she had used as a sarong earlier in the evening, and wrapped it around her, hiding her nakedness.

Brody stirred groggily.

"Mistress—" Kale began, speaking softly.

"Up! Get up, you lazy bastard," one of the guards demanded. He

lifted his foot and kicked at Brody.

His foot didn't make contact.

Brody seemed to roll out of the way and rise to his feet in a move that Taylor would have sworn was only possible for a vampire to make, with their enhanced strength and responses. But in a cat-quick reaction, Brody barreled his way between the front pair of guards, sending them staggering.

The guards reacted almost as fast. They circled Brody in a defensive pincer, enclosing him in a tight circle of bodies. He slammed up against the other side of the

circle and instantly, they closed in on him, raining fists and the pommel of their swords on his back, arms and shoulders, forcing him down to his knees.

Taylor realized she was trying to go to his aid when Kale gripped her arm, holding her back. Horror washed through her, along with despair, but Veris was not here this time for her to hide her face against and pretend this was not happening. Taylor grit her teeth, remembering that she was truly alone now and the only one who could help Brody.

She made herself watch each

blow and punch. The tears she shed as she watched scalded her cheeks like hot acid, but she didn't wipe them away.

When Brody was beaten into submission and docile once more, they attached the chains to his cuffs and slid the collar about his neck and fastened it. A long disguising cape was thrown about his shoulders. No one bothered with a tunic for him. He was left naked and barefoot beneath the rough material of the cape.

Taylor picked out the head guard by his blind eye. She wiped her face and stepped in front of

him. "It isn't sunrise," she told him. "You are not abiding by the terms of the agreement I arranged with Oresme."

"Terms?" He laughed at her. "What, exactly, did you think you were arranging? You get what you get, lady whore. Consider yourself lucky."

Taylor glanced at Brody, at his face which was barely visible under the pulled-over hood. He had warned her this would happen and she fully expected him to send her a n *I-told-you-so* look, or to lift his brow at her. But his head was down, his gaze on the floor. Even

his shoulders were slumped, making him look smaller. Shorter.

Brody had gone. Braenden the slave had returned.

Anger stirred in Taylor's chest and belly for what they had done to him and to his spirit. She looked at the guard as he tugged on the chains, preparing to move Brody out.

"What is your name?" she demanded.

"What business is that of yours?"

"The next time I arrange a night

like this, I'll make sure to include your name in the list of people who share the purse I give Oresme," she told him.

He laughed. "What makes you think there's ever going to be a next time?" He pushed past her, making her stagger. Kale was instantly at her side, holding her up, helping her find her feet again.

Taylor looked up, just as the huddled group of caped men disappeared around the corner of the suite entrance.

Brody was gone.

As they got closer to the main cavern, the stench got stronger, and that was what finally overcame Brody's lethargy. The throbbing in his back and shoulders from the punches and blows from the sword hilts was nothing...but the idea of being forced back into that filth and wretchedness after even a few short hours of touching and tasting Taylor's delicate sweetness was too much to bear.

The guards led him directly toward one of the cages, and Brody

reared back, blank wordless refusal building in his mind and muscles. It was like a madness swelling inside him, rising to engulf his sanity and shake him apart with despair and fury.

“Whoa, boy!” he heard Basilides say.

That was the last coherent thought he had for a while. He hit out at anything and everything around him, fighting with every fiber of his body and soul. He would not let himself be put in the cage. He couldn't.

He knew it was a battle he could

not win. There were too many guards and he was chained and naked.

But to give in just because he couldn't win would strip him of more than just clothes. So he fought until one of them—probably Zeno, who had spent the journey from Matthew's house bellyaching about his assignment—took his consciousness with a decent blow to the head.

His vision faded as he sank to the ground and his last coherent sight was of Evaristus, crouched in the dark shadows near the last cage, watching his downfall with a

quizzical expression.

Brody thought there was surprise in Evaristus' eyes.

That he might have surprised Evaristus, who seemed to know everything and see everything, was a satisfying idea.

Chapter Thirteen

Taylor lifted the lid to disclose the enameled tray and its contents. Metrodora leaned forward to look at the contents. “Oh,” she said uncertainly.

“I made these myself. They are a family recipe...a great secret passed on from generation to generation,” Taylor told her. She picked up one of the cookies and handing it to Metrodora. “Do not let the appearance of these biscuits fool

you. They are the most sinful delights. Try it. Go on."

Metrodora took a small, hesitant bite and chewed. Then her eyes widened. "Mmm..." She took a bigger bite, one that demolished most of the cookie. "What...?" she asked, speaking carefully around her mouthful.

"I told you...it is a secret recipe," Taylor told her. In fact, the cookies were a rough approximation of the simple peanut butter cookie recipe that Taylor could recall from every jar of peanut butter she had ever seen Marit devour. Peanuts were

plentiful if one could afford them, here, and wheat flour could be bought at a price. After that, it was a matter of substitution and ingenuity. Cooking with a wood stove had been the most challenging part of the task.

Metrodora eagerly reached for a second cookie. "This is a most generous gift," she said and bit into it.

"It does come with a small price attached," Taylor confessed, pushing the enameled tray closer to Metrodora.

Metrodora lifted a brow. "More

conspiring? You are so adventurous, Ariadne! What now?"

Taylor joined her fingers together docilely. "Your father is the Emperor's chief tax collector."

"He is," Metrodora agreed. She cocked her head to one side. "What mischief are you brewing?"

"Oh, something a bit more potent than mischief," Taylor assured her. She leaned forward. "There's a man—a guard—that needs to be taught a lesson..."

* * * * *

Brody came floating back to consciousness slowly. It wasn't like waking from sleep at all. There was pain and confusion and a deep reluctance to stir back to the state that had caused the pain in the first place.

For a while he let himself drift, unwilling to pick up the traces of the thoughts and memories that gave coherence and meaning to consciousness.

“Braenden...Brody!” came the soft hiss.

That caught his attention and pulled him closer to the surface. He

tried to fit the names together. Why would someone be using both of them?

Evaristus. He was the only one who knew both of them here and now, apart from Taylor, and it was not her melodious tones he had heard.

Brody kept very still and opened his eyes a sliver.

Bars.

The cage. They had thrown him into the cage after all.

He grew immediately aware of the bars underneath him, digging

into his arms and thighs and hip. It was an extra discomfort – one that was painful enough for him to ease himself up until he was sitting and then to find a position where the bars didn't dig into his ass too deeply or uncomfortably.

Evaristus tapped on the bars to get his attention once more and Brody turned his head to look. That set off a pounding in his skull that made it feel like his eyes would pop out and the bones of his face would slide off without too much more encouragement. He hissed at the throbbing agony and paused, waiting for it to subside, before

opening his eyes once more and focusing on Evaristus where he squatted outside the cage.

“This is familiar,” Brody told him.

Evaristus pushed rough material through the bars. “If you insist on defying the guards, you will keep finding yourself in these bear cages. It is a fate entirely in your own hands.”

“That’s a familiar refrain, too,” Brody replied, sliding the fabric under his butt. “You don’t happen to have any food, as well?”

“Not yet,” Evaristus told him.

“Did the lady Ariadne not feed you?”

“In all ways,” Brody told him. “But I’m hungry again.”

“Then the blow they gave you didn’t permanently damage your head,” Evaristus judged. “You have a very thick skull.”

“So I’m told,” Brody replied dryly.

Evaristus lifted his head and turned it, questing. Brody recognized the movement and the odd cocking of his head. Evaristus had heard something with his extra-range vampire senses.

“What is it?” Brody asked.

“Footsteps. Boots. Many of them, coming this way,” Evaristus replied.

“Boots. That’s something official.” Brody looked toward the entrance to the cavern, where the wide, well lit passage led directly to the street. There were several flights of stairs on the way, and a well-guarded gate at the street entrance. Only guard-escorted members of the public with authentic reasons to be here or people in authority would have got past the guards. Slaves were brought in to the cavern via the

Hippodrome entrance, and guards used a private portal on a side street.

After nearly a full minute had passed, Brody heard the susurrations that heralded the arrival of many people, thrumming along the air issuing from the mouth of the big tunnel.

No one else had heard it yet. Everyone was going about their business in ignorance, but gradually, one by one, heads began to turn as they heard the approaching boots and turned to look toward the main tunnel.

The guards were cautious. Zeno sent six of them to stand in loose formation around the entrance. They didn't draw weapons, for the guards on shift at the front gate had passed the approaching strangers through. But the slaves, chariots and equipment in the interconnected caverns represented a huge investment in capital and were high income producers. It wasn't unheard of for raiders to pirate the caverns of high-producing chariot outfits, steal the slaves and equipment and supply their own caverns. It was worthwhile to be cautious about a

large group coming down the tunnel.

The guards—everyone, in fact—fell back half a step either mentally or physically, when the group emerged from the tunnel and stepped into the cavern proper, for half of the men in the group wore the colors of the Emperor's own officials, and the guards accompanying them were army soldiers.

“The Emperor sends his minions here. This looks...interesting,” Evaristus murmured.

A short man with cropped black

hair and thick brows, and the dark olive skin of an island Greek stepped out from behind the guards, as Basilides moved forward with a bow and a subservient smile.

“I seek the man called Zeno,” the official told Basilides, tapping a scroll against his other palm.

Basilides failed to hide his relief, while Zeno looked startled, the brow over his one eye lifting. He swallowed and moved forward reluctantly as Basilides bowed low again and stepped backwards at the same time.

“I am Zeno,” he told the official.

“I am Tarasios,” the little man replied, looking up at Zeno. “I am honored to work with Cosmos, who has the honor of collecting taxes for our great Emperor.”

Zeno looked puzzled. “You are welcome here, Tarasios, but I fail to see why you seek me out. My affairs are in order. I have paid my taxes.”

“The official taxes, yes.” Tarasios unrolled the scroll. “Certain unofficial transactions and income you have been privy to throughout the year have come to our attention. You did not report these items to the Emperor. Nor did you

share tribute with him. He is most vexed about this."

"Sir?" Zeno queried, looking panicked. His face had drained of color.

Brody glanced at Evaristus, a rich and warm humor flowing through him. A smile was tugging at his lips. Taylor had pulled this off. Somehow. She had been super-pissed about Zeno cutting short her night with him.

"Never get on the wrong side of a scheming woman, Evaristus," he murmured.

The vampire glanced at him

sharply. "This is the doing of your Ariadne?" he whispered.

"The timing is too coincidental for it to be anything else," Brody replied.

Zeno was gripping his hands together. Pleading. "But I do not have fifty bezants!" he cried.

Tarasios was completely unmoved. "It is a pity you did not think to put the money aside when you first earned it."

"But I didn't—" Zeno began, then stopped as he realized that declaring he had not earned the money would win him no

sympathy, either. He shot a helpless glance toward Oresme, who had emerged from the room where the off-duty guards sometimes relaxed before and in between their shifts. Oresme was standing with his arms crossed, absorbing the situation.

Brody realized that Taylor was sending Oresme a message, too. "Oh, you are one wicked schemer, Maggie Taylor Yates," he murmured.

When Oresme didn't leap to help Zeno, the one-eyed guard realized he was on his own. His shoulders slumped and he turned

back to face Tarasios. "I do not have such a sum put aside," he said flatly. "Is there some arrangement we can come to, instead?"

Tarasios let the scroll roll up with a snap of parchment. "Slavery is the usual course in these matters, in order to pay the debt."

Zeno winced.

Tarasios smiled. "But this *is* a first transgression. I'm sure we can transmute that remedy."

Zeno looked hopeful.

Tarasios glanced at his companions, who all looked dour

and disapproving. Tarasios shrugged. "Very well. Public flogging in the market." He clicked his fingers and the soldiers all surged forward, to grip Zeno by the arms.

Zeno let out a squeak of protest that sounded high and frightened as the soldiers stripped him of his weapons and armor. He glanced pleadingly at Oresme and Basilides, who stood motionless and silent.

Tarasios bowed regally toward Basilides as the soldiers marched Zeno out through the main tunnel. He smiled widely and turned and moved down the tunnel himself,

his companions falling in behind him.

Brody let out his breath in a gusty exhalation. "I wish I had my video camera, or even a cellphone so Taylor could see it later. That was priceless."

Evaristus frowned. "Those would be things of the future, I would be guessing."

Brody nodded. He gripped the bars in front of Evaristus. "She's going to go after Oresme next," he said quietly. "She'll let Basilides stew in the stink of his own fear."

Evaristus jerked his chin a

fraction toward the pair of them.
“Look, it’s already working.”

Brody glanced over his shoulder. Basilides was carefully not looking at anyone. There was sheen of sweat at his brow and temples and at the base of his throat, just above the neck of his tunic.

* * * * *

There was one advantage to travelling about the city with a large contingent of people, Taylor discovered: It tended to halt traffic, both foot traffic and vehicles. It was

just what she needed to corner Oresme at the far end of the Regia, the colonnaded stretch of the Mese that runs into the forum of Constantine, where all the processions and festivals tended to go.

Her guard captain “gently” tapped Oresme on the shoulder and brought him across the road and into the patch of shade cast by Taylor’s mobile, square parasol, carried by four slaves holding a corner each erected on a staff.

Oresme look thunderous, but resigned. He held himself stiffly.

“You short changed me on the terms of our agreement,” Taylor said shortly.

“Straight to the point, my lady.” Oresme glanced around, looking for eavesdroppers.

“I trust everyone who stands within hearing distance,” Taylor said flatly, although she knew nothing of the sort and cared less about Oresme’s reputation. “I know it was Zeno who really made the decision, but he took orders from you.”

“That is correct,” Oresme agreed evenly.

“I understand he pissed himself when they flogged him in the market this morning,” Taylor added and smiled brightly at Oresme.

His jaw sagged and the truculent look in his eye faded. Shock and dawning suspicion replaced it.

“I suggest,” Taylor continued, keeping her tone pleasant and light, “that tonight, when you bring the slave to me, you remember Zeno’s fate. I can always arrange something similar for you.”

Oresme drew in a slow, deep

breath, his chest lifting under the leather breast plate. "Aye," he said finally. "I understand."

"Eleven o'clock and not a moment later," she told him.

"Eleven..." he began to protest. He halted, then nodded shortly. "Eleven."

"And make sure he is freshly bathed and sweet smelling when he arrives," Taylor added.

Oresme's jaw flexed. His nostrils flared. "It'll cost more," he ground out.

"Take it out of the taxes your

guard didn't pay." Taylor turned to go and looked at him over her shoulder. "Give Basilides my regards."

Oresme's eyes widened in surprise.

* * * * *

Evaristus alerted Brody by tugging on his ankle from his position on the bunk below his. "Something is happening," Evaristus called softly.

Brody looked down at the cavern floor below. Oresme was

crossing the cavern in long strides, his cloak furling behind him. He eschewed the dalmatic most men wore, preferring to wear armor over a tunic, in imitation of military men.

Oresme strode directly over to where Basilides sat on a wide stool and began to speak in a low, hard tone, his hands working furiously as he spoke.

Evaristus climbed up to Brody's bunk and sat cross-legged next to him.

"Can you hear what he's saying?" Brody murmured.

“Bits and pieces. He’s speaking very low.” Evaristus narrowed his eyes, focusing his concentration. “He’s talking about her, your lady.” He grinned. “He’s not using nice words, either.” He listened further, then pursed his lips. “Hmmm....”

Both Basilides and Oresme turned and looked up at the bunks.

At Brody.

Basilides was scowling.

* * * * *

Oresme’s men arrived a few minutes after the chimes in the

streets below announced the hour, the sound floating up through the open windows to where Taylor leaned against a cool column of marble, waiting.

Every minute that passed after that before Taylor spotted their shadows moving along the processional seemed to last forever. With no time-keeping gadgets to mark the exact passage of time, she could only guess when another minute had elapsed, and she knew that in her heightened state of anticipation, her judgment of time was absolutely skewed.

For a brief moment she wished

she had Veris' and Brody's accurate and infallible sense of time. It would serve her well right now.

But then she saw the movement of dark patches at the far end of the processional. Her heart leapt and she pushed herself away from the marble column she had been leaning against and hurried silently down the cool tiles toward them.

Kale, alerted to her movement, lifted herself up from the floor where she had been squatting and followed Taylor down the length of the passage, her bare feet making no sound on the floor.

Taylor halted as the tightly gathered group drew closer to her.

The one in the lead threw back his hood and she hid her surprise, for it was not Zeno, the one-eyed guard she had been expecting. She had been bracing herself for insults and anger from him.

The man staring coldly at her was younger, a typical Greek with the dark hair and eyes, and there was intelligence in his expression and gaze. "Where do you want him?" he said shortly and softly.

Taylor stepped aside. "Kale, show them the antechamber."

Kale beckoned. "Come," she commanded.

The huddled group continued down the processional and Taylor fell in behind them. She followed them into the front room of her suite and heard the soft rattle of chains as they were unfastened.

She moved around the group, to where Kale was watching with eagle eyes. The slave woman considered the guards of charioteers to be beneath her in rank and a lesser breed of people. Her prejudice was rich and open and she had managed to belay her disapproval of Taylor's association

with them *and* their drivers via expressions, sounds and gestures, even though she was not permitted to say anything directly unless invited to speak freely, which Taylor had carefully not given her permission to do.

The group dissolved, leaving Brody standing alone in the center of them. Then one of them stepped forward to snag the back of the hooded cape, as if it was a forgotten item. It was whipped away, with a sharp tugging motion.

Brody was naked beneath.

Naked, and covered in bruises,

scratches and wounds. His hair was damp and hung down the center of his back in a tangled skein. He had a black eye forming and there was a raw scrape along his jaw that looked like his face had been ground against stone.

There were older bruises all over his ribs. Some of them, Taylor recognized from last night, but others were forming and they looked bigger and deeper.

There was a series of scratches that turned deeper and uglier as they moved from his forearm up along his biceps to his shoulder. It was his left arm and Taylor knew in

her gut that Brody had been using that arm to fend off a knife.

“Animals,” Kale muttered, her nostrils flaring, as she took in Brody’s state and the guards, who stood grinning around him.

“It is eleven in the evening. The stink of the cavern has been scrubbed from his hide, as ordered,” the lead guard said. “We will be back two hours before dawn. I trust there will be no protest when we retrieve our prized driver this time.”

“One hour before dawn,” Taylor bargained.

“Two,” the guard said flatly. “We will need that much time to return through the streets to the Hippodrome before sunrise and without being noticed.”

It was a reasonable objection. Taylor nodded reluctantly. “Two hours, then.”

The guard did not react. He did not wish her a good evening, or give any of the standard pleasantries. He simply turned and walked away, the rest of his men following just as silently.

Kale inclined her head toward Taylor. “I will leave you, my lady. I

will return before the guards, to wake you, if you need waking." She floated away, more regal than Taylor could ever aspire to be.

Taylor stepped toward Brody, who was watching Kale leave. When Kale disappeared, he looked back at her.

"They've beaten you. Again. Oh, Brody..."

He shook his head. "You scared the crap out of them, Taylor. This is the only way they can hit back." He held out his arms. "*I am* clean this time. They used boar brushes and soap that I think was nearly pure

lye. I think it took off layers of flesh."

She hugged him gingerly, afraid to add any more pain to his already pain-riddled body. "They hit back hard," she whispered. "The cowards."

"They're all that," he agreed, his lips moving against her hair. "I don't know what miracle you pulled off, but Zeno has disappeared. He was a sadistic bastard so no one misses him for a nano second. Oresme has been looking thoughtful and Basilides is flat out scared."

“They thought they could dick me around because I’m just a woman,” Taylor told him. “So I showed them it wasn’t a good idea.”

She felt his silent chuckle. “We’ve had a marvelous time watching them shit themselves wondering what you’d do next.”

“Despite the beatings?” she asked, appalled.

“I’ve had worse.”

“Worse than guards coming at you with a knife?” she asked. “I know defensive knife wounds when I see them.”

He was silent for a few seconds, then he said softly, "Worse than guards with knives."

She shuddered. This was the reason why, sixteen centuries later, Brody still carried the traces of his time as a slave. The brutality had left very deep imprints on his soul.

Then Brody's stomach rumbled and in the total silence in the room it sounded loud.

Taylor stepped away from him. "God, you must be starving!"

Brody gave a lopsided grin. "I could eat," he confessed. "Especially more of that fancy stuff."

And wine.”

She picked up his hand. “Come with me. I had Kale put a meal together for you. More fancy stuff, only different than last night.” She tugged him toward the inner rooms, where the meal had been left. “Hot food this time, as I was pretty sure they would bring you here when I said they must.”

“Hot sounds marvelous,” Brody replied, following her without resistance.

“Let me find you something to slide into while you eat. You don’t want to drip hot sauce on your

flesh.” She lifted the lid of a chest and pushed aside silk mantles and delicate robes, looking for the heavy winter robe she had spotted folded at the bottom. She pulled it out and shook it out. “It’s huge on me, so you should have no problems with it.”

Brody was already sitting on the edge of the divan where he had sat last night, looking over the half dozen dishes laid upon the giant circular bronze tray sitting on the ottoman in front of him. He was inhaling in big, slow breaths, sampling the aromas.

“It smells even better, as a

human," he said.

"That's because your body is responding to the smells and making you feel even hungrier," she told him, stepping around the ottoman and holding out the robe. "Here, put this on."

"I'm fine," he told her shortly.

"I'm not," she shot back. "It's my fault you have those cuts and bruises. You said as much. It would help if I didn't have to keep looking at them."

He looked up at her sharply. Then he got to his feet and slipped the robe over his shoulders and

wrapped it around him. "It's not your fault they're ignorant fucking morons. You're working with limited means in a world you don't know..." He shook his head. "I'm amazed you pulled this off a second night, Taylor. I'm truly stunned. I'm sure you've already learned how small a woman's freedom of choice and movement is here."

Taylor grimaced, which Brody responded to with a flash of one of his big smiles. "I see you have," he added. He sat on the divan and reached eagerly for an apricot and bit into it and chewed.

"Do you want to know what I

did?" she asked, pouring wine.

Brody shook his head and swallowed. "No," he added for emphasis. "I don't want Oresme and Basilides to have reason to think I know more than I should. Keep it between you and them, Taylor. Leave me as the ignorant sex object."

Taylor tried not to smile, then not to laugh, instead. She gave a breathless wheeze and handed him the wine. "Oh, you're really getting off on that idea, aren't you?"

"An ignorant slave?" he asked innocently. "Not likely." He drank

some wine.

She rolled her eyes. "The sex object whose services of which all the rich wives have knocked themselves out trying to buy."

The corner of Brody's mouth lifted just a little. "It's a pleasant amusement that passes the time." He sobered. "But mostly, I spend my time thinking about you and Veris."

Taylor drew in a slow breath, searching for the calm she had to deliberately reach for whenever she thought about Veris and how very far away he was. "That's how I did

it," she told Brody. "That's how I tied Oresme and Basilides up in a knot and got you here for a second night."

Brody looked puzzled, so Taylor added, "I imagined I was Veris and figured out what I would do if I were him. It worked so well I've been almost scared at the effectiveness of it. No one seems to be able to cope with a woman who acts like a man."

"Or looks like you," Brody added. "I'm beginning to understand why Oresme has been looking so thunderous and thoughtful."

Taylor reached for a bowl and scooped up some *sphoungata* for him, the spongy omelet that was a local dish. "Eat up. You're going to need your strength before the sun rises."

"I am?" he asked with the same innocent tone.

"Veris has the bad taste not to be here. You'll have to be twice as creative tonight to make up for it. You two have been neglecting me dreadfully."

Brody's gaze simmered as he chewed. "That's a gauntlet hitting the floor if ever I heard one."

She grinned. "I imagine you've heard one or two in your time. Real ones, too."

"Aye, but the sword I will use on you bites a different way altogether, my wanton wife."

Taylor pushed the plate of figs toward him with a slow smile, a shudder of anticipation running through her, and settled back on the divan to wait.

They had almost all night. Brody would make her enjoy every moment of it now.

Chapter Fourteen

The soldiers returned at the appointed hour and this time, Brody was ready for them both mentally and physically. So was Taylor.

Kale had found a plain, short tunic in the slaves' quarters that would fit Brody and brought it to him shortly before the soldiers were to return. It was clean, white and hemmed. Brody gave a small smile of thanks as Kale held it out

stiffly, her expression wooden. "I am indebted to you for your kindness," he told her.

She sniffed. "You speak fine enough," she allowed, with a glance at Taylor.

Taylor hid her smile as Brody slid the tunic on, and poured a cup of the hot, spiced wine Kale had also bought with her. "Here, to warm your belly," she told Brody as she held it out to him. "And you should eat more."

Brody gave a gusty sigh. "I don't know if I could eat more." He took the cup and sniffed it

appreciatively, then sipped. "Mmm. I've never eaten so much in my life."

Taylor caught Kale's second glance at her. She understood Kale's thoughts clearly. There was pity there and a dawning recognition of the vast difference between Kale's life as a slave and Brody's. Taylor had seen Kale's gaze flickering over Brody's bare body, lingering on the bruises and cuts.

Kale had probably never been struck by Ariadne, or Ariadne's family. Certainly, she had never lacked for food, water or adequate

shelter and she was cared for when she was sick. She held a privileged position in society and until this moment, it was possible she had never considered the plight of other slaves who did not enjoy Kale's situation, or wondered if they didn't deserve their fate.

It wasn't just Taylor who was receiving an education into the intimate workings of chariot racing.

Taylor coaxed Brody to eat and drink by handing him morsels between mouthfuls of the spiced wine, picking out items she had identified as food he had already acquired a liking for. Brody liked

the medley of spices and combinations of unexpected flavors, as opposed to unadorned food. If he had been able to eat as a vampire, she suspected he would be a gourmand or a chef, while Veris would be the plain steak and potatoes man, who would want hot, workmanlike food cooked well and plenty of it, for that had been the food he had favored when he had been human in Norway.

This went against what she might have predicted if she had thought about, but it held constant with the fact that of the two of them, Brody was the one that spent

the most time in the kitchen and was the better cook of the two, when it came to preparing meals for the humans in the family and their friends. Veris could put a meal together well enough and he was always willing to do his share, but he didn't have Brody's creativity.

While Brody ate, Kale went to receive the soldiers and escort them through the sleeping household.

Taylor rested her hand on his thigh. "I'll arrange another night as soon as I can, Brody. I can't take you out of there - it would screw with history too much. But a night of rest, here...that I can do, as often

as I can.”

From beyond the entrance to the suite, Taylor heard the soft sound of footfalls. His guards were arriving.

Brody lowered the cup, his dark eyes on her face. “You shouldn’t be doing this much, Taylor. God knows how it will fuck things up.”

“You want me to stop?” she whispered. “You want me to leave you there in that hellhole and go about Ariadne’s life for the next six months or however long it takes for Veris to reach us? Let you rot there, or wait for the next chariot race

to...to..." She halted, not able to complete the sentence.

"Kill me?" he finished. His fingers curled over her wrist. "Taylor, you might have to brace yourself for that."

Her heart stopped. She felt it halt. Her stomach seemed to split open to receive the plummeting organ. Her whole body stilled.

"What?" she whispered with lips that seemed to have grown numb. Even her hearing had shut down. There was a high buzzing in her mind. Brody's fingers over her wrist was the only sensation

available to her and they were a hot cuff, making her flesh sweat.

She shivered.

Brody shook her wrist for emphasis. "I don't know what year this is. It doesn't matter anyway because I don't know what year I died. But I think it's soon, Taylor. The way things are moving in the cavern—the races and the drivers... the events—from what I can remember, I think it's going to be very soon."

His eyes seemed to be growing larger as she stared into them. Larger and blacker.

“Veris is good. He’s very, very good,” Brody continued, “but even he can’t get around basic physics. It’s going to take him weeks to get here from Britain. You have to face this. He may not get here in time.”

“In time?” Her voice was bodiless. Barely a whisper.

“In time to let us jump away before I die.”

He said it so calmly. That was the frightening thing. Taylor sat, completely unable to utter a word. She felt frozen.

Brody leaned forward and kissed her gently. “I’m sorry to

frighten you, but I wanted to warn you so you can prepare yourself. Just in case." He stood up as the dark shapes of the guards slipped into the antechamber and looked down at her. "I'm banking on Veris pulling off a small miracle and my shitty human memory being completely out to lunch. We could have weeks, yet, *mo ghrá*."

She swallowed. Her throat clicked dryly. "But you don't think so."

He gave her a small smile. "I don't know." His shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "I just don't know."

The guards yanked him backwards, away from the divan and her, out into the more open space where they could surround him, to chain him.

Brody's gaze stayed on her as they finished binding him and throwing the robe over their work. Even from under the deep hood she could see his eyes glinting as he moved.

Taylor shivered and drew the voluminous robe Brody had been wearing earlier in the night closer about her. The robe was rich with his scent. As a human, he gave off pheromones...she could smell him.

The aroma rising from the folds was new to her, but exactly what she would have ascribed to Brody if she had been asked to invent one for him. It was male and complex, just like his taste in food...and oh, so Brody.

Until the guards tugged Brody around to face the doorway and march him away, he watched her. Then he was gone.

Taylor looked at the empty divan where he had been lying, then out the window at the pale early morning sky. "Veris, where are you?" she whispered. "Please, please hurry!"

Later that day, when more normal people were up and about, Metrodora came visiting. She insisted Taylor come to the market with her, along with their combined retinue of slaves and guards.

The last thing Taylor felt like doing was traipsing about the markets, looking at swags of silk and sweetmeats. She was so tired her bones ached and it felt like her face was trying to slide right off her skull. Her eyes were scraping inside

their sockets.

She had to pretend she'd had a full night's restorative sleep when in fact she had slept very little and not at all after Brody had been taken from her. Once he had left, she had rested on the divan, her heart aching and her mind whirling as she tried to think of a way to avoid the future that Brody had warned was racing towards them.

She couldn't watch him die. Even knowing he would be ultimately "saved" by another vampire afterwards didn't make it any better. She knew she would not be able to sit there and watch the

man she loved die as she has seen the other drivers be injured; trampled under horses hooves, or thrown against the walls of the arena, or a dozen other grizzly and horrendously painful ways a driver might meet his end.

But there was nothing she could do to change Brody's fate. There was nothing she *dare* do to change it. The three of them had thoroughly learned the dangers of screwing around with history. It was far too easy to make major changes in their own time with even small changes in the past. She could jeopardize everything she

cherished and considered important if she tried to change the outcome of events here and now because this was Brody's personal timeline.

So Taylor summoned Kale to her side and asked for her help in dressing as Ariadne for a day at the market. Kale gave a deep exhalation, the closest to a sigh of exasperation Taylor had ever seen her give. "You need sleep, my lady, not a day at the markets."

"So do you," Taylor reminded her. "But telling anyone else that leads to questions I can't answer. So I'm going to the markets."

Metrodora was almost vibrating with impatience by the time Taylor was suitably dressed and appeared in the public rooms where the other woman waited. "We'll be late!" Metrodora cried, moving from foot to sandaled foot.

"Late for what? The stalls are open all day and into the night," Taylor pointed out.

"Oh, never mind. Just hurry!" Metrodora insisted. She set a cracking pace along the streets, her guards just barely clearing the way ahead in time. Taylor found the effort of keeping up with her more energizing than the cup of coffee

she craved right now. By the time they arrived at the first of the stalls, she was feeling much more alert. The ache in her bones had receded to a dull throbbing.

Metrodora wove through the stalls, barely glancing at the goods. She moved deeper into the market until she reached one of the meeting areas. There was a fountain playing in the middle of the square with a smooth stone seat circling it. Stalls selling food and drink were featured all around the edges of the square and their owners were advertising their products at the top of their voices.

The square was dappled by the shade of huge trees that spread their branches across the area.

Metrodora looked around frantically. "Am I too late?" she murmured.

"You have an assignation," Taylor accused.

Metrodora was too busy looking for her lover to even blush in guilt. "There!" she pronounced, her face lighting in happiness. She didn't wave, for that would make their meeting a public declaration. But her smile and the glow of her features was exclamation enough.

Taylor caught at Metrodora's wrist. "You are not going to speak to him here in the square, are you?" she murmured.

She saw the freedman's son that Metrodora had pointed out at the Hippodrome, standing at one of the stalls across the square, trying hard to look anywhere but at Metrodora.

Metrodora hesitated. "But I'm at my wit's end, Ariadne! How else can I speak to him? Look, he is right there!"

Taylor stared at the woman, her mind racing as she ran through a litany of reasons why Metrodora

should not and could not speak openly to the man and all the things she might do instead. Why could Metrodora not see these alternatives for herself? Why was she so blind to the obvious dangers to her reputation, here?

Taylor was at a loss to begin to explain, for it would take far too long.

“There she is! That’s the one!” The sharp cry came from the lane where they had just emerged. Taylor glanced over her shoulder to look.

A stall owner, judging by his

workman-like tunic and sandals, was pointing toward them.

He was pointing at her. "She stole the necklace from my shop!" he cried.

Taylor caught her breath.

People, a great tide of them, were surging toward her, yelling insults and oaths.

Her personal guards stepped in front of them, but not before she saw a face she recognized.

Zeno, the one-eyed guard from Brody's cavern.

Zeno was wearing a civilian

tunic and sandals now, but he carried a knife in each hand and he was grinning as he came running towards her. She had been set up by Zeno for exactly this reason. He wanted vengeance and he was going to take it from her hide in bloody strips, using the knives in his hands.

Her guards barred his way, bringing up their shields, but even so Taylor found she was stepping backwards, away from the clash, just in case. Zeno rammed against the shields with an impact that made the guards push back on their feet for leverage. Zeno was

thrusting with the knives, looking for vulnerabilities, trying to break through. They parried with their longer swords to beat him back, but Zeno had passion and anger on his side.

There was a clash of iron behind her and Taylor whirled, fear grabbing at her chest and stopping her breath.

Metrodora's guards were fighting off more angry shopkeepers, who had circled around them and were attempting to reach her from behind. Metrodora was backing away from her guards, toward Taylor.

They were trapped in the middle between the tight circle of guards and an angry mob of shopkeepers and citizens.

“This is bad,” Taylor said.

She had been speaking to herself, but Metrodora glanced at her. “They would not dare touch us,” she said, her tone conveying more confidence than her frightened expression did.

“Don’t bet on it, Metro,” Taylor flung back, reaching for the knife on her belt, and switching it to her left hand.

Metrodora’s eyes widened as

they took in the knife. "They'll kill you!"

Taylor rolled her eyes. "They're going to, anyway."

Metrodora clutched at her chest. "But they cannot. My father..." She trailed off, as Taylor turned her attention to the encroaching mob instead. "You don't really mean it," Metrodora finished helplessly.

"I really do," Taylor said. She grabbed Metrodora's arm and turned her to face her own guards. "See that man there? The one with one eye? His name is Zeno. Do you remember that name?" Taylor

looked at Metrodora.

The woman's mouth opened and her eyes widened almost comically wide. "Him?" She looked at Zeno again. "Oh...Ariadne." She clutched at her arm.

"Leave my arm free," Taylor told her curtly.

A deep groan of pain, accompanied by a wordless sound of victory, made the hairs on the back of Taylor's neck all stand to rigid attention. She turned, pushing Metrodora out of the way, bringing her knife up.

Zeno leapt on her, his one good

eye flashing with a manic delight. He was going to enjoy carving her up. She could see it in his expression and the smile he wore.

His forearm drove onto the point of her knife, pinning his right arm on her blade. She just barely blocked the other with her right hand. He didn't seem to notice the injury to his arm. He swiped at her with the other blade and she sidestepped the arc and spun away, yanking her knife out of his arm as she went.

Zeno followed her with a ragged, low curse and Taylor knew she wouldn't be able to hold him

off for long. She didn't have the skill or a second blade and she didn't have a man's natural strength, or Zeno's thirst for vengeance.

He leapt on her again, his left hand without the knife this time. He reached for her throat, his other hand hanging uselessly. There was a light in his eye that Taylor recognized. Zeno was standing on this side of the door to madness.

"Whore bitch, I'll eat your pretty face off when I'm done with you," he growled, his hot breath billowing over her as his fingers scrabbled at her throat.

She brought her knife up, but his useless right hand flared to life and wrenched at her wrist, twisting it cruelly until her fingers numbed and the knife cluttered to the flagstones.

His fingers closed about her throat.

“Got you,” he snarled.

Fear thundered in her heart and her head. She couldn't hear anything but the sound of her heart slamming in her chest and echoing in her mind. She couldn't breathe.

Then Zeno straightened up with a jerk, gasping. His grip around

Taylor's throat loosened, allowing her to draw a breath. His eye widened.

He jerked again and this time Taylor saw the tip of a sword punch through the front of his tunic, the rough fabric tearing. Blood flooded the material around the wound, spreading quickly.

Zeno's hands dropped away from her and his eye took on a far-away look. Taylor had seen that expression before. He was meeting his death.

He toppled to one side, his knees crumpling as he fell, but

Taylor didn't watch him fall. She was looking at the man who had dealt with him, who stood right behind him.

Veris.

He wore the long robe and dalmatic of a rich upper-class Byzantine, with enough difference in accessories and finishings that would hint the clothes were made somewhere other than Constantinople, which would explain his coloring and features.

And height.

His blue eyes met hers briefly as he raised the end of the bloody

sword, then his gaze swept around the square. "I see you've got yourself into another fine mess without me."

Taylor covered her mouth with both hands, holding in the need to sob aloud, so great was her surprise and relief.

His eyes narrowed and he lunged toward her, a quick half step. His free arm swept her up against him. Taylor was mashed against Veris' chest for there was no gentleness in his vice-like hug at all. She felt his sword arm lift, transmitted through the muscles of his chest working to support it.

Then she heard the clash of iron, directly behind her.

Someone had been approaching her from behind. Again.

Veris leaned forward, bringing her with him. Taylor clung to him tightly, feeling no fear at all. She felt his arm working and heard the parry of blades. Then a grunt.

Veris straightened, his arm around her loosening. "Time to find a less popular spot."

"Metrodora, too," Taylor added, stepping back. She clutched at his clothing, unable to let go. He really was here. In the flesh and weeks, if

not months, ahead of schedule.

Veris glanced at Metrodora where she hovered, clutching her veil about her like it might shield her. "Aye, the woman, too." He was constantly scanning the square, looking for the next threat, but with the death of Zeno, the shopkeepers' ardor for justice was evaporating.

Veris hefted the sword and pulled out a long knife and handed it to Taylor. "Your friend between us. You're the caboose. We're going to have to fight our way out. Let's go."

Before Taylor could protest or

explain her lack of expertise, Veris whirled and surged toward the mob, his sword swinging.

Taylor pushed Metrodora into a stumbling trot after him, her own mind still blank and reeling with the series of shocks she had been handed in the last few minutes. Veris' expectation that she would be able to protect his rear was just one of them.

Chapter Fifteen

They won through to the lane with an ease that should have surprised Taylor, except that she had no more capacity for shock or surprises. With Zeno dead, the shopkeeper who had falsely accused her of thievery had lost his paymaster, which removed his enthusiasm for the chase.

Watching someone die at the hands of what was clearly a superior fighter took the stuffing

out of most of the others. As soon as Veris began to fight his way out of the square most of them melted away with little opposition, except for the most roused and angry of them. Veris dealt with those with barely a pause.

Taylor only had to use the knife once, to slash at a man who raised his own in a half-hearted attempt to halt her as she passed by. By then, Taylor had no intention of being stopped by anyone and she swung the blade with a strength even she didn't know she had. It made the man stagger back with a piteous cry and that was the last of

the resistance they met.

They began to run, Taylor nudging Metrodora along with an occasional hand on her shoulder or under her elbow, and holding her own hems up and out of the way with her other hand, the knife concealed within the folds.

Veris seemed to know exactly where he was going, for he led them through the market lanes and out into the Mese unerringly. On the main street he stopped running and sheathed his sword.

“Normal, now,” he said, over his shoulder.

“Without slaves or guards?” Taylor threw back.

Veris didn't answer.

Metrodora drew closer to Taylor's side. “Where are we going?” she whispered.

“We're taking you home,” Veris said, glancing back.

Metrodora bit her lip and looked up at Taylor. “Who is he, Ariadne?” she demanded. “You know him, but you've never spoken about a Northman before. He is a Northman, isn't he?”

“Veris is...someone I knew from

before. Before I married Matthew," Taylor extemporized, hoping Veris was listening and absorbing the facts of her masquerade as Ariadne this conversation was laying out for him.

Metrodora's gaze swiveled to take in Veris' back as they moved through the busy street, then came back to settle on Taylor. "My father will want to reward him for this." Then her face hardened and all the youth and prettiness fled. Metrodora suddenly looked old. "He will punish the shopkeepers for this."

Taylor gripped her forearm

hard. "You cannot speak of this to your father," she said urgently. "Your father, your husband, or anyone, Metrodora."

Metrodora looked indignant. "They attacked us for no reason!"

Taylor shook her arm. "*Why* were you there? Why were we in *that* square, so close to the slave markets, standing around and vulnerable?" It was a guess. Taylor wasn't sure where the slave markets were, but if Metrodora's lover was the son of a freedman, she had a feeling he would be more comfortable with that area of town

than the rich, bountiful end of the markets where people like Metrodora generally stayed.

Her bluff hit the bull's eye, for Metrodora paled. She pressed her lips together as her gaze dropped to the stones at her feet.

Taylor pressed her advantage home. "Do you not see? We cannot say a word to anyone, Metrodora, or your indiscretion will be revealed."

Metrodora nodded.

"Besides," Veris said, speaking over his shoulder again. "The man who incited the incident paid for it

with his life. Justice has already been done, my lady. You have no need to punish the shop keepers. They were fooled into thinking you had stolen their goods.”

Metrodora took a few dozen paces to consider the matter. She addressed Veris’ back. “You have been most kind. How do I thank you for what you have done?”

“There is no need,” Veris told her. “I’ll have you at your door in a few minutes and you can put this behind you.”

“I can rely on your discretion, I presume?”

Taylor heard Veris' soft laugh. "I do not know the same people that you do, my lady. Your secret is quite safe."

Metrodora relaxed and smiled. "Then I count myself most fortunate that our paths crossed today." She glanced at Taylor. "You have useful friends, Ariadne."

"I do," Taylor agreed.

* * * * *

Veris apparently knew exactly where Metrodora lived, for he led them both without direction or

pause, straight to the big house on the hill where she lived. It wasn't as big or as grand as Matthew's house, but Metrodora was counted as one of the city's greatest women. She pulled her veil about her face as she looked up at Veris. "You have my thanks...Veris."

Veris nodded. "You remember what you will tell your husband to explain the morning away? And how to deal with the guards and slaves that return from the markets?"

She nodded.

"Then you should have no

further trouble from this incident. I wish you the best, my lady."

Metrodora went inside and a slave closed the door behind her.

Taylor turned to Veris.

He shook his head, a tiny movement. "You must remain Ariadne out in public. Wait until we're behind walls."

She pushed back her frustration and impatience. "Very well. Where?"

"My house."

"Your *house*?"

Veris grinned.

* * * * *

Veris' house was in the merchant's district, close to the wharves and the Golden Horn, but it was located at the far western edge of the district—closer to the Palace and Hippodrome than the sea. St. Sophia's dome would cast its shadow over the house in the late afternoon.

It was a medium-sized building, neat and orderly, with an internal garden patio like the older Roman houses once had.

The house looked, smelled and sounded empty. Taylor looked around as Veris shut and barred the front door behind them, peering through the arches at the somewhat overgrown vegetation she could glimpse in the cavedium.

“No slaves? Are you alone here?” she asked.

“Not quite. Rafe is running some errands.”

“Rafe?”

“I’ll explain Rafe later.” He moved out of the foyer and Taylor followed him into the next room. It was a triclinium...a dining room.

Divans and wide low tables sat on beautiful carpets and the walls were painted and decorated but there was not much else in the room. No cushions or clothes, no artwork, nothing to soften or comfort or ease. Taylor realized with a start that she had got used to the gilded Byzantine standard of living and was comparing an empty room against that benchmark.

Veris turned to face her, unbuckling the sword belt from around his waist. "What do you need? Food? Water?" He dropped the sword onto the table next to him.

Taylor threw herself at him. She had been damning back all her reactions, trying to avoid even thinking about the miracle of Veris' presence here in Constantinople, for the entire time they had been travelling the city streets. But still it had bubbled up inside her as an effervescence, a joyous love-for-life that had put bounce in her step and a certainty that all was right in the world.

She just wanted to touch him once more, to assure herself that yes, he was real. He was here. She wanted to reacquaint herself with how Veris felt and tasted and fitted

against her body.

So she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

His lips were so familiar it made her heart ache. The little movement of his mouth to ensure his canines didn't tear her flesh open was as dear to her as his sigh as he pulled her up against him.

"Veris, I don't know how you got here so fast —"

"I'm only glad I did. Gods, Taylor...." His hand on the back of her hand clutched a little tighter as he lifted his head so he could look her in the eyes. "I was on the far

side of the square when he leapt at you. I watched you fight him off with that little knife of yours. If I was able to throw up, I would have."

"But that was only second before...Veris, did you use vampire speed? In front of humans?"

"I don't think they noticed." He shrugged. "I don't give a damn, anyway." He ran his fingertip down her cheek. "Not when it comes to a choice between saving you and revealing myself to a few humans." He unfastened the clip holding her veil in place and it slithered to the ground around her

ankles. "That's better." He rapidly unclipped and loosened her hair until it was free and unfettered. "Better still."

Her heart picked up speed. Taylor let her hands slide away from Veris' shoulders. "You like?" She turned around, so he could see the full effect of her hip-length hair, which Kale had curled and combed that morning.

"I like," he agreed, his voice deeper.

Taylor unpinned her brightly colored mantle and tossed it on top of her veil. It left her wearing the

long tunic with its complicated pleats, held together by a belt and the two elaborate pins at the shoulder.

Veris untied the belt and let it drop onto the pile of jewel-colored cloth at her feet. Then he slid his hand inside the opening of her tunic to cup her bare ass. He drew in an unsteady breath. "Naked underneath. I knew you would be." His fingers stroked her ass cheek. "I have been thinking of this moment."

"Of stroking my ass?" she asked, feigning innocence.

He moved fast. Blindingly fast. Vampire speed.

Taylor felt tugs at her shoulders. The pins were removed and her tunic was plucked from her like a small gale was pulled at the fabric. Then she was pushed up roughly against the painted and frescoed wall. She was naked except for her sandals, which wrapped around her ankles.

Veris wasn't moving at full vampire speed. She could still follow most of his movements, but it was like watching a movie in fast forward, without the blurred images or jerky movements. He

shrugged off his dalmatic, then the tunic beneath. Just like her, he wore none of the contemporary underwear. He emerged naked and paused long enough to kick off his boots.

His cock was erect, thick and dark with blood.

He picked her up, his hands about her waist. For Veris, vampire or not, it barely taxed his strength.

He pushed his cock inside her with a single thrust. Taylor was slick and primed for him. She had been since she had seen him, but having him inside her was

intensely satisfying.

Taylor sighed as he slid home and wrapped her legs around his hips.

Veris leaned against the wall, his eyes inches from hers. "Remember this?" he asked, his voice a low growl, deep with arousal. He was using Old Norse.

"Our first time...the first time we met. The first time we jumped." She smiled. "I was terrified."

He thrust into her. "I was already half in love."

Her heart jumped. "You had just

met me.”

He slid his tongue up the length of her throat, over her chin, to finish with a kiss, as he made love to her. “I just knew. So did Brody.”

She clung to him, her climax building. “So did I, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

Then there were no more words, just the mutual reach for pleasure. Taylor let go of any external concerns and relaxed, knowing she was safe, completely invulnerable while she was in Veris’ arms.

Her climax was powerful

enough to make her scream, her fingers digging into the paint.

Veris didn't wait for her to recover. He picked her up and laid her on the divan, on her stomach and spread her legs just enough to give his fingers access to her pussy. He plunged his fingers inside, making her moan and squirm.

Then he trailed them up to her ass, separating her cheeks and pressing his slick fingers against the rim of muscle. He was prepping her and she found she was pressing against him, her hips lifting, welcoming him.

Veris spread her own lubricant around and inside her, working it inside with his fingers, and Taylor was panting by the time he pressed the end of his cock up against her. She was more than ready to receive him into her.

He planted one fist on the divan by her head, his biceps flexing hard. The other hand curled over her hip, steadying her, as he pushed slowly into her.

Taylor let out her breath. This was another sort of possession, one she had missed. She knew what Veris was doing. He was taking her every way he knew how. It was an

instinctive need in him to renew his claim on her and while the modern woman in her could only smile, there was a more ancient part of her that answered the claim with a growl of arousal.

She closed her eyes, letting him take her as hard as he wanted to. It was good. It was *great*. When his hand slid further around under her hip to reach for her clit and stroke, she moaned and shuddered her way into another climax as Veris thrust in shortened strokes, his own orgasm blooming. He groaned deeply and Taylor could feel him leaning over her, straining. It

intensified her own sensations and she clutched at the edges of the divan, her body zinging and throbbing.

Veris picked her up again and lay on the divan with her. He was breathing hard. He tucked her up against him and lifted her chin up so he could kiss her.

“I missed kissing you,” he said, his voice low.

“Just kissing me?”

He grinned. “Oh, making you squirm as I fuck you is always a delight, but kissing you I will never tire of.” He touched his forehead to

hers. "Tell me about Brody," he said softly. "I saw him taken to your house last night. I know you've seen him."

She jumped. "How long have you been in the city?"

"Just over a day. I had to learn the lay of things here and find out where you were before I could make any useful moves."

"And buy a house, too." She looked around the room. "How did you get here so fast, Veris? Brody said you would take weeks. Months." She swallowed against the need to cry once more at the

miracle of his early arrival. "How did you manage it?"

Veris touched his lips to her cheek. "That was easy. I wasn't in Britain. I was in Pergamum. That's Southern Turkey in modern terms." His face shadowed over. "But I nearly didn't make it, anyway. Three nights ago I was caught in a storm on the Marmara Sea."

"What happened?"

His gaze shifted inwards. "Blood fever," he murmured. "I thought I was too old to be caught out like that anymore. Such arrogance...."

Reshef was screaming more orders. Veris turned away from Rafael's puzzled expression and pushed himself into movement. Human movement. He worked his way up the deck and planted himself in front of Reshef. "You cannot turn this ship around," he said. "We have an agreement."

"I have only one sail now. I am the captain," Reshef declared. "You will kill us all with this mad insistence on reaching Constantinople. We will put into

land, the nearest land we can find, until this blows over."

Veris lifted his arm, pointing toward the full, straining mainsail. His arm felt heavy and hard to lift. "We're already running ahead of the wind. If you try to turn in any other direction but this one, you'll risk losing the one sail you have left. You're better to keep running ahead and ride it out."

Reshef shook his head mulishly. "Your gold coin will be no use to anyone at the bottom of the sea, Northman. I would rather live to spend it."

“You *will*,” Veris assured him. “I’ve sailed bigger seas than this with a smaller sail. You have to trust me.”

Reshef shook his head again and called out an order. Veris couldn’t translate it. The wind seemed to be too loud and Reshef’s words were all snatched and gone before he could hear them.

A heavy hand came down on Veris’ shoulder and he understood that Reshef had decided to rid himself of a troublesome passenger, after all. He stared at the Phoenician, trying to will the little man to understand. To trust him.

Heat and noise swamped Veris, blasting him with an almost impossible summons. He groaned.

“Master!” The tug on his shoulder spun him around and Veris realized he had weakened to the point where a puny human could manipulate him with ease.

Rafael grabbed both his shoulders and shook him. “Come with me!” he shouted over the sound of the wind and waves.

Veris moved his head from side to side. No. If he went with Rafael, he knew what would happen. Instead he bent over, clutching at

his chest. It was coming, the imperious command he would not be able to ignore. "Go away!" he shouted, but it came out of him as a wheezy whisper, snatched away by the wind.

Rafael was tall. Tall enough to push his arm under Veris' while he was bent over and haul him across the slippery deck, back to where the cargo was strapped down and the other passengers clung to the railings and each other in white-faced fear.

Rafael pulled them both into a protected corner, tucked in behind the bulk of Veris' possessions. Veris

was so weak he couldn't protest. But fear loomed large in his mind, as did the animal.

Rafael shook him again. "What do you need?" he asked, lifting his voice just enough to be heard. "Tell me!"

Veris was too far gone to prevaricate. The animal, the hunter he could not put aside, was coming. He could feel the pressure building. "Blood," he croaked.

Rafael stared at him. "Blood," he repeated.

"Human blood," Veris added. "And now."

Rafael looked around the ship, at the sharply sloping deck and the crew heaving on the sails, then back at Veris. He swallowed. "Can you use mine?"

Veris clenched his fist. Hard. "Anyone's. Anyone...human." His whole body was throbbing with the effort to keep the animal at bay. It was thrusting at his mind and body, trying to get out.

Rafael's eyes were large. But he wasn't backing away. He even seemed calm. He nodded. "I owe you the price of my freedom, my... Veris. Use my blood."

Veris didn't have time to argue. He drew Rafael to him. "This might hurt," he croaked, knowing he didn't have the energy or finesse to be gentle.

He took the bite.

* * * * *

Strength and sanity returned within minutes. So did his normal vampire senses. Veris sealed over the wound on Rafael's neck, healing it for him, and propped him up in the corner of the deck to recover. "You'll be weak for a while," he warned. "But I only took

enough to get me through until we land. Eat the food you put aside, it'll help."

Rafael nodded, although his eyes had a glassy expression that Veris recognized via his medical training. Clinical shock. Well, food and water would help with that, too.

"I'm going to go reason with Rashef once more," he told Rafael. "We have to keep going. Turning against the face of this gale is suicide."

Once more, Rafael simply nodded.

Veris was too pressed for time to linger in worry over Rafael. He would have to deal with him later. He found the food Rafael had put aside for him and placed it by the younger man's side. "Eat," he coaxed. "You'll feel better, I promise."

Then he climbed the slope of the heaving deck, working his way along the rails, looking for Reshef.

The storm hadn't abated an iota. The wind actually seemed stronger. The storm was rising to its peak. Reshef would naturally worry that they wouldn't last the night, but they only had to survive the next

hour or so and then the storm would diminish. Veris had seen far too many storms at sea and knew the pattern well.

He was still looking for Reshef when he heard the sharp, unmistakable crack of timbers, high overhead. He looked up.

The right yardarm of the main sail had given out under the strain and now it was folding in on itself, the sail sagging.

They were losing forward momentum. The ship was starting to turn into the face of the oncoming waves.

Veris moved as fast as he could, heading for the main mast. "Give me rope!" he shouted, pulling out his knife.

Reshef appeared abruptly, almost magically, in front of him. "No man can climb that mast in this wind and rain. It is over!"

"Give me the damned rope, Reshef! Do you want to die?"

"We all die, sooner or later." He shrugged.

Veris closed his eyes, searching mentally for options. A modified version of the truth had unexpectedly worked with Rafael.

Perhaps it would again, and there were no other options—time was pressing on them all.... “There is a man and a woman in New Rome I must reach,” he told Reshef. “One of them is about to die. I want to take the other one away before that happens.”

“You can’t stop them dying?” Reshef asked curiously. “*You?*”

Veris sighed. This was a slippery slope he was on, just like the deck he stood upon. “I would stop it to spare the pain it will cause, but the effects of stopping one death will be disaster and death to others I love.”

Reshef laughed in disbelief. "You love people? You are a warrior."

"That's why wars are fought, Reshef. Men fight to protect those they love. They hide it with a lot of words about country and honor, but when they're gripping their sword and looking the enemy in the eye, they're thinking about their wife and their children and the warmth of their bed that they want to go home to." He shrugged. "We all have people we love waiting for us to reach safety tomorrow. I can get us there. Give me the rope, Reshef."

Reshef considered him. Then he waved.

A coil of rope was dropped over Veris' head. He threaded an arm through it, so it settled over his shoulder and nodded at Reshef. "Get ready to haul on the main braces as soon as I get it fixed. You're going to have to run with a shortened sail."

"If we run with any sail at all, it will be a miracle," Reshef replied. "Good luck."

Veris clamped the knife between his teeth and began to climb. He was already soaked

through to the skin, so the driving wind and rain were just inconveniences that made the climb slightly more difficult. He edged out to where the yardarm was broken and got to work, lashing the broken ends together with the rope. It was a rough-as-guts jury-rigged job, but it gave the sail a horizontal and solid frame once more. Even before he had finished the first few winds of the rope the sail filled out, yanking on the yardarm and nearly ripping it out of the grip he had on it with his thighs.

Below on the deck, he faintly heard cries from the crew as they

hauled on the braces, bringing the sail in tight and back under control. The ship shuddered and started to move again, running under the wind. Reshef was a smart captain.

Veris used the full length of the rope to make sure the yardarm would stay in place. Then he worked at the knots, tightening and hauling on them. The last thing he wanted was for them to unravel. The rain would help keep them tight, too.

Satisfied that his work was sound, he backed down the mast. Once he was on the deck again, he put his knife away.

Reshef gripped his hand and grasped his shoulder, his feet spread wide to maintain balance. "You are courageous indeed!"

"I just want to get to Constantinople!" Veris replied truthfully.

Reshef laughed. "Thanks to you, that is where we must go! We cannot risk turning against the wind, now. The yardarm is too weak."

Hot watery relief trickled through him. It was so strong, it overwhelmed his vampire state and for a few seconds he felt the

emotion as a human does—physiological reactions and all. Veris swallowed, his breath shuddering in and out. “Thank you.”

Reshef’s smile faded. “It will be a journey through hell, my friend. I could use an experienced hand like yours.”

“I had no intention of sitting it out, Reshef.”

Reshef grinned. “Good.”

They reached Constantinople at sunset the next day, limping into the wharf with a torn sail and very low in the water, for they had been

taking on water all day. But they had made it.

Reshef gave Veris two of the gold bezants back, in thanks. "Find your friends," he urged. "And Allah speed your way."

Chapter Sixteen

Matthew was scowling as he entered the formal reception room of the big house where Taylor and Veris stood waiting. His stride faltered as he took in Veris' presence, but he was the master of this house, and confident in his position in society. He moved forward, the scowl settling back into position.

“Ariadne, I have heard the strangest tales from the servants,

about you and a man...this man, I presume, running through the markets with weapons drawn."

Taylor glanced at Veris. The slaves and guards had already reported back to their master.

Veris stepped forward. "Taylor was set upon by shopkeepers who had been told she had stolen from them. I rescued her and Metrodora, the daughter of the Emperor's tax collector. I believe you know him."

Matthew registered the use of her real name and glanced around the room. There were no servants within hearing range. "Who are

you?" he asked shortly.

"Veris Gerhardsson."

Matthew looked sharply at Taylor. "Your husband?"

She gave him a small smile. "I have not openly declared this."

Matthew drew in a slow breath, considering the matter. "Why were the shopkeepers told you had stolen something?"

"I believe the man who told them wanted to separate Taylor from her guards, so he could have her for himself," Veris replied. "To rape her, as men do."

Matthew licked his lips. "Such crudity..." He shook his head, dismissing the matter, as Veris had predicted he would. After another quick glance around the room, he reconsidered Taylor once more. "I still need Ariadne here with me in the house and most especially at the Hippodrome."

Taylor nodded. "I am willing to assist you in that matter, if Veris can be allowed to come and go freely?"

Matthew studied Veris once more. "I would prefer that some discretion is maintained. I presume your wife has shared with you the

circumstances surrounding her stay here in my house?"

Veris crossed his arms. "All of them," he intoned. "Down to the smallest detail."

Matthew's eyes widened just the smallest amount—all the dismay he showed. His gaze slid away from Veris' face. "Very well. Um...welcome to my home, Northman."

Taylor looked out the window to check the position of the sun in the sky and judge the time. "I must find Kale. I have an errand for her." She smiled at Veris and left the two

men alone, while she hurried from the formal reception room, down the long processional to her private suite.

Kale was setting fresh water on the table that served as Taylor's bathroom counter. Her eyes widened when she saw Taylor. "My lady! I have heard such horrible stories about the markets!"

"Another time, Kale. I will tell you the full story and leave not a single detail aside, I promise." Taylor drew the woman aside. "I need you to go to the front gate of the slave quarters at the Hippodrome and ask for Oresme."

Kale's mouth opened in astonishment and dawning horror. "My lady! I *cannot!*"

"I certainly cannot go," Taylor told her firmly. "But you can take as many guards with you as makes you feel comfortable. You must deliver a message for me. It is very, very important, Kale." She shook the woman's arm for emphasis. "Please do this for me. I will ask nothing of you ever again. I promise."

Kale hesitated. She clearly did not want to do this.

Taylor picked up her hand and

held it. "What is it you most want in this world, Kale?"

Kale tilted her head to one side, puzzled. "Want?"

"What is it you desire? What would you like to have?"

Kale frowned. "I don't understand."

Taylor stared at her, flummoxed. Then she rolled up her mental sleeves, looking for another way to state it. "Do you ever wish for something unlikely to happen that would have a good outcome for you, Kale? Or to possess something you cannot have?"

Kale's frown deepened as she puzzled through what was clearly a novel concept for her. These were advanced philosophical subjects for such times. "I sometimes...wish...I might be allowed to own a cat."

Taylor held back her first natural reaction, one of disbelief. She squeezed Kale's wrist. "I will make it so," she promised. "If you deliver this message for me."

Kale looked at her doubtfully. "The master will not object this time?"

"No," Taylor said firmly. "He will not. I have leverage now, Kale."

He will abide by my wish. If I say I want you to have a cat, you will have a cat...a most adorable, fluffy little kitten to take care of. This is that important to me."

Kale pressed her lips together, gathering courage. "Very well, then," she said. "What is your message?"

"Thank you," Taylor said and gave her the message, as Kale's eyes grew wider once again.

* * * * *

Loud voices and commotion

from the reception room had Taylor hurrying back to Veris' side just as quickly as she had departed. The loudest voice was male and one she didn't recognize.

She entered the room to find many more people in it than when she had left. She quickly identified from dress and demeanor that most of them were servants and slaves. The remainder wore identical tunics and armor, swords and helmets.

Soldiers, she guessed.

Veris stood a few paces away, close by the door. A good strategic

position. He stepped over to her side as she entered.

“Trouble?” she asked in a murmur.

“Isaac Eudoxia. You tell me.”

Ariadne’s father. “Oh, shit,” Taylor whispered in English.

Veris glanced at her. “Trouble,” he concluded.

“Which one is he?” Taylor asked.

“Ariadne!” Matthew called, circling around a clump of the soldier and striding toward her.

One of the tallest of the soldiers

pulled off his helmet to reveal iron grey hair and eyes that were the same grey as hers. "Everyone, leave. Now." He said it flatly, with the snap of command that said he expected no protest and instant obedience.

At once, the soldiers all turned and filed from the room silently.

Matthew stood by her side, closer than Veris stood.

The man that could only be Isaac and Ariadne's father took the five paces that separated them, bringing him almost toe to toe with her. He was studying her, his gaze

roaming all over her face.
“Remarkable,” he murmured.

“As you can see, Ariadne is safe and sound,” Matthew said. His voice trembled.

Taylor glanced at him. “Don’t.” She looked at Isaac. “Matthew told me it would help to find Ariadne. Kale told me she sent you a message. It reached you, then.”

“This was Matthew’s idea?” Isaac asked, his gaze still skipping all over her face, as if he was absorbing her appearance. Storing it up.

“He thought it would confuse

whoever took her, if they saw me with Matthew at the races. It would give him time to search for her."

Isaac nodded. He turned to Veris. "And you, sir?"

"My real husband," Taylor explained. "Veris Gerhardsson."

Isaac looked Veris up and down. "Northman, yes?"

Veris smiled. "Yes."

"You permitted this duplicity to take place?"

"The affair was already underway when I arrived in the city this morning," Veris told him.

“As it was constructed to help your daughter, I allowed it to proceed while I monitored the situation.”

Isaac shifted his helmet so it was resting under his other elbow. “You have the look of the ranks about you.”

“That was a long time ago,” Veris replied. “And far from here.”

“A soldier is a soldier long after he takes the uniform off.”

“So I’m told.” Veris shrugged. “I study medicine now. It is a more peaceful trade.”

“There will always be wars.”

“Then there will always be wounds to stitch.”

Isaac grinned. “You’re right, at that.” He moved back to Taylor. “You have my thanks for the help you tried to give, even indirectly, to my daughter.”

Taylor frowned. Isaac was speaking in the past tense. But before she could question him on it, he swiveled to face Matthew, drew out his sword and plunged it deep into the man’s stomach.

Veris pulled her aside, inserting himself between her and Isaac. His own knife was out and up in the

defensive position, as Matthew coughed and folded over the short sword, then slowly sank down to the marble tiles.

Blood seeped onto the cold tiles as Isaac watched him die with a disinterested expression on his face.

The silence in the room was total.

Taylor gripped Veris' arm, sick pity washing through her. But her horror was tempered by the memory of the blows Matthew had given her, a woman who was not his wife, and the priority he had given to his own reputation over

the safety of his real wife.

Isaac pulled his sword from Matthew's body and wiped it on the man's dalmatic with slow thoroughness.

Veris lowered his knife, but didn't sheath it. "Ariadne is dead," he guessed.

Isaac nodded. He looked up at them and his eyes were haunted, filled with pain. "After I received Kale's message, I brought twenty men with me to the city. We have spent the last two days turning the city upside down, looking for her."

"You found her," Taylor

concluded.

Isaac drew in a breath that lifted the iron breastplate. "In the Golden Horn, late last night." He looked at her. "They...whoever they are, must have seen you with Matthew and believed they did not have the real Ariadne, that the woman they had was worthless to them as leverage to force Matthew to throw his races. So they killed her."

He pressed his toe against Matthew's body. "I found out that he had done nothing to try to find her, or to pay for her release."

Taylor shuddered. "He used me

as a way to safely ignore them, while drawing no attention to himself.”

Isaac nodded and pushed his sword back into the scabbard. “He has paid for his arrogance. Now the rest will.”

“How will they do that?” Veris asked sharply.

Isaac shrugged. “My men are turning over every blue chariot camp in the city, looking for the location where my daughter was held. When they find it, they will report back to me and I will know who did this deed. Then I will visit

him.” Isaac smiled. “And we will talk.”

Brody. Brody was a blue chariot driver.

Taylor realized her fingers were digging into Veris’ arm when he frowned and glanced down at his elbow. She let go of his arm and stepped around to stand level with him. “Brody is a blue driver,” she whispered.

Veris drew in a slow breath. “They’re only looking for evidence she was held there. That’s all.”

Taylor swallowed. “Then why do you looked scared, too?”

This time there was no warning. No murmur of many feet, or the whisper along the tunnel of the movement of many bodies. They were that good.

Oresme had returned from the front gate only a few minutes before, his face thunderous, to stomp over to where Basilides sat on his customary stool, to speak in low, angry tones.

From their conversation and the resentful expression Basilides sent Brody, Brody knew Taylor had

successfully put the squeeze on Oresme one more time and his spirits soared.

Another night in her arms.

He sat up straighter against the thick main post that supported the three tiers of bunks and looked down at the scrapes and scabs on the backs of his hands, to hide what had to be a stupid grin.

Evaristus squatted down next to him. "You're being discussed again," he said softly.

"I know."

"For what it's worth, they might

just take it out of your hide this time, too. Whatever that woman is doing, they don't like it much."

"I don't care much," Brody replied. "I don't care at all, really."

Evaristus lifted a brow. "If they beat you hard enough, you'll care."

Brody shook his head, smiling. "No."

Evaristus smiled back. "You found it."

"Found what?"

"The way out."

Brody frowned, confused. "No."

“I’m not talking about escape. I’m talking about here.” Evaristus tapped his temple.

Brody let out a slow breath. “Yes,” he agreed, and it had to do with a woman with a pair of big grey eyes and an ornery Northman who loved him despite everything he dragged them through.

That was when the soldiers exploded out through the main tunnel into the cavern proper, their swords whirling and their knives raised.

Evaristus straightened and Brody got to his feet, as did most of

the slaves dotted about the cavern. The guards moved forward, pulling out their swords and knives, and that spelled their fate.

The soldiers cut through them like a knife through cheese. Brody saw immediately that the soldiers had other objectives in mind. They were quartering the cavern like seasoned SEALs, cutting down anyone who got in the way. This was reconnaissance, not invasion.

Brody put his back up against the post he had been sitting against and stayed there, willing himself to keep still and small and unnoticeable, while every other

occupant of the cavern scattered like frightened rabbits, diving into the tunnels and sub-caverns with squeals and screams and shouts of dismay.

The soldiers stayed in pairs and systematically investigated every tunnel, cavern and hole in the ground. One pair stopped in front of Brody.

“Who are you?” one of them demanded. His short sword was red and dripping with blood. The smell of it was hot and coppery. Normally the scent touched off blood lust in Brody, but all it did now was make him tremble.

He held up a wrist, to show them the cuff. "I'm no one," he assured them.

They moved on, disinterested.

Brody let himself slide down the post until he was sitting on the ground once more. There was nothing to do but wait until it was over, then wait some more until tonight.

Taylor, I'm coming, he promised her mentally.

* * * * *

At ten o'clock, the guards

arrived as requested, to find the candles along the processional all fully lit and Kale and Taylor waiting for them openly.

“There is no need for silence,” Kale informed them. “Not inside this house, and you may remain in the house in comfort tonight.”

The lead guard threw back his hood to look at Taylor. “Has something happened?” He was suspicious.

“Matthew is not here. Do not trouble yourself,” she told him. “You are welcome to help yourself to any food and wine you wish to

partake of in the kitchen.”

He raised a brow. “Very well.”

“We can take him from here.”

He shook his head. “We’ll leave him in the suite, my lady, and I’m leaving a guard at the door. No offense, but after today, we can’t afford to lose any more.”

Taylor didn’t understand the comment and made a mental note to question Brody about it later. She stepped aside and let them lead Brody down the length of the processional and into Ariadne’s suite.

They unchained him and removed the robe and stepped aside. The lead guard nodded to her. "Two hours before dawn, my lady."

"Agreed," she replied. "Kale, please show them the way to the kitchen."

Kale waved them toward the door. "This way, please." Her eyes were red-rimmed and her face was drawn from her grieving over Ariadne's death, but for reasons she would not give, Kale had remained in Matthew's house to assist Taylor.

As soon as the guards had left

the room, Brody turned to Taylor and hugged her. As per her instructions, he was freshly bathed, although his tunic was the same one she had given him the day before and was already showing stains and wrinkles.

“Brody,” Veris said, stepping out from behind the partitioning curtains.

Taylor felt Brody’s quick intake of breath, then the bone-deep trembling begin. His arms tightened around her. “Oh, god, Taylor...how did you do it?” he whispered.

Veris rested his hand on Brody's shoulder and she felt Brody shudder at the touch.

"I was in Pergamum, Brody. Not Britain."

Brody turned and threw his arms around Veris and Taylor stepped around behind Veris so she could see Brody's face.

Tears were glittering in his eyes and he dug them out with his thumb, roughly, and closed his eyes against more. "Fuck," he said harshly, straightening up and looking at Veris. Then, "Nope, not enough." He grabbed Veris' face in

both hands and kissed him. It was a deep, hard and thorough kiss and Veris sighed and grabbed Brody's hair and pulled him closer.

When they parted, Veris curled his big hand around Brody's neck.

"Don't say 'I told you so,'" Brody warned.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Veris replied. "It's been worth the troubles to see you in a tunic and slave bands. I like it."

A hot look flashed between them, making Taylor catch her breath as arousal streaked through her.

Brody tugged at Veris' uneven blond locks. "Did you cut these off with a sword?"

"Ornamental sheers. Long story, for when we're back around the fireplace at home." He held his hand out to Taylor. "We can go home now. There's nothing to stop us."

Taylor stepped up against the two of them and Veris' arm came around her.

But Brody stepped away, breaking the circle. "We can't."

Taylor's heart sank. "Why not?" she asked. "We're all here. That's

all we've been waiting for, is for Veris to arrive."

Brody shook his head. "We can't go." He swallowed. "Some soldiers raided the cavern today. I don't know why. But they killed anyone who got in their way. They didn't care who they were." His hands curled into fists. "They were ruthless about it."

Veris watched Brody move restlessly on the tiles, while Taylor's mind whirled. The soldiers had been Isaac's men. They could be no one else.

"Who did they kill?" Veris

asked.

“Evaristus. They cut off his head. One slice. He couldn’t come back from that.” Brody gave a choked sound. “I found him in a tunnel. He bled out, too....” He closed his eyes and looked away.

Taylor glanced at Veris, to see if he was following this. She didn’t know who Evaristus was. She had never heard the name before. If Brody had never spoken of this time to Veris, either, then he should be as confused as she was.

But Veris seemed to be following along just fine, for his

expression was tense and conflicted. "There has to be another one in the city," he said gently.

Another one? Taylor glanced at the two of them, waiting for the puzzle to unravel.

Brody lifted his hands and let them drop. "There's you," he said simply.

Veris shook his head. "No."

"You have to, Veris."

"I can't."

Brody was the one to shake his head this time. "You don't get a choice this time, big guy. You *have*

to. Don't you get it? If you don't turn me, I die tomorrow or the next day and I don't live to meet you at the siege of Jerusalem. We don't go on to meet Taylor in the twenty-first century. That's it. Game over."

Chapter Seventeen

Veris seemed to have nothing to say, a moment so rare it was stunning. Instead he stared at Brody as if he could will him to undo what he had just said.

“Evaristus was vampire?” Taylor clarified, keeping her tone quiet and gentle.

Brody grimaced. “Sorry, yes. I forget you guys don’t know this stuff backwards. You know

everything else about me.”

“He’s the one that turned you. Originally,” she added.

Brody nodded.

Veris pushed his hand through the rough ends of his hair at the back of his neck. “Have you ever turned anyone, Brody?”

“Why?” Brody demanded sharply.

“I don’t know how,” Veris confessed. “I wouldn’t even listen to others speak about it when they talked among themselves.”

Brody blew out a breath. “Once.

A long time ago. It was that or he die. I didn't know how either, Veris. It's instinctive. I muddled through. You'll have to, too."

Veris crossed his arms. "Fine. Let's do it now, then jump home."

Taylor shook her head. "You can't," she added, just as Brody threw his hands up.

"Fuck!" Brody cried. "For a genius, you're not thinking too fucking well, are you?" he railed at Veris. "You turn me now, then they'll never see me die in the ring, and they won't toss my body out with the other trash. I'll be a slave

for the rest of my fucking days...I may end up a fucking slave in the twenty-first fucking century."

Taylor rested her hand on his arm. He was trembling, still. "Brody," she said as gently as she could. "This is tough for Veris, too."

Brody's chest was heaving as he drew in deep, quick breaths. He spun away. "Ah, *Criost!*" he cried, pushing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

Veris stood like a stone, unmoving. Taylor placed herself in front of him. "All your objections to turning someone don't hold this

time.” She hesitated, then risked touching his arm as she had just done with Brody. For Veris, though, such attempts at comfort could backfire if his anger was too intense. “You have to do this, Väinämöinen, if we are to see Marit again.”

Veris closed his eyes and dropped his chin, but not before she glimpsed the flare of fear and agony there.

Both of them were mired in dark thoughts.

She turned back to Brody, who stood at the open window, his arms

held stiffly at his sides. He was staring out over the city, toward the palace.

“Come and eat,” she told him, picking up one of his hands.

He made a choking sound. “I can’t eat.”

“Yes, you can and you should. This will all look a little better when you’ve eaten. Trust me.”

“Eating...of course,” Veris murmured. “I would like to see that.”

“I have more cheese,” Taylor told Brody. “Some *kefalintzin*, this

time. And a spiced omelet with vegetables. Salad with chicken. And honey cakes."

Brody shook his head, but his stomach grumbled. Taylor laid her hand against his abs. "You're hungry," she told him and pulled gently on his hand. "I have apricots," she added.

Brody drew in a breath. "Perhaps...an apricot," he allowed.

She drew him into the inner sanctum, where the table had been laid and picked up one of the ripe apricots from the bronze bowl. She sliced it with the small knife

swiftly, quartering it and removing the pit, then lay the quarters on the platter waiting in front of the divan for Brody to eat. She picked up one of the quarters. "Here," she said and offered it to him.

Brody took the fruit and bit into it. He gave a sigh as he chewed. "I don't think I could ever tire of these."

Veris had moved into the room behind them. "What do they taste like?" he asked curiously.

"Like kissing Taylor," Brody replied. He settled on the divan in front of the remainder of the

apricot.

Taylor poured wine into the cup that Brody had used for the last two nights and handed it to him.

“Then they’re addictive,” Veris concluded, “For Taylor’s kisses certainly are. It’s as well I can’t eat them.” He sat on the opposite divan and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his elbows, watching with fascination as Brody ate.

Taylor cut up the omelet, which had cooled enough to handle now and slid the bowl toward Brody. “Try a handful. This one is nothing

like TGI Fridays serves back home.”

Brody swallow the mouthful of wine he had just taken and scooped up some of the omelet in his fingers. He chewed thoughtfully, exploring the herb and spice-riddled concoction.

“Brody eating...” Veris said softly. “It looks very normal. I thought my mind would have trouble accepting it, but that isn’t the case.” His gaze shifted to Taylor.

She nodded. “It was the same with you. It looked completely natural. Just something I hadn’t

seen you do before. I was braced for it to look weird, too."

"You two can talk psychology all night if you want," Brody told them, reaching for the chicken. "Just don't expect me to join in. I just realized I'm off my head starving."

Taylor hid her smile and topped up Brody's wine cup and pushed the salad closer to his hand. She sat back to watch him eat and drink.

Veris straightened up. "There's another first. Brody making me wait while he eats."

"Wait?" Taylor questioned.

Veris sent her a scowl that she interpreted easily and it sent a hot flush through her body as she considered all the different ways Veris intended to fill the night hours until the guards came back. He had just had his temper stirred and his pride kicked, and he could not stalk away to sulk in private like he might have at home. So he was going to reassert himself in typical Veris fashion.

“Tyra, come and sit next to me,” Veris suggested, his voice low and ripe with promise and Taylor knew she was right. Veris had used Old Norse, their private language.

Her clit and pussy throbbed with potential as she rose to her feet and crossed the three feet of cool tiles to the other divan where Veris sat.

Brody paused to watch her resettle herself next to Veris. Then he took a mouthful of the wine. "There's a sight I never thought I would see. The pair of you together, here in Constantinople." He looked down into the wine cup. "My fault," he muttered and took a longer mouthful.

Veris picked up Taylor's hand. "Say that one more time, Brody and I'll make you take it back in a way

that will ensure you'll never even *think* the phrase again."

Brody blinked, looking at Veris with surprise. "You're joking, right? You know how we got here?"

Veris looked down at the back of Taylor's hand and smoothed his thumb over it. "I know."

"*I relaxed*, is what happened," Brody said. "We got the tapes, we had Tira where we wanted her and we were on our way home and I let down my guard, because the journey was as good as over. I was stupid."

"Brody," Taylor said sharply.

“Stop judging yourself that way.”

Brody scowled at her. “You asked me to take you home. Remember? I apologized for dragging you through yet another of our dark secrets, and you said ‘take me home’, and instead of thinking about home as I kissed you, I thought about this dark fucking secret of mine.” He gripped the wine goblet between both hands and stared down into the contents, a deep furrow between his brows. “Guess it’s not so secret now,” he muttered.

“Look at me, Brody,” Taylor commanded.

He drew in a breath deep enough to raise his shoulders and lifted his gaze to her face.

“We all jumped together because we all wanted to be together if exactly this happened,” she reminded him.

His frown deepened. “I never really thought it would, though. I didn’t think...I thought Veris would hold us together and steer us straight. He always has.”

It was Veris’ turn to draw in a deep breath. “There are some things even I cannot overcome,” he said, his voice deep and low. “This

is one of them, Brody. For whatever reason—call it fate, if you want—this part of your past was something you were destined to face again and it was too powerful a draw.”

Brody compulsively gulped a mouthful of the wine.

“If Veris is right,” Taylor added, “And you were bound to face your past again one way or another, aren’t you glad it happened this way, Brody?”

“*This* way?” He seemed horrified.

Veris glanced at her and the

corner of his mouth lifted in a small smile. "Revisionist history, hands-on style. She's right. You're re-writing your past with us in it. Don't you prefer it that way?"

The furrow between Brody's brows disappeared as he looked suddenly thoughtful. "I've been pathetically grateful for Taylor's interference, these last three nights, but I hadn't thought of it as re-writing my history until now."

"Eat," Veris told him. "You have to keep up your strength, you puny human." He didn't smile, but there was humor in his eyes.

Brody laughed and reached for one of the honey cakes.

Veris reached for her instead and Taylor caught her breath. His big hand tucked around her waist. "There was an elegance about these older fashions, but I do like to see a woman's legs," he told her, pulling her closer to him.

"If you had your way, I'd walk around naked all day," she told him.

"Half-naked," he amended. "Naked takes away the fun of undressing you."

He kissed her with the same

care and attention he always did; like it was the first time they had ever kissed. Taylor's breath whooshed out of her and her body tingled as she was caught up in the same power as that first kiss had provided. She trembled now as she had then.

She became aware that Veris was undressing her when her belt loosened and the top of her tunic dropped into her lap, exposing her from the waist up. Her nipples, already erect, hard nubs, tightened even more, with a painful rush of sensation.

Veris rested his hand under one

breast, the big thumb against her breast bone. The teasing touch, so near to cupping her breast, made her back snap straighter, thrusting her chest out and the breast toward his fingers. She needed his touch. She wanted both of them to touch her.

She glanced at Brody, to see what he was making of this petty teasing.

He was already on his feet and padding over to the divan, his eyes narrowed as he watched them.

"I thought you were hungry?" Veris asked and leaned down to

slide his lips along her throat.

“I am,” Brody growled. “But not for food, anymore.” Taylor felt his weight settle on the sofa behind her and her heart thrilled at his nearness. She was half-naked, as Veris had intended and it had been far too long by her standards since she’d had both of them.

Brody’s lips pressed against the back of her shoulder, hot and moist, as he slid his hands around the curve of her hips, following the channel where her thighs met, that swept over her thighs to meet at her pussy. The backs of his fingers pushed aside her tunic as they

stroked.

Taylor leaned back against him, her breath catching.

Veris watched, his blue eyes missing nothing. His lips were parted as he drew in long, steady breaths. He was aroused.

He reached out and pulled the tunic aside so he could better see what Brody was doing to her, just as Brody's fingertips reached the sensitive opening of her pussy, making her thrust her hips forward in a hard jerk.

Veris lifted her thighs and turned her so she was sitting facing

him on the divan. He spread her legs open.

Brody mirrored her movements and his hands returned to her thighs, to stroke and tease the entrance to her pussy and make her thrust and moan and squirm, while Veris watched. Veris' observation made it harder to keep still or stay silent, especially when he started to undress in hurried movements, his gaze not shifting by an inch.

"Inside her," he told Brody. "Push inside her." His voice was rough and low.

Brody's breath fanned against

her in a hard gust. "With what?" he asked and his voice was just as thick with excitement as Veris'.

Veris shrugged out of the last of his merchant clothing, dropping it to the floor with an impatient toss. He stood, gloriously naked, tanned, rippling with muscle and tendons. Even his shorn locks seemed to glow.

His cock was rampantly upright and his balls tight sacs beneath.

Brody let out another unsteady. "Now I don't know which one of you to fuck," he muttered.

Veris moved back to the divan

and pushed on Brody's shoulder, tugging his hands away from Taylor. "Both of us, of course." He lifted Taylor up and laid her on her back next to Brody's hip.

"Show off," Taylor told him. "Just because Brody has only human strength right now."

Veris grinned. "Let me enjoy the superiority while I can."

She rolled her eyes. "*Men*. Who cares who is stronger?"

Brody slid his hand over her waist. "He's stroking his own ego, anyway. He's always stronger, even when I'm vampire."

“And I’ve always told you strength is mostly a mental thing...” Veris drew in a breath and caught Brody’s face between his hands. “*Guds*, I missed you.” He kissed him, slowly and deeply, and Taylor’s body fizzed and bloomed as she watched them share the intimate expression. She loved this side of their three-way relationship. She loved watching them together and she loved catching hints of their long, long past together.

Both of them were typical males; they didn’t share intimacies and didn’t like talking about themselves except for moment like

now when their guard was down and they felt completely secure and safe. Taylor pieced together the story of their relationship before she had met them one fragment at a time and she still didn't have the full picture for it was a story that stretched over a thousand years.

Brody pulled away from Veris' kiss and looked at Taylor. "He tastes like wine, sort of. But not. Wine isn't quite right."

Veris took advantage of his momentary distraction to slide Brody's tunic up the length of his torso, gathering it in his hands so he could take it off.

“Brandy. That’s the taste you’re reaching for, that you can’t possibly know,” Taylor told Brody. “Veris tastes like brandy, especially when he’s human.” She smiled at Veris and he drew in a deep breath. Then he lifted Brody’s tunic over his head as Brody cooperated by lifting his arms and threw it onto the other divan.

“Apricots and brandy,” Brody said. “No wonder I can’t get enough of either of you.” He rolled over on his hip, propping himself up on one arm, so he was leaning over Taylor where she rested on the divan. His knee nudged her thighs

apart, which caused his thick, pulsing cock to brush against her *mons*.

Taylor slid her leg over his hip encouragingly, looking up at him. Her breath was already hurried.

Veris picked up the flask of oil sitting on the table next to the food tray. "Someone was anticipating," he accused.

"It was for the *oohh* – !" She sucked in her breath as Brody rammed his cock into her, the full length of him coming to rest as deeply as he could drive himself. She adjusted around his girth and

looked up at him.

“Now I have your attention,” he said, the corner of his mouth curling up.

“Completely,” she whispered back. “Do that again. Please.”

His smile broadened. “With pleasure.” He withdrew, until his cock was almost completely removed from her pussy. Then he drove into her again and Taylor gripped the edges of the divan, a groan emerging from her lips. She was slippery with moisture and oh, so ready for this. She could feel every inch of him enter her.

Brody caught his breath, his eyes drifting slowly closed.

“What is it?” Taylor asked.

The black eyes behind the half-lowered lids focused on her. “I’m the meat in the sandwich, it seems.” He gave a soft groan, his body tensing and Taylor knew then that Veris was behind him, using the oil to prepare Brody.

Taylor lifted and twisted her head to see and caught a glimpse of Veris just over Brody’s wide shoulder. But she could sense what Veris was doing from the trembling and tensing of Brody’s muscles.

Spasms shuddered through him as Veris worked.

Then Veris gripped Brody's shoulder with his big hand and lifted himself over the top of both of them. His blue eyes met Taylor's. "He wants both of us, he gets both of us." His eyes lost their focus as he worked his cock inside and Brody's breath hitched and hurried along in reaction.

Taylor could feel Brody's pleasure building in the small movements his hips were making against hers, the trembling of his body and his shortening breath.

He began to thrust into her again, this time in slow strokes that she knew he intended to be controlled and masterful, but were distorted by the frissons of excitement running through him. His desire was overwhelming him.

Veris' fingers were clenching on Brody's shoulder, signaling his own building pleasure. Taylor wished suddenly she had mirrors, dozens of them, so she could see exactly what Veris was doing to Brody. But all she had right now was imagination and the memory of countless times in the past when she had witnessed similar

moments. Veris was fucking Brody as Brody took her, using the strength and agility they had both just teased him about to ensure that neither she nor Brody bore any extra weight than was necessary. Taylor could see Veris' fist curled over the edge of the divan, and the tightly-flexed biceps and triceps in his arm as he held himself up and used the arm for leverage, too.

The mental imagery and Brody's thrusting combined were the catalyst that tipped Taylor over into a powerful climax. Her back bowed as she snapped taut with the rush of hot liquid excitement.

Brody hissed and his thrusts shortened. He gave a groan that sounded like a muffled cry of protest and climaxed in three hard, deep thrusts, the tendons on his neck straining.

Veris gave a guttural groan of his own and his fingers released Brody's shoulder. Brody dropped to the cushions next to Taylor, his breath ragged.

Veris sat next to them, still breathing easily. He wore a small smile, the one he often wore after sex. Taylor had decided it simply meant that Veris was happy.

Brody kissed her neck, her jaw, then her mouth. He reached for Veris' hand and held it for a moment. His gaze skittered between the two of them. "They're racing again tomorrow," he said. Then his gaze cut away, down to his toes.

Veris' smile faded. He let go of Brody's hand and turned to face them both properly.

Taylor sat up. "No, they're not," she said shortly. Swiftly.

Brody sat up, too. "It's the season, Taylor. There is racing every fourth day. There will be

races tomorrow and I will be in them."

Veris was wordless. Again.

Taylor shook her head vehemently. "No. I know every four days is traditional, but they postponed the races just this once, Brody, because of Matthew's death. The Emperor sent a message to Ariadne's father earlier today, giving him a general dispensation and advising that the racing would be held over a day so arrangements could be properly made."

"Arrangements?" Veris asked. There was a note in his voice she

had never heard before. Distress?

“Ariadne was Matthew’s heir. Through her, her father acquires all Matthew’s business interests, including his chariots. The emperor wants all the chariots ready for the races. He also thought Ariadne might like to arrange for Matthew’s rites, too.”

Brody plucked at an embroidered swirl of gold thread on the divan. “Considerate of him.”

“You have to attend a funeral tomorrow?” Veris asked, in the same tight, careful voice.

Taylor shook her head again. “A

Byzantine funeral? The rites will be held at the palace, so they're still preparing Matthew's body. It can't be done in a day. But arrangements can be started."

Veris seemed to relax. "Then we have this night and the next, at least," he said, reaching for her.

Taylor got very little sleep that night. Neither did Brody.

Normally, the lack of sleep wouldn't have bothered her. She was a lady of leisure and could sleep whenever she wanted. But she had plans for early Thursday that needed her full and sharpest

attention—plans she couldn't share with Veris and most certainly not with Brody.

Chapter Eighteen

Early the next morning, Taylor learned from Kale the name of the guard that had accompanied them to the races with Matthew four days ago and asked for him to present himself to her in Matthew's office, a large open room attached to the formal wing of the house just off the processional.

Taylor began by asking Narses about racing. She quickly established that the young guard

was as much a fanatic of chariot racing as any kid in jeans back home was a fan of basketball or hockey. A few more careful questions gave her the answer she needed; Genesios the Money Lender owned the blue chariots that Brody drove, and he, like all good businessmen, kept a shop front in Galata, the business district on the south-eastern side of the city.

As today was no longer an official race day, Genesios would attend his business as usual.

Taylor pressed a small bag of coins that she had found in

Matthew's quarters into Narses' hand and told him what she wanted.

Surprised, he agreed and Taylor hurried back to her suite to dress. Brody had been returned to the slave cavern, but Veris still lingered. Taylor couldn't read his mood at all. He had withdrawn into himself as he did when he was troubled.

But she couldn't worry about Veris for right now. She had more overwhelming, more urgent matters to deal with.

She dressed in a very simple,

almost unadorned tunic and plain mantle, suitable for a wife in mourning, and kissed Veris goodbye. "I will be making arrangements at the Palace all morning," she warned him.

But Veris barely seemed to hear her.

Taylor pummeled down all her concerns and worries about Veris once more. She would deal with them—*had* to deal with them—later.

She walked through the house once more, back to Matthew's office. Narses stood waiting for her,

as agreed.

“You brought them?” she asked.

He waved a hand toward the table next to him. “Everything you asked for,” he said, showing her.

She looked the items over. “Perfect.”

* * * * *

There were no women in the Galata district and very few people escorted by slaves and guards. Here, the men roamed unfettered, free to walk where they needed to go, to speak to whomever they

needed to confer with and to conduct their business freely.

Taylor pulled the deep hood of her cloak more tightly around her face, hiding her feminine features as much as possible. She was very tall for a woman of Constantinople, and taller than many of the men here, so her height was not out of place. She had surreptitiously shortened her tunic by tucking it up over her belt until it was as short as any merchant's ankle-length tunic. The lack of a dalmatic she hid by the voluminous cloak the guard had supplied and she kept the hood up.

The cloak also hid the bow and arrows she carried.

Narses threaded his way through the jagged, crooked maze of streets until he reached a corner. He stopped and waited for Taylor to catch up with him and carefully pointed across the road.

“Genesios?” she asked.

He nodded.

The business he pointed to was a peak-roofed open-fronted establishment with an awning painted in bright red spreading shade across the paving in front of the open store. Taylor could see

tables and cupboards inside the dim interior, but Genesios himself sat upon a stool outside in the cooler air under the awning. He was eating grapes and calling out to passers-by he knew, or back inside to what must be clerks or office workers of some sort. He was a chubby man, with dark curly hair, brown eyes and thick lips. He had heavy laugh lines at the corners of his eyes.

To be able to sit in the shade and watch the world go by, Genesios was clearly wealthy and his business must be thriving.

Taylor swallowed and looked at

her guard. "Go home," she told him softly. "You do not need to see what happens next."

Narses shook his head. "I will go back up the street if you insist, but I will not go home."

"You don't understand," she said, trying to explain without explaining. "There are events happening in the city...things you don't know, that you can't possibly know. You don't want to become involved in them."

"You are my mistress," he replied. "I swore I would protect you."

Taylor sighed. "Matthew is dead. Your fealty died with him."

Narses was very young and of the age when ideals were still shiny and new. He hesitated, pressing his lips together. "So is Ariadne dead, but I still served you."

"You know?" Taylor drew in a slow breath, riding out her shock. "Do you know what I intend to do now?"

His lips pressed even more firmly together. Then he nodded. "I think so."

"Then go back," she told him.

“Just up the street,” he replied with passive stubbornness and turned and left, removing any chance she had of arguing him out of it.

Taylor dismissed Narses from her thoughts. She had to clear her mind for what she had to do next.

She masked her movements as best she could by turning her back to the street, then with deliberate movements, she brought the bow out from under her cloak and fitted an arrow to the string.

She turned on her heel, stepped to the corner of the building until

Genesios came back into her view and took aim.

Her heart was slamming against her chest. Her mouth was dryer than the dessert. She was not trembling, for which a small chink of her mind was grateful as shaking would destroy her aim.

Breathe and release, Taylor, she told herself, watching the point of the arrow settle over Genesios' chest. Just let it go.

But her fingers wouldn't let the string go.

The building noise in her mind reassembled into articulate

thoughts. *This is murder. Cold-blooded murder.*

It'll save Brody, she told herself. Now her arm was starting to tremble, for she had held the bow drawn for too long and it was a man's bow – it took a lot of strength to keep it at full stretch.

Just a simple flex of your fingers and this is all over, she reasoned with herself.

But her fingers wouldn't cooperate.

Behind her, the guard's footsteps sounded and she sighed.

He had changed his mind. She saw his shadow come up behind her.

The shadow was too large.

She processed the size of the shadow and reacted, turning to face this new threat just as a hand plucked the arrow from her bow, right off her string. It made a little thrumming sound. She swallowed the cry of dismay that wrenched at her. The last thing she could afford right now was to draw attention to herself. She was a woman and armed, which would demand explanations she couldn't give.

Her arm was gripped with the

strength of a vice and she was turned and her back slammed up against the stone wall she had been hiding behind.

Veris pushed his forearm against her upper chest to keep her in place. His eyes were dark with fury. “*I knew*, last night, you were planning something,” he said, his voice low and angry. “You weren’t nearly upset enough and you dropped that tidbit about the funeral rites in with too much detail.” He glanced to his right, across the road toward Genesios. “Who is he?” he demanded.

“No one. It doesn’t matter

now,” Taylor said, all her fear evaporating and a bone-sapping weariness taking its place.

Veris turned his head in the other direction. “You, boy. Come here,” he called softly.

Taylor bit back another protest. She had forgotten Narses. The guard stepped to her side and looked up at Veris with some trepidation.

“You know who I am?” Veris asked. “You were in the room yesterday when Ariadne’s father was there, so I know you know.”

Narses nodded.

Veris looked toward Genesios again. "Tell me who he is. Why does my wife want to kill him?"

Taylor winced at the bald stating of the fact.

Narses cowered. "I...sir...."

"Don't be afraid," Veris told him. "I seek answers. Nothing more. I am a stranger to this city. Explain it to me. Who is he and what is he to my wife?"

Taylor caught Narses' eye and nodded.

He swallowed. "The man yonder is Genesios the Money

Lender, sir."

Veris frowned. "He offended my wife in some way?"

Narses sucked in a despairing, shaky breath. It was possibly the first time he had ever been directly involved in the affairs and politics of his masters and he was not enjoying the stress. "Genesios owns Braenden the Celt, the chariot driver your wife has had brought to her chambers the last three nights' past." Narses glanced at her and Taylor thought she saw an apology in his eyes.

Veris grew still and his eyes

narrowed. His mind was racing. "Ahhh..." he said softly, straightening up. His arm fell away from Taylor's chest. He rested the tip of the bow on the ground and his hands on the other end. "You may go," he told Narses. "Return to the house. I will see the lady home."

"Sir?"

"Go," Veris repeated in a tone that even Taylor would not dare argue with.

"Yes, sir." The guard hurried away.

Taylor pulled her hood back

over her features properly. It had slipped backwards thanks to Veris' manhandling.

"Don't do that," Veris told her.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't hide yourself away like that." He reached around behind her and tugged sharply on the back of the hood, bringing it down around her shoulders and revealing her to everyone who passed them on the street. "If you are going to kill a man," Veris told her, "then you do not do it anonymously, from some dark corner, so he is cheated of his chance to brace

himself.” He reached under his dalmatic and pulled out a long-bladed knife, which he hefted in his hands. “When you kill a man, you look him in the eyes.” He held the knife out to her.

Taylor shuddered, gazing at the long, sharp weapon lying on the palm of his hand.

“A silent arrow out of nowhere...that’s the Assassins’ way. The cowards’ way,” Veris added.

Taylor wrapped her arms around herself, staring at the knife.

“Take it,” Veris insisted.

She shook her head, sickness grabbing at her throat.

He made a sound of annoyance and snatched her wrist in a lightning fast movement, pulling her arm out from her body. He slapped the knife onto the palm of her hand and curled her fingers around the hilt while Taylor moaned in horror.

“This is how you kill a man,” he told her, his voice low and hard. “You use the blade and you cut out his heart so that both you and he understand what his death means.” He held up her hand, fisted around the knife.

Taylor found her voice. “Väinä, *behage...*”

But the use of his real name and Norse seemed to anger him more. He stepped closer to her, towering over her. He wrenched her arm up so the blade was shoved against his chest. “If you cut out my heart you would kill me as good as any human. Shall I help you drive the blade in?”

“No,” she whispered, barely able to speak the word for the sick horror gripping her. All she could see was his eyes, the blue dark with stormy anger.

Veris glanced at Genesios, who was standing and talking to a customer now. "Killing him is screwing with history. If you tweak *anything* this far back in our timelines, then you're as good as shoving this knife in and cutting out my heart, because we'll both be *gone*." His gaze would not let her go. "Haven't you learned *anything* in all the time and years and centuries we've crossed? All the time we've spent discussing and theorizing about this?" His jaw rippled. "*Gud*, Taylor, what about Jerusalem? We came so damned close to losing it all...did that not

teach you a thing?"

"Of course it did." She had to force the words out pasted the constriction in her throat and it hurt to speak.

"You'll kill us all if you do this," he told her, his expression bleak.

Taylor tried to pull her wrist from his fingers, but Veris' grip was vice-like. She yanked uselessly, feeling the panic building in her. "We have to do *something*!" she insisted. "If Genesios is dead, his chariots won't run. Brody won't have to drive them."

"But he *did* drive them," Veris

replied. "You must not change that."

The fear spilled over inside her —big, bubbling and huge. She grabbed at Veris' chest, gripping cloth in her spare hand, and shook him wildly. "Don't tell me 'no'! Don't!"

"Taylor...."

"No!" Her eyes were stinging and she couldn't draw breath because of the tight band around her chest.

"Tyra," Veris said, his voice soft. The grip on her hand around the knife eased and fell away.

She shook her head, refusing to look at him because she knew she would see the truth in his eyes.

“Tyra,” he repeated and his fingers lifted her face up so she *had* to meet his gaze.

Taylor drew in a breath that shuddered as she made herself ask the question that had haunted her since last night. “We let Brody die?”

He didn’t look away from her, so she saw the agony in his eyes. The truth.

She couldn’t cry. It was too awful. She stared at Veris as he took his time to reply—he needed to

find the courage to answer.

“Yes, Taylor. We let him die.”

Chapter Nineteen

They kept up the normal façade until just a few hours before Brody was to return to the cavern. Veris was so good at it Taylor was almost offended at the ease he seemed to have with maintaining an “everything’s fine” bearing.

She struggled to hide her fear and pain from Brody and to remember what her ‘normal’ behavior around him was.

They made love in a low-key, slow and honeyed way that was bitter-sweet. Afterwards Taylor found she couldn't let Brody go. But neither could Veris. His mask had finally dropped.

They lay on the bigger divan, Brody between them. In the moonlight streaming through the windows over their heads, their bodies were all silvered and ghostly. Veris' long arm stretched out over Brody's waist and his hand rested on Taylor's hip. He was not stroking or teasing or nibbling as he normally did. For a moment, he rested his forehead against Brody's

shoulder. It was a telling movement.

Brody shuddered. He sought for and grasped Taylor's hand. "You'll be there tomorrow, won't you?" he whispered.

Taylor heard the fear in his voice and struggled to control her own, to hide it. "Yes, both of us," she assured him. "Isaac, Ariadne's father, was invited to join the emperor and he insisted we go with him. We'll be able to see everything."

Brody looked at Veris. "You know what to do...when the time

comes?"

Veris rested his hand over Brody's heart. "I'm ready, Brody."

Brody took a deep breath. And another one. He turned back to Taylor. "I think...no, I *know*. Taylor, I would rather...die in your arms, than out there alone."

Taylor couldn't speak. She couldn't think. High-pitch sound static filled her mind. *Panic*. Station closed for the night.

Just the one image of Brody's broken body in her arms, before her mind shut down. Then nothing.

Brody clutched at her hand, bringing it to his chest, where Veris' hand rested. "I went through sixteen hundred years to find you waiting for me and perhaps this is why...for you to be at the end. Promise me you'll see to it, Maggie."

Taylor nodded. "I will. You know I will. I would move mountains for you if I knew how. But Brody, you have to fight, too."

He drew in another shuddering breath. "Fight?"

"You can't just go through the motions. You have to live your life

like it's the first time. You have to...." She couldn't even say the words. She looked to Veris for help. They had spent all day talking about this and now Veris, the philosopher and the man who usually never shut up when it was time for an opinion to be aired, was silent.

"You have to embrace your death," Veris finished, his voice soft, almost ghostly.

Brody lay silently.

Veris caught Brody's hand in his, Taylor's fingers entangled in the knot. "If you walk through it

like a zombie, Brody, you could fuck up the timeline. You have to be you, like you would have been. You have to drive like the champion you are, and you have to take risks you would normally take to win the race."

"We'll be there for you," Taylor assured him when Brody didn't answer. "But it's not just us you should do it for."

He sighed. "Marit."

"Not just Marit," Veris told him. His grip tightened around Brody's hand. "There's a very real chance you might have fathered your own

child these last four nights.”

Brody grew absolutely still. Even his breathing stopped. Then he drew in a hard, shuddering breath. “But...Ariadne...”

“Her body was pulled from the Golden Horn. Taylor isn’t using Ariadne’s body and she certainly didn’t live in this time, so she isn’t borrowing a younger version of herself. Taylor jumped back here in person. This is her contemporary body, Brody. And you’re human, as we’re all so mortally aware right now.”

Brody closed his eyes and

turned his head, pressing his face against Taylor's shoulder. Hiding it. Then he sighed and rubbed the thumb of his spare hand into his eye sockets. Hard.

"Then there's Veris, too," Taylor added. "Do it for him."

Veris drew in a sharp breath.

So did Brody.

Taylor pushed on, giving neither of them time to react more than that. "If you don't do this, Brody, you put a thousand years with Veris at risk. You doom Veris to walk through time alone, without you. He would never be

the same, if he even survives that spear in Jerusalem in the first place."

A little silence fell. Both of them were looking at her and in the dark, with only the moonlight spilling over them, even Veris' eyes looked dark and blank.

"There's your reason, if you need an ultimate one," Veris said softly. Firmly. *"Criost, you fuck up our lives so that Taylor disappears and I will kill you, Celt."*

Brody drew Taylor's head down to his and kissed her. "There are no words to describe how much I love

you. I won't let you down."

She felt him squeeze Veris' hand through their joined fingers. "And you. You must watch her. It will be chaotic."

"I know," Veris growled.

"You can't let your temper get out of hand."

"Brody—"

"No," Brody said, cutting him off. "Listen to me. You can't let the beast rise, Veris. You have to stay in control. I need you to fight for me. I need...."

Veris rested his other hand on

Brody's shoulder and squeezed. "It won't be like before."

"It'll be worse. I know what's coming, now," Brody said bleakly.

Taylor gritted her teeth against any sound she might make. Her heart was hurting. Her mind and body was sick with the tension and knowledge of what was about to happen. There were no words, no thoughts she could offer in comfort except for what she had already given and now Brody had countered them with this.

"It'll be easier," Veris replied flatly.

Brody turned his head to look at Veris, plainly startled.

So did Taylor.

Veris sat up. "Yes, there'll be pain," he said, his voice low but clear. "I won't lie about that. But you know pain. You've had long experience dealing with it. You can ride it out now." He spread his hands. "We're here this time and that makes all the difference in the world, because we would halt time in its tracks for you."

"How does that make any difference?" he asked.

"You'll see. It just does. Trust

me.”

Brody sat up slowly. Warily.

“Do you love me?” Veris asked.

“That’s a stupid fucking question,” Brody replied furiously.

“Do you?”

“I’d die for you.” He paused. “I am dying for you,” he said flatly. “And Taylor. And Marit.” He rested his hand against Taylor’s flat abdomen. “And perhaps my child.”

“Then trust me as much as you love me. Us being here this time will make dying this time easier.”

Brody drew in a slow breath and

let it out. "I'm still..."

"Afraid?" Veris finished.

"Yeah."

* * * * *

The moon was low in the sky when the guards returned to the chamber to retrieve Brody. No one spoke as he was locked back into the chains, not even the guards, who seemed to absorb the atmosphere in the room and stayed silent as they worked.

So Taylor was able to hear a sound that she might not have

heard otherwise. It took her a moment to identify it. The chain links were clinking softly and unmusically.

Brody trembled badly enough to make them rattle.

Taylor was forced to go through the motions of paying the guards for tomorrow night's stay-over. The guards had acquired a taste for the good food and softer accommodations to be found in Matthew's kitchen and guard quarters, and liked the nightly routine. Payment was just a bonus.

She lingered in the processional,

watching for the very last glimpse of the huddled group before it disappeared.

Then she hurried back to Veris' arms. He hugged her with ferocious strength but still Taylor could not cry.

"You lied to Brody about it being easier this time," she accused him.

Veris sighed and let her go. "You wanted me to tell him it would be harder, now he knew what it would be like? Now he could recall the blood, the pain and every instance of his own death?"

Taylor massaged her temples. Her head ached. “No, of course not,” she whispered.

“He knew I was lying, anyway,” Veris said.

Fresh horror spilt through her. “No!”

“He just needed something to cling to. An idea.”

“Hope,” Taylor whispered.

Veris shook his head. “He has you for that.”

Promise me you'll be there. At the end.

She closed her eyes. She wanted to protest that she couldn't do this —that she couldn't sit through the races and watch the man she love die, but the simple fact was; she had to.

She opened her eyes. "I have a ton of arrangements to make with Kale if we are to look like we belong in the Emperor's box today."

"I have my own arrangements to make," Veris said. He glanced out the window at the lightening sky. "It's going to be a stormy day," he warned. "Dress well."

Veris looked over the assembled people. There were a dozen guards and as many slaves. The slaves were all dressed in high-ranking clothes —some of them probably Ariadne's from the way the slaves giggled and pulled self-consciously at the folds and accessories and their hair.

“All of them?” Veris questioned.

“If we are to look like wealthy patricians, this is barely sufficient,” Taylor assured him. “Trust me, I’ve learned a lot in the last few days.” She glanced at Rafael, who was

standing next to Veris, openly gawking at the people, the house and the mound of gear and food gathered in neat mounds in preparation for the races.

Veris drew Rafael forward. "This is Rafael. Rafael, my wife, Taylor."

Rafael nodded his head. "Taylor." He wore the clothes of a moderately well-to-do merchant and he wore them surprisingly well. Veris had given him a purse of bezants and told him to acquire clothing and accessories to blend in with businessmen. Rafael had proved to be a quick study. He'd

had his hair trimmed neatly and he had been shaving every day to match current Byzantine standards.

Taylor assessed him in one glance. She was dressed in patrician clothing, with the elaborate make-up of a Byzantine woman. Veris could see that Rafael was confused and trying to assess if she was a blood-drinker, like him. Veris had not elaborated on his need for blood since the storm at sea. That conversation was overdue.

“Rafael is a friend I met on the road from Pergamum. He will help me to return there,” Veris explained to Taylor.

Rafael frowned, puzzled.

One more point to add to the conversation, Veris mentally tallied.

“This is one of the two people I spoke about meeting here in the city,” Veris told Rafael.

Rafael’s frown smoothed away and his toffee brown eyes came alive with interest. “And the other?”

“We’re going to see the other now,” Veris told him. “On the way I’ll explain everything.”

* * * * *

Their entourage was so large and cumbersome it halted traffic completely while it swept along the Mese on its way to the Hippodrome. For the first little while Veris worried about the attention it was drawing to Taylor and him, but then he realized that the chaos they were creating was more than adequately holding the attention of shop keepers and commuters.

They were not the only big party heading for the Hippodrome that day, either, so traffic in and around the Palace and Hippodrome was congested and syrupy. They

were just one more household on their way to the races.

It let Veris relax. He beckoned Rafael to his side.

Rafael drew away from the edges of the group, where he had been twisting his head in every direction, observing people and shops and every sight that tweaked his curiosity.

“You’re supposed to be a jaded merchant. You’ve seen all this before. Many times.”

Rafael laughed. “I cannot help it. It is all so...” He shrugged. “I have no words for it.”

“Even after two days?”

“It would be so after two years,” Rafael replied. “This place is unlike any I have ever been to.”

“It is that,” Veris agreed. “Constantinople is unique in the western world.” *For this time period*, he mentally added. He glanced casually over his shoulder. Taylor and Kale walked behind him, which was the correct place for a wife and her head slave. Only the guards strode ahead and they were three paces away and out of earshot if he spoke quietly.

“There are things I need to tell

you, Rafe, before these races end today."

Rafael was silent for several paces. "You did not free me just because you pitied my state, did you?"

"That was not the only reason, no," Veris agreed easily, "Although slavery offends me in principal, in practice and subjectively...in all its forms."

Rafael frowned his way through Veris' answer, then shook his head, dismissing it. "What is it you want of me? Or is it simply my blood that you need, like on the boat?"

“Ship,” Veris corrected automatically, without thought. “That was...unintended. I would have left this city with you still thinking of me as human.”

Again, Rafael strode several paces before he responded. He was beginning to learn to think before he spoke. “You are not...human?” he asked cautiously. “I did not know one could be something else.” He licked his lips. “Are you a demon?”

“Demons are a story made up by the church to scare sinners into behaving themselves. They don’t exist, Rafael. Well, not the way the

church wants you to think they do. But we do."

"We?" His voice rose slightly. "There are more of you? What are you?"

Veris squeezed Rafael's shoulder, calming him. "You must listen to everything I have to tell you, Rafael. Some of it is going to sound even more fantastic than the sights you've seen in this wondrous great city, but I need you to take it all in and absorb it as quickly as you can, because time is growing short for my friend and you have a part to play in his fate."

Rafael again took his time to answer. His strides, Veris realized, were not that much shorter than his own. Rafael was slender, but he had height and the legs that promised that somewhere in his future he would fill out into a much bigger man.

Rafael drew in a slow breath. "What must you tell me?" he said at last.

* * * * *

The Emperor's box was a huge, multi-level affair at the end of the arena. While Isaac was permitted to

sit on the Emperor's personal tier, Ariadne and her companions were relegated to the secondary wings, off to one side.

Taylor had foreseen this banishment and set about organizing the stifling hot, unadorned stone corner they had been assigned, with Kale's help. They set up shade cloths and temporary tables, and set out cushions and covers for the stone benches provided. Cool drinks were handed to everyone as soon as they settled and finger food set out on all the tables. Taylor cast an eye over the arrangements. It was a

luxurious, padded, perfect example of Byzantine indulgence.

Veris shook his head as he sat in the biggest chair, a cup in his hand purely for show. "You most certainly did learn swiftly," he told her. He picked up her hand and pulled her toward the chair next to him.

"I can't sit there," Taylor protested. "I should sit back behind you."

Veris caught her eye. "You really want to sit back there, for what comes next?"

Taylor's heart dropped. For a

few short moments she had managed to mask the fact of why they were here. Now it was back in the front of her mind, glowing in neon.

She bit her lip and sat on the edge of the chair next to him.

“Besides,” Veris added, “I want you to hear what I tell Rafael next. Rafe—”

The tall young man came forward. He nodded his head at her, his sharp, intelligent eyes flicking over her. His gaze fell on Veris’ cup of wine. “You drink?” he asked.

“I pretend,” Veris replied. “To avoid unnecessary attention.”

Taylor smothered her sharp inhalation. “He knows?” she asked softly.

“It is necessary,” Veris told her, “In order to tell him everything.”

“He must know everything?”

Rafael was watching their exchange, his expression curious, non-judgmental.

Veris sighed. “He must know everything,” he said.

“Why? Why not just write a letter to yourself and leave

instructions that way?" Taylor demanded.

Veris grimaced. "Because I can't read, here and now. I didn't learn until ten years from now."

Taylor sat back, stunned into silence. There was simply no answer to that.

Rafael, though, leaned closer toward both of them. "How do you know what happens in years from now?" he demanded, his voice low.

Veris gave a small shrug with his massive shoulders. "Because that's where we came from."

Rafael snapped up straight, his eyes widening.

“And that’s where we’re going back to, later today,” Veris added.

Rafael sank down onto the cushions of Taylor’s chair and she hastily moved over to make room for him. He was oblivious to her movements or her presence. He was lost in thought.

He reached out for the arm of Veris’ chair. “You said your kind live a very long time. Always, you said, unless something happens to end your time. That is how you have lived to be a philosopher and

a warrior and a sailor and a merchant and all the things you have forgotten to tell me you have been. You have been all of them, in these years from now.”

“It’s called the future,” Veris told him, keeping his voice low. “And now we have come back to this time, where I lived once before.”

“In Pergamum,” Rafael concluded. “You said you were from there when you freed me.”

“Yes. I was learning to be a doctor.”

“Learning...” Rafael thought

about that. "But you said you are going back to the future and I must help you."

Veris nodded. "This is where you may get confused, Rafael."

"It is all confusing, Northman," Rafael shot back. "But you said to absorb it, so I am absorbing it."

Veris laughed. "I have high hopes for you, Rafael. Your spirit hasn't been totally crushed by slavery. I would have liked to have seen what happens to you once you have thrown off the habits of servitude and inferiority. I suspect you will rise like the Phoenix."

Rafael's eyes narrowed. "*Feenix*. That would be future speech," he guessed.

"Yes."

Rafael shrugged. "So. Confuse me."

Taylor pushed her untouched cup of wine into Rafael's hand and he took it absently.

"When Taylor and I and our friend return to the future, Taylor will disappear, but not Brody and I. We will simply lose all memory of our future selves and become people of this time in fact, not just in pretense."

Rafael glanced at Taylor. He seemed to realize for the first time that they were sharing the big chair together. He shifted on the seat, moving over to make more room for her. "You will go back?" he asked diffidently.

"Yes," she confirmed. "So will Veris and Brody, but their younger versions will stay here. But 'here' isn't where Veris was last. It was like he went to sleep in Pergamum and he'll wake up in Constantinople, with no idea how he got here, what happened in between, or how to get back to Pergamum. You're going to have to

tell him what happened and how to get back there.”

Rafael’s eyes narrowed. “This younger Veris. He will not know who I am. Why would he believe me? He is the same as me, a man of these times.”

Taylor glanced at Veris who nodded slightly.

“You are not so confused after all, Rafael,” Veris murmured. “Not if you grasp that much. I will give you some facts about myself that only I could know. You will tell me – the younger me – those facts, as a way of convincing me that you

“speak the truth. They will be enough to tell me you have access to information I *must* believe and follow.” Veris gave him a small smile. “I don’t consider myself a fool, Rafael. I can reason well enough that presented with incontrovertible facts, I can be persuaded.”

Rafael took a long swallow of the wine, as he considered the matter thoroughly. Taylor decided that she liked him. He had a quiet strength about him.

“You will not be easy to convince,” Rafael said at last. “You are what men call a stubborn

bastard and you will not like waking to find yourself not where you were.” He glanced at Taylor. “He has a temper, yes?”

Taylor cast about for a delicate answer she could give right there in front of Veris.

Veris gave a soft laugh. “Yes, I have a temper. A thunderously white hot temper that Taylor and Brody have despaired over for years. But there are ways to dismantle my temper before it even gets started and I’ll explain those ways to you. You’re going to have to do all the thinking for yourself when we’re gone, Rafael, because

you will be the only one who knows the real truth of what happened in the last few days."

Rafael drained his cup and pressed it between his hands, leaning forward. "There is more to this than simply guiding you back to Pergamum, isn't there?"

Veris nodded.

Rafael hunched his shoulders in tight, then flexed them and sat up straight. "May I have more wine?" he asked Taylor. "I have sudden need of it."

Chapter Twenty

Rafael watched only one race, perched on a cushion set on the step their two chairs sat upon. He looked away when a chariot overturned, throwing the driver across the track, and didn't look back. As soon as the race was ended, he picked up the cushion and turned it so his back was against the stone balustrade. He settled himself on the cushion, facing Taylor and Veris, his long

legs crossed.

“Tell me more about you and the future,” he said. “I care not for this racing.”

“Nor I,” Taylor assured him, her gaze dropping to the pale bands of flesh circling his wrists.

The Emperor’s people left them alone. Ariadne was only the daughter of a general, while the general himself sat by the Emperor’s side, and the Emperor was too involved in the racing to care about his guests, anyway.

So while the races proceeded, all three of them diverted their

thoughts from the impending single race uppermost in their minds, by planning for those moments afterwards. As each race was called, they would pause to check the drivers as they were announced, their hearts hammering, then they would return to their conversation, knowing that the *next* race might be the one.

* * * * *

When Oresme's men hauled Brody out of the cage early instead of Basilides' people fetching him

closer to the race, he braced himself for trouble.

Four of them dragged him into one of the supply caverns just off the main tunnel and Brody realized it was very bad indeed.

Not just Oresme stood waiting for him, but someone it took him a moment to put a name to. He had to reach back into his human memory for the name, for he had only seen him once or twice in his life.

Genesios. Genesios the Money Lender. The man who owned these caverns, the chariots Brody drove,

the horses...and owned Brody himself and every last slave in the caverns.

All the spit dried up in Brody's mouth. Genesios never came down to the pits. It was unheard of. He just sent orders via Oresme or Basilides.

But the man was here, now. Why?

Oresme strode toward him as soon as the guards had carried him to within a few paces of Genesios. The guard captain looked mad as hell. He used the momentum from his stride to swing his fist and bury

it deeply into Brody's gut. It was only the fury on Oresme's face that gave Brody warning enough to brace himself, but the blow still hurt like crazy and drove most of the wind out of his lungs.

His hearing buzzed and fizzed and his vision grey-out, so he didn't see the upper cut coming, although he should have anticipated it. Oresme's fist creamed him, connecting square with his face and snapping him backwards like a twig. Brody *felt* his nose crunch and the hot spurt of blood.

The guards that had hauled him in here let him drop to the ground

like a felled tree, where he lay curled up like a comma, trying to breath around the blood running down the back of his throat, while his abdomen twitched and spasmed in pain.

He heard the shuffle of feet on the grit and sand that made up the floors of most of the caverns around here.

“You’ve been causing my men a lot of grief lately, with your social activities,” Genesios said. His voice came from right over the top of Brody. He was standing next to him. “They’re very unhappy with you.”

No shit, Brody thought. I would never have guessed.

“It is only because you are my best driver that you have not been tossed into the Horn one dark night, as beyond the bother of your upkeep.”

A shudder ran through him. He couldn't help it. How many late night sessions had Oresme and Basilides had, where they had discussed the benefits of doing exactly that?

“These are important races today. The Emperor wants the Blues to win, no matter what, and

he has given me a purse to ensure that happens. You understand what that means, don't you?"

Brody nodded, wiping away the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. If the Emperor wanted a blue victory, then the bribes, tampering and blackmail would be systemic. The idiots thought that would ensure victory, but it simply ensured more accidents.

More deaths.

He closed his eyes. Veris and Taylor were out there. Waiting for him.

Calm washed over him.

“Give him some incentive to win,” Genesios ordered. “Then strap him into the cart so he has even more reason to bring his chariot home to victory.”

Icy fingers of fear touched Brody. They were going to beat him, then tie him to his reins or the platform. If something happened to the chariot – if it flipped or was crushed, he would not be able to get clear of it.

The guards grabbed his shoulders, tearing at the tunic, pulling it away, stripping him for his beating and Brody drew in a shuddering breath that bubbled

past the blood and mucus in his throat.

It was happening. It really was happening.

* * * * *

Taylor lifted her head as the drivers of the next race were called. Because they sat next to the Emperor's box, they had no trouble hearing the crier at all and her hand shot out to clamp on Veris' with a grip that was painful.

He sat up, looking toward the chariots that were rolling into the

arena.

Rafael, alerted by Taylor's tension, turned on his cushion to peer over the balcony. "Which one?" he asked softly.

"The gold chariot. With the tall driver and the white horses. The one just turning now."

Taylor was leaning forward, peering intently. "There's something different about him," she whispered. "He's not standing the same as he did last time."

Veris ran his gaze over the chariot and checked off a mental list. Rims, axle, wheels, nave,

spokes, felly, pole, pin, ropes, bands. Whip. He ran his gaze the length of each rein.

Then he saw it. His gut tightened and he closed his eyes for a moment, fighting not to show any fear. Taylor would panic if he did. "They've tied the reins to his driving arm." His voice sounded remote. Distant.

Rafael glanced at him sharply and Veris shook his head in minute movements, hoping Taylor did not see it.

Rafael glanced at her, then back down at the sandy arena. His

fingers were white on the balustrade.

The flag dropped, the race began and Veris for one frozen moment felt a fear so overwhelming he knew he was close to a human reaction; panic.

Only Taylor's still, slim figure next to him and her heated hand on his kept him in his place...and the knowledge that Brody would need him very soon.

* * * * *

Embrace it. Or we all die. Veris'

voice, rich with the still lingering trace of his ancient roots, whispered in Brody's mind. It was the loudest thing Brody could hear, louder than the horses, the whips, the screaming crowd, the straining leather of the reins, any of it.

Brody could barely breathe for the broken bones in his nose and the congealed blood that had clotted his airways. He pulled air in through his mouth, but couldn't suck in enough to compensate. He felt dizzy.

Not enough oxygen, he realized.

He realized he was driving on

automatic, barely even concentrating on the race, which was exactly what Veris had warned him about. He tried to pull his thoughts together, to build a strategy to win.

He was in third place, a useful position from where he could move up as he needed to.

That was when the chariot next to him rammed into his with an impact that flung him against the side of his cart. He heard and felt something crack. Ribs, he realized. The pain was intense and he groaned, all thoughts about winning wiped away for the

moment. He struggled to get the horses back under control and the chariot lined up in a straight line. They were coming up on the curve, where he had to maintain control and use some sort of strategy to move ahead at least one place.

The chariot rammed into him again, slamming him up against the side of his cart. He heard wood splintering. The cart lurched and he looked over at the driver of the other cart. It was a blue driver.

The Emperor wants a guaranteed blue victory.

Brody realized that the Emperor

hadn't just paid off Genesios, but every blue chariot owner in the city. No rules would apply out here today. The emperor wouldn't care for anything except victory. Any victory that included a blue driver.

Any blue driver. It would pit blue drivers against blue drivers, as well as the green drivers. It was anarchy.

His horses began to round the bend and the chariot to swing out with the gforce of the curve. It was a particularly vulnerable moment in the race, for the driver had the least amount of control over the chariot at that moment. He could

only hang on and wait until he was around the curve and straightened up before attempting anything other than straight driving.

The chariot in second place, a green chariot, was already pulling out of the curve, and chose to swing wide in an attempt to take the outside line of the straight, and overtake the leader.

It obstructed the path of the blue driver who had been battering Brody, as he came around the bend with a burst of speed, intending to pass Brody. There wasn't enough room for the blue driver to slide into the inside lane where the

green had been.

Brody had no maneuverability because he was still pulling out of the curve, still under the pull of g-force.

The blue chariot slammed into his once more, this time in a square broad-side, their wheels slamming together, the metal hubs squealing and sending sparks flying.

Horses screamed in fright and surged forward, racing to get away from the danger. His chariot leapt forward and their locked wheels ripped apart, shredding spokes with a sound of cracking wood.

Part of a painted spoke flew up into the air and from the color of it, Brody knew it was one of his.

How bad is the damage? Will I see the end of this race?

The chariot listed to one side, sagging in a way that told him the damage was severe.

He couldn't help it. He looked up toward the Emperor's box, searching for their faces.

Help me, he pleaded silently.

Then the curve was ahead and he was forced to look away, to concentrate on the mechanics of

driving and holding the chariot together for a few more minutes.

* * * * *

Taylor was afraid to move. Her gaze was locked on Brody's disintegrating chariot and his figure, which looked so vulnerable, standing on the open platform, as he was tossed about each time the chariot was rammed.

She knew she held Veris' hand, but she couldn't feel it. She could barely hear the crowd. The sound of her own breathing was very loud in her mind. So was the sound of

her heart, fast and frantic.

If she moved, she knew she would spin out of control, into hysterics. So she sat watching.

Waiting.

This was it. Brody needed her. That was the only thing that kept her on the chair and a tiny corner of her mind calm and silvered and untouched by the panic and fear tearing through her body.

* * * * *

When the rim of Brody's wheel cracked, just on the other side of

the bend, Veris let out a shaky breath. Taylor's fingers crimped around his like a vice. She had strained the tendons in his smallest finger and broken the joint, but it would heal.

Right now, pain was good.

He reached for and found his voice. "Rafael," he croaked.

Rafael turned his head and looked over his shoulder at Veris. His face was white and his eyes were huge.

"Be ready," Veris whispered. "It's coming."

When the chariot began to shudder and break apart, wild panic touched him. Brody looked around, calculating, figuring ways out, strategies, maneuvers, but nothing would defeat the reins tied around his wrist. He was bound to the chariot's fate.

This is it.

His breath deserted him as he acknowledged the fact. It felt like he had dropped into a deep, endless hole.

Then he remembered.

They were waiting for him. They were watching this. They were *watching*. God, they were watching him do this. Taylor...poor Taylor and Veris. They would be beside themselves, seeing the cart fall apart around him.

She had promised to be there.

Brody reached for the memories of the previous night. Lying between Taylor and Veris. Their hands on him. Their assurances of love. Their promises that they would be there at the end.

Calm dropped over him, even as

the chariot shook and shuddered and the last wheel dropped off and it began to drag along the ground. It would tip in a few seconds and he would be dragged with it. The knowledge didn't touch him now as it might have. He was in their arms.

Brody drew in a breath. It came easily.

He gripped the side edge of the chariot, measuring the progress of the other blue driver coming up behind him.

"I love you," he whispered and closed his eyes.

He jumped.

* * * * *

“No!” Taylor whispered. It was the only sound any of them made, as Brody’s body disappeared under the front horses and the crowd made a collective “ooooh!” sound.

Veris surged to his feet, gathering Taylor up against him. He was moving fast. Too fast. But no one was watching them.

He lunged for the balustrade. Rafael had already moved out of the way. Veris pressed one hand

against the wide stone ledge and leapt over the edge, taking Taylor with him.

It was a thirty foot drop to the oily sand of the arena, but Veris had vampire power to compensate for the impact. He rolled, protecting Taylor as best he could, and trying at the same time to watch for any approaching chariots, but the race was over.

He scrambled to his feet and hauled Taylor to hers, then grabbed her hand and ran toward the still body in a white tunic, over in the middle of the track.

The audience was screaming with mingled delight and horror. The sound washed over him like a wave of hot air.

Brody was lying face down, his limbs at odd angles. He was half-buried in the sand, from the weight of the chariot and horses that had passed over him. Veris pushed the memory to the back of his mind deliberately. He dropped to his knees next to him, and carefully turned him over.

Brody was covered in blood. It was everywhere, mixed with the sand and coating his skin.

Taylor gave a hiccupping sound that might have been a smothered sob. She dropped to the sand next to Veris and held out her arms. "Give him to me," she said, her voice shaking.

Veris had no trouble hearing her despite the roaring crowd. Their noise had receded to a distant murmur, leaving him and Taylor alone with Brody in their own little silvered silence.

Veris lifted Brody until he was resting in her lap, his head in her arms. His eyes were closed and Veris dropped his fingers to his neck to check his pulse. It was

there, but thready and faint.

Taylor looked up at Veris questioningly. Her eyes were large, glassy and swimming in tears, but none had fallen yet.

Veris shook his head. "He's alive. Just."

Taylor's composure cracked just for a second. Her face worked. "Then he's in pain." She stroked Brody's face, wiping away the sand and blood.

Brody's eyes opened and he focused on her. Taylor instantly calmed and smiled at him. "Hi," she said softly.

“Veris?”

Veris moved around so that Brody could see him. “Here.” He rested his hand on Brody’s blood-matted chest. Gently.

Brody sighed. “Thank you.” He looked up at Taylor. “Kiss me.”

She bent and kissed him gently.

“Apricots,” he whispered and closed his eyes.

His hand dropped to the ground, loose and lifeless.

Veris picked up his wrist and felt for the pulse he knew he wouldn’t find, as pain ripped

through his chest and speared his heart. He looked at Taylor. Her eyes were still wide and hurt and bewildered, but her tears were falling now.

“Don’t,” he told her, wiping her cheeks. “He was in pain. Now he won’t be.”

“Take your own advice,” she murmured and stroked his face. She held up her fingertips, showing him the faintly pink tears glistening on the tips.

Overhead, thunder rumbled from the gathering storm clouds. The bright shaft of sun that had

been peeping through the dark grey cloud and lighting their little tableau on the sand extinguished like a candle and shadow was cast over the arena like a pall.

Chapter Twenty-One

The thunderstorm broke barely an hour later, just on sunset, clearing the streets of everyone but the most determined traveler and casting an early darkness over the city that suited their agenda perfectly.

Dressed alike in dark tunics and cloaks and both heavily armed, Veris and Taylor hurried through the rain-sodden streets to Veris' house under the shadow of

St. Sophia, their hoods pulled well over their faces as protection against the relentless rain.

Veris used the hilt of his knife to rap on the door loudly enough to gain attention.

The door cracked open a mere inch and Rafael's eye showed. Then he opened the door to admit them.

"Did you manage it?" Veris asked.

Rafael wordlessly waved them through into the triclinium. Brody's body lay on one of the couches, a cloak spread over the top of him. What little Taylor could see of his

flesh was filthy.

“He’s naked,” she observed.

“They strip the bodies of everything,” Veris murmured. “Even the armbands are removed, to be used for the next incumbent. Then they burn the pyre at sunset.” He pulled the cloak away. “Did you have any trouble?” he asked Rafael.

“I was nearly run through by patrols who thought I was a looter.” Rafael shrugged.

“You were,” Veris pointed out.

Rafael grinned. “I grew up stealing anything that was left

unattended for a blink of an eye. I've never stolen a body until now."

Taylor pressed her hand against Veris' shoulder. "Shall we leave you?"

He shook his head. "There's no time." He lowered himself to his knees beside Brody's body. "He was right. I know what to do." He rolled Brody's head to one side, baring his neck. Veris opened his mouth, letting his teeth descend.

Rafael backed up a step and Taylor caught his hand in hers. "You've earned his trust. You are completely safe."

Rafael glanced at her, his eyes wide. Then he looked back to where Veris was bent over Brody.

Veris bit into the big artery carefully, his eyes closing in concentration. Then he lifted his head and buried his teeth into the flesh of Brody's chest.

"What is he doing?"

"I'm guessing, but if I am right, then he is injecting the stimulant that is part of a vampire's bite directly into Brody's heart and into the major veins and arteries. It should revive him long enough for him to drink Veris' blood."

“Stimulant?” Rafael murmured, his eyes glued to the two men.

“Veris told me he fed from you on the ship. You must have felt it. The arousal.”

“Arousal?” Rafael frowned.

“Excitement,” Taylor amended.

A faint blush touched his cheeks. “Yes,” he confessed. “I thought...I thought...” He swallowed.

“It wasn’t you, Rafael. It is in their bite. Veris is using almost pure stimulant on Brody.” She was not about to start a discussion about

aphrodisiacs now. It was so not the time or place.

She found she was drifting closer to the couch, her eyes on Brody, watching for signs of life. Her gaze lingered on his chest and she could barely blink, waiting for the first lift of his breast bone that would indicate breathing. Her eyes started to water as she stared.

Veris sat back on the floor, his fingers on Brody's wrist, measuring his pulse.

"He can't ingest my blood until he's breathing. He has to breathe... he has to be able to swallow," Veris

murmured.

“Your bite doesn’t restore life,” she said.

He shook his head. “It’s a spark. A last gasp. Enough to process the change...if we haven’t left it too late.”

“Like CPR keeps the heart alive?”

Veris’ head snapped up and his eyes burned fiery blue. “God, you’re brilliant.”

“CPR?” she asked.

“Heart massage,” he said, standing up. “It’s worth a try. Just

enough to push the blood around the body...and the stimulant.” He twined his fingers together, one hand over the other, and pressed the heel of the bottom hand against Brody’s chest and began to depress his breast bone in hard, rhythmic movements.

After four or five depressions, Taylor heard a soft, sodden crack. Veris hesitated.

“What?” she asked.

“Breast bone,” he murmured.

“You *broke* it?”

“You’re not doing CPR properly

if you don't," he said sharply. "He'll heal." He started pressing again and Taylor squeezed her hands together. There was silence in the room except for the sound of Veris working. Through the big open doors, Taylor could hear the rain pattering on the foliage of the plants in the cavedium.

"It's not working," she whispered.

"It will," Veris said sharply.

Fear was grabbing at her throat. "It's not," she croaked.

Veris lifted his hands away. "It did," he said, looking down at

Brody. His chest was rising and falling slowly.

Hope flared in her, sharp and painful. "Hurry," she said.

Veris lifted his wrist to his mouth and bit down sharply. There was a tearing sound and she winced.

Rafael drew in a shaky breath.

Veris crouched down and pressed his wrist against Brody's mouth, forcing his lips open. The vein he had torn open dripped rapidly into Brody's mouth.

"Swallow, damn it. Come on,

it's instinctive," Veris muttered. "Your airway is blocked. Swallow and clear it."

Time seemed to stand still as they waited for Brody to swallow the blood. After what felt like a few years had passed, his throat worked.

He swallowed.

Taylor sank down onto one of the other couches, relief circling through her, as Veris tore a fresh wound in his wrist, for the first had healed over. He fed Brody more blood.

"Now what?" she asked.

“He will wake in an hour or so,” Veris said. “He’ll be disoriented, but that will pass quickly. He’ll also be hungry.” He glanced at her. “One of you will have to feed him.”

Taylor’s heart lurched. “I will. This is a day of firsts, after all.”

Veris shook his head. “I would prefer Rafael do it, if he doesn’t mind. Rafael?”

Rafael frowned. “If I must. He will need...much blood?”

“More than I did,” Veris replied. “But it won’t harm you if you eat and drink straight away and I’ll watch to make sure he doesn’t take

more than that." He tore open another wound and pushed his wrist against Brody's mouth again. "It will create a bond of sorts, Rafael, so when we've returned to our own times, he will still recognize the link. It will help you deal with him." He grimaced. "And me."

Rafael appeared to consider this for a moment. "Very well," he said softly.

Veris looked down at Brody's still form and lifted his arm away. "Now we wait."

* * * * *

Veris was sitting on a stone bench under the eaves, just out of reach of the rain, watching it fall on the plants and soil in the enclosed garden.

Taylor settled on the cold stone next to him. "Are you brooding?" she asked.

He leaned back against the wall. "Worrying," he confessed. "Wondering what we will jump back to."

There was nothing she could do or say to alleviate that worry, so Taylor sought to change the subject.

“Is telling Rafael so much about us wise?” she began.

“That is why I worry,” he told her. “What are we setting in motion?” He gripped the edge of the bench and squeezed it. “Yet we need something to put me back on the right path when we leave. I *must* go back to Pergamum. A letter cannot do. Rafael was the next best idea I could come up with. Besides,” he added with a scowl, “I didn’t like the idea of leaving him with that ancient version of a card shark. It was a piss-poor life he had. We can leave him with this house and a start-up stake, and Rafael will

have a chance to make something of his short time here."

Taylor picked up his hand from where it was squeezing the bench. "Why did you insist he feed Brody, when he awakes?"

Veris glanced at her and away. It was a telling look.

"You were lying," she accused. "There is no such thing as being linked after you've fed from someone, or else you'd be overwhelmed by the vast thousands you've fed from over the centuries."

"There *is* a link of sorts, if the

person you feed from is known to you," Veris told her. "It is tenuous and it doesn't last long, but it is there for a while. It is like the intimacy that comes from sex between humans, only this is a more distinct sensation."

Taylor nodded. "I guess I wouldn't have had a chance to find that out because you and Veris have never fed from me."

Veris' flashed a sideways raking of his gaze over her. He didn't speak.

Taylor added carefully; "Except for that one time you tried."

Veris remained silent. That one occasion had been a disaster...an emotional tearing apart for Veris and therefore for her, too. It had been so harrowing, they had never dared attempt it again.

“Then if the link is real enough,” she pressed, “You lied or omitted *something* about the feeding.”

He drew in a long breath. “I don’t want you risking your health any more than you have to right now.”

It took several seconds for his meaning to clarify in her mind and

when it did, Taylor could feel the floor shift underneath her. It was like the world had moved.

“No...” she breathed. “You don’t really think... I thought you were just saying it to help Brody. A *child*?”

Veris shifted on the bench, facing her. “Every criterion for conception is right here,” and he was wearing the expression and using the tone she had come to label his professor mode. He had dropped back into the mindset and thinking that came from years—centuries, really—of medical training.

“There’s just my cycle,” she objected. “I have no idea—”

“You’re ovulating,” Veris said shortly.

Taylor caught her breath. She could feel her cheeks heating. “How...?”

Veris shrugged. “It’s a vampire thing. Your heat, the blood.”

Her cheeks flamed hotter. “You’ve always known, then, when —”

He grinned. “As much as we’ve always known sunrise and sunset and you know it’s summer or

winter. It's just there, in our minds. An awareness that you take for granted." He picked up her hand and smoothed his thumb over the ring finger. It was bare right now, but her wedding and engagement rings were normally there. "I will not have you risk yourself in any way. Not if there is a chance of another child and this is a real chance."

Her eyes were stinging. "Then there may be some good come out of this, yet."

Veris curled his other hand around the back of her neck. It rested there, heavy and big. He had

discarded the dalmatic as soon as he'd stepped out of the public gaze and pushed the tunic sleeves up his arms. Now he was more like the Veris she knew; bare arms, rippling with muscle, the familiar scars barely showing in the early evening light. There was just the ragged hair, longer, sun bleached and unkempt, that she was not used to.

"There has been more good wrought out of this disaster than just the chance of a child," he told her. "I don't know for sure yet what that good is."

She frowned.

Veris let out a gusty sigh. "Brody was not the only one to face his demons, here." He nodded toward the big doors that opened onto the triclinium, where Rafael stood watch over Brody. "I turned him and I didn't go mad with grief or despair afterwards."

Taylor gave him a small smile. "You didn't," she agreed.

"It was Brody," Veris qualified. "So it's not nearly the same thing as turning a normal human, but it was a first step. The sky didn't fall in on me and the earth didn't split asunder and swallow me whole."

Taylor frowned. "Are you saying you want to reach a point where turning people feels... good?"

Veris' face clouded over. "Never," he said flatly. He sat up straight again, his hands falling away from her and stared out at the plants and the night shadows that were swallowing them.

"This issue is a...weakness, for me. I want it to no longer matter. I want to be able to turn or not turn someone and have it make no difference to me."

"Then you want to not care

about anyone at all?" she asked carefully.

Shock slithered over his face.

"Veris!" Rafael called from the triclinium door. "Brody stirs."

They both got to their feet, Taylor more slowly and wearily than Veris. She had gone without sleep for far too long. She could feel it in every bone in her body and in the way her flesh seemed to throb with every movement.

Rafael stood with one foot thrust outside the dining room door, his hand on the door frame. He took his guard duties seriously.

Veris had told him not to step outside the room and he wasn't.

Veris moved toward him. "I don't think we've had time to warn you about turning your back on a hungry vampire, have we? It's been a busy few days."

Rafael grinned.

That was when Brody attacked him from behind. Taylor saw his hands grip Rafael's shoulder and head, then his face appear as he leaned in to bite. Brody was a stranger to her. His eyes were feral and his expression was savage.

As Rafael's eyes widened,

Brody's mouth batted onto the man's neck and Rafael screamed. Brody dragged him backward into the dining room.

Veris leapt toward them. *Vampire speed.* As Taylor drew in a breath of shock at the sudden turn of events, he had already reacted. She felt the small vortex of wind that he created by the speed of his movements tug at her tunic hem.

He slammed the dining room doors shut and she heard the heavy bar drop into the slots on the other side.

Then came the sounds.

Taylor turned away from the dining room and walked in the other direction swiftly through the house to the far end, where she could hear through the window the rain falling on tiles and nothing else.

Chapter Twenty-Two

She realized she had fallen asleep only when hands shook her awake. She knew immediately whose hands they were.

“Brody,” she murmured, opening her eyes.

He was leaning over the high bed she had found, but straightened as she sat up. Since she had fallen asleep, he had bathed and wore a tunic similar to Veris’ —

a long, simple one that any free man would wear. Even his hair had been combed out.

Veris sat on the edge of the bed next to her, while Rafael hovered by the door. Taylor glanced at Rafael sharply. He seemed none the worse for Brody's violent attack, although he was not smiling.

Brody grimaced. "I scared the crap out of you, didn't I?"

"With the feeding, the dying, or this whole trip back to your past?" she asked.

Brody pulled her off the bed, his arms tight around her and she

could feel the difference, now. He had strength to spare and was being careful not to crush her.

This was the Brody she knew.

“Please, please, can we go home now?” she asked.

“*Exactly* what I was going to say,” he replied, his lips brushing against her neck. His tongue slid up against her flesh. “Heat,” he murmured. “I remember that now.”

She shuddered, as images of him lying in her arms, crushed, bloody, his human body still warm, flickered through her mind. “Thank

the gods you *can* remember it," she whispered and hugged him even more tightly.

Veris' big body pressed up against her from behind. "Let's go home," he said, his arms coming around them.

"Wait, not in here where it is so cramped," Rafael said, holding up his hand. "Step out into the main room here. It would help me sort out matters after if you are out here."

Brody shrugged. "Very well."

They moved out to the big open area where once there might have

been carpets and cushions and other luxuries, but now it was just an expanse of tile, opening up onto the other side of the indoor garden.

Veris pulled Taylor up against him, his arm around her waist. "At last," he said with a sigh. "Brody...." He held out his arm.

Brody looked at Rafael. "You know what you are to do?"

Rafael nodded, unsmiling still. "I have it all worked out. Veris has tutored me very well."

Veris tugged Brody closer and slid his arm around his waist. "I don't think I taught you as much as

you think. You're going to go far, Rafael. I'm going to look you up in the history books when I get home."

The corners of Rafael's mouth turned up just a little. "That would be nice, to be in...books."

"It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest to find you in them," Taylor told him.

Brody threaded his arms about the waists of both Veris and Taylor. He took a deep breath. "Home. Home, home, home. If I had red shoes I would click the heels. Do what you do, Taylor. I am so ready I

am bursting with it.”

Veris grinned. “I don’t think I’m going to have to do any steering at all, this time. I’ll just settle for the kiss, then.” He glanced at Rafael. “It has been an honor, Rafael.”

“Thank you, Northman.” Rafael nodded.

“And my thanks, too,” Brody told him, looking over his shoulder. “If I had a house to give to you, I’d give you one, too. But, I’m just a slave.”

“Not anymore,” Rafael pointed out.

Brody grinned. "Neither are you."

Rafael gave him a small smile. "Farewell."

Veris leaned toward Taylor. "My favorite part," he murmured, his lips pressing against hers.

* * * * *

Rafael watched Taylor literally disappear. One moment she was there in front of him, then she was wrenched away like a strong wind had snatched her and was gone, passing through the air like there

was a doorway there that he couldn't see.

It was the moment he had been waiting for. Veris' information had been very detailed, very precise. Rafael watched the two men buckle to the floor, their eyes drifting closed.

The two vampires.

Rafael moved over to where he had left the cudgel propped up against the corner and grabbed it. Moving quickly, before the pair gained their senses, he strode toward them and raised the cudgel.

With all his strength he brought

the heavy implement down on the back of Brody's head. The newly-made vampire sprawled across the tiles with a groan and was still.

With a fierce sense of satisfaction, Rafael looked down at his still figure, enjoying the moment.

* * * * *

Veris shook his head, trying to clear it. He was on his hands and knees...on tiles. It was cold. Damned cold for the Mediterranean at this time of year. What gods had twisted the world

around?

“Let me help you. Here, move slowly. You’ve been out for a while.” Hands tucked under his arms and assisted him into a sitting position. He didn’t know the voice.

Veris sat back with a groan. His whole body seemed to ache. He pushed back hair from his eyes and felt around the back of his head.

All his hair was gone. It felt like it had been shorn with a knife.

A man, a young man with a pleasant face, was sitting on the tiles in front of him.

“I am known to you?” Veris asked cautiously.

“You warned me this might happen,” the man said. “But you wanted to try, anyway.” He smiled. “You really don’t remember *anything*?”

Veris reached back...and back. “I was working in the surgery. But that seems like so long ago, yet that is the last I can recall.”

The man nodded. “You lost a lot, then. I can fill in most of it for you. We met just outside of Pergamum...” He hesitated. “Do you remember that?”

Veris shook his head. "You are unknown to me. Forgive me. It is clear we are friends..." He looked around the room. "Where are we?"

"This is my home, in New Rome."

"*Miklegarth?*" Veris paused in the act of hauling himself to his feet and sat back on the tiles. "Constantinople?" he repeated, staring at the man for confirmation.

The man grinned. "It was your idea, when you found out I lived here. Wine, women, more wine... you wanted to truly relax and enjoy yourself. You said you had been in

a morose and difficult mood for far too long.”

Veris rubbed at his temples. “I was...drinking?”

“Hardly. Not one like you.” The man got to his feet and held out his hand. “*I* drank.”

Veris took his hand and let himself be helped to his feet, caution flooding him.

“You enjoyed the benefits of my drinking,” the man added.

Veris drew in a sharp breath as the man turned his head and pulled the neck of his dalmatic and tunic

away from his flesh. "You healed the wounds, but I'm sure you left marks anyway. See for yourself."

He never left so much as a bruise, once he had properly healed a bite wound, but there were always markings left behind, visible only to vampires. This man had them all over him. A shudder slid down Veris' spine.

Well, that explained the dizziness and the disorientation. He'd never tried the blood of a drunkard before, but he'd heard reports from others that the effect was so much more than merely being drunk, as humans

experienced it. He'd clearly warned this man that the consequences could be dire.

It was probably just as well.

“What would make me want to do such a thing?” Veris murmured as the man lead him into another room, this one with couches and low tables. A very old fashioned, very Roman dining room.

Veris sank thankfully onto the cushions of one of the couches. The light was much dimmer in here. The man sat opposite and considered him with his soft brown eyes.

“You wouldn’t tell me when you were sober, but as the wine did its work, your tongue loosened.”

Veris considered him. “And you remember well enough despite the wine?”

“I had begun to sober by then. You drank deeply and it seemed to clear my head.”

Veris winced.

The man laughed and leaned forward to rest his hand on Veris’ knee. It was a friendly gesture, nothing more. “We have been through some trying times, you and I. It is nice to know you a little

better.”

“I don’t even know your name,” Veris complained.

The man smiled again, showing that he had all his teeth and they were white and even. “Rafael,” he said. “And you are Väinämöinen that your closest friends call Veris.” His smile faded. “You lost your wife, Tyra, in mysterious circumstances one night, back when you were human. It has troubled you since.”

Veris fought not to show anything on his face. “*That* is what I mumbled, in my cups?”

Rafael nodded. "I think that is why you left Pergamum and sought company for a while. All that doctoring and doing good brought the guilt you feel rising up..."

Veris blew out a breath. "And now I know you speak the truth." He relaxed and looked around. "But whatever was driving me from Pergamum is no longer there. I must return."

Rafael nodded. "I have business there. We should travel back together. It's too chancy these days, to travel alone." He stood up. "Excuse me for a moment. I must check on a servant who is taking

care of some matters for me. When I return, we'll make plans for the journey to Pergamum."

Veris nodded. "That would be appreciated. I feel I have spent far too long here, indulging myself."

"You give yourself too little credit. I have found the time I have spent in your company the most valuable hours of my life so far." Rafael smiled down at him. "I may be a moment or two. I would not suggest moving around the house or stepping outside it. Your memory is too foggy. You would be lost."

Braenden opened his eyes warily, trying to figure out where he was before any guards set on him or learned that he was awake.

The first sensation to register was warmth. Then the softness underneath him, when he had been expecting bars of the cage, or the planks of a bunk. Cloth covered him from neck to ankle.

A hand patted his cheek. It wasn't a swat. It was a gentle tap designed to wake him.

“Braenden. Wake. I need to speak to you.”

Evaristus? It was the wrong voice. Too young and he had an accent.

Braenden let his eyes open fully.

It wasn't the slave cavern.

He sat up, alarm filtering through him, and discovered then that he was wearing clothing befitting someone who might *watch* the races, not drive them.

He gripped his wrists. The armbands were gone.

“This is a shock for you, I

know." A man with eyes the color of honey sat on a stool next to the bed. "Yours was always going to be the hardest one to explain."

"Who are you? Why am I here?" Braenden held out his arms. "What happened?"

"My name is Rafael." He held out his own wrists, up against Braenden's. His wrists were scored by the same washed-out skin that came from years of wearing slave bands.

Braenden drew in a sharp breath. "You're a runaway?" he asked, panic grabbing at him. The

price for running away was death.

Rafael shook his head. "A very kind man—a very wise man—paid for me. I am a free man, now. So are you."

Braenden let out his breath. "He paid for me, too?"

Rafael shook his head. "This is the part you must take some time to understand, Braenden." He clamped his hands together, proving that he was nervous, under the surface calm. "You died, Braenden. You died in a race."

Braenden flinched. Driving was dangerous. Plenty of them had died

over the years and he had always known that it was a possibility he could die, too, but if he had died then how was he...?

“Am I in heaven?”

Rafael smiled. “No.”

Braenden swallowed. “...Hell?”

Rafael shook his head. “You’re still here in Constantinople. This house is in the Galata district, by St. Sophia. It is the evening of the day you died. You are not human anymore, Braenden.”

He took a breath. “I feel...”
Human. But he couldn’t finish the

sentence because he didn't feel human, now he had focused on his body. There were differences that he couldn't define, except that he just didn't feel...the same.

Rafael pulled his dalmatic and tunic away from his neck. "Do you remember feeding from me?" He tilted his head to one side.

There was nothing wrong with the man's neck, and Braenden did not know what 'feeding' meant. All the same, Rafael's act of tilting his head and exposing his neck set off a run of shudders through Braenden. A sense of the familiar.

Something shifted in his mouth, next to his teeth. Braenden slid his tongue up under his lip and pulled it away quickly when it was pricked by something sharp. He pushed his finger up under his lip carefully.

“They’re teeth,” Rafael told him. “For tearing flesh, so you can make blood run and drink it.”

The *rightness* of what he said struck Braenden as an absolute truth. “I did that to you?” he breathed, already knowing that he did. Even though there was nothing wrong with Rafael’s neck, he could see...something about him. Like a

heat shimmer, just over his skin, around the area where his neck curved into his shoulder. There would be a blood vessel there, a big one.

Braenden blinked. How did he know that?

He looked down at his hands, at the pale skin where his bands had been, then up at Rafael. "What am I?" he whispered.

"You are a vampire," Rafael told him. He stood up. "You have much to learn and much to decide about your future, but for now, I must leave the city and travel with a

friend to Pergamum. It is a journey of only a few days, so I will leave you here to rest and think about what you will do and where you will go, now you are a free man. When I return, we can talk. Yes?"

Braenden nodded. "Yes. Thank you, yes."

* * * * *

Taylor moved her head away from the insistent tapping and winced as her head throbbed.

"That's it, wake up," Veris coaxed.

“Brody!” she said, memory returning in a cold rush. She tried to sit up and groaned. She had no strength at all. She couldn’t even lift her shoulders up.

“Take it easy,” Alexander warned, from further away. It sounded like he was across the room. “She’s been on nothing but glucose for days.”

“The new Weight Watchers,” she whispered. “Woohoo.” She cracked her eyes open.

Veris was bent over her, doing his doctor thing. He looked into her eyes and tapped her abdomen with

his fingers.

“Why aren’t you weak?” she demanded, annoyed.

“I was getting blood and blood is all I need,” he told her. “You, on the other hand, were missing a whole lot of nutrients and basic things like exercise.” He pulled out her IV needle and helped her sit up.

Alexander was bent over the other bed, examining Brody. There was a whole lot more equipment around his bed, including an IV pole on which hung both blood and saline, *and* glucose. On a tray next to the bed were a dozen or more

bottles of drugs in liquid form, for injecting directly into the IV tube.

Alexander sat back and looked at Veris. "What on God's green earth happened?" he asked. "I've been tearing my hair out trying to even *diagnose* Brody, let alone treat him. I couldn't figure out if he was human or vampire for a while. You've been scaring the shit out of me for a week." He dropped the stethoscope around his neck and rubbed at his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt.

"For a week I *was* both," Brody said weakly, still lying on the bed.

“You gonna let me get up so I can hug my wife and husband, doc?”

Alexander considered Brody for a second. “You were both?” He reached for and withdrew the IV needle. “Do I want to know what happened? Of course I want to know...but I really don’t. I saw what happened to you, right here.” He shifted along the bed and sat down wearily again. “My people used to like their entertainment strong. I’ve seen bodies trampled by horses and carts. I could have sworn—” He looked sharply at Taylor as she caught her breath.

He looked back at Brody, as he

hoisted himself to the edge of the bed, wincing. "Oh," he said. He closed his eyes briefly. "Oh, god..." He sat still and silent for a moment. Then he opened his eyes again and got to his feet. "I'll get Marit. She'll be beside herself."

As Alexander stepped out of the room, Veris helped Brody over to the bed Taylor lay on. Brody dropped onto the mattress beside her with a sigh.

Veris laid down next to him, putting Brody between them.

"You're shivering," Taylor said to Brody, resting her hand on his

chest.

“I can’t help it,” he said. “*Criost*, we’re home...do you know how many times I thought we weren’t going to make it?” He turned his head against her shoulder.

Veris tucked his arm over him. “You were always going to come home while I still had breath in my body.”

“And me,” Taylor added, sliding her fingers into Brody’s hair, which was now long and thick and soft once more. “Although I think I had the easy part.”

Both Veris and Brody lifted their

heads to look at her, surprise on their faces. Veris raised a brow and opened his mouth to speak.

“Mommy!” Marit burst through the door like a miniature whirlwind. “*Far! Athair!*” She scrambled up onto the bed and threw herself into their arms, smothering them with kisses that were suspiciously sticky and sweet-smelling, but no one said a word.

Instead, they squeezed back, feeling her squirming, small body next to them. Taylor hid her tears, wiping them on the back of Marit’s tee-shirt or her own sleeve when she got the chance.

Marit finally calmed as the sugar rush wore off and after a while, she slept, her body curled up between them, Brody's hand stroking her hair.

That was when Brody and Veris looked at each other as if they had been struck by the same thought at the same time.

"Rafael!" Brody declared, sounding aggrieved.

"He changed the script," Veris said, a small smile of remembrance on his face.

"Why, what did he do?" Taylor asked curiously.

“I told him to think for himself.”
Veris shrugged. “He did.”

Taylor held up her hand. “No. Stop right there. Do not start reviewing your memories until we’ve finished with current business.” She sat up. “We started this joy ride for a reason. We need to deal with that first.”

Brody carefully eased himself up so he wouldn’t wake Marit. “The queen,” he said, his expression grim.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Las Vegas, Nevada. Current day.

The stretch limousine that drove them from the airport to the Bellagio was as luxurious as any they had used over the years, but it was as common as a housefly, for Vegas.

Taylor looked through the smoked glass at the two stretch limousines they were lined up next to at the traffic lights and was

content. There was no possible way they could draw attention to themselves in this city. Brody would go unremarked, if not unrecognized.

She turned back to face Veris and Brody. They were dressed in their public best—Brody in black rock style, wearing a full length coat and Veris in leather pants and a suede jacket. It was late December and off season for Vegas. The tourists were at home getting ready for Christmas.

Even Alexander, Marit and Mia were dressed up. Taylor had talked Marit out of her jeans and coaxed

her into a dress. Mia wore black tailored dress pants and a designer silk tee shirt. It said that she was working, but it was still a classy outfit. The Chucks had been replaced by D'Orsay flats.

Alexander was the surprise of the three. When Taylor had warned him they were going to face the council, he had merely nodded, as if she had said they were heading to Starbucks for coffee. But when they had pulled up at his house in L.A. to drive to the airport for the quick flight to Nevada, even Brody had commented.

“Someone has been pressing his

buttons.”

Alexander had put aside his sensible doctor suit and tie that Taylor had been expecting to see. He wore black designer jeans that emphasized his slim hips and surprisingly muscled thighs. His dark shirt reeked of expense, from the dull gleam of silk to the understated perfection of the cut and the fit, but was open at the neck. He wore a knee length light coat over the top.

Veris was the first to notice. “You’re not wearing your Ichthys,” he pointed out.

Alexander settled back on the bench of the limousine and hugged Marit, who had climbed into his lap. "No," he agreed in a neutral tone and kissed Marit's cheek.

Marit climbed back into Brody's lap. She had been clinging to Brody almost constantly since they had returned, as if she knew what he had gone through. Now she dropped into his lap, her legs kicking out, like she was bouncing on a mattress.

"Not nice," Brody murmured.

"Fun," she told him, looking up at him over her shoulder.

“Fun is paddling your bottom for being mean.”

“Tell me when she gets too much,” Mia murmured.

“Wait,” Veris said, holding up his hand. He was still staring at Alexander. “Marit distracted me.”

“As usual,” Taylor said.

Veris frowned. “Why did you take it off?” he asked Alexander.

Alexander shrugged again. Taylor could see that behind the casual shrug he was working to hide his discomfort. “I have taken many names for myself over the

years," he said. "I have been given many names, too. I thought it was time to give up the name 'hypocrite' ...at least until I learned for myself if 'Christian' is a name I want to keep."

Brody clamped his hands around Marit's waist to keep her still and studied Alexander. "Your science and your faith have worked together well enough for nine centuries. Why now?"

Alexander looked at Brody, then his gaze skittered away. "There are things I have come to want from life that I cannot see working with either of them."

“You *are* in a pickle,” Veris said softly. “Time to choose.”

Alexander gazed at him steadily. “It is not so easy to put aside a lifetime’s prejudice and learning. You know that.”

Veris sat back, sliding on the mirrored Ray Bans he favored. “I know,” he agreed.

Taylor shifted the conversation to the first innocuous subject she could come up with. She’d had enough of heart-rendering examinations for now. She kept the conversation light and insubstantial for the rest of the flight to Vegas.

Las Vegas itself was enough to keep everyone neatly distracted after that.

Marit kept her nose pressed against the glass and Mia, who had never been to the city before, was just as interested in the passing parade of people, lights, casinos and displays.

Brody and Veris had seen and done Vegas too many times to count and even Alexander seemed uninterested in the view. They kept their thoughts to themselves.

As they got closer and closer to the strip and Taylor spotted the

rear of the Bellagio, she scratched at her thumbnail again, gnawing mentally over the events since they had arrived back home. “How good is that hacker friend of yours, Veris?” she asked.

“*Now* you ask?” he said, his mouth lifting in a smile. He picked up her hand. “Relax, the information is good. I wouldn’t have let you drag us all here on a simple hint. If she says the council is meeting here, they’re here.”

The council—the governing body for vampire authorities across America, which included every self-styled king, queen, sheriff,

mayor, lord, or title-less dictator who controlled a territory in the continental northern and southern Americas—held their authority by a combination of cooperation, fear, secrecy and intimidation.

Vampires found it useful to have a uniting body to help pool and pass along information and resources and the council worked as a preservation mechanism; it helped control the excesses of its members for the good of them all. But in order to maintain their authority over what was essentially a group of immortal control freaks, the council members tended to

maintain their anonymity, using representatives to intimidate and strike fear into their members.

It had worked well for several centuries although Taylor considered their tactics borderline abusive. Their heavy hand had caused the queen to come after her family and Brody in particular. A more delicate demand for information would not have created this near-disaster for them.

As the limousine sat at the lights on Flamingo and the strip, waiting to turn onto the strip itself, she reconsidered her strategy once again. They were a mere minute or

two away from turning into the Bellagio's big entrance drive that curved up alongside the famous fountains.

Brody had been incensed over her idea. "Confront *the council*? Are you fucking nuts, Taylor? No one just talks to the council! *No one*. It's like...me thumping on the Queen of England's bed chamber and flopping down on her sofa for a quick chat. They'll crucify you."

"Didn't someone do just that, once? Walk into the Queen's bedroom and chat with her?" Taylor asked.

Brody threw up his hands. "Veris, for Christ's sake, you know how the politics work better than I do. You explain it to her."

Veris leaned forward, rubbing his chin, his eyes narrowed. "It might work," he said thoughtfully.

Brody choked in disbelief. "If you can even *find* them," he said. "No one knows who is on the council. No one knows where they meet, when they meet. It's all hush-hush spook stuff because too many people want to do exactly what you're trying to do—an end run around your top dog."

Alexander laughed. "I love listening to you guys. That was a British espionage euphemism, mixed up with a U.S. sports analogy and an animal hierarchy reference. You don't stint when you mix your metaphors, do you?"

"You can see why I keep adding to my history degrees, can't you?" Taylor told him. "It's the only way I can keep up." She picked up her tomato juice. "Veris thinks it'll work."

"I know someone," Veris said.

"Of *course* you do," Brody said and threw himself onto the sofa

next to Marit and Mia.

Mia cleared her throat. "I know it's not my place and all, but it seems to me that if the queen has it in for you and there's a higher authority, you appeal to the higher authority. The queen isn't being reasonable and there's no one else around to whack her upside the head."

"Exactly my point," Taylor said. "Thank you, Mia. You wouldn't get someone behaving like the queen in human society, because there's too many checks and balances. Someone like Tira would be accountable to too many people."

The council is leaning on her and she is trying to squash us flat in turn because she doesn't like it. She couldn't get away with that in a human-equivalent structure."

Brody crossed his arms in an eerie shadowing of Veris. "Wanna bet?" he said.

"Hitler in the 1930's," Veris said, "is almost a perfect example of a human getting even for imagined slights. History is filled with others, but I won't insult your profession, Taylor." He stood up. "Your idea is sound. It is the execution that needs to be flawless. I know someone... they were busted for hacking into

the university exam server.”

“Wow,” Mia breathed.

“They were caught,” Taylor pointed out. “How good are they?”

“She was sold out by a bitter ex-girlfriend,” Veris corrected, “Or she would have got away with it stone-cold. She’s that good. I’ll get her on to it.”

“On to what?” Alexander said, saving Taylor from having to ask the same question.

Veris shrugged. “Hacking into Tira’s computers. We’ll start there and follow any electronic trail that

leads us to the council. Someone reached out to her to smack her around about time travelling. There'll be a trail. We'll find it and follow it back." He glanced at Brody. "That video copy of Tira's men planting the stash on your coach. It may come in useful sooner than I thought. We should pick it up."

Taylor stood up. "We should all prepare to face the council in every way we can."

It had only taken Veris' hacker friend a mere six hours to find the location and time of the next council meeting and one hour of

that time had been taken up with dickering over the price. The hacker, a blonde with black roots, driver's gloves, a mini skirt with purple blotches and green tights, had delivered the information in person on a slip of paper and waited for her check, while Taylor read the slip: A private boardroom on the third floor of the Bellagio, Thursday, starting at noon.

“We’re on,” Taylor announced.

“I’ll book the jet,” Veris said, kissing her as he shut the door.

Brody scowled.

The Bellagio was busy despite the day of the week, the tourist low season and the time of the day. It cascaded tourists, customers, gamblers and yet more people out onto the wide portico in a steady steam. Just as many people entered the grand hotel through the swing doors and revolving doors.

Inside, the noise spiraled up toward the jeweled and decorated ceiling. The lobby was filled with people moving in all directions.

Brody lifted Marit up into his arms. "Elevators are over that way." He pointed.

"Our kind are everywhere," Veris murmured, his hand on Taylor's back. "Watching."

She nodded. "Good. Our arrival won't be a surprise, then."

They snagged an empty elevator and got off on the third floor. There were considerably less people on this level although it was still clearly a public area, for the passage was wide and the ceiling high. Function rooms lined the corridor and public congregation areas

broke up the long stretches of blank walls and doors.

“That one down there,” Alexander said, nodding. “It’s the only room with guards.”

The two guards were on either side of the doors and they looked like vacation coordinators, with crewneck sweaters in pastels and casual trousers. One of them wore cargo pants. But their motionless, alert stance on either side of the door gave them away.

“Problem?” Taylor asked, looking at Veris.

Veris rolled his eyes. It was all

the answer he gave her.

“Sorry,” she told him.

Mia, who was ahead of all of them, glanced back. “Can I try something, first?”

“You?” Brody asked.

She grinned, pulling the ties out of her hair. “Watch.” Her walk turned into a sway, her hips swinging engagingly.

“Oh, wow,” Brody breathed. “Those poor suckers.”

Mia’s hair flowed over her shoulders and behind her like a siren song as she sashayed up to the

guards. Everyone else slowed down.

“Well, hi there,” they heard her say, in a low, sultry voice. “We’re looking for the way back to the lobby, see...” Her voice got lower and her head got closer. The guard leaned forward to catch what she was saying...and look down her shirt.

While he was looking, she snapped out her foot toward the other guard. She did it from a standing start. She didn’t telegraph her move by swaying sideways or even glancing at him, until her foot connected. Then she leaned

sideways and drove the heel of her foot up under his chin. It snapped his head back, lifted him up off his feet and would have dropped him to the floor, but Alexander was abruptly there to catch him and lower him to the ground.

Mia wasn't fast enough for the second one, but Veris clubbed him and lowered him to the ground before he could grab her.

Alexander felt for the pulse of the one Mia had kicked. "I think you broke his neck."

"Pay back for what they did to Marit's daddies. Now maybe she'll

sleep better at night. Hey, honey?" Mia turned to Marit and took her from Brody's arms. Marit stared down at the two fallen guards with an interested expression.

"He'll heal," Alexander declared and pulled a syringe from inside his jacket and removed the cap.

"What the fuck, doctor?" Veris asked as he injected the two guards.

"It's a special blend of sedative I've been researching. It actually works on vampires," Alexander said, straightening up. "It would probably kill a human, but they'll

be out for the next four hours.” He put his hand on the handle of the conference room door. “Shall we?”

Veris put his hand on the other handle and nodded.

Taylor took a deep breath and took Brody’s hand.

The pair of them opened the doors and they all filed in.

* * * * *

Only one man sat at the head of the long boardroom table, which was completely empty and gleamed with polish under the

overhead lights. The same lights shone directly upon the man, distorting his features enough with downcast shadows that it was hard to see his face properly.

He was dark haired and the hair hung just past his collar, hanging in loose curls. That was all Taylor could make of him despite squinting.

“It’s about time,” he said, placing his hands flat on the table.

Veris halted and studied the man a little harder. Then he muttered in Norse. “Fuck,” he added and crossed his arms. “I’m

out two thousand dollars in hacker's fees, thanks to you, Rafael. You couldn't have just called?"

Brody stalked to the head of the table. "Are you council or their lackey?" he demanded. "Are you the one we have to thank for all this crap raining down on us?"

Rafael stood and the strong down light shifted away from his face. Taylor caught her breath. *Now* she could see what Brody and Veris had been able to see past. It was Rafael, but an older version. He was perhaps ten years older in biological years than the man she had met in Constantinople. His

body had filled out and matured in those years. He had shoulders as wide as Brody's and he was nearly as tall.

There was an air of mastery and control about him that had been missing in Constantinople. He had shrugged off the habits and mindset he had acquired as a slave and his years of slavery had not left the same mental scars as Brody's.

Rafael rested his hand on Brody's shoulder. "It doesn't matter which role I play. As far as the council is concerned, I speak for them." He waved along the length of the table. "Will you sit down?"

We can sort out your troubles once and for all. That *is* why you are here, isn't it?"

Veris crossed his arms. "If that is why we're here, we're short a person."

Rafael smiled, his toffee-brown eyes lighting up with good cheer. Taylor remembered that smile from when he had been sitting listening to them telling him about the future, during the racing at the Hippodrome. She'd had the sensation he'd been brewing mischief then, too, but it had seemed so wildly unlikely that a man so fresh out of slave bands

would have the mental wherewithal to build a plan that would get around Veris, who was not exactly stupid, had eyes in the back of his head and not just a sixth sense to go with his vampire senses, but a seventh, eighth and ninth one for luck.

But Rafael had out-flanked both of them, Brody and Veris had said, although there had been no time for them to elaborate on that.

Rafael gave the same disarming grin now. "The last participant. Right. I anticipated just a smidgen. I hope you don't mind." He strode across the vast room, which was

empty except for the eight of them and opened a small service door on the back wall.

Two more vacation guards stepped through. They had a hand each on Tira's arms and walked her over to the boardroom table, despite her trying to wrench her arms out of their grip.

Taylor blinked at her appearance, for Tira was wearing yoga pants, a wrinkled tee-shirt and no shoes. She looked like she was wearing very little make-up, or perhaps none at all, for her eyes were pale and washed out. Her hair was springy and wild.

She looked like she had been pulled out of bed or somewhere equally as private and tossed without pause into a waiting vehicle to deliver her here.

Rafael pulled out a chair for her. "Sit," he told her, all pleasantness gone from his voice.

"This is *outrageous*," she began.

Rafael held up his forefinger. That was all.

Tira took a deep breath, swallowing anything else she might say, but her eyes narrowed.

"Tira has agreed to hear you

out,” Rafael explained, sitting next to her and pulling his chair up to the table.

Veris laughed shortly.

Brody pulled out a chair opposite her. “Will she get the charges against me dropped?”

“They’re public charges,” Rafael pointed out. “But I can do something about that for you.”

“Who are you right now?” Taylor asked carefully. The question sometimes offended vampires, who were sensitive about having to pass as humans in the first place.

“Rayner DeLeon.”

“The Federal Appeals Court judge?” Brody asked. “How old are you passing yourself off as?”

“The youngest judge in history,” Alexander murmured.

Rafael raised a brow. “I do pro bono on interesting cases. Yours is an interesting case, Brody.”

“Is it?” Brody stared at him. “What did you have to do with this in the first place, Rafael? Cards up. You know what happened in Constantinople. I’m so far beyond being cute now. I want truth. Let’s cut to it.”

“Constantinople?” Tira repeated, bewildered. “You...know each other?”

“Knew,” Taylor said. “On my personal timeline, I just met him. I thought he had remained human and withered, back in the fifth century.”

Tira rose to her feet. “Wait... wait...are you telling me that the reason my men couldn’t find any of you, that you haven’t been seen in public for over a week is because you *went back in time*?”

Then she pivoted to face Rafael, her mouth open as she put it

together. “You *knew*!” she accused him. “You knew all along! You knew time travel was a fact, that they were accomplished travelers... you had already met them in the past!”

Rafael leaned back in his chair. “And you played the puppet for me so nicely, Tira. Thank you.”

Her face grew stormy.

“Sit down and shut up,” Rafael told her.

She hesitated.

“Now,” he added without any undue emphasis.

Tira sank back into her chair.

“If you behave yourself, I will let you stay in this room to hear the remainder of this meeting,” he told her. “Otherwise, I’ll toss you out onto the strip, to fend for yourself and find your own way back to L.A. Your call, sweetheart.”

She drew in a breath that made her nostrils flare and her cheeks to suck in. “I’ll stay,” she told him.

Rafael smiled winningly at her. “I thought you might.” He swiveled his chair to face Brody. “I owe you an apology, Braenden.”

Brody blinked. “For what?”

“The night you jumped back here from Constantinople. Veris said keep you two separated and I did, but not the way he suggested. I indulged in some petty vengeance in exchange for feeding from me the way you did that first time.”

Taylor sucked in a breath and turned to Mia, who was holding Marit on her lap. Marit was frowning, puzzled, as she tried to work her way through the implications of Rafael’s conversation. “Mia....”

Mia stood up, bringing Marit up onto her hip. “Lunchtime,” she declared. “I’m going to go find a

restaurant with a kid's menu in the lobby somewhere. Text me when you're done, 'kay?" She looked down at Marit. "How about a milkshake, kiddo?"

Marit nodded.

Mia gave everyone a bright smile and left.

Rafael pushed a hand through his hair. "Sorry," he said, to Taylor. "I'm not used to kids being about."

"Especially smart ones," Taylor added. She threaded her fingers together. "I think it's time you both reviewed your memories. What happened back then? Brody, you

first.”

Brody blew out his breath. “I fell asleep one night a slave and I woke up... I *thought* I woke up, on a bed in Rafael’s house in Galata. He told me I had died and now I was a vampire. That’s the short version. He had to...” Brody shook his head. “Damn, you were cool as a cucumber, Rafael.” He looked around the table. “He told me he had a business trip to Pergamum for a few days with a fellow traveler, but when he got back, he and I would talk about my future, the two of us, ex-slaves. I just now realized...the fellow traveler was

Veris.”

Veris swore. “I was in the other room the whole time. Waiting for him to deal with a domestic problem, he said. Holy cow bells, Rafael. Cool is an understatement. I gave you the minimum amount of information to deal with us and we’re hostile with strangers at the best of times.”

Rafael shook his head. “Don’t admire me too much. I took Brody out with a fifth century baseball bat in order to get him into the other room.” He grimaced. “It felt good at the time, especially with my neck still burning from the feeding. But

I've regretted it ever since. Even more since I was turned myself." He looked at Brody. "I know, now, what was driving you that night. I've come to understand a lot more about both of you since then. Review your memories. Veris, recall the trip to Pergamum. Brody, remember your return to Britain."

Brody sat back. "Shit," he murmured, looking at the tabletop.

Veris glanced at Brody, then at Taylor. "I see," he said.

Rafael was watching them both with a strange intensity and it was that, along with Veris' glance that

told Taylor what neither Veris nor Brody were saying aloud in front of Alexander or Tira.

Rafael had been intimate with them both. He had sought them out and initiated relationships with them. For how long and the circumstances of each, Taylor would have to wait until Brody and Veris were alone with her and comfortable enough to speak of the details.

Brody lifted his head and pinned Rafael to his chair with a hard, penetrating look. “*A Naomh-Mhuire, a Mháthair Dé. I made you.*”

Rafael's smile this time was warm. Soft. It reached his eyes. "A fact I have been eternally grateful for."

"*Grateful?*" Veris breathed, sounding shocked.

Rafael's smile didn't change. "I have waited for this day for nine centuries. I have planned for it. Schemed my schemes as Brody so aptly put it. I began planning that day I sat on a cushion with my back against the railing at the Hippodrome, ignoring the races, while you and Taylor tried so hard to *not* tell me too much about your

future, while with every sentence you betrayed more and more about how you thought and felt and how very advanced your world was...and I wanted to be a part of it. You had given me a tiny glimpse of it the first day we met, Veris. The way you spoke and thought was so strange, so different. It was clear you had seen a much larger world than mine and I wanted to see it, too."

Veris blew out his breath. "I thought I had left no clues about myself until the storm."

Rafael shrugged. "You prodded me into using my mind almost

from the moment we met. So I used it."

Alexander laughed. "The look on your face, Veris. The dismay. Do not feel guilty. You did nothing wrong. You cannot help the effect you have on anyone with a half-way curious mind, when you are back in the past. Taylor worked the same magic on me and brought me forward because of it."

Rafael spread his palms. "There you are."

Brody leaned forward. "So all this...this business with Tira, the council, was just to get us here

today?"

Rafael shook his head. "You overestimate my role with the council and your own importance. Tira's, too."

Tira scowled.

"The existence of time jumpers has been known for centuries," Rafael said. "They're a rarity, something that occurs once every couple of centuries or so and because they can only move along a personal timeline, they usually end up self-annihilating quickly. You three have come very close to doing that twice already and the council's

official position is to let you self-destruct at your own pace.”

Brody gave a hollow laugh of disbelief.

Veris rubbed his temples. “*Very* unimportant,” he concluded.

Tira smiled.

“I knew Tira was stirring up trouble about a jumper. I didn’t know it was you until she protested to the council and they began to investigate.” Rafael gave them a small smile. “I didn’t reach out because I wanted our meeting to be unforced. Natural. In my human role, I would not suddenly call an

international rock star or his lover. It would raise questions I couldn't answer. I had to wait for you to come to me. And there you have it. The complete mystery unraveled."

He turned to Tira. "You are going to go back to Los Angeles and leave these people alone. Let the matter take care of itself in the natural course of time."

"Or else?" she asked sweetly.

"Or else the council will find itself a new ruler for the greater Los Angeles area. That is the official ruling. Don't ask me to put it in writing because the council will

view that very unfavorably, Tira."

She swallowed. After a moment, she nodded. "Very well."

But Taylor wondered if Tira would concede as easily as that. She was curbed for now, but it would pay to watch Tira in the future.

Rafael looked at Brody. "The drug charges will be dealt with through the human courts. I assure you they will be reduced to legal red tape, nothing more."

Taylor pushed the sealed copy of the VHS tape across the table toward Rafael. "That will probably make them all go away."

“What is it?” Rafael asked, picking up the tape and turning it over.

She told him and he nodded. “It will,” he said, leaving it in front of him.

“And now what?” Veris asked.

“You’re free to live your life,” Rafael said. “As safely as you can manage it.” He stood up. “I would prefer you live *very* long lives. I would like to spend more time in your company now I have finally found you once more. Please take care.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The fire was burning in the big fireplace and this time all four of them stood close by the flames, for it was cold enough in Los Angeles in December that hugging a fireplace was comforting.

“This has a sense of déjà vu about it,” Alexander said, looking about the room, and up at the gallery where all the book spines with their gold leaf shone dimly in the firelight. “I remember an

evening similar to this, about five years ago, not long after you returned from Jerusalem....”

Veris winced. “It was fall, though, and we were sitting over there.” He pointed. “And there was champagne, for Taylor’s birthday.”

“But everything else is the same, even the baby,” Alexander said.

It felt like the entire room came to a standstill. Taylor could hear her heart in her ears. “B-baby?” she repeated.

Alexander tilted his head to one side, studying her. “You didn’t know?”

“We...hoped,” she whispered, reaching for Brody’s hand. It shook as she slid her fingers into his.

Alexander smiled at her and pushed her hair behind her ear. “The signs are all there if you know what to look for and I do. You *are* pregnant. About three weeks, if I am any judge.”

Veris scrubbed his face with his hands, hard and fast. “And you would be. You’ve forgotten more legitimate hands-on medicine than I’ve ever learned. You had Taylor’s first pregnancy nailed to the day just by looking at her, in the Jordan desert, and you’ve been practicing

medicine for centuries since then. I'd say your guess is as good as an ultrasound." He took a deep breath that shuddered. He was smiling.

Alexander gave a small smile back. "I am glad to be the bearer of such good news, but I should leave you alone to celebrate."

He refused to stay despite their protests and finally, once the front door shut behind him and Veris returned to the room, they stood once more in front of the flames.

"The timing is all wrong," Veris said, frowning.

"Not now, *please*," Brody said,

with a groan. "I am so sick of talking about time travel the subject makes me want to shove that poker into my eardrums and twist."

Taylor picked up both their hands. "Shut up, both of you."

They looked at her.

"I'm pregnant," she said. "And I want to celebrate, like Alexander suggested."

Veris' expression instantly turned hot and feral and Brody's eyes turned even darker, as he stepped closer to her. "What do you have in mind?" he asked, his voice low.

“Your villa in the south of France, just after the First World War. The one on the coast, during the summer, when you said there was no one around but locals who minded their own business? When it was so hot you could fry eggs on the sand?”

“Hot sounds really good right now,” Veris said.

“A few hours, while Marit is overnighting with Mia, soaking up the sun and swimming in the sea is just what this pregnant wife would like as a starter,” Taylor told them, pulling Brody closer so she could get her arm around his waist. She

held out her other arm, beckoning Veris to step into it. He wrapped himself around both of them.

“I love you,” she told them. “I don’t care where we end up. I just want to be with you both, until the end, whatever that may be. I want to live our lives, whatever happens.”

Veris let out a breath. “Agreed,” he said, his voice hoarse. “*Unimportant*. Screw the council.”

Brody rested his hand on her belly. “All the people important to me were in that room today. No one else matters.”

“Kiss me,” Taylor told them, turning her mouth up for one of them to comply.

They jumped.

**More erotic vampire
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“Ah Christ, Tally,” he said breathlessly. “I should have known ye would find a way to surprise me.”

She sat up. "Just surprise you, Rob?"

He hoisted himself onto one elbow and looked up at her. "I've given up on trying to judge ye, or anything we do, sweet Tally. How can any of it be wrong or evil if it feels so good?" He gave a half smile. "I just wonder when yer going to run out of ideas."

She leaned over and kissed him. "There's always more where that came from."

"Ye are such a beauty," he murmured and his big hand reached up to brush her hair away

from her face. "The kind of beauty that drives men wild and makes them fight wars for the lack of it."

"There is no such thing. You're teasing me," she whispered. All the same, she felt a glow in her heart that he would think such a thing of her.

"I would fight for ye."

She laughed a little and he shook her to silence her.

Then she really looked into his eyes and her amusement faded. There in his eyes, she could read his heart, his soul....

“No, you cannot. Not for me.” She gripped his shoulder. “Not for me, Rob.”

“For you and no-one else.” His voice was a low rumble that she could feel against her hand.

Abruptly, painful tears pricked at her eyes. “I would break your heart,” she whispered.

“No, you wouldn’t.” He spoke with complete assurance. “I have watched ye for a week, Natália mine. I know ye. Ye would not deliberately hurt me. Ye think I don’t understand women, that I have not seen the glances you have

sent me. Ye're wrong."

Real fear leapt in her chest. "You can't possibly know me."

"Not the facts, no. They still remain a mystery, but the truth—that I know. I know who ye are puts you in a dilemma you've spent a week trying to sort out in ye mind."

She drew very still. "You know that?" she whispered weakly.

"I'd be the fool if I dinna notice what's before my eyes." His fingertips swept across her brow. "I'm not as foolish as all that."

The prickling in her eyes turned to hard, searing tears. "There is no future for us," she whispered. "None."

Rob sat up and cupped her face with his hands. "Hush, my lover." His lips touched hers. "D'ye know nothing of the Scots? We've been fighting against the longest odds this blasted world could throw at us for generations. Ye think a little thing like ye heritage could keep me from ye?"

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—

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“Politics has a lot to do with timing,” Cáel said firmly, lifting his voice a little to compete over the sound of the raucous jazz and the audience that were clearly enjoying it.

Ryan snorted and filled his glass again. “Your timing is off. I’m up one shot on you. Drink.”

Cáel picked up the glass. “Take your vampire rights, just as a for instance. You will never get full rights while the current president is in office.”

“Which president are we talking about?”

Cáel laughed. “The only one with any real power left. Worlds Assembly.”

“Him?” Ryan picked the bottom of Cáel’s glass up and hoisted it up to Cáel’s mouth, assisting Cáel’s grip.

Cáel drank and cleared his throat. The whiskey had stopped

burning with each mouthful by the top of the second bottle. Now it just tasted very smooth and mellow.

“Why’d you say that?” Ryan asked. “He’s a good man.”

“‘cause he’s a vamp hater,” Cáel replied. He shook his head. “A great man, ‘cept for he’s flawed.”

Ryan was staring at him. “That’s...he comes off like he’s Henry Kissinger. How could you know that?”

Cáel shrugged. “We were lovers for nearly a year. Then I found out.” He shuddered and drank. He reached for the bottle to refill and

realized that Ryan was still staring at him.

“Lovers? You?” Ryan said.

“Think you’ve got a corner on the market, Irishman?” Cáel topped up Ryan’s glass. “Not everyone goes for poetic lilt, you know.”

Ryan half-laughed. He picked up his drink. “So...what is this, then? Are we on a date?”

Cáel’s stomach seemed to drop out from his body with a sickening, electrifying rush. It had nothing to do with the whiskey. He let his hand drop away from the glass and looked at Ryan, wishing his heart

would quieten. “Do you want it to be?”

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About the Author

Tracy Cooper-Posey is an Amazon #1 Best Selling Author. She writes erotic vampire romances, hot romantic suspense, paranormal and urban fantasy romances. She has published over 50 novels since 1999, been nominated for five CAPAs including Favourite Author, and won the Emma Darcy Award.

She turned to indie publishing in 2011. Her indie titles have been nominated four times for Book Of The Year and *Byzantine Heartbreak* was a 2012 winner. She has been a national magazine editor and for a decade she taught romance writing at MacEwan University.

She is addicted to Irish Breakfast tea and chocolate, sometimes taken together. In her spare time she enjoys history, Sherlock Holmes,

science fiction and ignoring her treadmill. An Australian, she lives in Edmonton, Canada with her husband, a former professional wrestler, where she moved in 1996 after meeting him on-line.

Her website can be found at <http://TracyCooperPosey.com>

Other books by Tracy Cooper-Posey

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Romance — Fiction

Paranormal – Fiction

Vampires – Fiction

Later...or Earlier

Jordanian Oasis, 1099 A.D.

Because of the inordinate amount of sleep she'd got, Taylor found herself wide awake just as daylight was creeping into the oasis. She was the only one awake, she suspected and possibly the only human to watch the herd of ibex silently creep past the sleeping men and file down to the water's edge to drink.

There were hundreds of the miniature deer-like creatures, with their long spiral horns and dainty noses. There were so many, they made the ground they covered look like a moving carpet of brown fur punctured with raked backed needles.

Food, Taylor realized, carefully rolling over onto her knees so her mail didn't jingle. She reached for the bow and quiver of arrows lying nearby and picked them up. Moving silently on bare feet she crept toward the edge of the reeds that lined the oasis on her side. The ibex were drinking on the other

side and at the moment she was no threat, although they had seen her.

As she moved away from the protection of her tree, her gaze was caught by a darker man-sized shape at the corner of her eyes and she turned to face it, lifting her bow almost automatically in a defensive movement, even though there was no arrow nocked yet.

Alexander stood barely ten yards away from her, looking around the oasis with a puzzled expression...and dawning excitement. It was Alexander, but he was different. There were changes about him that Taylor

knew it would take careful study to pinpoint. He looked.... She struggled for the word, then found it. *Stronger*.

Alexander wasn't alone. He had one arm around a stunningly beautiful blonde woman. She wasn't just pretty. She was bone-deep, classically striking in an old Hollywood glamorous way. She *glowed*.

But there was a deep puzzlement on her face, and a growing fear.

"I think," Alexander said, using medieval French, "that you are

supposed to say, now, that you're not wearing a red shirt."

Taylor dropped her bow and staggered forward through the sand toward them. "*Alexander?*" she whispered. "Is this 'live long and prosper'?"

He gripped her wrist. "Taylor!"

Her heart lurched. Taylor. Not Tyra. Not 'my lady'.

"What year?" she said. "Quickly, what year is it for you?"

He told her.

Taylor squeezed his wrist with her other hand. Her heart wouldn't

slow down. Neither would her mind, as she tried to calculate the implications, the meanings, the incredible consequences. “You’re from my future,” she told him.

He looked around. “I came here to tell you how to shoot Ibex.”

Taylor shuddered. That hadn’t happened yet. It was in her future. He really was from her future. “I’m a jumper here myself. I don’t know how this messes with history. You need to go back.”

Taylor looked at the blonde, who was frowning heavily. She was utterly lost in this conversation and

Taylor had no time to explain it. It would take way too long. "Alexander will explain everything," she told her. He'll bring you to me and I'll explain more. You and I have a lot to talk about. You are the only other one like me I've ever met."

The blonde's very blue eyes narrowed. "You're speaking... English. Then what were you speaking before? Where are we?" Her eyes narrowed. "I know you. You're the woman who lives with that rock singer."

Taylor's heart lurched. "Don't say any more," she said urgently.

“Whatever you know about me, it’s from my future.”

The woman’s lips parted in surprise. She turned to Alexander. “Alex?”

His arm around her tightened. “I’m going to kiss you again, Sydney, and you need to think of your apartment and wine and relaxing and going home. Then we’ll be back there again. You have to trust me for just a moment more.”

She glanced at Taylor. Taylor nodded. “He is telling you the truth. Do as he says and you’ll get

home.”

Sydney nodded, looking around the oasis once more, sizing it up with a quick, sweeping glance. She pressed her full lips together. “Fine,” she said, although her voice shook.

Alexander slid his hand gently under her hair, to cup her face. He leaned in and pressed his lips against hers. Her eyes drifted closed and Taylor heard her soft moan, just before the blonde disappeared, right in front of her eyes.

Her heart hammering, Taylor

turned and hurried back to the edge of the water, to plant her arrows down in the sand and wait for Alexander to recover his senses and tell her how to hunt Ibex.

She waited and thought about how this changed...oh, only *everything*.