



Kiss Across Swords

by

Tracy Cooper-Posey

The Kiss Across Time Series Book II

About Kiss Across Swords

To save them all they must win back one reluctant heart...again.

Taylor Yates never dreamed growing up she would end up happily living with two drop-dead sexy vampires and time-hopping

through their thousand years of personal history. Her life is

complete...or is it? When she finds herself at the siege of Jerusalem during the first

crusade, Veris doesn't know her at all and doesn't want to. Worst of and Taylor drives a wedge in deep between them by trying to seduce Veris at their first meeting—*not*

all, he and Brody are total strangers,

something a lady of the day does if she wants to keep her head.

Taylor and Brody must woo Verisusing the customs of medieval

Veris using the customs of medieval England, win his heart and his full commitment before Jerusalem falls in four days' time—or when they return to their own time, their lives as they know them will be gone...

Praise for Kiss Across Swords

This is a story, and these are characters, that stay with the reader long after the story is finished. *Kiss Across Swords* speaks to the very

heart of what it means to love somebody. I have to give a hearty

thanks for this unforgettable tale. Clare for *Happily Ever After Reviews*

Not only immensely imaginative, but incredibly ingenious – it's an unforgettable journey.

Chris for Romance Junkies Reviews

wonderfully imaginative story that will grab readers from the first page and hold them transfixed. Her ability to create a story that captures readers and characters with depth will keep me coming back for more. Claudia for A Romance Review She shows the reader how beautiful and seductive two men can be when they unleash their desires for each other. It's a romance that has a number of elements, all combined to make a very captivating story. I'm looking

forward to reading more in this

Kiss Across Swords is a

Leslie for Leslie's Psyche

imaginative series.

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

shaking love that time cannot erase. Rhonda for *Vampire Romance Books*

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Dedication

To Mark, for putting up with this compulsive obsession of mine. This one, once more, is for you.
You'll see why.

Chapter One

Brody carefully returned his long glass of untouched champagne to the table by his side and slid cautiously around so he was diagonal to Veris and Taylor as they confronted each other. Brody's

heart was actually thudding, reacting to the tension in the room all by itself, something it hadn't done in years.

Taylor's smile faltered. "I

Taylor's smile faltered. "I thought you would be pleased," she told Veris. "It's what your queen

happen in the next ten years, anyway." She stood straight and tall, not backing down even though she could probably see Veris' reaction wasn't the one she had been expecting.

wants. You implied to her it would

God, she was so gutsy. Brody admired her even as he wondered how he could stop this disaster from happening: her black hair with the unexpected copper highlights, the smoky gray eyes, the gorgeous long legs. She was damn sexy and she had just asked Veris to provide the means to bind her life

to him forever and irrevocably.

half a brain would turn cartwheels over. "You want me to turn you for your birthday. To make you a

They were words any man with

vampire." Veris put his champagne down and wasn't nearly as careful with the crystal. It made a grating noise on the glass side table. He moved his shoulders inside the jacket he'd put on for their private birthday party.

Brody wished now the big,

book-lined room was full of guests, for then Taylor would never have asked her question and Veris would not do what he was about to do.

end of the room near the big, unlit fireplace. The last of the late sunset was streaming through colored lead lights in the front foyer across the twin openings on either side of the

Instead it was simply him, Veris and Taylor standing at the south

twin openings on either side of the fireplace, filling the room with unearthly light.

Taylor wore a simple white sleeveless dress that stopped more than a few inches short of her

knees. It probably cost a small fortune despite the lack of material in it. Her flesh glowed with health and vitality and her dress rippled with color each time she moved, room. Her legs were just wonderful. Brody never tired of watching them move. He already knew one reason for Veris' ill-ease. Perhaps he'd just caught a hint of one other. Taylor

from the light spilling into the

was ripe with living.

Brody gripped Veris' forearm.

"Don't," he said softly as his lover seemed to brace himself to answer

Taylor.

Veris took a breath and Brody could hear the air shudder as it drew in. He yanked his arm out of Brody's grip. His blue eyes came to

bear upon him and Brody almost

winced at the pain there. "I won't, then," he said, his voice very soft. "Not tonight, as you asked and its Taylor's birthday. But this..." He shook his head. "I will not do it."

"You won't turn me," Taylor concluded. "Despite your promise

to the queen."

Veris closed his eyes briefly.
"That was four years ago. I

expected, when the time came, that Brody would do the deed."

Brody said, controlling his tone very carefully. "If Taylor

wants you, Veris..."

Veris sighed and looked at

Taylor. "I cannot. I will not. And do

not ask Brody to do it instead of me, Taylor." Her lips parted, but that was

all the surprise she showed.
Brody hid his shock. He'd had

far longer to get used to Veris' occasional outbursts of authoritarianism, a holdover from other ages.

Taylor slammed her glass

down. "Like hell!" she said, her voice strident. "You won't, but no one else can either? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Stay away from my bone?" She planted her hands on her hips and her knuckles whitened.

The one thing guaranteed to switch on her fury for a good long storm was any overt attempt to tell her

Yep, Taylor was angry now.

what to do. Veris was a master at it. He was also expert at dismantling her anger with calm, clear logic.

Taylor was anything but a hypocrite and once she saw the truth, her fury fled like storm clouds and her sunny temper returned.

But Veris simply looked at

Brody, his eyes haunted. "I promised I wouldn't open this Pandora's box tonight. You'll have to explain the rest to her." He left

shadow cross the wall of the foyer as he started to climb the wrought iron-lined stairs to the second floor. Veris was removing himself from the argument before it even began. Taylor stared at the doorway Veris had used. "He's never done that before." She sounded almost breathless. "He's never walked away from an argument before. Not just because you asked him to." "You've never pushed him so hard before, either," Brody said simply.

"Pushed?" She spun to face

him. "How on earth is asking to be

the room and Brody saw his

The distress in her voice was genuine, overriding any anger left in her.

turned pushing him? I don't get it!"

Brody picked up her glass and held it out to her. "It's still your birthday. Drink. I'll try to explain as Veris wanted me to, but I'll be

guessing most of it." "You know him so well, your guesses might as well be sworn statements," Taylor muttered. She with a little convulsive jerk.

tipped a heavy slug of the champagne back into her mouth Brody frowned. "That

sounded less than happy, too."

She shrugged and glanced away.

"You want to have an argument with me, now that Veris

has gone?"

Taylor grimaced. "No," she said and sighed.

"Then..." He frowned, as meanings shifted and became clearer. "Is that why you want Veris

to turn you and not me?"

She glanced up at him, her lashes just barely lifting to reveal

lashes just barely lifting to reveal the dark gray of her eyes. "Does it matter?"

"To you, it does. So of course it matters to me."

"You're trying to find a way to tie him to you," Brody told her. "For humans it's marriage. For our kind the bond we have has no ceremony but is far more

permanent. But lifetime permanency isn't enough for you. You want the bond that comes from

lifted just a fraction.

emotion.

The corners of her mouth

maker and child, as well."

Her tiny smile died.

Brody shook his head. "It won't work, Taylor."

She blinked. "Why not?" Her voice was thick with unexpressed

own fate. You can't manipulate him, you can't handle him and you can't out-think him."

"I know," she said softly, her eyes enormous as she looked up at him with a wretched expression.

"Then why on earth did you

try?" He tried to keep his question

gentle.

resent it. He'll resent you. He's spent his entire life as master of his

"You can't trap Veris. He'll

"Because you possess more of him than I ever will," she whispered. His breath escaped him in a hard rush. "Sweet Jesus, Taylor." with those huge eyes. If she started crying, he knew he was going to feel like the world's biggest piece of undead dog meat, but Taylor never turned on the tears just for effect. She would be fighting to hold them back. She hated crying in front of

them, especially as neither of them could shed a tear even if they

She was just staring at him

wanted to.

Brody curled his hand into a fist, fighting for calm. "I don't possess so much as a hair on his head. I never have. He stays because he wants to."

"Bullshit," she said softly,

fifteen years...nearly a thousand years, Brody. No one stays just because they haven't got bored yet, not for that long." She drew herself up straighter, leveling her shoulders. "You both love me, I know that. But what you feel for each other..." She shook her head. "I'll never have that. I can't. I haven't been around for a thousand years and all the little flips back in time we get to do aren't nearly enough to make up for it. They're just glimpses. Teasing. Sometimes I wish they didn't happen at all, because they just make me envy

hopelessly. "Nine hundred and

had." She picked up the glass again and this time her convulsive jerk emptied it.

Brody had no time to even

you for the long, long life you've

formulate a response. Veris came back in the door, wearing his professor clothes. A summerweight, silver-gray silk suit and

begin to pull his mind together to

dazzling white short-sleeved shirt that stretched over his biceps and triceps as he lifted his arms to transfer the jacket from his right hand to hang it over the back of the Craftsman chair next to the door.

"You're leaving already? So

Veris said. "I can beat the rush at security and settle in at the first class lounge, then get straight into writing the keynote speech as soon

"I think it's probably best,"

early?" Taylor asked.

as the plane takes off."

"But—" she began, then stopped. "That's probably a good idea," she said stiffly. "I'll get the car brought around."

"I've already done that," Veris

said. "It's waiting for me."

Brody hid his sigh. He knew what Veris was doing, but Taylor wouldn't understand. Not this

wouldn't understand. Not this time. Perhaps not for a century or

She was staring at Veris with a bewildered, hurt look and Veris

more.

ignored it. He kissed her. It was rough, quick and hard and Brody suspected only he saw the heldback emotion. "Happy birthday,

my dear sweet one," Veris told her.

Taylor nodded. After a second

she said, "Thank you." Her voice was thick. "I hope your lecture series is a roaring success," she

added stiffly.

Veris had already turned away, toward Brody. So only Brody got to see his eyes close and his grimace. "You knew," Veris said

without looking back at her.

"That you were doing a tour of universities in Europe, not a conference? I'm not stupid, Veris. I knew within a week of you getting the invitation." Her voice was controlled—so tightly leashed

Brody knew she was fighting to hold back some emotion. Envy perhaps. Resentment. Four years ago, Taylor herself might have been the one to receive such an invitation. Or perhaps it was simply anger for Veris trying to hide this from her in the first place. Brody had warned him the conference story wouldn't hold up with her.

done more than enough damage." His big hand curled around Brody's neck. "Take care of her." "Of course." Veris kissed him, with the same hard possessive passion he'd used on Taylor and Brody felt his heart rate elevate in response. He swallowed as Veris let him go. Veris picked up his jacket and

walked to the doorway. He paused there and glanced back. "I love you both. It makes my heart ache to

Veris opened his eyes and

looked at Brody. "Then its well beyond time I left," he said, speaking to both of them. "I've "Ábéodan."

Neither he nor Taylor moved as Veris left. Nor while the front door closed. They listened as the

limo tires crunched on the gravel

leave." He drew a breath.

outside. Only when there was silence once more did Brody dare look at Taylor again.

She was crying silently. Tears rolled down her cheeks unchecked

as she stared at the doorway Veris

had used.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "He wanted to stay. I could almost *feel* it. I drove him away, Brody."

almost childlike in bewilderment. "You just have to give him

into his arms. She came hesitantly,

Brody sighed and drew her

time. Veris will think about things and eventually he'll come around to it." She lifted her head to look at

him, her tear-smeared cheeks shining in the late evening light. "I know about these moods of Veris'.

You've told me about them before. I know how you two work. How

you take breaks from each other. You just take off. A month, a year.

A decade!"

Brody could see genuine fear in her face. "That's not what's happening now." "No? How do you know?" she demanded, pushing away from

him. "Did he ever warn you in the past? Did you ever tell him? Or did you just have a big argument and

take off after telling him you loved him, like Veris just did then?" Cold fingers touched the heat

inside his chest and made

everything ripple uneasily. "You don't understand, do you?" she said softly. "You think you do and maybe intellectually you do, but you don't really accept now," he said frankly. "You and Veris have the fancy degrees. I'm just the muscle, remember?"

She gave a ghost of a smile, but there was more sadness in it than he liked. "You keep saying you like that I'm human, but you fail to make allowances for that fact. You and Veris can argue and

baffled. "I don't understand you

Brody stared at her, truly

it, not in your gut."

decades to spare and you keep forgetting that."

That's not true. The hot denial

go off and brood for a few decades, but I can't. I don't have a few

keep forgetting. Taylor was so much a part of them, even her human aspects had blended into the tapestry of their lives, to the point where they overlooked them and took them for granted. "You need to feed," Taylor said flatly, stringing her fingers together, her eyes narrowing as she ran her gaze over his face. "You're too pale."

pushed at his lips but he held it back, because she was right. He *did*

too pale."

Shock could force him to feed early, and he was being handed a series of shocks here. Brody pushed his hand through his hair, then

take care of it, then," he said and stretched his shoulders and back as he felt the tension there.

Taylor held out her hand, palm up and out toward him.

twisted it to one side and back over his shoulder. "I had better go and

"You...could feed from me," she said softly. "If you want to."

In the four years Taylor had been with them, she had made the offer only once before. Both Veris

in bed, often, but never to feed. The one feeding had been a disaster. Veris had never told Brody what had gone wrong. Neither had

and Brody bit her when they were

Brody shook his head. "I appreciate the offer. But you want a teddy bear, not a predator and you've been drinking. The alcohol in your blood would hit me like a

Taylor.

be..." He tried to find a word that wouldn't totally unnerve her. "Unpredictable," he finished.

She chewed her upper lip.

depth charge. The results would

"I'll come home tonight," he told her, relenting.

Relief touched her features.

"That would be nice if you could," she said softly. "But I know you have to roam far these days, so

don't promise anything."

Brody dug in his pocket for the keys to his own car, the one he used when he needed to get around

incognito, fast and quietly. The unremarkable black Mustang was parked out the back of the house.

Taylor was back to chewing her lip.

He touched his finger to it.

"Stop that. Drink your champagne and eat something. I'll make this quick and dirty and I'll be home before you know it."

She nodded. But her goddamn beautiful eyes were luminous with more unshed tears. Brody kissed

It had been too long since he'd eaten real food and memory was a poor substitute. He could feel his uppers trying to descend at the smell of her and the beat of her pulse so close by. She had been right. He needed to feed and soon. "I must go," he said, pulling himself away. As he hurried out the

door, he dared to glimpse back.

Taylor had dropped into the

her. Despite the chill of the champagne and the salt of her tears he could taste the sweetness of her lips still. Despite four years he still hadn't decided what the taste was.

junior high school girl's. Her head was in her hands. If she wasn't crying, she was about to, or struggling not to.

Brody dug his nails into his palms and forced himself to keep

walking away. He would be no use to her if he went near her. Not in

Craftsman chair, her knees together and her lower legs askew like a

this state. He would terrify her and be a danger to her.

Taylor would have a hard time understanding that tonight she was better off alone, even on her birthday, but it was cold hard fact.

The truth gave Brody no comfort either.

Chapter Two

suddenly felt like the old wooden floor of the big office was actually heaving like the deck of a ship. She clutched the arms of her chair. "Excuse me?" she said. Her lips felt

Taylor stared at the doctor. It

thick and uncooperative. "I don't think I caught that last part." "Which part?" the doctor asked, with a small frown, flipping back a page in Taylor's folder.

back a page in Taylor's folder.

"The part about the p-p-regnancy." She rubbed her

forehead. "That was what you meant about gestation, right?"

Dr. Edward Cruz frowned again, more heavily this time, making his handsome face look suddenly older. "That is what most

physicians mean by the term, I believe." He looked at the page again. "The blood work confirms

your pregnancy." He smiled at her, flashing very white teeth. "They're very accurate tests these days."

Her hand began to shake. "That's...not possible."

"You're not using birth control," he pointed out, actually

tapping the file with his pen. It

through the windows. "Unless you're consulting with another family physician?" Offense thickened his tone. "I cannot treat you properly if I don't have the full facts of your medical history, you know."

made the heavy gold Rolex on his wrist flash in the sun streaming

Taylor plastered a small smile on her face. "I had no need for contraception. My partner—" She just managed to make herself stop at the singular term. "My partner is unable to father children. We had accepted it would not happen for us." for you, isn't it?"

She let herself fall back against the backrest of the vinyl patient's chair, staring at him. No

words would come to her. Nothing

was also a small smile. "Then I guess this is a day for celebration

Dr. Cruz smiled himself. It

encompassed this.

"How pregnant am I?" she asked at last.

Cruz looked mildly vexed.
"When was your last

menstruation?" he asked.

Taylor blinked. She barely

kept track of such matters anymore. After some deep thought, she came guess I would say about five and a half weeks. But until we do an ultra-sound scan, it's an approximation." He turned the page on her annual physical, clearly ready to move on. "Why haven't I had any symptoms?" she asked. "Morning sickness? All that stuff? Women I've known who have been pregnant told me they knew the

This time his frustration was

moment they got pregnant."

up with a date. Cruz glanced at a calendar and tapped his way through the weeks. "If you are right about the date, at a very rough

pen to the desk. "Probably because they were trying to become pregnant and they were looking for symptoms. You've possibly overlooked the symptoms or

more than evident. He dropped his

completely disregarded them, or mistaken them for something else. Or else you're one of those lucky women who will sail through their pregnancy with very few symptoms at all. Shall we move on?"

She leaned forward. "Are you kidding? You drop a bomb like pregnancy on me and expect me to change subjects and move on? I

want to know what happens now. Where I go next. Options. Details."

Cruz blew out his breath. "We

can schedule another appointment at another time to discuss your condition. Right now, we're here to discuss the results of your annual physical checkup." He tapped the

physical checkup." He tapped the file.

"Where you discovered I was pregnant, a condition of my

physical health. So let's discuss it,"
Taylor insisted.

Cruz glanced at his watch.

"Prenatal consultations are not

included in the fee for an annual physical consultation. You'll have

to reschedule for that."

Taylor felt her jaw sag and snapped her teeth together. "You have somewhere else to be that is

so important, Doctor?"

He sat back and threw his pen down. He smoothed his hair back with a vexed, controlled

movement. "As a matter of fact, I do, Ms. Yates." He seemed to be barely holding in his ire. "My wife is in the hospital right at this moment undergoing radiation treatment for a malignant astrocytoma. I would like to be there at least before the end of her

treatment session, as I'm already

session."

Taylor wanted the floor to open up and swallow her whole.

too late for the beginning of the

"A malignant..." she began. She had no idea what the term meant, but "malignant" sounded very bad. Her cheeks were heating.

"A brain tumor," he

interpreted dryly, completing her humiliation. "I'm sorry," Taylor said. She had no idea what else to say. Anything else she might add would

"Accepted," he said flatly. He closed her file and gave her a dry

be inadequate.

"I think that would be acceptable," Taylor agreed with a sigh of relief. She picked up her bag from the floor beside her. Suddenly, the idea of finding somewhere far from here, a spot out of the way where she could sit and think about this enormous news, alone and uninterrupted, seemed like a great idea. She

couldn't seem to concentrate on

consult, too," he finished, standing

"Do book that prenatal

smile. "Perhaps we should finish

this up another day?"

anything else.

up.

door, feeling about three feet shorter than when she walked in. Shorter and fatter. Pregnant. How had that

"I will." She hurried out the

happened?

Twenty minutes later, Taylor had her answer.

She had only been able to walk as far as the nearest Starbucks. Dazed, still unable to cope with the

reality of a baby, she had sought the shelter of the dark green umbrellas on the patio in front of the store. They provided relief from the heat

of the day, along with a tall cold green tea lemonade. There she found her answers from within her diary.

Five and a half weeks ago,
Veris and she had travelled back to

fifth century Norway again. She had been there once before with Veris, four years ago.

The day Taylor had met Brody

and Veris, she had slipped back

very briefly to the time when Veris had left Norway to sail to Britain. That was the last time he had ever seen his homeland before it had become Norway.

This occasion, five and a half

weeks ago, they had travelled back to when he had been a few years

simple paragraph she had written that covered the day and glorious night she had spent with Veris in the kingdom where he had grown up and become a man and warrior. Mid fifth-century. Veris says 462 as he remembers it. What would become Norway, but was a land of petty kings. I met his sister Marit, who is a fellow conspirator, just like Veris. And I met the king, thanks to Marit. We danced and drank in the king's hall. There was so much she had left out of that paragraph! Taylor sipped her iced tea, tasting

younger. Taylor stared at the

taste of green tea, remembering how the time trip had begun. Veris had simply kissed her as she had been passing on her way to

the stairs to the upper floor of the

lemonade and the slightly dusty

big main room, to get at the rare books kept up there. Veris rarely missed an opportunity to kiss her if she moved within a few feet of him. Sometimes the kisses were absent-minded. Sometimes they

were full-hearted, let's-fuck-now type kisses. This had been another type. A hello-you-look-edible kiss that had some intent behind it, but as she had an armful of books, he especially as he and Brody had both brought her to a screaming, mindless orgasm barely three hours before, pinned between them, their tongues dancing across her breasts and genitals.

wasn't going to push it that hard,

His big hands slid under her jaw, holding her face steady so that his lips could meet hers squarely and his fangs wouldn't tear her mouth. They had learned quickly that her flesh was far more delicate than theirs, even with their own mouths shielding their teeth. The vampire teeth, designed precisely for puncturing human flesh, could kiss her. It wasn't such a hardship, after all. That was the last time she remembered about holding books

tear into Taylor's with uncanny

Taylor kept still, letting Veris

ease.

in her arms that day.

The smell of pine became almost overpowering. Up near the ceiling, a ticking noise began.

Something ruffled her hair.

Taylor opened her eyes,

knowing it had happened again. She looked around first with just her eyes. A deeply-shaded forest.

Massively tall pine trees.

Then it had to be the wind

her hair was down to somewhere near her waist and loose. It must be held back in some way she couldn't tell just yet.

ruffling her hair. From the feel of it,

She studied Veris cautiously as he stood with his hands loosely against her jaw. He was watching her, his gaze roaming over her face.

Assessing. He held up his hand, the four fingers split two aside in the famous Vulcan greeting. "I'm not wearing a red shirt."

Taylor blew out her breath. It was the pre-arranged signal all three of them had set up for these unexpected time-jumps, to let each counterpart of themselves inhabited the body of the younger version. If the signal didn't come, it was sometimes possible to force the modern consciousness there by kissing them, or other emotionrousing actions. "Then you'll live long and prosper," she murmured, which was the response to let him know she was aware. But for her it was an academic matter, for Taylor could

only be herself in the past as she had never been here before, while Veris and Brody had lived through

these times once already.

other know the modern

never to take things for granted on these flips back in time. They went through the motions of cue and response, just in case. Veris stepped back and looked

They had learned, though,

around. "This place feels familiar." "You look...different," Taylor said. "Wow." She ran her gaze up and down his long length. He really did look longer, she realized. This version of Veris was younger. Younger. She let that novel idea sink in for a moment. She had never seen Veris look anything other than

the timeless age he had always looked. Somewhere between late

looked older than God, when the weight of the centuries he had experienced seemed to weigh him down.

Right now, he looked somewhere in his late twenties. Perhaps. He wasn't carrying as much muscle, which was why he

thirties and early forties, depending on his mood, his clothes and his situation. And sometimes, he

And boots, with laces that crossed over the calves and up to the knee.

Saxon, Taylor's trained mind

white shirt—with sleeves, for once.

He wore simple trousers and a

looked taller.

dressed in the village where I grew up," Veris said. "I wonder..." He looked around. "Someone's coming." His hand fell to his hip.

"You look like how the girls

automatically catalogued.

There was a dagger there, well hidden in the belt.

Now Taylor could hear the soft footfalls far off Running

soft footfalls, far off. Running.

Veris pulled her around the tree and put her back to it. He pressed against her and glanced

around the trunk. He drew out the knife and shook his head a little, as if he were vexed about something. Frowning heavily, he watched for The footsteps pattered closer. Then the swish of garments became

the newcomer.

clearer.

"Väinä?" It was a woman's voice. Young and soft.

Veris drew in a sharp, hissing breath. Shock. He stepped around the tree. "Marit."

the tree. "Marit."

Taylor straightened up from the bite of the tree bark. Even through the thick swathe of hair at

her back, it stuck into her spine. She watched Veris step back out onto the wide, sandy path and turn to face the newcomer, whom she could not yet see. Veris' face was

when he said it was you," Marit said. "He swore, though, that you were back and waiting. I had to come to find out if it was true." Her voice shook. "Fifteen years,

"I couldn't believe the boy

painted with shock.

forgiven you even now."

Veris took a deep breath and held his hand out to Taylor. She stepped out from the tree and turned to face the speaker.

Väinämöinen. I don't think he's

The woman's mouth opened. Her eyes widened.

Taylor stared at her. Marit was just like Veris. Tall, blonde but

determined jaw and blue, blue eyes. Fair skin and straight shoulders that looked like they could take on the world. She glanced from Taylor to

slender like a willow. She had a

Veris. "I might have known you would find the most beautiful woman in the world. This is your wife, yes?"

"This is Tyra. My wife," Veris

confirmed. "She speaks our language, too. Tyra, this is my sister, Marit."

Marit stepped forward and lifted her hand up toward Taylor's

Marit stepped forward and lifted her hand up toward Taylor's face. "Your face. It glows. I have never seen skin so soft." She

face and stepped back with an embarrassed laugh. "Forgive me. You must experience that all the time."

stopped her hand short of Taylor's

Taylor smiled. "No, but you're forgiven for saying such kindly things."

Marit gripped Veris' arm as an

idea struck her. "Let me introduce her to the king, brother! Please! He would be delighted by her."

would be delighted by her."
"The king?" Veris repeated.
Marit laughed. "There have

been changes since you ran away, Väinä. I am head lady in waiting to the queen now. The king likes me,

family. We are favored in the village because of the politics I play at court." "You're not married yourself?" Veris asked politely. "Not when competition for my hand gives me such leverage over others," Marit replied bluntly. "You don't find that...lonely?" Taylor asked. Marit's smile was slow and wicked. "I only said I remained unmarried, that is all." "I see," Taylor replied diplomatically. "That is another kind of

which means all goes well in our

Taylor leaned toward Veris.

"She's just like you."

Veris laughed loudly.

"May I bring Tyra before the

leverage altogether," Marit added.

king, brother?" Marit asked. "Please? There is a dinner tonight. It would be perfect."

Veris sobered. "We may not be able to stay that long. I mean, I

will be here for another three days, I think, but Tyra may have to go rather suddenly."

rather suddenly."

Marit's sunny expression fled.
"You don't have to fear Father,

Väinä. He's too ill now to do more than step outside the cot to relieve

himself. He would not touch a hair on Tyra's head." Veris glanced at Taylor. "You misunderstand me—"

"Do I?" Her tone was dry. "I live in my own cot now. The queen gave it to me when I entered

service with her."

Veris' breath was quickening with genuine, human emotion.

What was going on here? Taylor could see he wasn't going to ask the obvious question, so she did. "When did you enter service with the queen, Marit?"

"The night Väinä left the village," Marit said softly. "The

beat him nearly to death because my father was interfering with me. You know, that way." Marit's gaze slid to meet Taylor's eyes. Taylor swallowed as her mouth seemed to suddenly lose all its spit and her heart flip-flopped. "Yes," she breathed. Veris cleared his throat. "It's in the past," he said sharply. "But it also means we can't roam the

village freely. If I am recognized—"

Marit said instantly. "You're three

"They won't recognize you,"

night he was forced to leave because he'd broken the law by laying hands on his own father. He hand spans taller and twice as wide in the shoulders. You have strength now you never had then. You've let your hair grow. And you're wearing mainland clothes. With Tyra by your side stealing all the attention, no one will pay the slightest bit of notice to you, Väinä. Give yourself a different name and you'll be virtually invisible." "Call him Veris, then," Taylor suggested. "Very foreign sounding," Marit said. "Almost Roman. But it does seem to suit him."

does seem to suit him."

Veris grinned.

Taylor held up her hand. "I

have anything to wear nearly suitable enough for a king's court." Marit ran her gaze over Taylor's breasts and hips. "I do,

have an objection, though. I don't

though. Come with me. Come along." She turned and strode back along the trail, her dress and cloak fluttering in the moist breeze

moving through the thick shade.

Taylor glanced at Veris. "Now what?" she said softly, forcing herself to use English and

what? she said softly, forcing herself to use English and whispering behind Marit's back as they followed.

"This is my sister," Veris

replied just as quietly. "This hasn't

happened in over four years of jumping. Let's play it out."

"And what if we jump back in the middle of the party tonight?

with his memories intact and wonder why he's in the king's hall. He'll be okay. But I'll suddenly poof out of existence right there in

front of the king. Or so we've

Your younger version will go on

theorized and so you guys have remembered it. I don't exist in these times. You do."

Veris shrugged. "For right now, I don't care," he said. "I'll let my younger self deal with the crap

and the fallout."

"That's not nice," Taylor chided.

"Why? A night in the king's court, good food, wine and music.

He'll wonder how he got there and he'll have a headache in the morning. He'll be fine." "Why will he have a

headache?" Taylor asked suspiciously.

"Ah, as to that..." Veris reached to his hip and pulled out the dagger once more. He flipped it

the dagger once more. He flipped it in midair and caught it with a quick midair snatch and nodded. "That confirms it," he muttered. "Confirms what?"

"It confirms it for me, but you'll want visual proof. You always do. Look." He held up his left hand and ran the point of the blade over the pad of his thumb. The small wound began to bleed. "Oh, fuck, that hurts," Veris muttered. "I'd forgotten pain." Taylor caught her breath, staring at the little nick. It was still bleeding. Still open. "You're human," she breathed. He nodded. "I wasn't made until about ten years from now," he said softy. "Not long before I left for Britain."

Drink..." She smiled up at him. "No wonder you don't care what happens tomorrow."

Taylor caught his arm. "Food.

Veris grinned. "Not just food

and drink, Tyra my love. I intend to savor you from the tips of your toes to the ends of your fingernails and every inch in between. If we have

time, I'll do it over and over again. Then I'm going to sit with Marit and share a cup of wine and tell her how proud I am of her and..."

He stopped walking. Taylor turned to him, concerned, for he was staring at his boots.

Marit turned back as they

"I'm happy," Veris explained, switching back to the Norse of his childhood. He lifted his head,

faltered. "What is it?" she asked.

revealing eyes that glittered with tears. He shifted his shoulders, clearly embarrassed. "So why am I crying?"

hurrying down the path again. "Men!" she said, as if that explained everything.

Marit laughed and began

Taylor stretched up to hug Veris. "You cry when you're happy," she said softly in English.

"Don't you remember that?"

"I never did," he said harshly.

"Well, maybe you've grown up a bit." "Maybe I was never happy,"

he said grimly. He kissed her cheek and lowered her to the ground. "Let's go and see the king."

Chapter Three

scaled his age to somewhere around the mid or late fifties for this era. Perhaps a bit younger, if disease had been unkind to him. But he was hearty for his age and there was nothing wrong with his

looked nearly seventy, so Taylor

King Herleifr was elderly. He

mind.
With Queen Ingvild's permission, Marit presented Taylor to the King as a cousin from a neighboring kingdom. As an

husband, Veris, who bowed from his position at the back of the big fire burning in the center of the room.

Herleift nodded at Veris

afterthought, Marit present Tyra's

Herleifr nodded at Veris before turning his gaze back upon Taylor. "Most remarkable," he murmured. He glanced at his wife, who sat upon the much smaller throne several steps down below the tier his grand chair was placed upon. "Have you ever seen such

throne several steps down below the tier his grand chair was placed upon. "Have you ever seen such beauty before?"

Taylor glanced at Marit, who was smiling with a self-satisfied expression, standing next to the

How could she tactfully tell these people that where she came from she was considered quite average? That her height and bone

structure were the result of generations of genetic adaptation and selection for "attractiveness" over "breeding stock" that had

her lips and gritted her teeth.

queen. She had predicted this. She had also warned Taylor not to argue with the king. Taylor could feel the need to explain pushing at

been a luxury that mankind had enjoyed for the last two hundred years?

Or that it was the benefit of modern chemicals that made her skin look like it did? But she couldn't explain any of it. So Taylor stayed silent. She

clean water, healthy diets and

found herself gripping the edges of the cloak Marit had draped about her shoulders as the finishing touches to her court dress, her

touches to her court dress, her palms abruptly sweaty.

The cloak was made of a material more finely woven than any of the rough garments she had

any of the rough garments she had seen today, as they had walked through the cluster of fifty or so round huts, stables and animal shelters that made up the tiny town stout walls of the king's hall.

The hall itself was surprisingly stately. It was made of massive,

well-hewn and crafted local trees and built to withstand just about anything but fire. With roots

clustering thickly up against the

tapping the rock shelf it was built upon and branches running back into the mountain it perched upon, the king's hall was a fine fortress that had stood for five generations and continued to grow with each succeeding generation.

stood open to guests and lights blazed from the unglazed windows.

Tonight the giant oak doors

The king was entertaining.

The dress Taylor wore to honor the King and his guests was clearly expensive and one of Marit's

best. The underdress was white and there was not a lot of material to spare around her breasts. It clung to her until it reached her hips, giving her enough room to walk—and dance, Marit had explained. It was about four inches longer at the back

than the front, forming a simple train and had long sleeves and a simple round neck with beautiful white embroidery.

Over the top of the underdress Taylor wore a deep blue

over each shoulder like a sundress, that fastened with two blue jewels just above each breast. Hanging between each jewel were two chains, one longer than the other. Swinging from the longer chain was a small bronze pendant of a dragon. The apron dress was also form-fitting and surprisingly flattering, especially when Marit fastened a thick leather belt around Taylor's waist, pulling it in firmly. There was a small leather pouch hanging from the belt from two short tabs. A third loop hung empty.

apron dress. It had straps going

"That's for your dagger," Marit said as if it was obvious, when Taylor fingered the loop. Taylor held back from saying

she was left-handed. It was possible left-handedness was a sign of the devil here.

devil here.

The cloak was the final layer

–a soft wool that seemed to be cool
or warm just as Taylor needed it to

be. It didn't scratch at all, which she expected it to. It was long, as long as the white underdress.

Marit had left Taylor's hair alone. "I can't improve upon it," she said simply.

Now the king pushed himself

was and wore no crown. But his tunic was white and embroidered at the neck and his boots were whole and clean. He wore a short cloak around his shoulders and there were matching gems where a chain held it together at the neck. Short fur edged it. The king studied her closely. "There is no artifice about your beauty," he said shortly. "It is quite natural. How lovely." He sighed.

"Marit teases me with possibilities

that are quite beyond my reach."

out of his chair and stepped down onto the broad step Taylor stood upon. He was only as tall as she Startled, Taylor looked toward Marit. Now what? Marit was smiling. She was

He held out his hand to her.

enjoying Taylor's discomposure. When she saw Taylor's glance in her direction, she lifted her hand upward. *Take his hand*, she seemed

upward. *Take his hand*, she seemed to be saying.

Taylor hesitantly took the king's offered hand. The man's grip

was firm despite his apparent frailty. She glanced over her shoulder, back toward Veris. "Ah, you are right," the king

"Ah, you are right," the king murmured. "You should ask your husband's permission first. Go "In the state of t

"Why, to accompany me to the table and after, to dance. That is all. I am long past the age where anything more is required of you. You may even sit next to your husband during the meal as I have political guests to entertain tonight and they will not speak in your presence." He nodded toward a group of dour warriors standing off to one side, their arms crossed over their chests, wearing beards and swords and shaggy hair. "I must keep them entertained and woo them so that my borders are safe, you understand?" he said softly, so his voice did not carry. "Perfectly," she said just as softly. "But wouldn't more womanly charms put them at their ease...soften them up for you?" He laughed. "You are a delight! Alas, those tough old war dogs are moved by nothing less than money or power. The softer charms ceased to touch their souls a long time ago. They'll have to reckon with the gods when they didn't place the gentler arts on the earth only to have them ignored. Come, let us lead this kingdom of mine to dinner and let them gorge. I look forward to dancing with you, Tyra of the godlike beauty. You are a breath of fresh air." "Thank you, Highness." He turned her and led her down the steps. "Your husband's name is...Veris, yes?" "Yes, Your Highness." "He is not a native of your kingdom, is he?" Herleifr said as they swept past the surly visitors

reach Valhalla for such

oversight, I'm thinking. The gods

and on down the broad steps to the round room at the foot.

"No, he was not born there,"

Taylor said.

The room was filled with

people standing and watching their king greet and escort her to the dining tables. In the middle of the large rounded area was a huge fire pit. Kitchen staff were busy

preparing last minute dishes over the edges of the fire.

As the king walked Taylor across the floor, the crowd made

way silently, letting them through.
On the other side of the room,
long tables and benches had been

out as the king approached.

Veris stood waiting just before the tables. Taylor could see

set up and the meal was being laid

wariness in his eyes, even though he was wearing an affable, pleasant expression for everyone else. His hand was resting on the pommel of

the sword strapped to his hip. It looked casual. She knew otherwise.

He had changed from the foreign-looking European clothes to

more local garments, so that he could blend in. Now he looked like someone who belonged here. She corrected the impression in her mind. Veris looked like he might

hung a leather money pouch. His sword belt crossed over it. Because he was in the king's court, he'd left off the chain mail and other armor and accoutrements a warrior would normally wear. But he had wide leather cuffs on each wrist and a bronze torc about his neck. Taylor's heart skipped a beat. This was Veris in his native element. Väinä at home. She found herself smiling at him. She couldn't help it.

have looked in the real past, before he left. He wore boots, pants and an embroidered tunic over an under tunic. From the thick leather belt than the best storyteller in the world could ever explain." Taylor jerked her gaze away from Veris and back to the king. "Forgive me, Your Highness. I wasn't paying attention to you." The king smiled. "There is nothing to forgive, child," he said. "For see? We are already at our destination." He lifted her hand and placed it in Veris'. "Thank you, Highness," Veris said. "Your wife is lovely beyond

"Then it truly is a love

match," the king said. "That expression on your face says more

hovers by your sword," Herleifr said softly. "Or is it, rather, your discomfort in being back in this hall once more, Väinämöinen?" Veris grew still, his gaze locked with the king's. "I am old," the king said, still speaking softly. "But not old enough to forget faces, even though both fifteen years and the lad have gone and now a man stands in his place." Taylor stepped in front of Veris and faced the king. "My lord

-" she said, also keeping her voice

compare. You're aware of that, I can tell by the way your hand

"No, Tyra," Veris protested and thrust her aside.

down.

The king held up his hand. It was meant as a signal for peace, but the heel of his hand thumped into Veris' chest. There was a collective gasp of surprise around them.

gasp of surprise around them.

The king thrust his foot backward, trying to push Veris back. "Stop, you fool," he hissed. "Do you really want to die

"Veris, for heaven's sake, please, think it through," Taylor pleaded, tugging on his arm as he stood over the king. He was forgotten he was mortal right now and surrounded by men wielding swords, men that were loyal to the king? Quite likely, yes.

"No one will come to my aid until I ask for it," the king added. "Such is my reputation. To them I am utterly strong, invincible and need assistance from no man unless

thrumming with tension. Had he

simply watch me deal with you, believing only that you are angry because I desire your wife. It can remain that way...Veris. But if you insist on taking this path then it will no longer be a small matter of

I choose it. At the moment, they

back from the king. He was shaking.

Taylor realized she was, too.

Herleifr straightened his

sleeves. "My queen dotes upon Marit. She is the daughter my wife never had. Marit would not be the woman she is today if someone had

pride over a woman. Do you

After a moment Veris stepped

understand?"

not intervened in her life fifteen years ago and changed her fortunes. Because my queen is grateful for that blessing, I am grateful." He adjusted his cloak.

"Enjoy your supper." He walked

Veris' neck and clung to him, despite their public location. She was trembling badly enough that she had to clamp her jaws together

Taylor threw her arms around

away with a swirl of cloth.

Veris' lips pressed against the nape of her neck, then slid up to her ear. "I could have cheerfully killed the bastard for touching you.

God, Taylor, I'm so full of emotions,

I'm almost drunk with them."

Taylor dropped back to her feet and tugged on his wrist. "Come and eat," she said. "Come on. You need food and drink, and

reaction inside you. You're chewing up juices and your metabolism probably just dropped dead over this." She pushed him toward the table. "I know that." He frowned. "I know that," he said softly, wondering. "Basic biology." "Dry academics," she whispered back. "You learned it in

a book. Long after you were made and long after you'd forgotten what it was like to be human." She found

you need to relax. Your body is a chemical factory now. You're not use to it anymore. Every emotional reaction you have is also a chemical

Some of the men at the table looked at Veris with alarm.

Veris sat down in the empty space and looked at the man closest to him. "Make room for my wife."

The man shuffled over,

a space at one of the long tables and pointed to it. "Will this do, my

husband?" she said more loudly.

for Taylor. Taylor sat down with a nod of thanks.

Veris picked up the cup of wine placed in front of him and

making more than plenty of space

stared at the golden liquid inside.

Taylor picked up her cup and touched it to Veris'. "To your good

He cleared his throat. "Yes," he muttered and brought the cup to his lips and slowly drank a

health, my husband."

mouthful.

The mead tasted watery yet strong to Taylor's westernized and retail-and commercially-packed-

food-trained palette. She waited for Veris to swallow. He lowered the cup to the table and looked at her. A small smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "I thought I had

forgotten, but I find it's all coming back. Like riding a bicycle."

He turned to his plate eagerly.

to the music and dancing. It seemed that as soon as bellies began to fill, minds turned to other distractions. The first hint of entertainment was

There was no formal beginning

the background, as the diners were nearing the end of the long meal. Despite the plain, well-cooked fare,

the thrumming of a drumbeat far in

these people ate with gusto. The drumbeat in the background barely checked their enthusiastic chomping.

chomping.

Then a pipe joined it in a merry tune as they nodded their heads or tapped their feet. A low horn came next.

him. He grabbed the arm of a woman nearby and hauled her to her feet. He spun her in a series of looping, somewhat graceful circles that seemed to be more or less in time with the beat of the music. Everyone else clapped along with him, while the music settled down into a distinct dance tune.

Abruptly, a man sprang to his

feet, a cup of mead in hand, to the cheers and calls of those around

Veris grasped Taylor's hand. "This, I've always known how to do." He climbed from the bench

around the fire.

Other couples joined him

was flushed from the wine and food.

"You?" Taylor said, amazed. It was always Brody who danced with

and tugged on her arm. His face

her. Veris occasionally partnered her when there was a Viennese waltz because he loved the graceful rhythm, but that was about all. She

looked at the energetic swooping

and whirling happening next to the fire with amazement. "Are you sure?" she asked Veris.

He picked her up around the

waist and lifted her off the bench. "Stop arguing, woman."

Taylor found herself laughing

laughed, too. It was infectious.

She realized they weren't the only ones laughing and smiling. Under the beat and sound of the music and the rap of the dancers' feet on the floor she could hear

everyone—dancers and the audience watching them—laughing, calling to each other,

as he swept her into the rush of bodies swirling and tapping out the beat with their feet against the floorboards and their hands. Veris

shouting encouragement and rude observations about each other which generated further laughter and comments. The mead and wine with even more frequency now that the meal had all but finished. Everyone knew everyone, despite the large number of people

pitchers were being passed around

in the hall. It made for ease and familiarity. As two of the handful of strangers there, word had quickly passed as to Taylor and Veris' public identities. Their acceptance had been smoothed by

acceptance had been smoothed by the king leading Taylor to dinner. Now they were tacitly part of the village, even if the men were careful to give Veris plenty of elbow room and not jostle him even accidentally. heads almost together and drained a pot of mead between them, oblivious to the people around them.

conversation looking both grim and happy at once. But there was a

Veris emerged from that

Veris got his long conversation with Marit during one of them, when his sister settled on the bench beside him and the two sat with their

Between dances, they rested.

contented air about him and Taylor knew Marit had impressed him—a difficult thing to do with Veris.

It was during one such rest, when Veris was studying Taylor

warm and her nipples harden against the underdress, that the king appeared in front of them both, looking for his appointed dance with Taylor. Veris' jaw rippled as he reached for the mug of mead he had just drained and called for the pot boy. "Of course, my lord," he told the king. "I am honored."

with a brooding look in his eyes she knew well, that made her body

Herleifr grinned, the wrinkles at the corners of his very pale blue eyes coming together. "I'm sure," he said, holding his hand out to Taylor.

"Veris?"

"Go," he said roughly, concentrating on the mead in his mug. "I'm fine."

She sighed and let the king

Taylor glanced at Veris.

take her hand and pull her into the ring of dancers around the fire. Veris turned away, his profile to the fire, which bothered her.

Herleifr was a sedate dancer, using none of the lifting and tossing the younger dancers were doing to show off their vitality and strength.

But he kept up with the beat and Taylor had already learned the quick steps and routines, so the

worry over Veris' mood. He wasn't really jealous of the king, was he? She glanced toward Veris again when she could and saw that

vigorous dance left her mind free to

he was watching when he thought she wasn't looking. Then he was jealous...or something like it. Taylor knew she

something like it. Taylor knew she couldn't deal with it until Herleifr released her and let her return to Veris. Meantime, she had to

entertain the king.

A few minutes later, much to Taylor's deep relief, the musicians

Taylor's deep relief, the musicians decided they needed a rest from their labors and put down their

booing. But the dancers returned to their seats to grab drinks, gulp down water and talk to their friends.

The king nodded his head at Taylor. "My thanks, Tyra, but I

instruments. There was a lot of loud complaints and good natured

must return to the dour company I am forced to keep this night."

"Thank you, my lord, for the dance."

"You're a diplomat. I can see why Marit enjoys your company so much. It has been a pleasure meeting you." The King walked

meeting you." The King walked away with a nod to others as he

small table sitting on the top tier by his big throne, where the big men sat with impatient scowls. Taylor turned away, intending

skirted the fire, heading back to the

to hurry back to Veris.

His space on the bench was

empty.

Her heart actually thudded

Her heart actually thudded against the inside of her chest, so hard did it leap in fright. She looked around frantically. He was

looked around frantically. He was nowhere in sight. She looked for Marit. Perhaps he had sought his sister out, while

waiting for Taylor to finish her dance with the king. But Marit was

king and queen and their exalted company. Nor could Taylor spot her long figure amongst the crowd on the main floor.

Taylor tried to keep her panic under control. There were a

number of reasons why Veris wouldn't be in the room, all of

not in the main hall either. She was not sitting at the top tables with the

them perfect simple. She walked to the tier steps and climbed the first three, which gave her a higher perspective of the room. Then she began to quarter the big hall systematically, looking for Veris among the constantly shifting find him. He was a distinctive figure.

Taylor finally located Marit and realized why she had not noticed her at first. Marit was

backed into a dark corner created

crowd. It would surely be simple to

by a thick wooden pillar and the body of a handsome man who pressed against her. His body was a tight bow and his hand, where it rested flat against the wall by Marit's head, was braced with tension. He quivered as his lips

her neck.

Marit's mouth parted as she

hovered near the delicate flesh of

smile. Her hand lifted in a tiny wave. Acknowledgment.

Taylor smiled back. There was no mistaking who was in control, there. She turned away, giving

them privacy. Instead, she looked one last time for Veris. She would have to consider what else to do

perhaps breathed in the man's desperation. Then she saw Taylor watching her and she gave a small

now. Then she saw him.

Veris stood on the far side of the tables by the big entrance doors. He must have left for a moment or two and just stepped in. He had

been watching her. He stood as he

that the already-building muscles of this younger Veris swelled by the positioning of his forearms.

Taylor's heart lifted.

Conversation around her faded.

She found herself smiling at Veris again. Her feet in their felt slippers

stepped back down the stairs and found a way through and around the people as she watched Veris

often did, with his feet apart and his arms crossed. He'd pushed the sleeves of the tunic up his arms, so

studying her with his brooding, sensual gaze. She walked right up to him and Veris' big hand settled on the back of her waist, hot and

heavy. She shivered.

"Come with me," he told her.

* * * * *

Veris threw a tied, heavy bundle

hand. "There are roots and fir cones to trip over and break your ankle," he said. "I may be just human, but I'm still a man and stronger than you, and I know the way."

"You can take my hand any

time you like. You don't need an

over his shoulder and took Taylor's

excuse."

Veris glanced at her as he led her into the forest that started right behind the village. He grinned. "Do you think you're pointing out a

and when you are. Here, a man keeps both hands free when he can because he might have need of them at any moment."

weakness, Tyra? You forget where

The forest at night in high summer was softly warm, glowing with light from the moon overhead and dappled with deep shade. It was perfumed with a dozen scents, all of them delicious. Taylor was caught by the unexpected beauty of it and by the utter silence, so completely bereft of any modern noises. There were no nearby

highways, no air traffic far above, or power lines, or campers in the sound of the wind against trees, far overhead, small animals underfoot and their own progress. "Don't you recall this and

distance. There was nothing but the

regret the loss?" she asked Veris.

"This'?" he repeated.

"All this glorious rustic charm and peace," she explained. "It's

wonderful."

"Occasionally. Sometimes.
The good stuff, yes," he said. "But

this peace and tranquility came at a price. The cost was mostly bloodshed, ignorance and sheer bloody horror. I mostly don't mind

bloody horror. I mostly don't mind the compromise we paid for around, looking left and right. "Yes, over here," he murmured and took a turning in the path that barely appeared to be a path at all.

Taylor gripped Veris' hand more firmly as the footing grew more treacherous. Branches, cones,

modern living." He glanced

leaves and more showed that the path wasn't as nearly well-trod as the one they had been on. "Are you sure about where you're going?" she whispered.

"It's only been sixteen hundred years," he said. "My memory isn't that bad." "Wonderful," she muttered. She heard him chuckle.
Ahead, running water softly sounded. It wasn't the thunder of a waterfall but a gentle trickling. Then the path opened out as the trees thinned to reveal a tiny lake. It was more like a pond. A well-

It was more like a pond. A wellthrown stone could hit the other side and not get wet. Trees crowded the edges of the water, their roots curling into the moisture like toes dipping into coolness on a hot day. The moonlight silvered the surface of the still water, turning it into a mirror, all except the far side where a tiny stream slid over halfa-dozen boulders, feeding the pond with fresh water. It was the source of the trickle. There was a pocket-sized area

next to the pond, covered with

grass and the remains of old fires. Veris and possibly others had been here before.

"Only a few others know of this place and they won't come here tonight," Veris told her. He

dropped the bundle from his shoulder and untied it swiftly. She watched him work, pulling together wood for the fire and spreading the furs for their bed. He used flint with swift movements to get the fire going while Taylor

"I don't think anything has really, truly impressed the fact that you were born in this time upon me so much as these last few moments," she told him as he

curled up on the makeshift bed.

coaxed the fire to build.

Veris dropped more wood on the fire, then satisfied it would take care of itself for a while, he turned and unbuckled the sword from his

waist. He pushed the sword itself

into the ground, still within arm's reach, dropped the scabbard to one side, then stretched himself out on the fur beside her with a sigh. He rolled onto one side and propped

his head on one hand. His blue eyes in the moonlight almost glowed.

"I've fallen back into the old habits with surprising ease," he confessed. "You've noticed that."

She nodded.

"It's like the human body remembers it."

supplied.

"Perhaps." He frowned.

"They say you remember best what you learn first."

"But that's human memory.

You and Brody keep telling me vampire memory is perfect. You remember everything, because your

"Muscle memory,"

she

mind is completely unchanging. There's virtually no memory loss at all."

Veris nodded, but he was still frowning. "It's a different quality though. I've only realized it now that I've come back here and had a

chance to compare. *Everything* is a different quality. Of course, food and drink, for which we have no

basis to compare. But I didn't realize touch was different. Smell. Even pain. Sensations.

Everything's...more alive."

Taylor stared at him. "More alive?" she repeated.

"Better," he added.

dumbly. This was the articulate, educated Veris, using "better" as an adjective.

He dropped his gaze and took a deep breath. "Jesus, Taylor. There's no words for this. If all

sensation was put on a scale of one to ten, then vampires feel sensations at level six. I thought

"Better," she repeated

humans did, too, but I found out today I was wrong. Humans feel at level eight, maybe nine. I've been walking around feeling the brush of your hair against my arm and almost jumping out of my skin. The smell of your shampoo makes me

mistake of touching the top of a lamb's head this afternoon. Do you know how soft lamb's wool is?" He screwed his eyes shut. "It's... overwhelming. Every time I think about how we're going to get yanked out of here sometime soon, without warning, back to our world, back to feeling plain old dull level six sensations..." He rolled onto his stomach

and rested his forehead on his arm.

salivate! The shitty cloth they call material here feels wonderful under my fingers—I can feel every fiber and it's *soft*. And don't get me started on embroidery! I made the

"That's a compromise I don't like," he said, his voice muffled. Taylor rested her hand on his

shoulder. "Veris, didn't you stop to think that all this overwhelming sensation is simply normal for humans? You're just not used to it

anymore. We hardly notice all that

massive input on a second by second basis. We just focus in on the important signals. You're trying to process *everything* and getting bowled over by the traffic jam."

He was silent for longer than she liked. Finally, he rolled over

onto his back, looking up into the night sky. "It's still far stronger vampire, with or without the traffic jam."

"Only you can judge that," she said as calmly as possible.
"Perhaps that's the price you have to pay for immortality. There had to be a downside somewhere."

than anything I've felt as a

He turned his head to look at her. "You think watching those you love age and die isn't a high enough price?" His words were

calm, but she heard old wounds, never healed, behind them. She knew then that she could not let Veris wait much longer for her to be turned as their queen had

suspended and afraid that she might be snatched from them by some quirk of human fate. Soon, very soon, Taylor would ask them to turn her. She touched Veris' lips. "I'm sorry. I've made you sad." "Agh." He sat up with a flex of muscle and sinew and turned to

demanded. It would be cruel to leave Brody and Veris dangling,

her. "Screw sad," he said roughly. "I want to taste every inch of you while my taste buds are still

working as they should." He pulled her across the fur until she was on

her knees before him. "That's

tossed it away. "I just wish Brody was here." "To taste me?"

better." He unhooked her cloak and

"To taste you, for me to taste, to tell me what I taste like here. He'd have found the perfect simile

for what your mouth tastes like. It's

just not the same as at home. And he'd have waxed lyrical over the food."

Taylor fought not to giggle as Veris' tongue slid down her throat, because the image he painted was

exactly right. Brody would have so enjoyed the food. He would have

been in raptures over it.

delight with it, as Veris' hands unbuttoned and unfastened her dress and underdress with swift, sure movements. Her shoes and garments were stripped from her in a few quick movements.

But the image faded and her

I've fallen back into the old

habits with surprising ease.

It didn't surprise her that
Veris knew his way around a lady's

undergarments.

She was left, kneeling again, naked on the furs and trembling with anticipation. Her breasts were

swollen and the nipples hardpeaked. Her hair brushed the small into it. "I love your hair like this," he growled and brought her mouth to his.

Their kiss was explosively hot

of her back. Veris thrust his hands

and frantic. Veris' tongue speared into her mouth as he held her head steady, exploring deeply. The kiss was different. Arousing, but

different from any other kiss Veris had ever given her. Abruptly, he broke the kiss

Abruptly, he broke the kiss and gently pulled her head away from his.

"My God..." he breathed. "I have been missing out." His chest was heaving. "If that was just a

simple kiss, heaven help me by the time we are done."

Then she realized. "No fangs," she whispered. "You don't have

not you, not really."

Veris drew back a little more.

fangs," she said more loudly. "It's

"Of course it is."

She shook her head. "You're

you inside. But you're not complete. You're not really, completely Veris that I love if you don't have the canines, if you don't

have to be careful about hurting me when you kiss me."

Veris' gaze dropped from hers.

He lifted his head again. Astonishingly, he was smiling. "I love you, Maggie Taylor Yates." He kissed her gently on the mouth, like he might if he was being careful with his canines, or just kissing her goodnight. "You have too much wisdom for a human as young as

you. You make me feel like a fool and at the same time incredibly

He pushed her hair over her

"I'm sorry," Taylor added. "I

know you adore the level eight sensations and being human, but I want the real you back. I want the

old Veris back."

grateful I met you."

wish. In the meantime, I intend to finish what I started." He lowered his head and brushed his lips over her carotid pulse. At any other time, it might have been arousing for Veris to feel the beat of her

shoulder. "We'll be back in our time soon enough. You'll have your

blood. Now it was only a caress of his lips against her flesh. She shivered.

His hands once more plunged into her hair, stroking it and controlling her head. He pulled her

head back gently, extending her throat and giving him access to it. His mouth and tongue moved hotly heat of his body was keeping her warm despite the chill of the air moving softly across the pond. It was a luxury to feel heat from Veris, but she still wanted the comfort of the familiar. This was alien and a novelty only.

across her flesh. Human heat. She shivered again, realizing that the

His lips explored lower, sending shivers and ripples across her flesh. As he nibbled and licked across her upper breasts, his hands brought her head back, supporting it. She was lowered down onto the fur, a tight bow with her calves tucked under her and her breasts

He fastened his lips upon one with a growl. His teeth nipped and

raised for Veris to feast upon.

tugged on the hard and sensitive nipple, as he slid his hands under her back, slowly moving them down to her buttocks.

Taylor gasped, her body blazing with need. There was a wicked wantonness in being utterly naked and writhing on furs in the outdoors while a fully dressed man played with her body.

Veris' fingers gripped her ass

cheeks, separating them, as he moved his mouth to her other nipple. He sucked on it, drawing it

his tongue.

Taylor moaned as she was swamped with heady, ripe

into his mouth and flicking it with

sensations of arousal. She could barely think beyond the need to have Veris' cock inside her. To be fucked fast. To come as hard as she could.

Her clit was throbbing with need.

She tried to reach for Veris,

but her arched position on the furs made it difficult. Veris pushed her arms back down.

His mouth left her breast. The nipple crinkled at the touch of the

night wind on its wet tip, making it cold. Veris pushed her knees as far

apart as they could go. She was spread so that her pussy and anus were completely open for Veris to access as he may. Her pussy was

Veris swept his tongue across her pussy and clit. Taylor cried out, her hips jerking upward. "Ah...delicious," he said with

weeping fluids.

a groan and did it again.

the fur desperately. "Veris!"

"Music," he crooned. He

Taylor moaned, her head rolling into the fur. She clutched at fingers into her pussy.

Taylor tried to lift herself off the fur in delight, but Veris held her down. His tongue played with her as his fingers worked a different magic. Taylor could feel

her orgasm rushing at her at express speed. "Veris, hurry. You...

sucked her clit into his mouth and at the same time pushed three

I want you." She was panting.
But Veris continued his assault unabated. Then his thumb slid into her anus, moistened with her own lubricant and she was lost. Her climax tore through her like a

silvered lightning bolt, making her

herself clenching about Veris' fingers as she shuddered and came.

The aftereffects of the climax

were still lingering when Veris lifted his tunics and undergarments aside, pulled out his cock and pushed it into her with a hard,

shriek with delight. She could feel

single driving thrust that made him groan and pause. His hands splayed out next to her head to support him.

"Heat..." he muttered.

back.

"You, too," she whispered

"You're like a velvet fist

around me." He swallowed. "In

many ways, this feels like the first time."

"In some ways, it is," she

murmured.

"It's astounding." He began to

thrust again, taking his time. Then even slower.

Taylor could feel her body

starting to tremble and respond to the stimulus even though she had just come. Her breathing hastened and her hips flexed. She clenched at the furs, trying to ride it out, to let Veris have his experience. But she shuddered and writhed desperately at his slow, gourmand pace. "Veris!" she warned. growing desperation all along. He'd been teasing her. Riding her. "Is it that you want to come, Tyra my lovely wife?"

"Damn your eyes! You know I do!" She gasped as he slid back into her, angling himself to kiss her clit

knew he'd been aware of her

He gave a low laugh and she

with the base of his cock.

He thrust both arms out, his hands on either side of her head. "Well, then," he said simply. He pushed his cock deep into her. Fast. His blue eyes locked with hers.

"Come around me. I want to feel

you come again."

his cock inside her, brought her. She climaxed with a harsh cry that Veris smothered with a kiss. Afterward, he lifted himself

up and she realized that he had

His voice, the low command,

been careful not to rest much weight on her at all. He helped her un-tuck her strained calves. Then he stood and unbuckled the belt around his waist. "I've discovered something else about being human that I'd long forgotten-on a personal basis, anyway." "What is that?" she asked, kneading her lower legs back to

life.

tunics over his head. He unstrapped the boots quickly and pulled them off, then the leggings and undergarments. "You don't have any scars, either," Taylor observed. Veris straightened up, dropping the last of his clothes on the pile at his feet. His cock was still ramrod hard and the head was beating against his stomach. She realized that he had not climaxed. "The scars are yet to come," Veris said, looking over his

shoulder to his back. "I leave the

"Sweat." He grinned and

dropped the belt, then pulled the

bidder anywhere, now I know that Marit is truly secure. Scars are part of the trade." He turned and walked straight into the water with

village two days from now and become a mercenary for the highest

no hesitation about how cold it might be. He hissed a little at the temperature, but that was all.

The pond was deceptively deep. It looked small and shallow

but a few steps beyond the shore, Veris sank down to his shoulders. He bathed with quick economy and emerged, streaming water from all over his body. His erection had not survived the dip in the cold water, told Taylor that was a situation that would soon be remedied.

She sat up as he climbed onto the furs.

but there was a light in his eye that

"What do *you* taste like as a human, hmm?" she asked and pushed at his shoulder.

pushed at his shoulder.

Veris lay down on the furs, letting her push him there. Taylor spread his thighs and snuggled

spread his thighs and snuggled between them and hid her smile as his cock twitched. She ignored it and instead leaned over to slide her

tongue over his chin. She was momentarily shocked to feel the rasp of whiskers. Then she licked down his strong neck and throat to his chest.

Veris drew in a breath.

"What?" Taylor asked, hesitating.

"Just more overwhelming

sensation," he told her. "Your tongue, your lips, your hair, your hands, your breath." He smiled.

"The heat of your body, the wind blowing over both of us... Should I continue?"

She laughed. "No." She bent to her work again, sliding her lips farther down his long body, toward

his cock which was now fully erect with anticipation and arousal. His

familiar with Veris' cock. She slid her lips over the head, letting it stretch her mouth open.

His hand touched her hair. Lightly. She felt his hand tremble.

"Have mercy, Taylor. I'm only human. Finish me quickly," he begged.

Like he had finished her?

cock was exactly as she knew it to be and Taylor was intimately

She took her time. After four years, she knew exactly how to drive Veris crazy with her mouth. The seam on the underside of his cock was particularly sensitive for

Veris, even when he was a vampire.

mad. Taylor spent minutes stroking the seam with her tongue as her lips bumped up and down over the ridge of flesh that made the head of his cock. At the same time, she cupped his testicles and reached underneath to stroke his perineum.

Now, in human form, it drove him

Occasionally, she flicked her tongue inside the eye of his cock.

She kept her rhythm nice and slow, enough to have him tugging at the furs and rolling his head back

slow, enough to have him tugging at the furs and rolling his head back as he made hard, low sounds in the back of his throat, his chest heaving as he gasped for air. He could barely keep still. distended cock.

He gave a cry as she slid down upon him, his hands clutching at her hips.

Taylor swiveled her hips, clenching around him.

"Ah dear güd." Veris thrust up

close to the point of no return, she spread herself over his hips and lowered herself upon his throbbing,

When Taylor judged he was

seed spurting into her in hot jets as his hips lifted her.

He fell back onto the fur and Taylor relaxed, but with a growl he

into her. Once, twice and with a shout he came. She could feel his around so that she was on her hands and knees.

Taylor's hair fell down around her shoulders. She barely had time to brush it out of her face before

Veris spread her knees and his cock slammed back into her, almost as hard and hot as before. Within three thrusts he was hard again. "I'm not done with you yet." His voice was thick with arousal and

flexed up into a sitting position without using his hands, showing the promise of the strength that ten years of mercenary work would bring to the fore. His hands, still on her hips, lifted her and flipped her hunger was sustaining her own.

His fingers slipped into her cleft and stroked her clit. Taylor gasped at the electrifying pleasure his touch sent bolting through her. He stroked, making her wriggle

and her hips buck. Then, when her climax neared, he changed his thrusts to hard, heavy, deep ones. His fingers on her clit began to

just the sound of it was enough to trip off Taylor's own barely subsided needs. Veris was feeding them, somehow. His insatiable

gently pull.

Taylor arched her back, threw her head back and screamed as her

he came with her. She could actually feel his cum inside her, pooling in her vagina like molten lava, even as her body disintegrated

climax seemed to rip her apart. Veris' hand gripped her shoulder as

around him.

She found herself on her knees, her back against Veris' chest, panting, as she recovered.

Veris turned her chin so he could reach her lips from over her shoulder. His were warm. "One of these days we will resolve this silly marriage issue," he said.

"We're already as married as you vampires count it," she pointed

"I want to be married to you as we humans count it," Veris replied.

out, tiredness tugging at her.

"Not if I can't be married to Brody as well, and not if you can't be, too."

"Brody and I are as married as two people can be," Veris said.

"Then why can't that do for you and me?" Taylor asked. She

smiled sadly. "Because I'm human?" Veris looked away.

* * * *

Taylor blinked in the dark. There were street lights outside, but it was utterly dark here. She felt stiff and very sore. "Taylor?" It was Veris somewhere next to her.

"Can you see where we are?" she asked. Her voice was stiff and scratchy.

"We're on the upstairs library landing. Stay still. You're all scrunched up with books around

you."

She heard movement. Then light came on. She was lying on the carpet on the upstairs landing, her legs at odd angles, surrounded by half a dozen old books. The same books she had been carrying when birthplace in old Norway.

Veris, more able to overcome stiffness, hurried back to help her up and sit her on the padded stool against the wall. "We must have

fallen to the floor and laid here for the day and the night we were back there," Veris said, sitting next to

they jumped back to Veris'

her. "Instead of mimicking movements like we normally do." Taylor swallowed. Her throat was very dry. She looked at Veris. His gaze slid away from hers.

He went to get up. "I'll get you

"I don't need water." She

some water."

He sat back heavily. He stared at his hands.

"Veris."

He closed his eyes. "Marit," he breathed and put his face in his hands.

Taylor let her tears flow then.

Veris wouldn't have any to shed.

He looked up after a minute

and touched her face. "Can you

She nodded. "I thought you

He pulled her into his lap and

spare some of those for me?"

might need them."

caught at his hand and pulled him back down to the bench. "Veris,

stop."

compromise I hate, Tyra."

"I know, Väinä. I know."

His breath caught. After a moment, he began to breathe again.

held her tight. "This is another

And after a while, he had the courage to let her go again.

Neither of them had the courage to tell Brody about that particular jump.

Chapter Four

Taylor stared down at the diary entry as she finished her green tea lemonade. Veris was the father of her baby, then. It was ironic. He'd

been missing for two weeks now. The lecture series had been over for ten days, but Veris hadn't arrived home on the expected flight. The limousine had returned empty.

Brody had received the news in silence. His first reaction had been to glance at her. Then, nothing. No reaction at all. Taylor

But this news put everything into a whole new class of...not quite urgent. Importance? What if Veris had gone off on one of his decade long breaks? Taylor's heart gave a queer ierk. Brody's tight-lipped silence about Veris wasn't reassuring on that point. She simply had to find out more from Brody. A feminine hail, light and

knew he was muffling his responses. Hiding them, for her sake. It both bothered and touched

her.

was on served the hospital where her doctor's office was located, not far from the main entrance—a very strategic location. The sexy blonde woman was

tall, lean and drop-dead gorgeous, wearing the latest in designer

throaty, caught her attention. She lifted her head from the diary to look. The road the Starbucks branch

sundresses in dazzling, trafficstopping red, that stopped just short of showing off what was sure to be the latest in designer underwear, too. Her legs were, Taylor admitted, gorgeous. Tanned,

endless and finished with strappy

stilettos even Taylor wouldn't mind owning. Red, of course. Plus red toenails to match. She was leaning against a convertible sports car with the top down, wearing sunglasses and lipstick that matched her dress. As Taylor lifted her head, the blonde waved enthusiastically toward someone emerging from the hospital to catch their attention. Then she dived between cars, causing at least one driver to stomp on his brakes and slam to a stop. She made the curb on the other side, flashing plenty of thigh, kept running and threw herself at the doctor as he stepped out of the within viewing distance that theirs was not a nodding acquaintance by any stretch of the imagination.

The doctor returned the kiss with enthusiasm, his hands on her ass. He slid one hand down her

thigh and back up so it was under

the dress.

second set of sliding doors. She wrapped one long leg around his thigh and kissed him with a thoroughness that told everyone

Taylor could feel the green tea lemonade trying to come back up her throat.

The doctor was Dr. Edward Cruz, who had been so cut up about They shared another intimate kiss before the blonde pulled the car out from the curb and drove away.

Taylor closed her diary. It was time to go home.

blonde climb into the convertible.

his wife's malignant brain tumor.

Taylor watched Cruz and the

All the way home she kept seeing Cruz's hands on the blonde. The knowledge burned that he wouldn't have pulled that stunt if

Brody or Veris had been with her at

* * * *

the examination.

Brody watched Taylor walk into the library from his seat on the few weeks of record heat and the stresses of her new job at the state library, she had lost more than a few pounds. Enough to be noticeable.

He sat up from the slouch

balcony and for a moment it was like watching a stranger walk into the room. She had lost weight, he realized with a start. Over the last

he'd fallen into while he'd been reading. Who was he kidding? Veris' absence was mostly responsible for her wasting away before his eyes.

He felt like a bastard for only just now noticing it. Someone who

sooner. Veris would have.
Yes, but Veris wouldn't have been dodging her in the first place,

cared more would have noticed

would he?
Self-loathing circled through
him. Brody put the book on the

floor beside the low-slung chair. He'd lost all interest in it now.

Taylor came up to him. "Thought you'd be here," she said

"Thought you'd be here," she said softly. "Can I interrupt?"

Even the question made him

feel guilty. "Of course," he said roughly. He studied her face more closely. She was ghostly white, to the point where he could pick out Good God, what had he and Veris driven her to?

"You've been working too hard," he said, probing.

the tracery of veins under her skin.

"Perhaps," she said lightly. She pulled over the padded bench and perched on one side of it. She

spread her hand on the empty

space next to it, her mouth curving up in a small smile that made him think, oddly, of Veris. Had they had sex on that bench? He made a mental note to ask Veris one day.

Taylor looked at Brody and there was a tiny line between her brows. "Do you know where Veris is?"

Bingo, Brody thought. Then he mentally sighed. He wanted to slug Veris square on the jaw for what he was doing right now.

"Truth, Taylor?" he said. "I

Her face fell. The change of expression was so dramatic, Brody was alarmed. He held up his hand.

have no fucking idea."

"That doesn't mean we don't have resources to dig the bastard up if we have to."

She hesitated. "What does

that mean, exactly?" she asked.

Brody sighed. *Jesus*. He so wanted to kill Veris now. If the old

Taylor's face, he'd be back here in a heartbeat, groveling on the floor at her feet begging forgiveness. Instead, he'd left Brody to deal with her. Brody wasn't Veris and she wanted Veris.

There was no way to explain the truth to her and have her accept it, because for her, it wasn't

Viking could see the look on

it, because for her, it wasn't acceptable. Just waiting around for Veris to work out whatever the hell he had to work out then come home, fuck his brains out when he did and move on...that wouldn't go over with Taylor. It couldn't. As Taylor had pointed out, she didn't

Brody pushed his hand through his hair. "Shit, I don't know how to explain all this stuff. Veris is good at it. *You're* good at it. You two are the brains. I just go along for the ride, remember?" Taylor shook her head. "You're better at it than you think. You're the son of a bard and you have poetry in your soul. You understand feelings. You understand people. That's why you and Veris get along so well. You do know this stuff. You know words very well indeed. So just tell me.

have the timeline they did.

Tell me your way."

wasn't going to let him off the hook. So he ruffled his hair again and sat forward. "Look... I was a slave for seventeen years. I know what it means to be afraid of being

locked into a relationship that is too tight. So does Veris. He negotiated

He blew out his cheeks. Taylor

your independence before you stepped foot through that door, four years ago, remember?" He inclined his head toward the front door.

Taylor nodded. She was independently wealthy now and didn't need to work a single day of

her life if she didn't want to, thanks

"I've known Veris a very long time," Brody continued. "We took a long while to figure things out

to Veris.

smooth." He grinned. "Still isn't." Taylor smiled. It was weak, but it was there.

between us. It wasn't always

"You need to figure that stuff out for yourself, too. This is the start of it." He picked up her hand. "I love you very, very much. As

much as I love Veris. I would never want to have to choose between the two of you. I don't think I could anymore." "But," she said softly.

He smiled. "You keep saying you want Veris the way I have him, but you keep trying to grip too tight." She shook her head. "No, I don't. That's where you're wrong." Surprise touched him. "Why?" "He wants to marry me." Brody sat back as something hot and hard skewered his chest. "Did you say yes?"

"I said I would marry him only if I could marry you, too."

"Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Marry me?"

"Is that a proposal, Brody?" Her gray eyes seemed to grow larger as she watched him. He swallowed. "It's academic

anyway. This world will only let you marry one man and neither of us are really men to begin with.

Besides, in our world you're more permanently bonded to both of us than any of today's marriages appear to last." He shrugged.

Taylor nodded slowly. "So Veris tells me." Brody sighed. "He's never

turned anyone." Her chin jerked up and her

eyes seemed to get even larger.

Brody grimaced. "In nearly sixteen hundred years, Veris has avoided making anyone a vampire. He won't do it." Taylor's breath pushed out in a rush. "Oh my..." She frowned. "Because of you?" she asked. "Were you...forced?" Brody shook his head. "Not unless you consider a choice

"Excuse me?"

between death or vampirism as being forced."

"It was another slave that made you, wasn't it?"

Brody nodded. "And you and Veris didn't "The first crusade."

"Even though you were both in Britain in the fifth century."

meet until the crusades."

Brody grinned. "It happens. Angelina Jolie and I are both in the

United States right now, too, but I doubt we'll ever meet."

Taylor smiled a little. "Don't

discount your own fame. She might like Death Metal music. Your band is fantastically popular in North America and you get mobbed whenever you go to Europe"

whenever you go to Europe"

"I won't hold my breath on it," Brody said. He brushed Taylor's hair out of her eyes. "I don't know

to kill him myself, except that it would upset you. I've tried the hotels he's supposed to be staying at, but he checked out. He's gone to ground and I've lost track of him. We spent years touring around Europe before the band got known here and we've got contacts all over the place over there. Veris knows... six, seven modern languages. He's got four current passports and sets of ID that I know about. He could be anywhere. I gave up trying to trace him two days ago." Her smile this time was radiant. "You've been trying,

why Veris is staying away. I'd like

though." Brody sighed again. "Yes." "You wouldn't, normally, would you?" "No. I'd let him sulk and kick his ass when he came home." "So you were doing it for me." "Well, yes." He shrugged. She slipped into his lap and that told him exactly how much weight she had lost. She was a featherweight on his thighs. "If ever you got around to asking me to marry you, I would say yes, Brody Gallagher. You're too good for me, but I'd say yes anyway." Brody caught his breath in pleased delight, just as she kissed him.

The dry, dry heat was his first warning. That and the noise of dozens, if not hundreds of hammers on wood, the braying of horses and donkeys. Brody opened

his eyes to dazzling sunlight and shut them, giving his too-sensitive vampire vision a chance to adjust. Taylor's lips were still against

Taylor's lips were still against his. "I'm not wearing a red shirt," she murmured.

Relief flooded him. "Then you'll live long and prosper," he said. "Wait a moment," he added.

"It's too bright for me. I have to adapt."

She slid her arm around his neck, giving him the time he

requested. He felt the touch of cloth. Smelled bergamot. More impressions registered. Voices.

Many of them. Languages. Accents. Arabic, Farsi, old Latin. And Medieval French. Lots of it.

That alone was almost enough to tell him where they were. "There's a walled city nearby," he murmured.

"Yes. And people standing along the walls, firing arrows." Her lips brushed against his. To the rest

privacy he needed to let his eyes adjust to the blinding harshness of the Middle East in high summer.

He sighed. "Then I know where we are. Holy Mother." Slowly, he began to open his eyes.

There was a loud clearing of a

of the world they would look like they were kissing. It gave him the

throat nearby. "Clearly, I'm interrupting," came the familiar voice.

Brody turned, alarm slamming through him. Taylor

gasped behind him.

Veris stood a dozen paces away. He wore a red and black

gauntleted hand, unconsciously controlling the fretful animal. His blue eyes blazed in the bright sun as he looked from Brody to Taylor and back. "You are Brendan, Raymond's man, are you not?" Veris asked. Brody nodded. "I am." Veris looked past him again. "You brought your lady wife with you all this way?"

Brody glanced at Taylor over

tunic with a red crest on the breast, over a black mail hauberk and a long sword strapped to his hip. His visor was under his arm and he held a war horse by the other Brody spotted the crest on the center of her gown. Her bliaut, he recalled from memory.

His crest. He fought the need to look down at his own tunic to

his shoulder. She was dressed in the clothes of a landed woman. Then

confirm the blue and white crest was repeated there. He knew it was.

Taylor was staring at Veris with wide, shocked eyes.

"You are William, with Selkirk, who is camped with Godfrey of Bouillon on the north side of Jerusalem," Brody prompted, turning back to Veris.

said. He looped the reins of his horse around a lump of blasted and sun-bleached rock that was weighing down the rope holding up the pole of the tent behind them. The tent was emblazoned with Brody's colors, too. Veris pulled off his gauntlets and held out his right hand. Brody took the offered hand, staring into Veris' eyes. There was no recognition there. Nothing. Taylor stepped up to Brody's side. He could feel the fine

trembling in her as she stared at

"I am. Most who call me

friend call me Will, though," Veris

She either didn't understand or didn't care. "Sir, would you permit me an indelicacy?" she said to Veris. He seemed puzzled. He looked her over with a flicker of his

blue eyes. "If I must," he said

"Tyra, this is not the time,"

dismissively.

Veris. He reached under the deep looping sleeves of her bliaut and

squeezed her wrist in warning.

Brody said softly. There were too many witnesses. Knights tending their weapons nearby. Pages caring for horses and running errands. Footmen, soldiers, cavalrymen, far the heat of the day that would soak up the gossip Taylor was about to create.

She reached up on tiptoe, her

too many witnesses lolling about in

veil thankfully hiding her actions from most of the people nearby. Her fingertips rested against Veris' jaw and she kissed him. It was no

light, chaste peck. Brody knew from

personal experience that Taylor threw her mind, body and soul into her kisses and the impact was devastating to the recipient. Veris—Will—had never experienced one of Taylor's kisses before. If anything

was going to bring the modern

Veris broke the kiss and staggered back a few paces. He stared at Taylor, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "An indelicacy?" he said, sounding utterly outraged. He turned eyes blazing with fury upon Brody. "Keep your woman contained,

Veris back to the past, this would.

Norwich." He picked up the horse's reins and mounted, then turned the horse until he was looking at Brody again. His gaze was direct and angry. "I believe we were at crosspurposes. I must have misunderstood. I won't make that mistake again. Good day."

He turned the horse and wheeled away.

Fright tore through Brody. He lifted his hand to halt Veris. "Wait!"

he called. But it was too late. The horse was already galloping away and the sound was loud on the dried-out land.

Taylor watched Veris gallop away on the horse and felt a sense of panic. Kissing either one of them had *always* worked to bring them into the past before.

Brody whirled to face her and the despair on his face told its own story. This was worse than she He grabbed her arm and hurried her into the tent behind them. She found she was tripping over the hem of her dress until she thought to lift the front of it as she

thought. Something was wrong beyond simply failing to bring Veris

back to the past.

slapped his thigh.

walked.

astonishingly luxurious and stiflingly hot. She gasped at the still warmth, feeling sweat break out on her temples.

Brody walked a pace or two, then back. The sword at his side

The inside of the tent was

you didn't figure it out, that was the moment Veris and I..." He took a breath. "Got together," he finished. He pushed his hands through his short hair. "Or when we were supposed to in our true pasts."

He rounded on her. "In case

Taylor wrapped her hands around her middle. "But you didn't, just then. Because of me.

Because he saw me." "Right." Brody kept pacing.

Taylor sank down onto a chest with a flat carved lid. "Oh, God, Brody, this is awful. He said he wouldn't be back."

misinterpreted."

Brody nodded. "We had a moment earlier today. He was following up. He wasn't misinterpreting at all. In the real past, I was alone." He threw himself into a big wooden chair and

he

"He thought

"Right."

Taylor really was starting to feel ill now and wondered if it was something to do with the baby.

put his head in his hands. "Oh fuck,

Then a more terrible thought struck her. "If you two don't ever get together, if we don't fix this, then what happens? Do I never get to meet you in the future? Do we as a relationship suddenly cease to exist?"

Brody lifted his head and

looked at her. It took him a long time to answer. Eventually he said slowly "I suppose...yes. We do. If the time travelling we do is real, like Veris claims and not just in our minds, like the queen seems to think, then yes, we'll cease to exist as a relationship. Veris and I don't get together, so you never meet us in the twenty-first century."

Taylor already knew that the time travel they did was real. The

will cease to exist too, she thought. She clutched at the edges of the chest as dizziness swept through

proof of it sat in her uterus. My baby

her. "Then we have to win Veris back for you, don't we?" she said. Even to her, her voice sounded wobbly. Brody gave a harsh, hollow

laugh. "You're talking about

manipulating the most uncooperative man on the planet, the man who has never had a true master, remember?"

She pushed forward on the chest. "I'm talking about seducing a

man. That's a different sort of

manipulation."

"I didn't seduce him the first time. He hunted me. Veris would never consent to being the prey."

consent to it this time, isn't he?" Taylor snapped. "We're possibly

"Well, he's going to have to

running out of time. Between the two of us, we know every erotic weakness Veris has. If we can't seduce him, no one can."

"We?" Brody repeated, sitting up in the chair.

the cry from a dozen voices outside the tent. At the same time, the sides of the tent began to shiver as

"Fatimids! Fatimids!" came

English. He picked up a bow and slung a quiver of arrows over his shoulder. "Stay here," he said, his voice flat. "You're mortal. I'm not." He dropped the tent flap down

behind him, leaving her in virtual

"Fuck!" Brody muttered in

something slapped it repeatedly.

darkness and with nothing but the shouting and slapping against the tent to listen to.

There was a sharp tearing sound and a clatter nearby and

Taylor finally lifted the tent flap to see what had happened.

An arrow lay next to her feet.

They were shooting holes

through her tent. Taylor picked up the arrow and stepped out of the tent. It was

of no protection to her, anyway. Instead, she ducked down behind a row of bags of seed that had arrows sticking out of the sides of them and watched over the top.

There was a lot of fighting happening on and around wooden equipment close by. There were a lot of bodies swarming over the equipment but gradually Taylor could make out the basic shape and recognized it from history books

movies. Siege engines... incomplete siege engines.

happening and her memory supplied the rest of the information from her study of history. This was the first crusade when the Fatimids controlled Jerusalem and the western powers

Then she realized what was

marched on the city and laid siege. They broke the city in July 1099 by cannibalizing one of their ships and building siege engines from the wood. Brody would have to give her the exact date.

But the Fatimids clearly weren't happy with the idea of the western allies building siege

engines and were trying to stop

Raymond and his men, including Brody, were beating off the Fatimids and protecting the engines.

Taylor sought for and found Brody's tall figure among the allies. In his blue and white tunic, he

them from completing them.

stood out. She was shocked to realize he was liberally daubed in blood and the blades of his sword and knife were red with it. He was fighting as hard as the men he directed, and shouting orders at the same time in a parade ground voice she could hear from her sheltered position behind the seed bags.

She didn't see the Fatimids give up but suddenly, they all laid down their arms and were backing away from the engines.

The fight stopped abruptly.

A group of five of the

Fatimids was forced to their knees in front of Brody and another man with red hair and a green tunic that Taylor guessed was Raymond, Brody's superior. Brody had an

arrow sticking out of his left arm. She hadn't seen that happen. He was leaning on his sword as if he were tired as he spoke to the men kneeling before him.

The Fatimids spoke quietly,

never lifting their gaze from the ground at their knees.

Brody moved with lightning-fast speed. He lifted the sword,

swung it and decapitated the man and was walking away all before Taylor barely began to react. She clapped her hand over her

mouth, sure that this time she

would be physically sick. But Brody reached the tent itself and she found she had not moved from her crouch on the ground.

Brody leaned on the sword, looking at her. "You didn't stay in the tent," he growled. Even his face

had blood sprayed on it.

through the tent. I figured I was just as safe out here, behind these seed bags. They're like sandbags." She stared at him. Brody was nothing like she had ever seen before. Not from him. She let her gaze settle on the arrow. "Do you want me to tend to that?" "No, thanks." He pushed into the tent. "Mordacai!" A small man with tight black curls hurried in after him and Taylor followed in behind. "My lord?" Mordacai asked

"I need the wound kit and

Brody.

"The arrows were shooting

let's open up the tent."

Taylor sank back down onto the chest again. "What can I do?"

"Help me get everything off around this arrow," Brody said shortly, as he worked at his sword belt.

She rose again and worked the belt undone, then eased the bloody tunic off. The hauberk unlaced at the shoulders, but the arrow pierced the sleeve, so Brody shook his head. "It stays until the arrow is out. Just get my gauntlets off for me. Flexing the muscle hurts right now." "Just hurts?" she asked.

"It's not fatal. Nothing is," he added softly for her ears only. "Except spears. The spears here are basically wooden stakes with metal tips. One of those through the chest is a stake through the heart." He caught her eye. "I saved Veris from one this morning." He grimaced. "We recognized each other as vampire immediately." Mordacai hurried in with a wooden box which he placed next

"Just hurts," he confirmed.

to Brody and hurried away.

"That's why you liked each other?" Taylor asked.

"No." He blew out his breath.

"It's Veris. You tell me why you first liked him."

She tugged the gauntlets off his hands. "Because he's so large he

sucks all the air out of any room he's in. Because you can't look away when he's there. Because he's

Veris."

"Exactly," Brody said dryly.
"Sometimes, I wonder what he saw

in me."

"You say he and you were fighting this morning?" Taylor

asked. "Yes."

Taylor thought of what she had seen of Brody out there just

leading his men. The ruthless leader who had just summarily executed the leader of the opposing side and barely remembered it now. The man who was now gripping the arrow stuck in his arm with pliers and was... "What are you doing?" she asked, alarmed. "Pushing it through." "What?" He held out the pliers. "It's my non-dominant hand and it's been centuries. You'll have to do it." She backed up a step. "Do

now, bawling out orders and

what?"

"Push the arrow through and cut off the head, so you can pull it back out."

All around them, the sides of the tent were falling on the ground as servants unlaced them from the roof and rolled them up. It left a filmy layer of thinnest gauze as the walls.

rounded-head pliers. "Either you do it, or someone from this time who has no idea about infections and cleanliness does it," he said.

"You can't get infections," she said, but took the pliers anyway.

Brody hefted the big,

"You'll be more gentle than anyone else," he added.

You don't feel as much pain in

Brody held out his arm.

vampire form. It was on the tip of her tongue, but she held it back at the last second. Now was not the time to begin that conversation.

Brody placed his hand on her shoulder and the other on the arm of the chair. Taylor swallowed hard. "I don't believe I'm doing this," she muttered and took a good

grip on the arrow.
"Do it fast," he told her.

She put hard pressure on the shaft and felt it move through the

and breathed hard and kept pushing. The flesh beneath was the worst, because it stretched before it gave way. Taylor was nearly hyperventilating when it was done. Brody, too. But his voice was calm. He pushed the links of the chainmail up his arm to expose the metal head of the arrow, now red with his blood. He gripped the other side of it with his other hand. "Use the heavy sheers to cut it off," he told her. "You're nearly done." She picked up the sheers, still

breathing heavily. With a series of

tissues in his arm. Nausea swept over her, but she gritted her jaw the arrow. She made sure there were no splinters hanging from the end of the arrow. Brody pulled it out of his arm. It made a sucking sound.

cuts, she sawed the metal head off

Taylor clapped her hand over her mouth. "Where?" she tried to say, looking around wildly. He pointed. There was a covered bucket sitting in the corner.

She staggered over to it, pulled off the lid and vomited hard and tiredly into it. When she was finished, she put the lid back on and pulled herself back onto the chest.

Brody was naked from the waist up and wrapping a bandage around his arm. He was scowling.

"You're angry?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"For heaven's sake, now is not the time to be coy about anything.

If we're to get out of this, we have to stick together. I've got to know what you're thinking. All the time, not just when it's convenient for you."

"You won't like what I'm

thinking," he told her.

"I'm a big girl. I can handle hearing things I don't like. Stop being the peacemaker for once."

She bit her lip. "You try to protect me. A lot. Mostly from Veris."

"I just know what he can be like."

She leaned forward. "News

flash. After four years, so do I."

bandage, startled. "Is that what I

do?"

He looked up from the

in Europe caught you by surprise."

She shook her head. "Surprise,
no. I knew about them. Distress,
yes. But not for the reasons you
think. I'm working it out. Just not

it. Not all of it. His disappearing act

"Not really. Not the worst of

course I'm going to work it out a different way." She tilted her head. "So what are you going to tell me that I won't like?"

He tied off the bandage using

the way you and Veris work it out. I'm female and I'm human. Of

He tied off the bandage using his teeth and the fingers of his right hand and sat back. "I've always suspected you held a romanticized view of me. 'Brody the poet.' Today just confirmed it. You don't see me

by what happened here just now. You would have accepted it as part of who I am. You would have

at all. Not the real me. If you did you wouldn't have been so shocked slave, I'm a soldier. I'm just a savage who happened to strike it lucky and ended up owning land and a title when it counted. Veris was the educated one, for all he didn't write a word. Even before he left Norway he could speak five languages. Who do you think taught me to speak Saxon? Arabic? Greek?" Taylor recoiled. "That's what you think I believe of you?" "I know it. You're looking at the wrong person if you're looking at me to be the gentle one." He

picked up his hauberk and tunic

known that's what I'm like. I was a

and undershirt with his good hand and his sword belt with his injured one. "I'm going to find out where Selkirk is camped and what Veris is doing. I was a good hunter myself, once. Time to unpack old skills." His gaze slid from her face. "I don't know how long we'll be left in this time, Taylor. Pray it's long enough to fix this. If we jump back before

Veris commits to me, then we jump

back to non-existence."

Chapter Five

was clearly Taylor's side of the tent. There was a pair of beautifully painted five panel dividers, arranged to provide privacy for changing when the heavy tent sides were taken down, as they were now. There was a chair made comfortable with cushions and even a bed that must have been carried all the way from England just for her convenience. There

The tent was divided into half

by a panel of gauze. The other side

were two big chests of clothes and smaller boxes of possessions. The costs and logistics involved in carting such luggage shocked her. No wonder Veris had been so disdainful about bringing a woman on crusade. For the first time, Taylor realized that for this time and age, Brody had to be a man of influence and means, especially to be able to afford to bring such burdens as a wife and her luggage with him. The huge tent, the servants and the crest she wore meant Brody had his

own lands and they supported him

very well indeed.

And he considered himself to be a savage?

A woman with a much smaller crest on her gown stepped

into the tent and through to

Taylor's side and dropped her head down low. "My lady," she murmured. "M' lord said you were looking for me. I'm sorry, I fell asleep. It's this heat." She straightened up and cast her eye

over Taylor. "You'll be needing to dress for dinner."

Taylor looked out at the blazing sun, which was noticeably lower in the sky. "My husband wants a formal dinner tonight?"

showed wisdom beyond the few years the woman seemed to possess. "With all the rationing, I don't think dinner will be anything much at all. But we must try, hmm?"

The woman smiled. The smile

When Taylor insisted on bathing first, the woman was shocked. Then she explained that water was even

more severely rationed than food.

Taylor shed layers of gown and undergown as the woman—
Taylor could not directly ask her what her name was—fetched the jug of water that was Taylor's share

cupfuls into a laver. Taylor used that water to wash herself while standing on a cloth behind the screens, then let herself air dry. In the torrid heat she dried in a few minutes. She discovered when she unplaited her hair that it reached her ass. The woman combed through it with quick, practiced motions, barely tugging at all. Taylor marveled over the length and thickness of it. "Veris would

"Excuse me, m'lady?" the

love this," she murmured.

woman asked.

for the evening and poured two

"Nothing," Taylor said quickly. She realized she had spoken English. The woman had put out another full chemise and bliaut for

Taylor to wear. The chemise looked to be made of some delicate cotton while the bliaut was rich with

embroidery and with the heavy full sleeves.

Taylor shook her head. "I'm

not wearing that. It's too hot."

"It's a formal evening gown."

The woman shrugged. "The chemise is the lightest you have."

"I'll wear that, then."

The woman looked relieved

"Haven't I got a robe or something simple to wear over the top?" Taylor asked. "Or is all I have here bliauts?" The woman frowned. "Robe,

and picked it up.

m'lady?"

"Something light that covers me, but isn't constricting."

"Like the tunics your husband

wears?"

Taylor laughed. "That's perfect! Go and get one from his

chest. And the sheers!" She slipped into the delicate, cool chemise. It had a rounded neck and clung to her body from neck to hip. The

little to the imagination. In the twenty-first century, it could even be called seductive.

The woman brought one of Brody's blue and white tunics to

material was so fine it left very

Taylor, along with the sheers. The tunic was laid out with light blue and white squares on the left and white and light blue on the right, which left a perfectly straight line right down the center for her to cut along.

She tried the "robe" on. It was too large around the neck and had a tendency to slide off one or other shoulder, but if she tied her belt "Put the gown away," Taylor told the woman. "I'll wear that the night we have a real dinner." The cantering of a horse warned her of someone's approach

and she found herself looking around hopefully to the north. When she saw the blue and white of Brody's tunic, her heart skipped

He threw his reins to a page,

a beat. He'd returned.

around the waist, it served well enough. It was a more comfortable substitute than the bliaut. She could slide into it in thirty seconds and it left her free to wear just the chemise while she was in the tent. his gauntlets to another along with a murmured order and strode into the tent.

The woman bowed her head.

"My thanks, Mary," Brody told her. "Go get yourself some supper. You're dismissed for the evening."

"Thank you, my lord," the woman told him and slid past him. Brody didn't even look at her.

Mary, Taylor catalogued, as she ran her gaze over Brody, taking in the broad shoulders that the long hair and heavy metal clothes usually diminished. He wasn't

hugely muscled like Veris, but he

was very strong, all the same. Some time since he had strode, fuming, from the tent and his return, he had washed off the blood and dirt.

But he still looked angry.

"You didn't see him," Taylor guessed.

Brody shook his head.
"I'm sorry."
He made an impatient sound.

"Don't."

"Don't what? Apologize? This is partly my fault. You tried to tell

is partly my fault. You tried to tell me not to kiss him right then. If I'd listened, then maybe it would have gone okay."

"Damn it, Taylor, don't." He of it. "I lay on a ridge and watched his camp and couldn't see a sign of him. All I'm supposed to be worrying about right now is Veris and getting him back. Yet I look at you in that chemise with your hair

loose and the only thing I can think about is dragging you down to the

lifted up his hand and made a fist

ground and fucking you until you mewl for mercy." Her heart seemed to stop for a moment. Then it hurried on, faster

than before.

"You like my hair, too?" she asked. She didn't dare move in case she broke the spell. Brody wasn't

pissed at her right now. She wanted to keep it that way. Brody made a choked, almost

desperate sound. "I can feel my hands sliding into it. I can see locks of your hair spread about after I've made you scream my name. Yes, I

like your hair." She licked her lips. "Then,

when – if – we get back, I am never cutting my hair again."

His jaw rippled. "Veris told you the same thing, didn't he?" She nodded.

Brody looked away. "I know what he saw in you the first time, Brody."

His black eyes narrowed as he looked back at her. "He told you that, too?"

"No, but I saw it today, I think." She threaded her hands

together. "You were right, a little bit. I do tend to think of you as the bard. But not in a bad way. Not in a weak way. I think you underestimate yourself by calling

yourself a savage." She waved her hand around the tent. "You're supporting how many people? You

speak and write how many languages now? Right now in this year, 1099, before you met Veris?" Brody's mouth opened a little. "Yes it *does* count! God damn it, you're *just* as stubborn as he is!" She shook her head. "Why does toting up Veris' achievements make him smart, but it doesn't mean the

him smart, but it doesn't mean the same thing for you?" She stared at him, daring him to refute her.

Brody cleared his throat and gave the half-sheepish shrug he

always gave when he knew he was

cornered. His mouth curled up at one corner. "I supposed it doesn't count because I'm just as stubborn." She fought not to laugh. She had a point to make and wouldn't let herself get sidetracked. "Thank

need Veris to shrug off any traces of savagery or slavery. You did it all just fine by yourself. Today, I watched you as a leader of men, out there when the Fatimids tried to take down the siege engine." His glance flickered to where the wooden structures stood like forlorn abandoned structures, except that guards patrolled their

you," she said simply. "You didn't

"You saw...all of it?" he asked. She nodded and he winced. "Now I begin to understand your reactions this afternoon. That, then tending the wound, so closely

base.

together. I asked too much of you. Women of this century are raised to He thought she couldn't

handle the bloodiness of his work. The reality of what he was. They were back to that again. He couldn't know she had been sick

because of the baby. Now was not the time to tell him. Taylor hurried to correct his impression. "Yes, you're ruthless,"

she said quickly. "I think that's why you think of yourself as still a

savage. Leaders are ruthless. It

comes with the job. But Veris

would know the difference and I

think that's what he saw in you."

Brody drew in a sharp breath.
She had surprised him.

"He saw you as a leader," she added, "A successful man who came from the worst of beginnings. A man who hasn't lost his soul

along the way. The bard is still in you. Veris would have seen that and for Veris, that would make you almost irresistible. I know it does

for me."

Brody hung his head for moment. He shook it then lifted his chin to look her in the eye. "You're astonishing. I insult you and head

off to seduce another man and

when I come back, you do nothing but praise me and put me on a pedestal."

"You deserve it."

He shook his head again. "Now I'm starting to feel like

you're the one stealing the oxygen, Maggie Taylor Yates."

There was a clearing of a throat and they both looked around. The page boy stood at the

entrance to the tent, his back to them, holding something. Brody called, "Come!" in

The boy entered, carefully carrying the metal plate. It held

French.

asked them to give you my portion, too."

She smiled at him. "I remember that from the history books. Thank you." She took the plate and smiled at the boy and thanked him in French. It was easier to speak in French than English, which took conscious

effort to use. But using it with Brody made their conversations

"Use my chair," Brody told

perfectly secure.

"Your supper," Brody

explained. He switched to English. "There is very tight rationing. I

food.

"Clean by our standards or crusades standards?"
"Ours." He held it out.
"Boiling water for twenty minutes.
They think I'm crazy."

Food would be a problem here if she was pregnant and it was rationed. She would have to be

She ate, suddenly ravenous.

her and pulled over a small folding table. "And my knife. It's clean

now."

careful about hoarding handfuls to ward off sickness if it struck.

"Tell me about you and Veris.
How it was really meant to go," she asked as she ate. "We need to plan

"You know this story," Brody said.

"The broad strokes, sure. You've never given me the full-on tiny details. Neither has Veris."

how to get things back the way

they should be."

"Really? I'm surprised." Brody pulled the chest over closer to the table. "You're the storyteller,"

Taylor pointed out.

Brody grinned and unbuckled his sword belt. He reached around

her to hang it over the back of the chair. As he did so, he kissed her cheek. "And I don't even mind the

"It's called truth."

"When I use the truth, people just get insulted." He unfastened his belt and dropped it beside his

chair.

"You use it like a weapon. You use it to wound."

Brody paused from lifting the tunic over his head to glance at her. "More truth, huh?"

She smiled. "Tell me about when you saw Veris for the first time."

Brody threw the tunic on top of his belt. "It was another skirmish, like the one you saw this "Why 'of course'?" she interrupted.

He looked surprised. "I keep forgetting you learned this stuff in history books. It's the gate where they used to lead all the sinners,

dragging their crosses on their way to their execution. Jesus would have gone that way up to the mountain. But there is also a holy

afternoon. The Fatimids want to preserve St. David's Gate. Everyone

does, of course -"

Muslim temple — a mosque — on the same mountain." "I see," Taylor said. "Godfrey of Bouillon and his

the north of the city and down along the west side as far as St. David's Gate. Raymond, my patron, is controlling the walls south of St. David's Gate, until they swing toward the east. The Fatimids tried another sally this morning, at the gate. Both Godfrey's forces and Raymond's became involved in beating them back." "And you ran into Veris," Taylor finished. "Not exactly. I was clearing the south side of the gate for

Raymond's knights to push through and saw Veris take a sword in the

group are patrolling the walls along

side. It was a mortal blow-or should have been for any other man. I think he believed no one else saw the strike. I thought nothing of it except that it was a waste of a fine fighting soldier, for I'd seen him working the field before." "Military thinking." She picked up a date. "If I'd seen Veris fighting and knew nothing of him, I'd rue the loss of such force and skill, too." Brody grinned. "I was stunned to find him still fighting twenty minutes later, apparently none the

worse for wear, except for a rent in his tunic and blood all over it, with be nothing other than vampire. No one else would have survived such a blow." He leaned forward on the chest, his eyes glowing. "You should have seen him. He was as good as three men, laying them down like a scythe at harvest time, his eyes blazing with fury. It was fascinating." Taylor had seen Brody only a

his temper up well and good. I knew then, what he was. He could

few hours before, locked in battle with dozens of Fatimid fighters and she had been just as compelled by the warrior who had emerged from Brody at that time. She knew exactly what had drawn Brody to Veris.

"Then I saw the spear from the corner of my eye," Brody said,

straightening up. "I have no idea even now, sixteen hundred years later, what made me so sure the spear was intended for Veris. There

was no signal they were heading for him. It was just a sinking feeling I had that the one weapon that was lethal to vampires would be used against him. So I started running, trying to reach Veris before the Fatimid with the spear did. The Fatimid was clambering over the

bodies that Veris had slain and

making hard going of it, but Veris was turned away. The asshole was going to take him from behind." Brody shrugged. "I got there in time."

"In time to do what? Come on," Taylor complained. "You can do better than this! What happened

next?"

He blinked. "You want more

detail?"

"Of course I want more! You

can't hold out on me about something as important as this! I want every single little detail.

Every second of it!"

Brody rubbed his hand over

acutely uncomfortable.

Taylor straightened. "Oh wait.
Oh, no, is this a guy thing? You

the back of his neck, looking

don't want to talk about the intimate details? Is it?"

He glanced away, out of the tent, then down at his boots. "I

don't know that I'd put it..."

"Oh shit, it is," Taylor said, staring at him in amazement.

"That's why I've never heard this story from either of you. You can't talk about it because you're both

story from either of you. You can't talk about it because you're both guys and it's icky talking about intimate stuff." She swallowed back a big lump of laughter, because she

make Brody shut up permanently. Instead she sat, flummoxed by the logic of the male mind.

"I don't get it," she said softly.

"Neither of you has ever had any

knew that would be guaranteed to

problem talking about anything at all with me about stuff we do, before now."

Brody took a breath. A big

Brody took a breath. A big one. "Of course not. That stuff we do with you."

"Oh" She chewed her lip

"Oh." She chewed her lip while she phrased her next sentence very carefully. "But you don't even mind talking about stuff you and Veris do—I mean, now I'm

with you."

"Exactly. You're with us now."

"But you talk about stuff you

do even when I'm not there."
"Not there physically, but that

doesn't make any difference," he said flatly, his gaze not shifting from her eyes. *Ahhh...* And just like that, the

Shape of it fell into place for her.

"Are you afraid I'm going to

resent your relationship with Veris in this time, if you tell me too much about it?" she asked softly. "After all I said about your hold over him,

the hold I didn't have and wished I

about that," he said flatly. He grimaced. "Although now I am." He yanked at the hauberk and pulled it over his head in one impatient tug and it fell with a metallic, heavy sigh onto the ground between his feet. He plucked the undershirt away from his chest. The expression in his eyes was one of discomfort touched with resentment. "This time has always been ours." "'Ours'?" she repeated, puzzled.

Brody rubbed at his brow.

"No. I wasn't even thinking

did?"

It actually hurt, once his meaning sank truly home. She sat staring at him as the pain settled and spread like a fast expanding pool of something black and

"Mine and Veris'."

noxious.

"God, don't look at me like that," he said with a groan.

"How should I look?" she

whispered.

He turned his gaze from her.

"It isn't meant to hurt you," he ground out.

"It does." She couldn't quite keep her voice steady. "What do all the trips back in time mean to both

pretend never happened? An alternative history in your memory? What?" "Don't do this to yourself. Not now. Especially without Veris here." Brody sounded a touch desperate and even perhaps afraid of what he'd set in motion. "He would explain it better than me anyway." Taylor sat up, push her plate away. "Not now? Then when? Where? We've been together four

years. These trips back in time were

of you, then, if your time before me is so sacrosanct? Are they just make-believe? Something you supposed to be giving us a chance to backtrack through both of your memories. I thought we were building me into your personal histories. That's what the queen said and neither of you saw fit to disagree with her, or tell me any differently. Now you tell me neither of you consider me a part of your past. That you're fighting to keep me out of it! How the hell did you expect me to react? Smile and say 'oh, how silly of me. My mistake'?" She reached for the tunic she had cut up, thrust her arms into it and yanked it closed around her furiously.

"You're reading far more into this than you should." "Really? The two men I love don't want me involved in fourfifths of their lives? That's trivial?"

"You're going to penalize us for having pasts longer than you? I

That jerked him to his feet.

movement. It wasn't until she gripped the spiked post at the back

of the chair that he spoke.

Brody watched her every

didn't think you were capable of such prejudice." The condemnation in his tone was rich.

She held up a hand. "Stop," she said softly. Tears burned in her

attack instead. It's the easiest way out of talking about feelings."

Brody sank onto the chest. "You're right. That's exactly what he does. Jesus, I just did it, too. I didn't even realize." He pushed his hand through his hair, then

scratched at the back where the long hair he was used to feeling

was missing.

eyes. "God, Veris taught you how to do that, didn't he? When the going gets too tough or uncomfortable in an argument,

Taylor felt her tears spill and let them roll unchecked. Brody was just going to have to feel even more uncomfortable now. This was too important to dance around with subtleties.

"Brody?" she nudged gently.

He lifted his head to look at her and sighed. "Oh, God, it was just a simple thing. It wasn't this huge significant shutting out you feel it is."

"Tell me," she begged. He looked down at his hand

resting on his knee and curled the fingers into a fist, then loosened them. Thinking. Then he looked at her again "It's like that rule most

them. Thinking. Then he looked at her again. "It's like that rule most people have about not discussing intimate details of past relationships with their current lovers."

Taylor lowered herself onto the edge of the big chair. It held no

cushion or comfortable lining. That, more than anything seemed to characterize Brody in this time period. "But you and Veris *are* my current lovers."

"It's different for us. You live as long as we do, you tend to compartmentalize your life. It lets us blend in with humans. It keeps us sane. Keeps things straight in your mind. You keep the events in one section separate from the others."

Taylor asked.

"Something like that," Brody said. He picked up her hand.

"There's no reason why the three of us won't continue on for another

two thousand years. You'll have

and Veris into one section and me and you and Veris into another?"

"And you've separated you

plenty of history to share with us."

She pulled her hand from his.
"Then why do we get to jump around history? Your history?
Veris' history? There has to be a reason. The queen thought it was so

I could catch up with your pasts. Now you're saying you don't want she's wrong. Veris has been insisting for about a year now we're not just living inside our memories when we jump back, that this is really time travel. We're actually back in history. I have facts to prove that he is right, too." "What facts?" "I can't give them to you until we're back in our time. They're material proof." She fought hard not to touch her belly as she spoke, or look down at it. "But if we're not flipping backward in time for me to catch up with your pasts, then why

are we doing it?"

me to share that. You're saying

Brody shook his head. "You really think I have an answer for that?"

Her tears began to fall again.

"I think you're wrong. Both of you," she said flatly. "We only ever travel to times and places in your personal pasts. Things you

remember. It's one of the first

things both of you nearly always say when we arrive. 'Oh, I remember!' And have you noticed that I'm always with you when we travel? Sometimes the three of us go. Sometimes it's just you and me and sometimes just me and Veris. But it's always me that goes."

Brody's hand clenched. "I had noticed," he admitted.
"Why would we be doing that

if it wasn't for me to catch up with your pasts? Can you think of any other reason?"

He sat there for a long

moment in silence. Taylor waited him out.

"No" he said at last "But it

"No," he said at last. "But it doesn't mean that yours is the only reason. It just means we haven't figured out the reason. That's all."

She nodded. "I know. I'm not trying to trap you into agreeing with me. I'm just trying to get you to help me to reason it out."

Brody pressed his fingers to his temples. "God, I wish Veris was here," he muttered. Taylor wiped her damp

cheeks. "That's why we're having this conversation you so hate," she pointed out. "To make sure he'll be here next time we need to have one."

His black eyes skewered her. Her heart beat twice before he said flatly, "And for that you need to know every little detail of what

happened when Veris and I met."

"Yes."

"Why?"
"The past has been disrupte

"The past has been disrupted.

We need to get it back onto its rails again. You know how it is supposed to go because you lived it the first time. I didn't. But if I know as much about what did happen, I can help nudge it back on track. We both know him inside out. I'll have to make some adjustments for this younger version of him, but his erotic tastes will still be the same. If we can't orchestrate your seduction of him in record time, then we don't deserve him." Brody pulled the undershirt off over his head. Slowly, as he thought through her plan. "You suggested something like this earlier today," he pointed out.

"You really are willing to help me do this?" he asked, almost diffidently.

Taylor shook her head. "For heaven's sake, it's all of us at stake here. I'd do anything to preserve that. So would you."

His face hardened and seemed to grow older before her eyes. "True," he said simply. "I'm sorry, I

keep forgetting the big picture. I only seem to be able to focus on the fact that Veris is gone." His gaze cut away from her face abruptly. "For now, that is all we have

He looked back at her, shocked. "And you were the one who kissed him..." He pulled her onto his lap and into his arms. "Forgive me. I've been utterly

selfish." His kiss was soft, seeking forgiveness. But it didn't stay that way for long. His hand wound into her hair and his tongue slid into her

today too, Brody."

lost," she said gently. "If we jump back to our time and Veris is still lost, then we lose it all. I lost Veris

mouth, while his lips hardened and grew more demanding and hungry.

His free hand found the hem of her chemise and pushed it up her

Brody's hand was warm as it slid along her flesh. His thumb caressed her inner thigh.

Taylor sighed. She craved this intimate contact. The implied approval and love was a balm after

legs, baring them to the night air that seeped through the tent walls. In this hot, dry climate even

she clung to Brody, her body strumming with pent up need. "Higher," she begged, when his lips lifted from hers.

the loss and disaster of the day and

His thumb pushed between her thighs, up against her pussy lips. "No underthings. Why, my skin. "Bare my cock and straddle me," he commanded. Taylor glanced around. There were soldiers, knights, pages, dozens of people lingering around

lady Tyra, you are most wicked," he murmured. He licked her throat. His fangs lightly scraped over her

the tent, going about their business or sitting or lying about campfires. But they were minding their own business. Inside the tent, as Brody had brought no candles with him, it was almost dark. Only the light from nearby fires illuminated the interior.

"I am their lord," Brody

even though they are like gossamer, may as well be three feet thick curtain walls of a keep. My men are stone deaf and blind to everything that happens in here until I call for

murmured. "The walls of the tent,

them." He pushed aside the rendered tunic and his tongue slid over her nipple, through the thin fabric of the chemise. "Undo my pants," he repeated.

She caught her breath at the

bolt of pleasure that speared her at his touch on her breast. She dropped her hand to the fastenings of his *braies* and fumbled with the ties at his waist. It took her a few

moments because she was both inexperienced and excited.

Eventually, she tugged at the garment, letting it drop down his

hips and baring his cock. It reared, red and veined, more than ready and she stroked it. She adored Brody's cock, which was thick and had a perfectly formed head. She loved Brody being inside her. She spread her knees over his hips, feeling her pussy open up ready to have him slide in. She gathered up the delicate chemise around her hips.

"Wanton," he told her and bit

her nipple through the chemise.

cock, feeling it slide up, separating the walls of her vagina. His hand gripped her bottom

She moaned and sank onto his

and the tight grip told her he liked the sensation of her around him. Taylor lifted herself up and slid down upon him again.

down upon him again.

Brody groaned, his eyes half closing. She caught the flash of fangs. He was truly aroused. She

leaned forward to kiss him and lift herself up at the same time. She let

her tongue touch his canines very carefully. It was all the warning he needed. She felt them withdraw. His hands grabbed her hips his cock slamming up into her and grabbed at his shoulders as her climax rushed at her with express train speed. Her clit was being massaged by Brody's pelvis with each hard upthrust and all she

could do was hold on for the ride.

She climaxed with a cry she

and with a growl he jerked into her, hard and fast, riding her. She felt

did her best to smother against his hard, muscled shoulder.

Brody came a few seconds after her. He shuddered, his fingers digging into her hips and groaned

loudly.

Taylor could feel her cheeks

Taylor tried to climb from his lap, humiliated, but Brody stopped her. "Don't," he said softly. "They take pride in their lord's virility and they have no thoughts about you at all. It is the way of it and we must

be a part of these times for now." He held her still until she ceased

trying to get away from him.

heating. Brody seemed utterly unconcerned about the men lying and sitting barely twelve feet away.

She hid her face in his neck, instead. "For a moment I'd forgotten I was your property."

She felt him laugh silently. "I wouldn't dare presume that for

him lightly on the lips. When her breath and heartbeat had slowed, she murmured, "So...do you think you can tell me about you and Veris now?"

Taylor pulled back and kissed

His hands linked around her

anything but appearance's sake."

waist. "I can try," he said evenly. "But Taylor, you're asking a man to talk about intimate details. Most men would rather stick themselves with red hot pokers than speak of such things."

She nodded. "While a woman will spend hours going over every single second from every angle and

and more, with her best friend, her second best friend and maybe her mother for advice, just in case." She sighed. "I do know this. But between you and Veris, you're the most likely one to ever be able to tell the tale. Veris would clam up like an oyster if he was in your position. You've at least got a famous poet for a father, so you've

analyzing it for implied meanings

got storytelling in your blood. Think of it that way, if you must. Tell me a story."

Brody frowned. "If I have to," he said reluctantly. He flexed his shoulders, like he was squaring off

champion in the ring. "Where was I before?"

"You saw the spear heading

before a national heavyweight

for Veris and stopped it. Big on details, that," Taylor said dryly.

Brody nipped the tip of her nipple between his teeth and

tugged, stretching the still-damp cotton of the chemise and making

Taylor catch her breath sharply. "You're in no position to complain about anything," he reminded her

when he let go.

She took two calming breaths.

"The spear," she prompted him.

* * *

caught the dazzling early morning sun and flashed in Brody's eyes. That was the only reason he saw it in time.

The spear had a silvered tip that

The Fatimids had clearly grown tired of the giant knight blocking their path and mowing down their companions with fearless and angry efficiency. Brody was certain now the broadshouldered knight in the red and black Selkirk colors was vampire.

was certain now the broadshouldered knight in the red and black Selkirk colors was vampire. The sword in his side had done nothing more than get his temper up and now he was an fury-filled fighting machine, standing upon a single Fatimid had made it through. The man had given Raymond's people time to build the temporary wooden walls they could put in place over the hole the Fatimids had made.

pile of rubble at the top of the breach in St. David's Gate. Not a

But the Fatimids had not appreciated the knight's effectiveness and one of their better warriors had been chosen to deal with him. Armed with a silvertipped spear, the warrior had stolen closer under the cover of the chaos of Fatimid soldiers pushing toward the gap.

rubble toward the big knight. He had chosen a moment when the man had turned away to deal with Fatimids who had stepped through the wall and were perilously close to getting away altogether. From the angle the warrior was approaching Veris, the spear would take him in the back. Brody began to run at the same time. There was no thought in it. He wasn't even certain the spear

was intended for the knight. He just didn't like the line of possibility. Vampires and spears

Brody saw the warrior as he

began his run up the ramp of

didn't mix and the knight's flank was unprotected.

Brody pushed between the knight and the ragged edges of the

wall breach. He already had his

sword up in the high guard position, the tag position, so it was simply a matter of bringing it down as he cleared the wall. It chopped off the head of the spear before it reached the knight as cleanly as a knife cut through lard. Brody risked taking one hand off his sword hilt to catch the infidel by the throat as his impetus pushed him farther up the rubble hill. The man literally

ran onto Brody's sword point and a

before blood cascaded from the corners of his mouth and all emotion faded from his eyes.

"That was for me, wasn't it? The spear?" The knight was suddenly at Brody's shoulder. His

surprised look appeared in his eyes

voice was hard, heavy. Brody tossed the warrior back down the rubble hill and looked over his shoulder. This close, he could see the knight's eyes were pure blue. Saxon, he'd bet his life on it. There'd be blond hair under the helmet. If the man was truly vampire, did he go as far back as Viking, then?

touched his canine under his lip so the knight would see the movement of the tip of his tongue. The man's eyes narrowed a tiny fraction. Then his mouth lifted at one corner. "You've been watching," he said, dropping his voice just enough so that anyone nearby would have to strain to hear it. That still meant he was talking louder than a conversation anywhere else might be.

With a start, Brody realized

"The spear was meant for

you," Brody confirmed. "You should be more careful," he added. "Spears can be nasty for some." He

with more than the usual amount of attention. His heart thudded. "Yes," he said truthfully. The knight turned and

blocked a sword and beat back a

that he had been watching this man

Fatimid with a growl of impatience for having his conversation interrupted. He looked back at Brody, wiping blood from his face. "Norway, four hundred and thirty-

"Norway, four hundred and thirtynine."

Brody felt a rush of adrenaline
that had nothing to do with the
fighting. The vampire before him
had revealed his true age and birth
place. Just like that. It told Brody

rattled out "Britain, four hundred and sixty-one." It felt risky to reveal such information so quickly, but the knight had already made the first move.

the knight was just slightly older than him. Brody took a breath and

The man smiled, showing whole, good, white teeth. "Arthur's man?"

"Too young." Brody pushed back the rush of black memories that came with the name. Irons,

that came with the name. Irons, chains. His back burning with the taste of a whip. Cages. Filth and cold. Misery. He swallowed back the reaction.

roar and clash of iron. Brody found himself fighting next to the knight, holding back the Fatimids until the temporary wall was put in place. Nothing more was said

between them of a personal nature. There wasn't the time or the privacy. But Brody caught the man looking at him once or twice and

absorb all of it. "I see," he said. Abruptly, he whirled away, taking on the pressing Fatimids with a

The knight's gaze seemed to

the hairs on the back of his neck prickled and something low in his belly tightened with possibilities. He did find out who the man

was, though. William of York, Selkirk's man. Brody wondered what his real name was as he went about the business of the day. He wondered how long it would take William to track him down. It never occurred to him to hunt William himself. Of the two of them, William was the hunter and in his gut, Brody knew the hunt had begun. He spent the rest of the morning half-aroused and happy among the carnage, lack of food and water and human crisis.

Chapter Six

assigned and unofficial, by the time the camp had settled in for the night. He washed off the dust and dirt of the day, found a clean tunic and a borrowed horse and rode down the line of camps south toward St. David's Gate at an easy canter, enjoying the night breeze on

Veris completed his duties, both

his face.

He still wasn't sure why he was doing this. There was no sound reason for it. After finding that

with him on crusade, he should be leaving well enough alone. The man was lost to him. Veris had found him with his arms about his wife in the middle of the day, whispering sweet nothings into her ear. Those were not the actions of a man who roamed outside his

Brendan was married and was besotted enough to bring his wife

marriage. Who would want to, with a wife that looked as lovely as Brendan's, anyway?

Briefly, Veris recalled the moments the woman had touched and kissed him. She had an ethereal

quality he'd never seen before.

nagging feeling she had meant to achieve something with it other than seduction. She had been surprised when he had stepped back, as if she had been expecting something that had not happened...

Veris realized he had let his

Quite beautiful. What *had* that kiss meant? It had been shocking. But despite his initial shock, he had a

busy with his thoughts. He kicked it back into a canter again. There were mysteries to be unraveled, he decided. That made it worth a second conversation. That

borrowed mount lapse into a lazyhipped walk while he had been was all he was doing. Just speaking to them again. Nothing more. Having settled it in his mind, he rode on feeling somewhat

happier. But images of Brendan at the wall that morning, the look in his eyes, kept flashing into Veris' mind as he rode, disturbing his

simple mission. Worse, he kept remembering the sensation of the woman's lips on his.

He was nearly at Brendan's camp when it occurred to him with

a shock that nearly unhorsed him: She had kissed him with the expertise of a human who knew how to avoid being hurt by Brendan's wife knew what Brendan was.

Ergo, she knew Veris was

vampire canines.

vampire, too.

The last quarter mile to Brendan's camp was very long and full of racing, difficult thoughts

full of racing, difficult thoughts indeed.

"Now, was telling me the rest of

the story about Veris and the spear so very hard?" Taylor asked, as Brody poured her a mug of water from their combined rations, which had been boiled the requisite

twenty minutes now.

story," Brody admitted. "But that was the simple part anyway. This next part..." He took a deep breath. "You really want all of it?" "All of it," she confirmed, placing a cushion underneath her on the chest. "I need to know what he was thinking and telling me what happened will give me the biggest hints. All of it, Brody. The whispers, the murmurs. I've seen you two together doing just about everything the human body can do, so it's not like you can shock me."

Brody grinned. "I think you

can drop the 'just about'."

"It's easier trying to tell it as a

"I was being cautious. Every time I think I've seen it all, you two come up with something new." He chuckled. "You sound like

a lawyer." "You should know."

He grimaced. "Never again. Thirty years as a barrister was too

long for me." He settled on the chair, rested his elbows on the arms and pressed his fingers together.

"You know the start of it. Veris-Will-found me outside the tent

early in the afternoon. He'd obviously done some research and found out who I was. That must have given him pause for thought,

landed lord at this point in time. Neither of us gives a damn about such things, but in this time and place other people care very much about such matters." "Don't they also give a damn about men being together?" "Surprisingly, not so much. It's condoned in a blind-eye sort of way, depending on your partner. War time couplings are very

because he's a knight and I'm a

way, depending on your partner. War time couplings are very common. Men get lonely." He shrugged. "Young boys with their soft skin are quite sought after, but long-term liaisons are something else."

"I imagine they can find those disturbing. Threatening, even."

"If they learn of them. If they're flaunted, yes." Brody shrugged. "We didn't wave it around. Later on, when the Christian church really got going

on the evils of sodomy...well, we took it completely behind doors." He grinned. "So did a great many other people. The years Queen Victoria was so set on everyone

being perfect were very interesting."

Taylor smiled. "So I've heard.

But you were saying?"

Brody grinned again. "You'll

have it out of me an inch at a time, won't you?" "If I must. I'd rather you just tell me and stop struggling." "Surrender to you, huh?" She could feel her own smile broaden all on its own. "If that

appeals to you, sure." Something in his gaze

darkened. "I suppose you think that's what happened with Veris and me, hmm?"

Taylor could feel her body tighten. "It didn't?"

Brody's smile grew slow and warm. "Don't hurry the troubadour's tale."

Brody was seeing to the

dispersal of his men for the afternoon and evening when William arrived. It had been far sooner than Brody had expected and caught him off guard. Ho

and caught him off guard. He looked up at William on his big black war horse as the knight dismounted, doffed his visor and snagged the mount's reins about the bleached lump of blasted rock that weighed down the rope of the tent.

William stopped a dozen paces away. He wore a clean tunic now, the same red and black

Selkirk colors, with a red crest on the breast, over a black mail hauberk. His long sword was strapped to his hip. His visor was under his arm and he held the horse by the other gauntleted hand, unconsciously controlling the fretful animal. His eyes blazed in the bright sun as he studied Brody. "You are Brendan, Raymond's man, are you not?" Brody nodded. "I am." "You are William, with Selkirk, who is camped with Godfrey of Bouillon on the north side of Jerusalem," Brody prompted.

"I am. Most who call me friend call me Will, though." He pulled off his gauntlets, strode over to Brody and held out his right hand. "Thank you for what you did this morning, friend." Brody took the offered hand. At the touch of Will's hand a light shock seemed to travel up his arm and down into the pit of his stomach, to curl and roil like a restless snake. Brody fought to keep his face expressionless. "I would call it nothing, but perhaps you might return the favor one day. I know it would be no small matter,

then."

seemed to match the sky behind him, locked with Brody's. The shiver became almost a shudder. Brody dropped Will's

Will's blue eyes, which

hand. "It would be natural for me to invite you into the tent for a cup of wine," he said, dropping his voice so it wouldn't travel.

"Then you had better invite me in and call for wine. We can find a crack in this blasted dry earth to pour it into, I'm sure." "I made sure the crack was

"I made sure the crack was there when I had the tent pitched." Will grinned. "Then let's drink," he said loudly. "Bring wine!" he called, as Will handed his visor and gauntlets to the small, new page Brody's men

Brody led the way to the tent.

It was warm in the tent but private. The light was nice and dim after the radiant scorching

were training.

brightness of the daylight outside.

Brody settled himself on the big chair. It didn't surprise him when Will pushed the clothes

Brody's lazy page onto the ground and settled on the broad flat surface, facing him. The man seemed to be able to make himself

heaped untidily on the chest by

comfortable no matter where he was.

He studied Brody frankly.

"You've done well for yourself, clearly."

"Because I have land? Dirt is

easy to come by."

"If you say so. Try having blue

eyes and blond hair and acquiring a title. Up until about fifty years ago, being Saxon was a curse. Now the

pope has waved his hand and all is forgiven, although the Norman French still look sideways at me." Will grinned. "Perhaps I will catch up with you yet."

"You seem to do well enough.

Surely, that's all that one needs?"

"Not quite," Will said flatly, his gaze steady.

Brody was caught by that

unwavering gaze and almost jumped when the tent flap rustled as the page hurried in with a tray carrying a pitcher of wine and two

mugs. He placed it on the table next

"See we're not disturbed,"
Brody ordered.

"Yes, milord," the page told
him and hurried out, after a fear-

filled glance at Will.

Brody poured the wine and handed Will a mug. "Your good

"I'm sure you could come up with something better than that," Will said, not lifting his mug. The direct challenge. Brody smiled. "You don't believe in a subtle hunt, do you?"

health, sir."

once more. "Britain, four sixty-one. That was the year you gave me, wasn't it?"

Brody nodded. He could feel

Will put his mug on the table

Brody nodded. He could feel his heart picking up speed just sitting there.

"Camlann was only thirteen

"Camlann was only thirteen years later," Will said, his tone conversational. His gaze wouldn't squeezing the mug. He didn't let it go, though. He couldn't. "I wasn't there."

"Not for all of it," Will replied.

He knew. He had read it on

Brody's face this morning. Brody tore his gaze away from Will's eyes,

"How long were you a slave?"

release Brody's eyes, though. "I know that year exactly because I

Brody realized he was

was there."

that saw so much.

Will pressed.

Brody closed his eyes. He drew in breath that burned and

The stench of burning flesh. The crackle of fire. Men shouting. Above all, pain.

"You fight the memories still,"

Will said. His voice was closer.

made his chest shudder. Screams.

Will standing over him. He gasped in quick breaths to calm himself. "I fight the memories only when someone deliberately provokes them, knight." He curled his fingers

Brody opened his eyes to find

around the arm of the chair and wished mightily that he could quaff the mug of wine in his other hand. Drunken oblivion would be useful right now.

his hand. "I won't hunt a man who has been a slave. I'm not that cruel."

Simultaneous disappointment

Will cupped Brody's face in

and arousal circulated through him at Will's words and his touch. Brody froze, trying to deal with both.

both.

Will's thumb stroked over
Brody's cheekbone. The caress
sizzled along his nerves and

arrowed into his groin. He bit back the groan that tried to emerge. Will's eyes narrowed. "Oh, the depths in you..." He leaned down and kissed him.

experienced. But not just his body answered the kiss. As Will's lips moved against his and his tongue pushed inside Brody's mouth, he knew this was no ordinary dalliance, of which he'd had plenty. His body was rock hard and his cock throbbed painfully when Will let him go and stepped back. Brody wanted to reach for Will, to bring him back closer again, but there was something in Will's eyes that stopped him. Will drew a breath that was

not quite steady. "There is a small,

The kiss brought Brody's body

alive in a way he'd never

the desert two miles due south of Mount Zion. There's nothing there but an ancient olive tree and what was once a building and a very deep well. I've pitched a tent and most nights I go there to not sleep in peace." He lifted the mug of wine. "Around two a.m., when the human cycle is on the ebb. Come alone. It's risky, because the Fatimids have circled us, so watch

quite private and hidden corner of

yourself."

Brody sat forward. "You want me to come to you."

"I want you to come to me freely. No coercion. No hunt." Will

most interesting man I've ever met."
Brody almost laughed until he saw the flat, genuine light in Will's

lifted the mug. "To possibly the

face. He meant every word.

One o'clock in the morning

couldn't get there fast enough.

Brody seethed, bawling orders, his temper at the close edge of irrational as he trampled through the rest of the very long afternoon, evening and immortally slow night.

evening and immortally slow night. The time crier ceased delivering the news of the hour at midnight, so Brody had to guess when it was

dressed, and slipped under the fine linen sides of the tent. The horse he had arranged for the evening's excursion was waiting for him thirty paces away, which was far

enough from his camp and his men to avoid drawing attention to his

activities.

approximately one a.m. He rolled off his tousled bed, still partially

He took no chainmail, because of the noise it made. But he took all his weapons, including his sword, bow and arrows and knives. He wore a leather half-hauberk instead of mail. It was a compromise, but it would have to do.

after giving them the passwords and then a good dozen more paces farther on before mounting. Finally, he let the horse break into a trot, heading it for the upswell of Mount Zion that shone black in moonlit night. As soon as he felt comfortably far enough away from the siege camp, he began to gallop. The horse was fresh and ready to race and the night was cool. She eagerly stretched out her legs. They rounded Mount Zion and Brody looked up into the night sky for the cross formation of stars

He walked the horse carefully

around the camp, past the sentries

no matter where one was in the world. He lined the horse's head up with the stars and noticed track marks of other horses following the

same route. He was on the right

that pointed always toward true south. There it was, utterly reliable,

trail, then.

They hit loose sand dunes and their progress slowed. Brody let the mare chose her own pace, while he picked the direction. About forty minutes later, he saw the flicker of a fire over to his left and angled the

horse that way.

On the lee side of a dune sat the crumbling remains of a sun-

with a few tough leaves and a tent with a campfire before it. Spread out on the soft sand before the tent was a bedcover and cushions. It looked like something out of the illustrations Brody had once seen in Muslim stories.

The mare slowed as it

bleached wall, an equally old and pitted round well with a well-kept wooden cover over it, the withered branches of a very old olive tree

sensing it had reached its destination and resting place.
Brody dismounted, looking around. The spot seemed deserted.

approached the tent, perhaps

someone from the rear of the horse. He whirled, pulling out his sword, only to have the blade clash against Will's knife and come to a standstill.

"I had to know it was you,

He extended his senses and was just in time to feel-hear the approach of

first," Will explained. "The well has been poisoned by the Fatimids so the locals don't bother coming here anymore, but there are still some travelers from farther away who stop in sometimes, even this late at night."

Brody returned his sword to

the scabbard. "Your privacy seems

"My quarters with Selkirk are less than ideal. I'm happy to pay the price asked of me for this little oasis." Will pushed his knife back into his belt. "Let's get your horse comfortable. And then let's take

to come

inconveniences."

with

some

care of you."

A ripple ran up Brody's spine.

It took less than five minutes

to settle the mare, loosen her girth and give her some feed. Brody patted her on the nose as a reward for her good nature while Will leaned against the broken down

wall, both elbows hooked on the

top of it, watching. The tension was back in Brody's gut. He glanced at Will and saw a brooding expression had settled on his face. Brody made himself turn to face Will. "You were quick to tell me who you were. Your birth date." "You already knew I was vampire. Why be coy?" Will's eyes

narrowed a little. "How many other vampires have you known?" "Apart from the one who

made me?" Brody shook his head. "None."

"Sweet Lord." Will murmured. "You've held yourself apart all this time? Managed alone?" Admiration filled his tone. "I hated vampires. Hated myself. For a very long time," Brody admitted. "Then I... adjusted." Will nodded. "It's a very common reaction, the hatred." "It is?"

"You might have known that, if you hadn't cut yourself off. Others might have helped you through it. But...it's done now."

And still, Will continued to lean against the wall.

Brody realized then that Will

not come to Brody in any way. Brody must go to him. His entire body seemed to

meant every word he had said earlier that afternoon. He would

bloom and grow hot and begin to pulse in one giant heartbeat.
Will was waiting.

Will was waiting.
Brody had to force his feet into taking the first step. Then another. The next three were easier.

Then a sixth.

And then he was there. Will was taller, but Will was taller than just about everyone. Brody liked that. It fit with Will's force of

personality. Brody cupped Will's

cheek as he had done to Brody that afternoon. His hand was shaking.

At his touch, Will's breath

rushed from between his lips, telling Brody that Will was as tense as he was.

And abruptly, most of Brody's fear departed, leaving him simply an aching, tightly wound bundle of intense need. He pressed his lips to Will's and savored the taste, before

thrusting his tongue into his

mouth.

His canines extended and he was too overwhelmed to have the necessary control to retract them.

Will would hopefully take it for the

When Will groaned, the tension in Brody's body tightened to the point where a tap on the shoulder could have shattered him

into a thousand pieces. His cock was throbbing against his belly in

tongue. Tasting. Exploring.

compliment it was. He pressed Will's mouth against his, holding him there while he probed with his

time with his heartbeat and the heat in his balls was like a furnace.

He reached for the hem on Will's tunic with one hand, not willing to break contact with his

mouth for a second.
Will's hands came alive. They

spun around and pushed against the wall. Their kiss was broken. Will was breathless. "There's

gripped Brody's arms and he was

something I want to do for you. First."

Brody knew exactly what Will intended. He didn't think he could withstand more excitement, but his heart leapt anyway.

Will didn't wait for answer. His hands slipped beneath Brody's tunic and pushed it up

around his waist. Will smiled when he saw Brody was bare from mid-

thigh upward, bereft of braies. "I'll remember this sight," he knees in the sand.

He spread Brody's thighs and his fingers caressed his balls, just

murmured and dropped to his

before his hands cupped and squeezed them. Brody let his eyes close and his head roll back, the night air brushing over the heated

skin of his face. He was actually hot. Aroused and hot.

When Will's mouth closed over his cock, Brody groaned

desperately. He was already so close to climaxing, Will's work would be over barely before it had begun. Brody squeezed his hand into a fist, fighting the pleasure,

slid along his shaft and his tongue worked the underside with powerful effectiveness. Then Will's teeth bumped over the ridges of the head of his

trying to make it last as Will's lips

cock and Brody lost control of his building climax completely. It crashed through him with a power that swamped his senses. He dimly heard himself shout as he jerked

and came with hard, grinding

thrusts that dimmed his vision and drained his energy. He clutched at the crumbling wall for support, waiting for his heart rate to settle back to normal again and his

Will sat on the sand, watching him, wearing a small smile. Brody let go of the wall and stood up carefully. He cleared his throat. "Well, I guess we know your sensitive spot," Will said. "What's yours?" Brody said. His voice was strained. Will stood up and unbuckled his belt and dropped it to the ground. "There's two ways to find out." "You could just tell me," Brody said. Will turned and headed for

breathing to quieten.

wore no mail underneath, but he did wear an undershirt and hose. He dropped the tunic and kept walking. "I could just tell you, but that wouldn't make it very interesting, would it?"

Brody shed his tunic and the leather hauberk. Then, quickly, the

the tent and the fire, pulling his tunic off as he went. Like Brody, he

undershirt, as he followed Will to the fire. He removed both hose and boots in two strides apiece, which left him naked, as he wore no *braies*. It was simultaneously an unrestricted and sinful feeling and he could feel his body responding

Will stepped onto the bedcover still wearing his undershirt and leggings and turned to face Brody. He paused, studying him. "I thought you might have more scars," he said, almost diffidently. From being a slave, Brody realized. "I was young. Very young. I healed well," he explained. "And then I was turned before life handed me any more." "How old were you?" "Thirty. I think." "You were a slave for

to it.

"It would have been longer except I kept defying them." Brody shrugged, trying to make it sound casual. "In the end it killed me. Or

seventeen years?"

casual. "In the end it killed me. Or it would have, except another slave turned me."

Will nodded. He reached for his undershirt. "Then you fared

better than me, when it came to

scars." He pulled off the shirt.

There were minor scars in several places on his body, but there was a major scar right near

his heart. In the moonlight it looked dark. Brody imagined it was red in daylight. Will turned and

Brody saw a long, wriggling scar along his back, high up under the shoulder blade. "In the twenty years before I

was made I did what I am still

doing now. Mercenary. Soldier for hire. But I was mortal then and the scars I got didn't disappear like they do now." Will turned back to face Brody and removed his hose

and shoes so that he was naked.
"I'm marked by my profession."

But that wasn't what Brody
was looking at. Rather, his gaze was

caught by the perfect symmetry of Will's body. The man had a lot of muscle—far more of it than most

scar on his back, Brody had also seen the hard buttocks and taut thighs and the curve of the broad back down to them. From between Will's thighs,

men Brody had ever met. The muscle swelled and bulged and curved in a way that made Will's flesh dip and rise intriguingly. When he had turned to show the

his cock was standing erect. It wasn't as thick as Brody's, but it was possibly longer and the head flared wider, with the thick tracery of veins that showed on a man with pale skin.

Brody stepped onto the cover

acquired it, but the thought faded.
Will drew him closer, his hand on his hip.

Brody stroked the scar on Will's chest, feeling the roughness

of old skin healed badly. He let his fingers slid down over the flat

and felt rich embroidery under his toes. He wondered where Will had

stomach and felt it quiver in response. Then the sensitive thin skin by the hipbones. He stroked Will's cock with his fingertips and it jerked. He gripped it and stroked more firmly.

Will hissed, his hips shifting.

Brody, enjoying the petty

kept stroking and teasing. He let his thumb drift over the seam on the underside of Will's cock. Will grabbed Brody's wrist

control over such a powerful man,

and squeezed. "Enough," he said hoarsely. "I will not have you finish me this way. Not this time." *This time.* Brody wanted to

protest at the implied assumption but didn't, because he would be a hypocrite if he did. He already knew he wanted Will again after this night.

"You might as well get comfortable, Brendan," Will told him, turning and heading for the tent. "I'm going to fuck you until you scream."

Brody shuddered as he

watched Will walk away. The shudder wasn't in fear or distaste, either. His body was suddenly throbbing with great need and desire again.

throbbing with great need and desire again.

Will stepped inside the tent and emerged with a small bottle in his hand. Brody recognize it more

by intent than content. Oil.

His body tightened even more. His cock was spear-straight and hard as a rock against his stomach.

"Lie down," Will told him as

he returned. "Brody," Brody said. Even his voice sounded strained. "My name is Brody." "That's Will paused. something we don't usually give out easily. Brody." "I won't have you fuck me without it." Will nodded slowly. "You'd

better call me Veris, then." He grinned. "It's not my real name, but it's my own adopted one. No one can wrap their tongue around my real name."

"What is your real name?"

"Väinämöinen."

Brody smiled. "I'll call you Veris, too." Veris stepped closed enough

that their chests touched and their cocks brushed against each other. "I'll have you calling my name as

you come, Brody." His hand was heavy on Brody's shoulder as he pushed Brody down onto the cover.

Brody sank down, his heart thundering, his arousal a tight coil in the pit of his stomach once more.

His balls were two heavy, hard

masses between his thighs. Will—Veris—opened his thighs and settled between them. He poured a little of the oil onto his palm and

of it with slow, teasing strokes over Brody's. Then down to his anus and perineum. Again with slow deliberation.

spread it on his own cock and more

Brody was twitching with anticipation.

Veris finished with a squeeze of Brody's balls. Brody just about cried out then. He half lifted

himself up off the ground.

He felt the nudge of Veris'

cock against him and drew a breath, letting himself relax, letting Veris in. Veris pushed inside and it was...good. Hard, heavenly. Oddly

familiar.

Veris' hand curled around Brody's cock and stroked as his own cock thrust again.

Brody clawed at the cover.

"Harder."

"I won't last."

"I don't care. Not this time."

"Then we agree." Veris lowered himself over Brody, resting on his elbows. There was a shallow

furrow between his brows. "This is too pleasurable to last much longer." He lifted Brody's thigh and began to ram into him in hard, heavy strokes.

It was exactly what Brody wanted. He grabbed the back of

was a roaring in his head, growing louder as his climax approached, no longer brought on by Veris' hand, but by the pressure between the two of them and the rough chaffing of their flesh. It was all he needed, now, to tip over into orgasm.

As it hit, there was an almost

Veris' head with one hand and his shoulder with the other. His canines had extended again. There

overwhelming desire to lift up and bite into Veris' neck with his fangs. Something like feeding, but not exactly like it. It was connected with his growing feelings for the man above him. Instinct was the instincts that rose in him until he had explored them thoroughly. This one, though, was blind and powerful. He fought it, his fangs brushing against Veris' neck.

He realized his fingers were digging into Veris' shoulder, his hand holding Veris head in a vice

driving him, but Brody had fought long and hard against his vampire nature and he mistrusted most of

grip, just like he would hold a victim steady for feeding, while his fangs brushed and stroked over Veris' skin.

Brody forced himself to let Veris go. He fell back against the

cover, his heart thundering. He forced his canines back. "What was that?" he muttered.

Veris rolled onto his side,

"You were going to bite me. A permanent bonding." His voice was neutral.

leaving a few inches between them.

neutral.

"A...permanent..." Brody licked his lips. "I assure you, I had

no idea what I was doing just then. I'm not even sure I had any real control. I—"

Veris touched his finger to Brody's lips. It was enough to make him fall silent.

"You really don't know

enough about your own nature, do you?" Veris said, not unkindly. Brody rubbed between his brows. "Apparently not." Veris settled more comfortably on his side, propping his head on his hand. "You won't like this analogy much, but it's the best I can do. You know how -"

"What's an analogy?" Veris hesitated. "For now, don't worry about it. It's not

important. But -" "Only if you explain it to me

later." "I will," Veris said. promise."

"So now tell me about this analogy I won't like."

Veris laughed. "Even uneducated, you keep up well enough. You're going to be

dangerous once I'm through with you."

Brody felt a warm glow at the implications behind his words.

"The analogy," he prompted.

"You know how a wolf marks his territory? So that others won't try to take it over?"

Brody scowled. "Is an analogy."

Brody scowled. "Is an analogy a way of comparing things? Because I didn't try to urinate on you, which would make it a bad

analogy indeed."

Veris threw his head back and roared with laughter. When he had himself under control, he sighed. "You now understand what an analogy is," he told Brody. "And

you did try to mark me. You did it

as instinctively as the wolf does. But something stopped you from actually taking the bite." His smile faded. "You fought the instinct."

"Yes," Brody agreed. "If I had bitten you how seriously does the

faded. "You fought the instinct."

"Yes," Brody agreed. "If I had bitten you, how seriously does the vampire world take that marking? Would they consider you to be..."
He couldn't bring himself to say the word.

sentence for him soberly. "Oh yes, we obey these bondings in utter faith. They're always instinctive. Not made in haste or consciously, where errors might occur. If you find yourself marking another, it's because your vampire sense has directed you to make that other your permanent bond partner for reasons beyond logic or question." "You would have let me do it?" Brody said in growing wonder. "You wouldn't have let me do otherwise," Veris corrected. Brody sat up. "That is insanity! How could I know...how

"Yours?" Veris finished the

could my vampire instincts know such a thing, in such a short space of time?" "It's instinctive," Veris said

"And you would have accepted that? You?" Veris sat up. "You didn't take

calmly.

the bite, Brody. The question doesn't need to be answered." Brody sorted through that sideways answer. "You wouldn't

have liked it," he concluded. "You wouldn't have liked having the choice taken from you. You've been free too long." Veris smiled a little. "No, I

wouldn't have. But I would have accepted it. We must, if that is what happens. And in truth, yours is a bond I think I could wear without chaffing."

"You think." Brody stared at

master, have you?"

Veris frowned.
"You've always been for hire.

him. "You've never had a real

Your own man at heart," Brody concluded.

Veris shifted and faced Brody

squarely. He turned his head, so that his neck, thick with muscle and sinew, was bared. "You want to take that bite, Brody? Take it.

Brody recoiled a little. "No."

"In cold blood and in full judgment," Veris insisted. "Take the bite."

Brody grabbed Veris' chin and wrenched his head around so he

could see into his eyes. "No," he said flatly. "I will never mark you, not even if my instincts are driving

Now."

me blind with need to do it. You are your own master. I won't take that from you. I know what it is like to be without it."

He got up from the cover and headed back to the mare, picking

up his clothes as he went.

Chapter Seven

"And?" Taylor prompted, when Brody paused.

"And what?" He grimaced. "It's a story that extends for

another six hundred years. How long do you want me to go on?"
"I don't need huge amounts of

detail," she told him.

"Thank heavens for that," he muttered.

"Just the basics of what happened. You can't leave me hanging!"

hooked you," he said. "I hooked you like a fish."

She laughed a little. "Hell, yeah." She wriggled on her cushion, trying to find a more comfortable position. "And that's

smiled a slow, wicked smile. "I

Brody stared at her. Then he

not all."

Brody's eyes narrowed. "I see," he said, his voice growing thicker, heavier.

"Do you think..." she began,

then cleared her throat. "I think you should stop wearing underwear immediately. Just hose and your tunic. I love the idea. I bet Veris would, too. He did the first time."

She heard his heavy exhalation. "Come here," he said

softly, his voice thick with arousal.
"You should save yourself for Veris."

"What language is it you two are speaking?" said another voice entirely, from outside the tent.

"Fuck that. Come here."

Taylor slapped her hand over her mouth as a shriek of shock tried to escape from it.

It was Veris standing at the formal entrance to the tent, just beyond the thin white gauze,

to each other in English.

"It almost sounds like Saxon, but not quite," Veris continued. "I

feel like if I listened long enough, I

staring at them as they sat talking

might actually begin to understand it. Yet there are parts of it so strange I know they can't possibly be Saxon roots at all."

"You're right, they aren't,"
Brody agreed, standing up. He was

naked, but he made no move to put on any clothes. Instead, he opened

the tent flap and let Veris in. After a moment, Veris stepped through.

Taylor shrugged off the rendered tunic she was wearing

his arms into it but there wasn't any way to keep it closed permanently, so as he moved the tunic gaped open, giving glimpses of his nude body.

Veris kept his eyes averted

and handed it to Brody. He slipped

most of the time, but Taylor caught him stealing glimpses every now and again as they spoke.

"I could not help but listen to your conversation. It was..." He hesitated, looking from one to the other of them. "Forgive me, but even though the language was

strange, some of the words were familiar enough for me to pick up a being...frank." He glanced at Brody as he said it.

Had Veris heard his own name among the gibberish? Taylor

sense of your subject. You were

not have picked it up with their English accents, or even realized they had been referring to him. He didn't know they knew his real name.

"You were not speaking

wondered. Even if he had, he may

Saxon, were you?" Veris pressed.

Taylor switched over to
Saxon. "We would have sounded
like this if we were speaking
Saxon."

"No, neither of us is Saxon. We would not mislead you that way," Taylor assured him. "Although, clearly, your own roots are Saxon, no?"

Veris nodded. "My family

heritage goes back to when the Vikings first arrived in Britain in

the mid-fifth century."

studied her. "You have an almost perfect accent. You are not Saxon,

Veris' eyes narrowed as he

Arthur?" Brody asked, resting an arm along the back of the chair. "Camlann?" His pose had the effect

"Are you talking about King

Taylor hid her grin. Veris whirled to face Brody again. "You know about that?"

of opening up the tunic again.

"I have heard about it. There was a crazy old man in Gwynedd where I was born who knew all the stories and told them over and

over." "Who?" Veris demanded. "What was his name?" Brody

pondered. "Domhnall? No, that wasn't it..." He shook his head. "I

don't really remember, I'm sorry." Veris drew in his breath at the mention of Domhnall, for that had been Brody's father's name, the leaving no trace of Arthur to be found.

Veris stared at Brody, with the tunic hanging open, displaying just about all of his body while Brody stared back with an utter lack of

self-consciousness.

official court appointed poet and bard to King Arthur. The Vikings had been particularly certain about making sure all Domhnall's works had been burned completely,

He was shifting to safer ground... and shifting to the attack.

"You did," Taylor told him.

Saxon?" Veris finally demanded.

"Who taught you to speak

again.

Veris glared at her. "I did," he repeated angrily.

Which switched the attack back

"About a thousand years from now," Brody added. Veris continued to stare at

Taylor. After a few seconds he turned and stalked from the tent,

throwing the gauze aside with an impatient toss of his hand. He

strode into the night without a backward glance.

Brody watched him go, his

expression thoughtful.

"We're not going to be able to tell him about the future," Taylor

concluded. "He's too much a part of this culture. His mind can't adapt. You're just going to have to seduce him the old fashioned way." "We seduce him," Brody replied, moving toward her. "Excuse me?" "I have to succeed, we know this. But he spent just as much time staring at you just then as me. I

think he feels the pull of you now, just as much as he does in the twenty-first century, even though he's mired in eleventh century thinking here. It may be that we must get him to commit to both of us after all." He let his fingers slide chemise. "I mean, look at you. What man with a pulse, even an undead, uncertain pulse, could resist?"

* * * * *

over her collarbone and down over the slope of her breast in the light

Veris rode until Brendan's camp was far enough behind that the sound of his horse's hooves would not be heard, then he stopped, slid off the animal and rested his head against the side.

What had happened back there? He had never felt more unsure of himself, more out of his depth and foolish than he had with educations far surpassed his and their breadth and depth of knowledge was staggering. And too, there was their conversation he had accidentally

stumbled upon, then shamelessly

those two. It was clear their

eavesdropped upon. He had only been able to pick up on the odd word or two. Brendan had sat upon that chair, outrageously nude, and spun his wife a tale that had involved two men. Two lovers.

realize that Brendan was actually telling his wife such a tale. She had sat there in that incendiary,

Veris had been amazed to

indecent shift, clearly finding the entire story far too much to her taste.

Well...it was his own punishment for listening. He had

compounded the problem by barging in and demanding to know what language they were speaking.

Such foolishness! They hadn't scrambled to cover themselves in shame or make him feel more comfortable when he had invaded their hearth.

Instead they had managed to make him feel a depth of ignorance

Veris closed his eyes, feeling a

he'd not felt for centuries.

The future!

That was when sense had reasserted itself and he'd managed

rare rush of blood to his cheeks.

to pull himself out of there.

Veris snorted against the side

of the horse. The future.

But once more an image of

Brendan's naked body as he strode over to let Veris in planted itself in Veris' mind. The surprisingly broad shoulders and the lean length of him.

The willowy suppleness of his wife, displayed without a shred of self-consciousness in that almost see-through chemise. Veris had

breasts beneath the fabric. The darker shape of her nipples.

His body hardened at the memory of both of them, with so

been able to trace her rounded

much flesh on display and so much knowledge in their heads. They were a siren song to his heart and mind and body.

"God help me," he groaned and shut his eyes against the images. But the images played on against the insides of his eyelids, teasing and tempting. Taunting him.

* * * * *

Taylor drew the cover off her

with her. "Make me call your name as I come," she told him, spreading her legs and trying to guide him between them. "You wanton voyeur," Brody

accused her as he settled between her thighs. He pushed his cock into

bed and laid it on the ground, then slipped out of the chemise. She pulled Brody down onto the cover

her, deep inside. She could feel him stretching her.

She arched in satisfaction as his fingers stroked her clit in round, quick, masterful knowing strokes as he thrust inside her.

"I love your lives, every

we fell in love without you, one thousand years ago? How we fucked ourselves stupid without you?" he said harshly, ramming his

cock into her in massive driving

"You love hearing about how

second of them," she breathed as

her orgasm began to bloom.

strokes.

"Yes!" She rolled her head back as her climax hit and gasped.

Brody thrust hard two more times, his fists slamming into the ground by her head as his hips

groan as he came.

She felt the shift, the tension

drove into her. He gave a gasping

teeth pierced her neck with the sweet-sour sting she had grown used to. "Brody," she whispered, her hand in his hair. "I love you."

His teeth withdrew, his tongue laved the small wounds. His lips kissed it better. His hands soothed her and told her the

in him. The predator had awoken. With a smile, she rolled her head to one side and bared her neck. His

Our pasts?" He shifted his weight so that he was lying next to her. His hand lazily circled her breasts.

"All of you is all of you," she

predator had withdrawn. "You love even that part of us you can't have?

said simply. "You wouldn't be who you are without all that history behind you. Of course I love all of it. Of course I find it all fascinating and want to know about all of it." She picked up his hand and kissed it. "If I find watching the two of you together exciting now that all three of us are together, why wouldn't I find it exciting when it was just the two of you?" She put his hand back on her breast. "Just because I wasn't formally part of the two of you doesn't mean I get to put my feelings onto the back burner. I still get excited by the idea of the two of you doing wicked things to each other." She looked around the tent. "It must be getting late. It's getting darker in here." "The campfires are burning

down," Brody said. "It should be about nine o'clock." He turned her chin so that her face was toward

him. "No envy? No resentment?" he murmured.

She smiled, knowing he could see more in the dark than she could. "God no, Brody. How could I resent what happened long before I

was born? Of course I wish Veris had the same devotion for me that he has for you, but I'm beginning to stuff. It's taking the sting away."

Brody sat up in one smooth movement. "Devotion?" he repeated, with a stunned tone in his

understand why he developed that attachment and why I can't share it, now you're finally telling me this

voice.

Taylor laughed. She sat up and kissed him. "Devotion," she repeated firmly. "I'm betting that after your night next to the olive

tree, he was back...oh, the very next night. Probably sneaked into your

tent in the dead of the night and sneaked out again before morning. Made love to you all night and left you like a limp noodle while he went off to kill Fatimids and build siege engines."

Brody was silent for a second or two. "You're scary," he said at

last. "Only I had to work the next day, too." He turned his head. "Someone's coming," he said softly

and reached for the tunic she had slashed. "Slip behind the panels and I'll throw your chemise to you."

"More firewood! More light! The Lord Toulouse comes!" The cry came from the north.

came from the north.

"Raymond is coming," Brody said, as Taylor stepped behind the

dark and slide into it. She had just arranged the garment properly when the slashed tunic folded over the top of the panel, too. There was more and more light as she dressed, as the fires and noise built as people woke and prepared for the arrival

panels. Her chemise drifted over the top of the panels and she struggled to find the hem in the

of Raymond of Toulouse.

She slid the tunic off the panels and slipped it on over the chemise and stepped out from behind the panels. She bent over

behind the panels. She bent over the trunk where she had seen Mary drop the belt from the bliaut earlier do. It pulled the tunic in around her waist, which would have to serve as an emergency bliaut.

Brody was already dressed in a matching tunic and leggings. She ran her hand under the tunic until

she reached the top of the leggings

Brody grinned. "It was faster

and found bare flesh.

that way," he murmured.

that day and fished it out from among the unknown paraphernalia she found there. Hastily, she wound the belt around her waist twice and knotted it so it hung low on her abdomen as she had seen women in medieval illustrations

"Liar." She withdrew her hand as two knights stepped aside at the entrance to the tent and made way for a slender man with red-gold hair, a long narrow nose and one eye. He seemed weighed down with care and troubles. He nodded at Brody, who bowed from the waist. "My lord." Taylor took her cue. She curtsied. "My lord," she murmured. "If you had sent word," Brody added, "I would have been happy to have attended you. You did not need to stir yourself away from your wife and family at this time."

"I wanted air, anyway,"

wife blames me for this misfortune and I grow tired of listening to her accusations. She was the one who insisted on bringing the babe with us." He shrugged. "Enough of the matter, I grow weary of it. Water is the need that brings me here, Brendan. The siege engines will be complete in three days, but we only have enough water to last for one, maybe two days. I want you to find

Raymond said dismissively. "My

camp."

Brody inclined his head. "All the wells and soaks in the region were poisoned by the Fatimids in

some and bring it back to the

coming. There are no local water sources."

"Then you'll have to range

the city, when they heard we were

farther afield. We must have fresh water—and fresh meat, too. Add that to your list, while you're out there."

"Out in the desert" Brody

"Out in the desert," Brody clarified, his voice flat.

"Yes. We'll need you back by

the third day." Raymond inclined

his head toward Taylor. "Lady Norwich."

She dipped into a much shallower curtsey this time, her mind racing.

"Three days, my lord," Brendan replied. Raymond stalked out of the tent, his knights falling in behind him like a train. There was a call for more light, more torches, the calls gradually fading as Raymond headed north, back to his camp. Brody gripped the post on the back of his chair, his head down, his eyes narrowed as he thought hard.

Raymond nodded at Brody.

"Three days, Brendan!"

Taylor asked softly, in English.

"The fourteenth, four days from now," Brody said, just as

"When does Jerusalem fall?"

softly. "As soon as they get the siege engines finished, the Fatimids surrender."

"If you're away from the city

for three days, then you'll have no time to hunt Veris at all. Once the city falls, he and Selkirk will be gone."

Brody glanced at her. "I can't defy Raymond. It's the equivalent

of a direct military order. Besides, the entire army here *does* need water."

"This didn't happen, the first time around, did it? You didn't go

"No."

out for water."

"We're already changing the past," she said. "How much is this going to ripple down through history?"

Brody gave a short laugh. "Can we save the philosophy for

when Veris is around to chew over it? Right now, I have enough worries to make me want to throw

up." He pressed at his temples. "How the hell am I supposed to be in two places at once for the next three days? We don't even know if this time jump will let us stay here for the next three days!"

Taylor stepped around him so that her back was to the light from

blinked. "Fucking perfect," he muttered. "Now I need to feed on top of everything else."

"I think it's that you need to feed because of everything else, but

okay," she said. She stepped away from him, knowing her pulse and heartbeat would make it worse for him now. "Go and feed," she said

He lifted his hands away and

the campfires, then tried to turn Brody so that his face was to the light. "Look at me," she said. "Take

your hands away."

softly. "Take care of that first. In the meantime, I'll do some thinking." Brody's chest was rising and His gaze skittered around the tent.

"Brody!" she called. She couldn't touch him to gain his

falling. He was breathing too fast.

attention.

He blinked and looked at her.

His eyes were widely dilated. The

predator was loose. This creature,

though, wasn't interested in bonding. It was searching for food and she fit the profile.

"Go and feed," she said firmly. "Now."

He swallowed. Then he nodded and picked up his knife and pushed it through his belt. Wordlessly, he left.

her.

When he had left the camp proper she stepped out of the tent

Taylor shivered as he passed

and waved to the nearest page. "Find Mary and tell her I need her assistance at once."

The page took off at a dead run.

Mary turned out to be a coconspirator, once Taylor explained what she needed. Twenty minutes later, Taylor steadied herself on the horse that had been brought around for her, feeling that she was

very high up from the ground

been learning to use looked nothing like what she was faced with now. Nor had she been learning to ride while wearing the medieval version of formal evening wear.

But there were reins and she

indeed. All the riding lessons she had been taking just for these moments weren't much use when the saddle, bridle, stirrups and other modern equipment she had

that the instructor drummed into her from the start. Your knees are one of the principal steering mechanisms!

Mary was waiting for her, seated upon a smaller gray mare.

remembered one very basic lesson

really don't like horses," she confessed.

Mary laughed. "You hide it

Taylor gave her a nervous smile. "I

well, my lady."

Taylor gave the horse a gentle tap with her foot and it started forward. Mary kept up alongside

forward. Mary kept up alongside her.

"You'd best show me the way, Mary," Taylor told her. "I've been keeping to the camp so much, I'm

not entirely sure where Selkirk's encampment is."

"Not to worry, my lady,"
Mary said. "I know all the camps like the back of my hand."

warm night air lifting her veil. Soldiers and knights were watching them as they passed fires and tents, one encampment after another. They must have made quite a sight, for not every lord had brought his family with him. Only a very few women and their entourages of help and necessary support systems had made the arduous journey from more civilized climates. Taylor in her formal wear and with her maid must be quite a sight for these lonely men. She was glad

She edged her fat horse

forward and Taylor's trotted to keep up. Taylor could feel the loop on her belt, even if it was on her right hand side. Selkirk's encampment was ablaze with light and activity,

of the long knife tucked into the

which made it an oddity among all the others, which were settling down for the night. Taylor was pleased it was so. She would not be

an unwelcome disturbance, at least. But why would Selkirk be so busy when everyone else was lethargic?

Mary caught at Taylor's horse's bridle and brought her to a stop when they reached the sentries. Thankfully, Taylor

sentries. Thankfully, Taylor slithered to the ground. Her legs

her. She made a mental note to practice a lot more with horses when she got back. Bareback, this time.

Mary was already standing in front of the sentries, her hand on

her hip, the other holding both horses' reins. "Make way for the

were shaking from having to hold onto the horse so tightly. Adrenaline was coursing through

Lady Norwich, my good men," she said importantly. "She has need to speak to Lord Selkirk."

Taylor straightened her clothing and moved to stand just behind Mary's shoulder as she had

The sentries just stared at them.

Mary cocked her head.

seen Raymond do with his knights.

"Cheeky buggers," she muttered. "Move, or I'll have your bollocks!"

she said, much more loudly.

"It's rather late to be seeking an audience with anyone, my lady, don't you think?" The voice came

from dark shadows, but Taylor

knew it was Veris. She knew his voice so well she would recognize it anywhere. He stepped into the light thrown from nearby fires to stand behind his men. He crossed

his arms. "Forgive the caution my

must watch for assassins. I know you will be familiar with that term."

"Of course. Lord Selkirk has

men are showing, but at night we

been threatened, then. It explains the light and the activity." She tapped the knife on her belt. "This is the only weapon I carry. My maid carries none. You may escort me directly to Lord Selkirk and

escort me back to my horse. Will that satisfy your need for caution?"

"What is this fuss, Will?" came a low, contralto feminine voice, that seemed to be both full of laughter and full of sexual promise

at the same time. Just the sound of it made the fine hairs on the back of Taylor's neck stand up and sent a ripple down her back. It wasn't a

pleasant sensation at all.

Like Veris, the woman was lingering in the shadows, but she was using them deliberately and didn't reveal herself. The first

glimpse Taylor caught of her was a long-fingered hand that slid over Veris' shoulder possessively, before curling around and stroking his neck.

neck.

He didn't move. He didn't shrug off the hand. He didn't respond to it either.

Then the rest of her emerged into the light.

She was tall. Tall enough that

standing next to Veris, she only had to rise on her toes a little to slide her tongue along his neck and into his ear as her hand continued to

stroke the other side of his neck.

It was a form of greeting,
Taylor realized. An intimate

Taylor realized. An intimate greeting.

The woman turned to study Taylor, her greeting done. With a

small start of surprise, Taylor realized the woman was wearing chainmail, hose and a tunic, just like a man. She even had a sword

Everything was in Selkirk colors.

She had blue eyes. They weren't like Veris' though. Her eyes were almost completely colorless, like a washed-out summer sky, punctuated by the iris.

strapped to her hip. Everything was scaled down to her proportions.

It gave her eyes a hypnotic quality. Her hair was raven black and woven in one long braid down the center of her back.

Taylor fought down the sensation of dismay building in her.

Only a woman of high importance in the Selkirk household could arrange for

the Selkirk colors. And male clothing?

If she and Veris were lovers...

Taylor realized she had let

themselves tailored clothes with

herself stare for too long. She pulled her gaze away from the woman, who was beginning to smile with a self-satisfied expression that made Taylor's skin

crawl.

"I seek a few minutes of Lord
Selkirk's time," Taylor said. "I was
explaining to William that I am

happy to be escorted under arms if it makes everyone feel more secure and comfortable. I am no assassin."

The woman turned to Will. "I will take her."

Will shook his head. "The

assassins have you on their list, too." He was speaking softly, but not bothering to lower his voice too much because he thought no one would understand him but the woman. Taylor battled to keep her

woman. Taylor battled to keep her face expressionless as she found herself translating the words almost automatically in her mind. Except for the word "assassin" Will had used ancient Norse. He added, "There are too many spears out here tonight."

Taylor leaned forward. "Who

is she?" she breathed into Mary's ear.

Mary turned her head.
"Davina. Wife of Selkirk."

Taylor kept her best neutral look on her face as the two turned back to look at her.

Davina scowled at her.

"William will escort you to the lord" she said and stalked away.

lord," she said and stalked away, her sword slapping her thigh. The sentries stepped aside.

"Watch the horses, Mary. You really don't want to come inside the camp."

the camp."

"I don't think I do, neither,"

Mary murmured.

Veris halted her about ten paces beyond the sentries. "I have to ask you for your knife, my lady."

"Do you get to search me, too?" she asked, pulling the knife out of her belt.

"I will trust you for now." He pushed the knife into his belt. "I think we both know I could slit your throat faster than you could withdraw any other weapon."

"Finally, we are making some progress." Taylor smiled at him. "And where do we find your worthy lord?"

worthy lord?"

Veris held out his hand,

indicating the way. Taylor picked up the hem of her dress and carefully skirted around the chests, gear, ropes and pegs that might snag her clothes, while trying to look graceful. "You look much more elegant now," Veris observed. "I know you like elegance." She stepped over a sleeping man and moved on without comment. "You dressed for me?" "I would like to say yes, but I actually dressed for Selkirk. One honors the lord one visits, when

one is asking a favor."

"You've come to ask a favor?"

"Yes." "For your husband?" "For me." Veris laughed. "Where is the humor in that?" she asked. "You're a woman." She realized it was simply eleventh century thinking, but still found herself coming to a halt. "Like Davina is a woman?" Veris halted, too. "That's different." "Why?" Taylor dropped into old Norse. "Because she's a vampire? Or because she is your lover?"

Now he will try to turn the argument to attack, Taylor thought.

Veris scowled. "Are you jealous, perhaps? I saw your face

She heard his breath catch.

when she touched me."

Even knowing why he was doing it, his petty slash still hurt, because it was the truth. Taylor had

been horrified, watching Davina's lovely hands and lips touching Veris. It had made her sick.

"You were," Veris breathed.

Then he glanced around quickly and straightened up, as if

he had suddenly remembered where they were. "You are

your place to question who we chose to take as partners. You have no claim over us at all. Didn't your husband teach you this when he deigned to marry you?" Taylor could feel her eyes stinging and blinked furiously. The last thing she needed was tears, right now. "If that's truly the vampire creed at this time, I refuse to believe for a second that you follow it. It suits Davina down to the ground, but you'd hate it. You're too warm. Too human."

Veris looked deeply offended.

"You insult me, madam."

human," he said flatly. "It's not

out her hand. "Give me your hand for a moment." Veris crossed his arms, looking

"Do I? Really?" Taylor held

wise.

"For heaven's sake. You know

you could snap my neck in one second. Give me your hand." She

shook her hand for emphasis.

He laid his hand with the heavy mail gauntlet in hers.

heavy mail gauntlet in hers.

Taylor pulled the gauntlet off and handed it back to him. Veris'

and handed it back to him. Veris' hand was familiar and dear. She lifted it and stroked the palm. Then, delicately, she slipped her fingers between his and caressed the flesh

along the sides of his fingers.

She heard his tiny gasp and hid her smile as she continued to caress and stroke the sensitive flesh there. She looked up and saw that

with profound concentration, as if he was hypnotized. She lifted her fingers and beckoned. He leaned down. She reached up on tiptoe

and like Davina before her, she slid her tongue up along Veris' neck.

Veris was watching her fingers

But she followed the line of his tendon and concentrated on the hollow underneath his ear. Then, delicately, she slipped the tip of her tongue into his ear as she let her because of warm relationships with humans that a human could get to know you and do that to you. I bet Davina never has, Will."

Taylor stepped back. "It's only

breath blow over it.

Veris shuddered.

He growled. It was an animal sound that frightened her and she cringed.

Veris grabbed her arm and hurried her through the camp. She could barely keep her feet and only had one hand to spare to hold up her dress.

He only let go of her arm when they were standing before a

"Lady Norwich to see Selkirk," Veris growled. His voice was thick and hoarse. Rage or arousal. Possibly both. One of the knights slipped into the tent.

large tent and two more sentries.

These were fully armed knights.

back to your horse," Veris told her. "Here." He held out her knife to her, hilt first. When she took it, he turned and walked away with no

"Someone else will see you

attempt at a formal farewell.

The knight returned. "This way," he said, holding the flap open for her.

It was bright with candles and quite hot, plus there was a lot of furniture. That was her first

Taylor stepped inside.

impression.

Selkirk was a middle-aged man with dark hair going gray at the temples. He was unusually tall

for the times and had blue eyes that might have been called startling if

Taylor hadn't seen his wife's eyes or Veris' first. These eyes just looked ordinary in comparison, and tired. There were the beginnings of bags beneath his eyes, from either stress, lack of sleep or age. But he was once a handsome man and he was still attractive, with an air of command that came with age. "Lady Norwich, this is... unusual."

She curtsied. "I appreciate your time and your tolerance, Lord Selkirk. I have an unusual request and I've heard that you are a wise

man and open-minded. I have hopes that you will listen to my request and help me meet my

needs." Selkirk waved toward his big chair but Taylor had already

learned that the big chairs were for the men. She demurred with a

smile and perched on the little

it is a female matter, I am sure it is delicate."

"It is political, actually. But it is hard to explain."

Selkirk lifted his shoulders a little. "Plain words are often the best."

Selkirk gave a small laugh. "If

chest nearby. "This is...delicate."

"Then if you are not offended by plain words, I will use them. That will be easiest for me"

That will be easiest for me."

Selkirk lifted a single brow. "If you are able to use plain words, then please do."

Taylor settled her hands in her lap. "I want to borrow your man,

water and food for Raymond's forces."

Selkirk sat very still for a few seconds. "Well," he said at last. "I would not have wagered on that outcome." He stood and pushed his big sleeves up his arms. Taylor got

the sense that he was falling to business. "William is one of my most reliable knights. Why would I

William, for three days to assist my husband while he goes in search of

deplete my forces by lending him to another for three whole days?"

He was looking for compensation. But Taylor had none to give. Only Brody as the Lord of

Norwich had any real money in this time and she didn't want to drag him into this.

She was going to have try a

different sort of coinage. "I would have thought," she said carefully, "that you might like to have William removed from your

household, even for a while."

Selkirk's eyes widened. "Very plain spoken indeed," he muttered. He stalked to a table next to his chair and poured a mug of wine and drank deeply. Then he studied

and drank deeply. Then he studied her. "Let us agree that it would be to my advantage to have William gone for a while. It still depletes my

"There will be no fighting for at least three days. The siege engines won't be ready for at least that long," Taylor countered. "In the meantime, the knights you have can take care of any skirmishes." "You are an astute woman,"

Selkirk responded. "However, it still leaves the question of *why* you

fighting forces. That is no lie."

want William's services for this search for water." He sat back on the big chair.

"Why do my motives have to be a part of the bargain?" she demanded. "You would not ask this of a man."

"But as I have the commodity you seek, you must fall in with my conditions. Yes?"

"True," Selkirk replied easily.

Taylor seethed. "Yes," she replied, as sweetly as she could.
Selkirk's smile was broad. "I

heard that you kissed him."

Taylor drew a calming breath.
"You heard correctly."

She enjoyed seeing Selkirk's eyes widen. "You do not deny it?"

eyes widen. "You do not deny it?"

"It was a greeting. A gesture.

The French—the Normans—do it all the time. But of course in this camp where boredom has driven everyone to invent games and

at least three times. Each time it becomes more exaggerated. Next, they will have it that my husband and myself are trying to seduce your captain or something silly like that."

Selkirk actually blushed.

husband and I are familiar with

Taylor spread her hands. "My

fantasies, a simple kiss of greeting becomes something wicked, instead." She smiled at Selkirk. "I have heard the same rumor myself,

William's past and his expertise. He knows the lands around here and the ways of the desert dwellers. He will be an asset on our search for

wished to surprise him with this arrangement, for he is feeling the strain of this assignment. I thought William's company would be a welcome addition."

Selkirk sat back and thought about it. "In the end all mysteries

water and food. That is the sum total of my motives in asking for his assistance. The reason I approached you instead of my husband is that I

of alarm.
"One or two questions, Lady
Norwich. That is all. Your

then?" Taylor asked, feeling a touch

"There has been speculation,

are so simple, aren't they?"

lady, but in all honesty the threat of the Fatimids is greater than my domestic troubles. I can't risk sending Will on a trek into the desert that would bring no bounty to my men, simply to satisfy a personal gain."

reputation is far from besmirched, let me assure you." He stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles. "It is an intriguing offer, my

authority to offer a portion of the water or food they found, either.

She was stumped. Then she remembered something Selkirk had said earlier and sat up.

Taylor knew she had no

"I'll bet you for Will," she said.
"Excuse me?"

"A wager," she re-interpreted.
Selkirk's eyes narrowed and

an eager expression crept into his face. Clearly, the troops on the ground weren't the only ones suffering from *ennui*.

"How do we decide the matter?" he asked. "There's a game called Rock,

Paper – I mean, Parchment, Sheers." Taylor got to her feet and pushed back her sleeves.

Chapter Eight

Brody rose from his crouch in front of the fire as the hoof beats grew closer. They were at the far south end of the encamped

Christian forces. To the south lay nothing but desert, so anyone coming this way was coming for the camp, the fire or the siege

the camp, the fire or the siege engine they guarded.

"Someone comes at great

speed," Alexander observed. His olive face was calm. He was a Fatimid, but a Christian and lived a

across. It had not surprised Brody to find Alexander working on the most remote fringes of the Christian forces. He was outcast no matter where he went.

"They'll kill that horse, riding

precarious life constantly justifying his existence to anyone he came

murmured on the other side of the fire.

Somehow, Brody knew this was about him. He turned to face into the inky black night and

it at that rate," another soldier

waited.

It didn't take long for the horse to appear, not ridden like

inside of its nose showed red.

"You!" Veris roared, pointing at Brody. He jumped from the back of the horse, landing lightly in the sand, despite the height. He threw

the reins to the terrified page who'd come running and strode over to Brody. His forefinger thudded against Brody's chest. "I

that. Its forelegs climbed into the air in front of Brody as the rider yanked on the reins, halting it. Froth gathered at the bit and the

will have words with you, Norwich."
Alexander rose gracefully to his feet. "I will give you the fire, my

the morrow." He turned to the others. "Come, come my friends. Let us find another fire and wine." The others grumbled, but not very loudly. Veris' anger kept their protests down to almost nothing. Alexander gathered them up and swept them away with quiet promises of more drink, more food, more laughter. They shuffled off across the sand toward the next campfire where there was a minstrel singing softly, leaving Brody alone with the heaving horse, a half completed siege

engine and Veris, filled with more

lord," he said and bowed. "Until

pent up fury than Brody had ever seen in him. "I've had the devil's own time

finding you," Veris complained. "Your men didn't know where you went." "How did you find me?"

Brody asked curiously. Veris stepped closer. "Your

scent, vampire. I've marked it now."

It still would have been a hell of a task to track him. Brody's

search for sustenance tonight had taken longer and been more protracted than usual because of sentries and alert guards. He'd

Veris' hand trembled as he gripped Brody's tunic. "How on earth could you marry that...that

wandered farther than usual.

creature?" he breathed. Ahhh. Brody wondered what Taylor had done, but at the same

time he mentally kissed her. She

had prodded Veris somehow and wound him up to the point where he had been shot like a bolt straight at Brody. "Tyra is unlike any human

you have ever met." Brody kept his voice calm. Quiet.

Veris whirled away. "Humans!" He laughed, but it Brody caught his breath as he realized that Veris wasn't just angry. He was aroused. Taylor had

reached through his considerable

defenses and touched him, strongly enough to send him running for the one person he thought he wanted.

Brendan. Brody acted fast. Vampire

sounded tight, hard.

speed fast. He grabbed Veris by the back of the neck and pushed him up against the half-completed siege engine. The wooden sides creaked as their combined weights tested it.

engine. The wooden sides creaked as their combined weights tested it.

Veris groaned, his hands spread against the wooden wall,

surprised to do much and Brody had his legs spread and the weight off his feet before he could balance himself for a counter move. Brody pressed up behind

trying to press back. But he was too

Veris, leaning his whole weight against Veris' back. His heart skittered at the familiar contact.

He snaked his arm underneath Veris' and grabbed the man's throat. Veris didn't need to breath for a while, but he knew

breath for a while, but he knew Brody could take out his throat with that grip if he needed to. It kept Veris locked in that position as solidly as with irons. He didn't know that Brody would sooner tear out his own heart. Brody closed his eyes. Their positions reminded him of so many

other times and places. He pushed the memories away. Those memories were all at risk if he didn't play *this* moment exactly right.

"You liked what she did to you," Brody breathed in Veris' ear. "That is what you will not admit to yourself. A mere human knows you better than you feel comfortable with and it's driving you mad that you're responding to her." Brody

reached under Veris' tunic and

"Your future," Brody told him. He found the opening in Veris' braies and pushed his hand inside. "So am I." He closed his hand around his cock. He wasn't

surprised to find it as hard as

heard his hard exhalation as Brody's hand found his thigh. The

thigh trembled.

marble.

Veris groaned, his eyes closing. "Impossible," he muttered. "I decide..."

"You will," Brody assured him, stroking smoothly, the way

Veris liked it best. He could feel

his hips, the gathering tension in his back. His breathing shallowed. His hands against the wood curled, trying to tighten into fists.

Brody's own body was hard with excitement, his cock pulsing. So close, so close...

Abruptly, Veris pushed back

Veris responding, the tautness in

with a roar of protest. Brody had let his grip on Veris' throat relax and the bigger man reared back, pushing himself off the wall. It took upper body strength that few men, even few vampires, possessed, especially deep in the grip of direct and erotic arousal.

Brody barely was able to follow. He spun, his arm slamming across Brody's chest. Brody was dragged around in almost a complete semicircle. His back slapped up again the wood.

Veris moved with a speed

Brody remembered to breathe again.

The speed at which their positions had been reversed... He'd

always known Veris had been strong, but Veris had never used that strength against him in anger. Brody could feel the trembling deep inside him. Veris' eyes were inches from "I decide," Veris said flatly.
"Not you."

his. Hard. Unforgiving.

"You've always had that choice," Brody said truthfully.

The hardness, the anger in his

eyes shifted. Puzzlement crept in. He leaned even closer. His face tucked into the nape of Brody's

neck. Brody heard him take a delicate sniff.

Veris lifted his head to look

Brody in the eye. "You've fed tonight." His voice was strained.

Veris always loved taking

Veris always loved taking Brody when he was freshly fed, hot with new blood and vital with responding to now, but he was feeling the pull of it, anyway.

Brody tried to breathe around the restricting iron band of Veris'

humanness. This younger Veris didn't know that was what he was

arm against his chest. "I've fed tonight," he confirmed, his voice low.

Veris' canines descended. He

growled deep in the back of his throat. The predator was rising.

Brody did the only thing he

Brody did the only thing he knew that was guaranteed to keep the predator at bay. He kissed him.

Brody could only move his head. Veris was the stronger one,

against Veris' and it was like every other kiss they had ever shared. Brody felt like he had come home. He leaned into it, driving his

even despite Brody having fed so recently. So he pressed his lips

tongue deeper, pouring his soul and heart into the man. It felt right that Veris' hand would grasp his hair and hold him

steady. The barely-heard groan at the back of his throat made Brody's body tighten and thrum even harder.

So when Veris gripped his

So when Veris gripped his wrist and sliced the knife through his hand, pinning it to the wall,

away, barely even feeling the petty pain of the knife. "You and she are trying to bewitch me," Veris accused. Brody felt an insane urge to

Brody was shocked speechless. He stared at Veris as the man backed

laugh. He shook his head. "You, a vampire, are concerned about witchcraft?"

"You pursue me," Veris

"You pursue me," Veris insisted.
Brody shrugged, even though

it made his pinned hand hurt like crazy. He could feel blood running down his arm. "Of course. Are you so arrogant, you must only ever be Something darkened and shifted behind Veris' eyes. It alarmed Brody.

the one to hunt?"

"I've lost my taste for this game, Norwich. Stay away, do you hear me?"

Brody desperately sought for words to claw this moment back, to reverse it. None would come.

"Do you hear me?" Veris demanded. He was moving away, leaving. The shadows of the night were swallowing him.

Reluctantly, Brody nodded. Veris was gone.

* * * * *

being ridden hard. At this time of night, it could only be Brody returning. She almost threw herself off the bed and raced out of the tent, into the moonlight and firelight, to see the horse halt with

Taylor heard the thud of a horse

a spray of white sand. Brody saw her and focused on her. His face was grim and hard with some emotion she could barely process for the news pressing against her own heart. He jumped off the horse and

came straight to her, for which she would be forever grateful. No leisurely time with his men, orders,

man's world.

Taylor threw her arms around him the moment Brody was within reach, and despite Brody being an

lingering jovial moments in this

reach and despite Brody being an absolute rock, he still staggered back a pace. His arms came around her, steadying them both.

"I lost the bet," she told him.

"I lost! God, Brody, I'm so stupid! How could I have thought I could

play this and win? Just because I'm from the future. Now everything's completely fucked up and Selkirk

"Stop, Taylor, stop," he said, his hand in her hair. "You did me. I'm the one that fucked up." Taylor lifted her head from his chest. "What?" she said, puzzled

beautifully. Veris came straight to

and afraid. Brody's expression was wretched. "Veris came to me," he repeated. He took a breath and

opened his mouth to speak more words, but none came. He shook his head. "I can't even say it." He

closed his eyes.

Dismay hit her in a hard, cold rush. "Oh, Brody. No." She stopped herself from saying more by

wrapping her arms around him

again and just holding on. She

arms tightened in response.

She kissed his neck, the only part of him she could reach, tucked so tightly against him. She licked it.

could feel his trembling and his

He shuddered.
So Taylor did it again, lengthening the stroke of her lick

and making her tongue linger.

Brody's hand slid up into her hair and lifted her head, bringing

her lips to his. He may have meant his kiss to be gentle, but it swiftly grew hot, hard and overwhelmingly demanding. His tongue thrust deep into her mouth, stealing air, space and bits of her Brody pushed aside her tunic robe and gathered up the hem of her chemise so that he could slide

his hand beneath and cup her ass

soul. Taylor gave them all up

gladly.

cheek. Taylor pressed back into his hand and ran her own hand down the front of his tunic. She wasn't surprised to find him stiff and

ready.

He lifted her with the hand under her ass and she quickly wound her legs around his waist.

"Hungry?" she murmured.

"I just fed."
So he would be ravenous, she

interpreted. If Veris had roused him in any way, he would be twice as starved.

He pushed the light tent flap

aside and carried her inside, not

just to his side, but through to her side of the tent. He lowered her to the ground and stripped off his clothes. Her heart raced as she

watched his body emerge. His cock was hard, rising from his thighs like a rigid pole. The rest of him gleamed in the moonlight filtering in through the tent sides.

He removed her belt and

tunic, leaving her in her chemise.
"Turn around and put your

so many possibilities if she did this... Obediently, she turned and rested her hands on the panels. Brody spread her ankles as wide as

the chemise permitted, then swore and hoisted it higher up her thighs and spread her legs wider. She could feel the fine trembling in his

hands on the panels," he told her.

Her heart jumped. There were

His voice was thick with lust.

hands. He was in a fever of need, but controlling it. Directing it.

She felt Brody pressing up behind her. His cock brushing up against her back. His breath caught

a little at the contact. "I had him

"Veris?" Her body tightened at the idea. "Did you reach around..."

like this," he said.

"Like this." His hand curled around her hip, slid down her thigh and dipped under her chemise. She found her breath stopping as

Brody's fingers curled over her

thigh, caressing the inner flesh there. They slid up again, to brush against her clit. She moaned, her hips bucking at the contact. Brody pushed his fingers farther along her cleft, sliding them

into the creamy slick entrance of her vagina. He gathered moisture and brought it back to her clit.

Taylor tried to grip the panel with her fingernails, as her

excitement level rose. Brody had placed her in such a way that nearly all her weight was pressing on her hands. She was at his mercy.

Brody pushed her chemise up higher, rucking it up under her arms to free her breasts. He tugged

at the nipples, making her groan.

Then his hands lifted away from her altogether. Taylor could feel and hear her heartbeat in her

temples and chest and head. Her clit throbbed in time.
"Brody?" she called.

gasp in surprise and pure sensuous delight. She felt the cool touch of slick oil and her excitement spiraled higher.

His fingers toyed with her

cleft, from clit to anus, making her

His fingers slid through her

anus, spreading the oil and slipping inside, making her squirm.

"Hurry," she begged.

"Why should I?" he wanted to know.

But his cock brushed between her thighs, heavy and hot, then pushed inside her, in slow hard inches filling her, while Brody held

inches, filling her, while Brody held her hips and ass steady, his thumbs her. When he was buried balls deep, he paused.

"Fuck me," she begged. "As hard as you can."

stroking her flesh in delicate sweeps as he eased his way into

"Stroke yourself," he said.
"Come with me." He began to thrust in the slow, hard thrusts she

liked.

Taylor circled her clit with her fingers, absorbing moisture from her pussy and caressing Brody's

her pussy and caressing Brody's testicles as she did so. He gasped at the contact and she smiled as she began to massage her clit in hard little strokes to match Brody's

squeezing her nipples between his fingers. The little pinching sensation sent sparks of pleasure rushing through her and made her

nipples even harder and more

breasts and cupped them,

His hands slid up to her

thrusts.

her.

"You're so hot around me,"
Brody breathed. "So tight." He
gripped the top of the divider with
both hands, using it for leverage to
drive himself even deeper inside

Taylor moaned as his cock pushed into her. Her climax dropped down to cover hers between her thighs. His fingers joined hers against her clit. He thrust into her again, another powerful deep stroke and at the same time, he made her massage

hovered. "Harder," she whispered.

"Yes," he agreed. One hand

her clit in quick hard swipes.

Her climax slammed through
her. She gasped. "Brody!" Then she
realized that Brody's control was
already disintegrating. His thrusts

were speeding up. He was slamming into her. He was coming. Taylor felt everything clamp around Brody's cock, milking it, as her pleasure soared in sparkling waves through her. Brody cried out as he came with a final thrust that buried him

deeply inside her and grew still. She could feel his heart racing,

though. It matched her own. Brody carefully eased the

crumpled chemise from her body,

supporting her, then lifted her from his own. He carried her to the bed and laid her on it.

Then he surprised her by lying next to her.

Taylor turned to him and held

him. "You're frightening me." Brody caressed her face. "I don't want to."

"Then you'd better tell me all of it. Quickly."

Desert dwellers, used to picking

would have seen the shadow that was Veris and moved on. He was motionless as he laid watching Norwich's tent. He was far enough away that no mortal eye could see him, but he could see what was happening in the tent with perfect

out life from across the arid plains,

clarity.

He had watched everything, from the moment Norwich arrived back at the camp and his wife had

last tender moment Norwich had laid her to rest in the bed and then shocked Veris by lying beside her and taking her in his arms.

greeted him so passionately, to the

What had happened in between had been full of revelation...and release, too. Veris glanced down at his damp tunic.

The release had been involuntary and caught him by surprise. He had never considered himself a *voyeur*. Not the sort who found pleasure in

so Norwich enjoyed erotic pleasure with his wife that most men practiced together. What of it?

Veris frowned, trying to dismiss the rush of pleasure the idea gave him.

But in a tiny corner of his mind, it sat there. A kernel of truth

that wouldn't go away. He faced it squarely because it bothered him.

He liked the idea because it

had possibilities. He'd watched Norwich take his wife nearly the same way he'd tried to take him

and that had been the source of Veris' pleasure. Watching what might have been. Watching her pleasure. Being taken clearly wasn't the humiliation he'd thought it would be. She had loved it.

would be. She had loved it.

Veris paused in his thoughts

troubadour's word. That was the emotion that was most fitting for the way these

and examined the word. Love. The

two treated each other. They loved each other. Veris studied the tent again.

They were still talking. She was caressing him. Reassuring him? How a mere human could seek to reassure a male and a vampire Veris

had yet to understand. Yet she was clearly the superior in the conversation at that moment and Norwich was accepting her

reassurances. She was making him feel better. Veris could see the change right before his eyes.

How interesting.

Veris got to his feet and

dusted off the dry white sand of the desert and headed back for Selkirk's camp. He had his own problems to unravel and now this intriguing puzzle to solve.

problems to unravel and now this intriguing puzzle to solve.

By the time Brody had finished

relating how Veris had backed away from him and disappeared into the night, Taylor could understand why his heart rate was high.

She peered at his hand in the low light, looking for damage, but there was none. It had healed clean as usual. "I'm sorry, Taylor," Brody said

softly. "I tried. You had such utter faith in my hold over him that I

started to believe it myself. I think we were wrong. We never held Veris at all. He just chose to stay of his own accord." He sighed. "I'm still not sure what went wrong."

Taylor sighed, too. "I think I

a woman in Veris' life and I don't think she's making him very happy."

" A woman?" Brody sounded

can shed some light on that. There's

winded. "Do you know who?"

"Her name is Davina. I met her tonight. She's vampire."

Brody sat up. "Davina," he

said flatly, staring at her. "Oh, my fucking Christ." He pressed his fingertips to his forehead. "She's here?"

"She's Selkirk's wife." Taylor sat up, too, puzzled. "You know her?"

"I know who she is. I mean, I

know she's Selkirk's. I know she's vampire. I even know she and Veris were together. But that was over. It was supposed to be over." Brody scrubbed at his hair. "She didn't

come on the crusades the first time."

"Why not?"

"Veris killed her, in France,

the week before the pope called for volunteers." He blew out his cheeks. "He found his freedom from her shackles that way."

Taylor took a moment to absorb that. Veris had killed the woman, the vampire, who had been running her hands and tongue

all over him tonight. Deliberately? In cold blood? "But why is she still alive now, then?" Taylor asked.

"Something has changed in the past. Farther back than right

now," Brody said. "Something in Veris' timeline, I'm guessing."

Taylor kept her mouth shut. She knew what that change was. Not the specifics, but the when, at

least. She had been there.

"It could be something very small and it has rippled down the timeline enough to reach the point

where he didn't have the... whatever," Brody mused. "The courage to kill Davina when he did in the original past. Now he's got

her like a slave collar and arm bands, destroying his soul a day at a time." He sighed. "She's pure poison, Taylor. There's no softness wears one. She had her hooks so deeply buried in Veris he was bound to her. She was destroying his free will and he knew it. For someone like Veris, it was the equivalent of death. Her death, or his, was his only way out."

about the creature, for all she looks like heaven in a bliaut—when she

"But now he's submitting to her?"

"He's not submitting...yet.

But he's learned he doesn't like control being taken from him and that's why he backed away from me tonight." Brody sighed again, heavily. "Now I see it. If I'd known about Davina... Well, it's too late now."

He picked up Taylor's hand with the one that had been pinned

to the wall by Veris' knife. "Tomorrow I must leave in search of water. A three day quest that will take me as far from Veris as he wants. At least it won't be a useless search. I found a man tonight, Alexander, a Fatimid Christian, who knows of an oasis about a day and a half from here that he thinks the Muslims missed. It will have water we can bring back. At least no one will die of thirst because of me."

"It will be hard travelling. Hard even for a modern girl."

"I would rather be with you

"Let me come with you."

than alone." She threaded her fingers through his. "You're not the only one who feels like a fool tonight."

"What did you do?"

She shook her head. "I tried to arrange a surprise for you. It backfired horribly."

"A surprise?" He kissed her

"A surprise?" He kissed her hand, his lips nibbling along her wrist.

Taylor knew that disinterested

Taylor knew that disinterested tone of his. Brody would have it out

bargained with Selkirk for Veris' services and the last desperate wager, using a contemporary version of rock-paper-scissors and how Selkirk had won two out of three draws. "He laughed at me," Taylor told Brody. "He enjoyed winning the bet and he laughed as he had me shown out. He was still chuckling as that woman passed me

outside the tent with a superior

of her whether she wanted to tell him or not. She gathered her courage and told him about her visit to Selkirk's camp, how she had baited Veris, even how she had smile. She walked into the tent and snapped the flap shut in my face."

"That sounds like Davina, from everything that Veris ever

told me about her," Brody said. He kissed her fingers. "Your visit wasn't a total disaster. You sent Veris straight to me. You reached

past his defenses. We know now that he is vulnerable to you, just as we suspected."

"But he rejected you." Taylor

wanted to weep. "And we won't be back until the siege engines are almost completed. Even then, what if we get hauled back to our own time before we get back? I'll be

we've been doing and wondering what on earth he's doing in the middle of the desert looking for water, or whatever—"

Brody touched her lips. "Shush," he said. "Shhhh..."

gone, your younger self will be left here with no memory of what

She swallowed back the rising panic inside her.
Brody kissed her. It was a soft, comforting touch of his lips to her

temple. "We ignore everything but

success because failure for us is unthinkable. We don't compromise. We don't let go for a second. Veris doesn't get a choice on this either. wattage. Veris won't know what's hit him and will have no idea which way to turn. He may not like the loss of control, but he's going to have to accept the inevitable because we simply can't afford to do anything but win on this one. We don't give up until Veris gives in. Agreed?" "Agreed." She stifled a sudden yawn. Brody laughed. "That's a signal even I can read." He rose from the bed. "Sleep. I've got

As soon as we get back from finding water, we ramp up the seduction again. Both of us at full journey tomorrow, especially if you insist on travelling with us." "I do," she said, snuggling down on the hard mattress.

arrangements to make for the

"Will you let me make decisions for you?" "You know I trust you," she

said sleepily. She felt his lips brush her cheek. "Sleep, my beautiful Tyra." He spoke the words in his native,

archaic Celtic, which even Veris did not know. It was Brody and

Taylor's private language. Taylor could feel herself

smiling as she drifted to sleep. A

Brody may deny it constantly, but the bard in his blood knew a thing or two about romance.

She woke to find Mary shaking her shoulder. Harsh

sunlight pierced her eyes as soon as

happy note to end a dreadful day.

she opened them and she winced.

Then the noise registered.

Men shouting and talking. Ropes straining, horses snorting and stomping.

straining, norses shorting and stomping.

"He said to wake ye when they were hitchin' up the horses," Mary said. "Bring ye food and get ye ready, so ye could get a good long sleep for the way ahead.

You're actually going with them, m'lady?"

Taylor nodded and opened

her eyes again. The dazzling sun was shining directly into the tent and even the gauze didn't not diminish its power. Only when someone stepped in the way of the

early morning rays was there relief. She rolled over to face away from the east and sat up.

She clutched her stomach as the bed seemed to rock beneath

her. Nausea swept her. Taylor swallowed as her mouth filled with saliva and her body flushed in heat. She did not want to vomit in front she breathed steadily, trying to stay on top of it, willing the sickness away.

Thankfully, it passed.

Shakily, Taylor turned to Mary. "You said something about food?"

of Mary, who would instantly interpret the symptom correctly. So

Thirty minutes later, Taylor accepted the reins Brody held out to her and deliberately copied the knights and soldiers around her who were accepting boosts from pages to hoist themselves up onto their horses. Just like the knights,

strapped to her side. Her hair was parted and braided in two long braids down her back, her only concession to womanhood. She wore leather gauntlets rather than mail gauntlets and a knife in her belt. She had also left off the braies, but wore the undershirt to save

Taylor was wearing chainmail, leggings, tunic, belt and a sword

herself from scratches from the mail.

The chainmail was marvelously flexible, but she felt considerably heavier than usual and she was already sweating.

Brody was grinning as he

watched her settle on the horse. It was a big stallion and twitched at her slightest movement.

"This is Goliath," Brody told her. "He's a trained war horse and

as good as a third arm in a fight."

"You put me on a war horse?" she asked, incredulous. "I thought the chainmail was pushing it."

"We'll be in enemy territory,
Tyra. I'm not letting you put a foot

Tyra. I'm not letting you put a foot there without all the protection I can devise. You'll wear mail and Goliath will protect you in a fight. And you will do what I say without question if there is a fight. Is that clear?"

Brody as she had seen him in the first few hours of their arrival, yesterday—bawling orders at his men, splattered in blood, swinging

his long sword. She would be in the

She bit her lip, remembering

middle of something like that, if they came across locals who wanted to fight them. She would be hopelessly, helplessly lost. "You make yourself perfectly clear," she

told him.

He nodded. "I want you to ride by me for a while. The men will think it odd. Women are supposed to ride at the back of the line with the wagons. However,

I am fast acquiring a reputation for oddness." He was smiling as he said it "I want to watch how you

you are the only woman on this

it. "I want to watch how you handle Goliath. So come along with me now."

She nudged Goliath into a walk alongside Brody's big mount

as they rode down a short line of men on horses and three big wagons. Two of the wagons were filled with barrels and the third was filled with gear.

"Two wagons of barrels to bring back water," Brody said, pointing. "A wagon of food and a

there and back, along with some camping supplies and not much of those. We're going very light and lean because I'm trusting Alexander knows exactly where the water is and that I don't have to wander the desert looking for it. We go there and straight back." "All these men are not just to haul water. It's because we're in enemy territory, right?" "And because we must protect the water on the way back. We are not the only people who suffered when the Fatimids

poisoned the wells here." Brody

small amount of water to get us

on Goliath's reins. Her horse was marvelously responsive. He came to an immediate halt and she nudged him forward a few steps

brought his horse to a halt at the front of the line and Taylor tugged

A man about the same age as Brody in appearance sat upon a large chocolate mare, wearing the apparel of the Fatimids, except for the turban. He had close-cropped,

curly black hair, olive skin and a full beard that was neatly trimmed. His eyes were black and alive with thought. Taylor knew this must be the Alexander that Brody had Alexander inclined his head. "My lady." His gaze travelled over her. "I have heard much spoken about your beauty. Now I begin to understand why."

"Alexander, I present my

spoken about.

lady, Tyra," Brody said.

"Thank you," she said, suddenly uncomfortable with his scrutiny. Exactly how much could he see with his placid gaze? "Men far from home have too much time to talk among themselves," she added.

"True," Alexander agreed

easily. "Yet one would expect their

they linger upon your beauty. Surely, that is a true compliment?" Taylor could feel her cheeks heating furiously. Brody was smiling, enjoying her discomfort. "Shall we start out?" Taylor suggested. "We are wasting valuable daylight." "The lady speaks," Alexander said, with a quirk of the lips at Brody. Brody's smile broadened. He lifted his arm in a signal that was

repeated down the line of men

rumor mongering about a lady among them to center upon her more obvious...endowments. Yet the creak of the wagon wheels marked their progress.

Then there was a shout behind them and the thunder of many hooves. More shouts for

Brody to wait.

behind them, then moved his horse off at a slow walk. It was quite undramatic and after all the noise of preparation, almost silent. Only the occasional snort of a horse and

Brody held up his hand again and came to a halt. He turned to look behind the long column of horses and gear.

So did Taylor, using Goliath's rump as leverage to twist herself

There was another column of riders and horses and two more wagons, overtaking theirs. The

column was shorter, with fewer

riders. Selkirk colors.

around.

Were they going to compete with Brody for the water source?

Taylor sought out the lead riders, her heart suddenly racing.

It was Veris. No matter that she couldn't properly see his face

because of the visor, or the movement of the horse, or the adrenaline in her system making her shake. Nothing could disguise his size and no other knight Taylor had seen in Selkirk's household had shoulders like Veris'. He cantered up to where Brody and Alexander sat waiting,

bringing his horse to an easy stop and pulled off his visor. He glanced at all of them, even Taylor. His gaze seemed to heat through her face, searing her flesh.

Veris was not a happy man.

"My lord has instructed that

"My lord has instructed that my men and I join you in your search for water and food. We are to bring back enough of both for the northern camps, as you are to do for the southern."

politics. He wasn't going to lend her Veris, but he didn't mind looking like a hero to the rest of the Christian allies with a bit of careful rephrasing and the cost of a few more men and two wagons for a few days. As Taylor had pointed out to Selkirk, he gained by ridding his household of a troublesome domestic problem while there was no chance of any serious fighting, and now he gained an enhanced reputation among the allies, too. Brody's smile had disappeared as he studied Veris. "I'm sorry you

Taylor felt a touch of

admiration for Selkirk's sense of

clearly not to your taste and pulled away from the comfort of your camp."

Veris snorted. "I'm not." He slapped one gauntlet on top of the

have been saddled with a duty so

other. "Permission to file my men with yours, my lord?" Brody blinked. Taylor knew that was his reaction when he was hiding surprise. It was the "my

lord" that had caught him, along with Veris' lack of distaste over being here. "Of course," Brody said.

Veris pulled his hand out of the gauntlet and waved it. Behind him, the men he'd brought started

behind Brody and Alexander. The two wagons were maneuvered into position with the three already in file.

Brody lifted his arm in the

to merge with the line of riders

Brody lifted his arm in the signal to ride and began to walk his horse forward.

Alexander was riding on

Taylor's left and Brody on her right. Veris fell into place almost naturally on Brody's right. He removed the other gauntlet and placed them both on the horse's back between his thighs, holding the reins in place.

"Forgive me, my lord, but I do

not know the fellow to your lady's left." Veris nodded toward Alexander. "Alexander," Brody said. "A Christian, despite his dress. I would trust him with my life." Alexander nodded toward Veris. "This is Sir William of York, one Selkirk's best knights," Brody explained to Alexander. "I have heard of you, Sir

William," Alexander replied.

Veris shrugged. "You are a listener. I imagine you've heard about all of us here."

Alexander smiled. "Yes."

"A collector but not a dispenser," Veris added.
Alexander's smile widened.

"That would simply make me a conduit. One cannot collect wisdom if the knowledge is only passing through."

"You're a philosopher," Veris

concluded.

"I was, in my former life. I would like to be once more, if I can ever find peace."

Their horses had taken several steps before Veris replied. "You were born in the wrong times for peace, Alexander."

"So I am beginning to

understand."

The two of them exchanged glances. Veris grinned. Slowly, Alexander smiled. Taylor got the

impression that somehow, Alexander had met with some sort of approval. Veris sat back on his horse.

"You do not object to your assignment, Will?" Brody probed. "I thought, from the scowl on your

face when you rode up here, that you resented the work most bitterly."

"I did, until I saw your faces."

Veris didn't seem to mind talking in front of Alexander now. "The column had begun to leave and you were clearly shocked to see me here."

"Yes," Brody said. "We were."

Veris chuckled. "I spent the night and the morning thinking your lady had connived with Selkirk to have me put here." Taylor could feel the guilt

swirling through her. She pushed Goliath ahead a step or two so that she could see Veris properly past Brody's body. "I tried, Will. That's exactly why I went to see Selkirk

exactly why I went to see Selkirk last night."

Veris' smile faded. "You tried?"

Your knowledge would have been so useful. I wanted to surprise Brendan with my thoughtfulness, as he didn't appreciate this assignment any more than you did last night. I asked Selkirk if we could borrow your services for three days. He refused. I even tried gambling with him and lost." "Gambling?" "A wager," she amended. "You wagered for services?" Taylor couldn't tell if Veris was pissed or not. His tone was

She nodded. "You know these

lands and how the people live here.

completely neutral.

"It was a last attempt to make this work for Brendan and I lost,"

she said, confessing it all.

Veris was utterly silent. Taylor could almost hear him thinking it

through. "He won't give me to you for a favor, but he'll use me to enhance his own reputation. Well, I

knew the man was self-serving."
He stirred and looked at Taylor. "I
thank you for your honesty,
although I'm pleased you are such a

bad gambler."

"So am I," Brody confessed.

"It's better this way."

Veris parted his lips to say

Alexander. He closed his mouth. He said nothing more that day that wasn't perfectly polite until they had camped for the night and he found Brody and Taylor alone.

more and shot a glance at

Chapter Nine

wooden barrels, which they used to make a large protective semi-circle on the other side of a huge set of sand dunes that would protect them from the worst of the night winds. The horses were strung out on lines behind the wagons and a

them empty of everything but

They had five wagons, three of

guard set.

Brody defied normal security precautions and found a location for Taylor and him to sleep away

them. Taylor spread her saddle blanket. That would be her bed for the next three nights. She stripped the mail from

herself and plucked the sweatsoaked undershirt from her chest.

from the rest of the camp, outside the wagon ring. He built a fire for

Then, unable to stand it any longer, she pulled the shirt off, too. Then the leggings.

She unbraided her hair and

rubbed her fingertips through the stressed roots with a sigh.

Brody sat watching her with a half-smile as he tended the building

half-smile as he tended the building fire. "I would give *anything* to have

faded. "I know why you took it all off. I wanted to every day when I was first getting used to it. But you're sleeping in it, Taylor. I mean She grimaced. "At least let me air-dry the undershirt, first." He nodded. "We can wait that long. It'll only take a few moments

a camera right now." His smile

in this climate." He picked up the undershirt, walked over to the nearest wagon and spread it over the side to dry. He came back at a slightly faster pace, hooked up her tunic from the sand where she had dropped it and tossed it to her. "I'd

put that on," he suggested. "Veris is coming."

She struggled to throw on the

tunic, suddenly all thumbs.

Brody grabbed the hem and

hoisted it over her head. She managed to push her arms through the sleeves as he yanked it down over her body. She was still

pushing her head through the opening when she heard Veris say, "Your guard said to come straight through."

Taylor pulled all her hair out

of the neck opening and brushed it out of her face. Veris stood about ten paces away on the other side of standing orders to let you pass at all times."

"I see." Veris crossed his arms.

He was watching her adjust the tunic. "No matter what I

"That's because the guard has

Brody turned to face him.

"That's right," Brody agreed

the fire.

interrupt?"

easily.

Taylor dropped her hands to her sides. The tunic covered everything it needed to. There was no way it was going to look like

anything but a potato sack on her. It was what it was. She gave up and

and Brody instead.

"You stopped speaking this morning," she said to Veris. "You

turned her attention back to Veris

were going to say something, but then you looked at Alexander and stopped. What was it?" Veris licked his lips. "That is

why I am here." He came closer to the fire, but stopped on the other side of it. He looked at Taylor

again. "Do you ever wear the proper clothing of a woman?" he asked. He didn't sound angry. He sounded stressed.

Attack, Taylor reminded herself. Attack the emotions. Keep

"I wore the proper attire to visit your lord. Did you enjoy that gown more than this?" She put her

hands on her waist so that it was

him unsettled.

emphasized and the tunic was drawn in.

She heard his breath draw in.

"No," he confessed flatly.

Truth

Truth.

Brody stepped forward.

"Come around the fire, Will. Don't

be a stranger. Neither of us is armed. Neither of us means you harm. I think you know that now."

harm. I think you know that now."
Will glanced at Brody's big
sword, planted blade first in the

around the fire and stopped two paces from their blankets. He was still armed, but his hands and head were bare.

sand, next to the fire. He stepped

He was studying Brody once more. "You set out this morning, knowing I would be left behind in Jerusalem. Why?"

Jerusalem. Why?"

"Those were my orders,"
Brody said simply.

"Despite your lady's failure to have me recruited to your task, you

still went ahead as ordered."

"Well, yes." Brody frowned.

"Was there another course you expected me to take? I don't

understand, Will."

"You brought your lady with you," Veris pressed.

"Tyra asked to come along,"

Brody corrected.

Veris glanced at her. "Asked?

You indulged her?"

"I wanted her with me,"

Brody replied evenly.

Veris drew in a breath that even from a pace or two behind

Brody and to one side, Taylor could see was unsteady. Brody's quiet, truthful answers were not helping give Veris the vent he needed. They

were acting like accelerant.
"Why go at all?" Veris

while you do as you are told? We both know she can do that." He pushed his hand through his hair. "She has that power at least."

Brody frowned. "Her name is Tyra," he said flatly. "Or if Tyra is feeling very kindly toward you, she

demanded. "Why not leave her in the city to eat at me a bite at a time

may let you call her Taylor, her true name. I'll leave that entirely up to her."

Veris' gaze cut toward Taylor.
"My apologies, my lady. It is a habit

of speech. There has been one other "she" in my life of late and that one rarely deserves being fully named

He was talking about Davina, Taylor realized. She nodded her acceptance of his apology. She needed to let Brody control this conversation by keeping her mouth

at all."

conversation by keeping her mouth shut.

"I'm doing what I'm told," Brody said, "because someone has to find the water for everyone to

drink or we're all going to die. It's a simple equation, in the end."

"You won't die," Veris pointed out.

"Everyone else will. Raymond told me to find the water. I'm

finding water."

"It'll take three days at least," Veris said. "That's right."

"The siege engines will be built by then and Jerusalem taken." "I know."

Veris looked Brody in the eye. "I will be gone, then. Back to

Selkirk's keep." Brody swallowed. "I know

that, too." Veris stepped closer. "Yet you still go in search of water and bring

your wife with you, the one person who might anchor me in Jerusalem for you."

"You said not to pursue you,"

a pace away from him now. Taylor could feel her own pulse rising just watching the two of them hover in this ages-old dance. She was afraid to move or speak in case she broke the spell. "I expected you to ignore me," Veris replied. "I was going to," Brody confessed. "After I got back with

Brody pointed out. Veris was barely

confessed. "After I got back with the water."

Veris' hand curled around the back of Brody's neck. "Honorable

intentions," he murmured. "How irresistible they are." He kissed Brody with slow, sensual

Taylor covered her mouth with her hand, holding in her gasp.

She was so powerfully aroused by

thoroughness.

the sight of the pair of them kissing that she could barely stand still. But if she moved, they'd sense it. It was a wonder they couldn't smell her

arousal already.

Brody moaned softly.

Taylor pressed her hand

harder against her mouth. Brody's body was straining, aching for contact, but he didn't dare press himself against Veris. The bigger

man had to reach for Brody himself.
Finally, Veris drew Brody

Brody's waist.

Taylor let her mouth go. The

closer, his arm an iron band around

two of them were absorbed and oblivious to her. She should give them the fire and find a private corner somewhere else for the night.

She could feel herself smiling as she bent down to pick up her blanket.

Veris' eyes were on her.

Taylor straightened. He was

watching her as he kissed Brody.

Her heart rate zoomed into

the stratosphere and she grew still again. What should she do? She

frightened her with all the power and strength he wielded and could use against her because he didn't know who she was or that she would die for him in a heartbeat. In the end all she could see

was Veris, the man she loved, kissing Brody, the other man she loved. She nearly wept at how close

couldn't tear her gaze away from Veris' eyes. This was the man she loved, the father of her child. Yet he was a stranger whose motives she didn't understand and who

she was to losing that.

Veris lifted his mouth from
Brody's and ran his tongue along

of fangs and her breath stopped.

Veris had a grip on Brody's head already. Now his other hand

Brody's neck. Taylor saw the flash

was creeping up to Brody's shoulder. The classic biting position.

Taylor pushed her way

through the sand a few steps and halted. What could she do? Veris was infinitely more powerful...

was infinitely more powerful...

He was looking at her. No, not Veris, the predator in him. She could see the animal nature in his

eyes, looking back at her.

His fangs extended fully and scraped over Brody's neck. She

powerful. Unbreakable.

Taylor was aware that she was crying as she watched the teeth touch Brody's neck, her tears running down her cheeks in

could see Brody trying to move, but the hold Veris had on him was

Brody despite sword, knife, mail, or horse. She was useless. Veris was still watching her. His canines hesitated before they

scalding rivulets. She couldn't save

punctured Brody's neck.

Taylor drew in a hot breath.

Hope.

For long seconds they hung in that precarious balance.

told her Veris had used vampire speed, he let Brody go, stepped around the fire, climbed the sand dune directly behind them, crested it and was gone from sight.

Brody sank to his knees, his hands splayed in the sand for

Then in a blur of motion that

hands splayed in the sand for support.

Taylor hurried to him. "Up. Get up! Hurry!" She tried to lift

him.

Brody stared at her, dazed.

"You have to go after him

"You have to go after him.

Now! He's left tracks in the sand, it will be easy to find him. He can't

go all night. Go after him. He's

touched her wet cheek, leaving a smear of sand behind. "I don't understand," he said, sounding groggy.

Taylor crouched down next to him and grabbed his face. "He was

Brody reached up and

completely vulnerable now."

going to mark you, Brody. A permanent bond. Somehow, I got him to pull back. I don't know why or how, but I did. He's wide open, now."

Brody straightened up and got

to one knee. "I'm missing something," he said, his voice stronger. "We figured Veris didn't want to be tied."

" N o masters," Taylor emphasized. "But he sees what we have. You and I. He wants it. He

wants *love*. A sense of belonging. It's what drew him to you the first time. It's what he tried to claim just then. Equality. It's why he keeps questioning the way you treat me."

She hauled on him arm. "Come on. Go get him. Go."

Brody get to his foot "You'll

Brody got to his feet. "You'll be all right?"

"I'll be fine. Go!"

Brody turned and followed the tracks Veris had left behind.

* * *

halt about a quarter of a league from the camp. Not far enough away to lose sight of the glow of the campfires above the top of the dunes but distance enough that he could no longer hear the humans. From here he could indulge in the petty illusion that he was alone in the world, even for just a few moments. He closed his eyes and let the peace the silent stars and the desert usually imparted, but tonight that quietness of the soul wouldn't wash over him. He turned to face the man

Veris found himself coming to a

"Is that what she, what Taylor calls you?" "Yes" Veris pushed his hand through his hair. "I was going to mark you." "I know." "I was going to mark you and I didn't even know your real name." Brody stepped closer. "You're

being influenced by forces you can barely perceive right now. All I can tell you is that they're not evil. This

who followed him and sighed.

"What is your real name?"

"Brody."

long have you known my name?"

"About a thousand years."
Brody cupped his cheek.

Fear circled through him. The only thing keeping it from tearing him apart was the calm in Brody's

eyes. It was like looking at the stars. "I haven't lived for a thousand years." It was all he could think of

you even know my name. How

"Good Mary, Mother of God,

all works out, Veris."

"You will. A thousand years and more," Brody replied.

Veris veered away from that.

It was more future talk. "I was

face. She was crying. *Real* tears. For you," Veris said.

"Taylor understands about

about to mark you and I saw her

markings. She carries mine," Brody said. His voice was calm. "She knows they're instinctive. She also knows I was a slave once and how

much I would hate to be owned by another in that way again."

Veris stepped back, breaking contact with Brody's hand. "She

contact with Brody's hand. "She stood there and watched and she knew that? But there was such..." He could barely bring himself to say the word. "Her face was filled with love," he said harshly. "She

was glowing with it."

Brody smiled. "She does glow when she watches us."

Veris frowned. "What?"

Brody picked up Veris' hand. "You're not going to understand

more than a little of this, Veris.

You're a salty old bear and Davina has made you inclined to be suspicious, prickly and quick to mistrust people. Worse, she's made

you think there's no such thing as love left in the world when your whole soul is crying out for it. You've been wandering this earth for six hundred years looking for answers and she's messed you up reach out for the answers when they're staring you in the face. That's why you wanted to mark me. Your instincts know the way. Your intellect is stymieing you. You managed to see past her once. You

so bad you can't bring yourself to

managed to find happiness that time. I really need you to try again because I love you and I want you back."

Veris' heart creaked. He

Veris' heart creaked. He stared at Brody, trying to make sense of the idioms, the implications. He knew there was something huge here that he could see if only he could push aside a

few veiling cloths covering his eyes and think.

Then he properly saw Brody's

face and expression. The love there.

It was an echo of the expression that had been on

Taylor's face.

Brody loved him. He really

did. There was no artifice, no hidden meaning. It was a pure, simple emotion. Genuine.

Heartfelt.

All Veris' concern over the motives of this pair dropped away.

Yes, there were still meanings and intentions to be unraveled. Mysteries to be explored—too

experienced.

From the tightening of his body, he knew one of them would be now.

many of them to enumerate. And delicious first occasions to be

"Kiss me," Brody whispered.
Veris was willing to obey that

order. It was simple enough. He pulled Brody closer and took his time to really kiss the man. Not in anger or haste. But to taste him

properly. Teeth, tongue, lips. Breath.

"You smell of her," Veris accused. It was like a fine layer hovering over the surface of

horses, sweat and sand after a day under the sun.

He was growing hard just by that alone.

Brody's skin. But still he wanted to do it again. He slid his tongue between Brody's lips and at the same time breathed his scent and her aroma, mixed with the smell of

The kiss grew more frantic, more direct. But still there was no contact between them except for their mouths and their hands on each other's bodies.

Brody loosened his sword belt.

"Here?" Veris breathed.
"Why not?" Brody asked

stars, with the sand providing a smooth, white, rolling carpet that gleamed dully in moonlight, far from anyone or anything but each

Why not, indeed? Under the

reasonably.

other.

Brody's sword dropped to the sand almost silently, the sand muffling the impact. His hands immediately began to work on his tunic belt. He wasn't hurrying, but

Veris' excitement kicked up a notch. He dropped his hands to his own scratched and worn buckles. They came loose as they always did,

he wasn't stopping.

thousand times before, but this time his hands shook.

His sword and belt dropped to the sand.

as he had unbuckled them a

The night wind caught at his tunic, now it was loosened, and lifted it away from his hauberk.

Through all this, Brody's mouth stayed in contact with his own.

When Brody removed his tunic and hauberk and undershirt, all in one swift overhead shrug,

dumping them on the sand in an inelegant pile, he turned back to Veris quickly. His hand curled

brought his mouth back to Brody's like he regretted the loss of contact.

Brody stripped the rest of his

around the back of Veris' head and

clothing without breaking contact again, then reached for Veris' tunic. "Let me," he murmured, his lips brushing against Veris' mouth. He

was breathing hard.

Veris could feel the tension in his own body, the tightness of the

impending release. This was beyond anything he had experienced in more years than he cared to recall. He was almost

cared to recall. He was almost afraid of the coming climax. He nodded, trying to control his something as simple as being undressed produced in him.

Brody stripped him, a layer at a time, taking his time. He turned it into a feast of sensuality and by the time he was done, Veris was

trembling so badly, he could barely stand. His cock was jutting into the

runaway heartbeat, astonished at the level of excitement that

night air, throbbing with need.

Brody, his own cock thick and upright, ran his finger along the length of Veris', making Veris moan in desperate need.

Brody smiled at the sound and

lowered himself to his knees in

Veris had left. He exhaled with a shudder as Brody smoothed his hands up Veris' thighs. A hand curled around his balls and cupped them. The gentle pressure was heavenly, but was eclipsed by the

touch of Brody's lips around his cock. They bumped over the ridge of flesh at the tip, then slid like a

That stole what little breath

front of Veris.

hard, gentle band around his shaft, farther and farther and impossibly farther, before drawing back up. As they came back toward the head once more, Brody drew his tongue like a pointed digit over the

underside of the ridge of flesh, flicking at it. Veris' hips jerked hard and

the cry erupted from him as he

drove his fingers into Brody's hair in a desperate need to strive for the peak that was suddenly upon him *now*. Never had he been pushed so fast, with such precision.

Brody gripped the base of Veris' cock and worked his mouth over the head, giving Veris exactly what he needed. Veris exploded in a hard

Veris exploded in a hard stream of cum that seemed to work its way up from deep inside his toes, drawing everything from his

Brody took it all, to the last drop.

When he released him, Veris sank to his knees. It put them very nearly at the same level. His chest rose and fell still. "You're laughing

belly, his balls, his essence.

at me?" he asked Brody, for the man wore a small smile.

Brody shook his head. "I enjoyed that. It was... In an odd way it seemed like the first time."

Veris shook his head. "You

Veris shook his head. "You must stop doing that."

"Enjoying it?"

"Talking about a future I don't know."

Brody sobered a little. "If you insist. It could be difficult, though."

"Why?"

"I have no past here to speak of."

Veris took a few seconds to unravel that. Then he felt laughter squeeze his chest. "You jest. Surely.

If you have no past here, then you mean you are from..."

Brody nodded. "The future."

He smiled a little. "Yours, actually."
You will live a thousand years and more.

Veris' heart thudded "What

Veris' heart thudded. "What future do you come from? What year? How old are you now?"

am," Brody reminded him, with a grin. "I gave you my birth year when we first met."

Veris knew Brody had

"You already know how old I

avoided the question deliberately. "So...the subjective details, but not the general."

Brody nodded. "We think it's

Brody nodded. "We think it's safer that way."

""We'?"

"Taylor, me...and you." Again, his heart hammered

hard. Brody seemed so sincere, kneeling there in the moonlight.

That was the problem. So Veris pushed on Brody's shoulder until

Veris pushed Brody onto his back on the white sand. "I would give an eye tooth for a vial of oil so I could have my way with you properly," he told Brody. "But that

will have to wait for the next time."

a next time," Brody replied.

"I'm glad you think there'll be

him.

the man was sitting back on his heels. Brody, despite being leaner and shorter, was still solid and thick with muscle. It took effort to move

Veris hesitated. "You did not go to all this effort for a single dalliance," he said finally. Brody made an impatient

"Who wounded you so much you lost your confidence this way? The man I know would never have questioned me about a next time. He would have assumed it was his God-given right." Veris tried to pull away, but Brody was strong. Stronger than Veris expected, and on this matter he seemed to be determined to take issue. Veris shrugged. "I of course do not understand this. It is future

Brody shook his head.

related."

sound. "No, Veris. I was expressing appreciation." He pulled him onto his chest with an impatient sound.

The word made Veris blink. He wasn't entirely certain what it

"Bullshit."

meant, but the force that Brody delivered it with gave him a good general idea.

"This is Daving related."

"This is Davina related," Brody added. "And something before that or Davina would have been resolved back in France even

Terror seemed to swamp Veris in one black cloud. He tried to tear away from Brody as it grabbed at

away from Brody as it grabbed at his throat, but he was in the wrong position and had no leverage. Brody hung on, his arms like iron

quietly against his chest.

"You wanted to kill Davina in Normandy, before the crusade started," Brody murmured. "And

bands around him, until Veris lay

by rights, you should have. Something stopped you this time. Something in your past changed."

Veris closed his eyes. Now he

believed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Brody was from his future. He had to be. No one else in the world could possibly know these things. He didn't understand how it worked. There were whole

roomfuls of knowledge he needed to fully comprehend it all. But he His future.

He felt Brody's hand on his face. Reassuring. "I know about her,

knew Brody was who he claimed.

Veris. There is no need to explain."

Veris shuddered as something inside him seemed to shift and ease.

He was even able to lift his head and look at Brody. The man's eyes were completely without

judgment. They carried, instead, the same patient understanding—no, the same *love*—as they had since the moment he'd turned from his

wife's arms to face him.

The shudder this time rippled all the way down Veris' body. It

locked against him, but his arms were free.

Veris kept his gaze locked on Brody's eyes and ran his hand along his flank, just above the line of the

made him aware of Brody's naked length beneath him, pressed up against him. Brody still held Veris

sand that cushioned him.

Brody's eyes widened a fractioned. His cock stirred against Veris' thigh.

Veris pushed his knee between Brody's, separating his legs and giving him better access.

Brody's breath hitched. It was a tiny sound, but rewarding to hear.

This was almost too easy. Brody was tense and ready to break as Veris had been.

Veris weighed Brody's balls in his hand. They were heavy with promise. He slid his hand higher

and closed his fingers around Brody's wide cock. It was silky hard and throbbed in his hand, the veins

gasp.

Veris slid his hand between his thighs and stroked the stretch of flesh between balls and anus and was rewarded again with Brody's

pulsing with the life-force that sustained them.

He glided his hand up the

Brody's hips jerked. The arm holding Veris against Brody's chest

shaft and claimed the head.

fell away.

As Veris began to repeat the gentle stroking, he watched Brody's face and absorbed that exquisite

moment when lust took the soul,

the heart and the mind. Brody's eyes closed. His face emptied of all expression except that of a man caught in the best chase of all. A small furrow appeared between his

It would go quickly, this time. It had to. Without the bedroom privileges of privacy, oils and time

brows.

occasions.

But for right now he could take from this moment a petty sense of mastery as he controlled Brody's body and played with it.

Simple pleasure, bereft of pain and

fear, freely given.

pooling on his stomach.

to learn each other's paces and pleasures, Veris accepted that. It was also one of the joys of first

Sweet joy.

Brody came with a hoarse cry, his back arching as his hips lifted off the sand. He pumped ferociously in Veris' hand, his cum

He lay panting, recovering.

haven't done that to me in...too long."

Veris shook his head. "Future talk."

He put his arm over his eyes. "You

"Sorry." He looked down at his stomach. "How on earth am I supposed to clean up without water

Brody sat up on his elbows.

or cloth?"

Veris shrugged. "You've never heard of a sand bath?"

Brody shook his head.

Veris stood up. "It isn't water, but it is nearly as efficient."

There was sand all around them, so they didn't have to move

He spent more time watching Brody "wash" his body than completing the bath himself. Then, when he rubbed the sand over his flesh, he found it too sensitive to handle the rasping of the sand. He

But Brody was drawing on his

Caution flooded him. Veris

crossed his arms. "You're going

had been aroused once more.

clothes.

away from where they were. They were already stripped. So Veris demonstrated the process of a sand bath, using handfuls of the fine white sand to scour away dirt and Brody jerked his head toward the moon, sitting low in the sky. "It's late. Taylor will be worried. And if Alexander is right about

hack?"

where the oasis is, tomorrow is going to be a busy day. I need to make some arrangements before everyone wakes."

Veris pummeled aside his impatience and tried to encompass the idea that a woman's concerns should be taken into consideration. Clearly, the future was a far different world from now. It

Clearly, the future was a far different world from now. It explained in part why Taylor was so outspoken and forward.

Brody paused, his hauberk in his hands. "Come back with me," he suggested.

Veris frowned. What did that

mean?
"To my fire," Brody added.

Veris found himself suddenly breathing hard.

Such a simple statement. Such a complicated step to take. It would be declaring to everyone in the camp their relationship. By the time they returned to Jerusalem, word would spread.

Davina would find ways to make Veris' life miserable, if not

end it altogether for such a

woman?" Veris breathed, trying to make it sound as derisive as possible.

"Taylor would welcome you with open arms. You know that."

He could still feel the touch of

her fingertips on his hands. Her breath in his ear. Her lips on his

transgression. For such a betrayal.

"And what about your

neck.
Soft sweetness.
Open arms.
Veris shuddered. "I'd die," he said truthfully. Davina would see to

Something in Brody's eyes

that.

Veris watched it happen, dismayed. He wanted to reach out, to try to amend the error he had just made, but knew it was too late. Besides, it

withered and faded to nothing.

was better that Brody misunderstand.

Brody buckled on his sword

silently. He squared his shoulders. His gaze wouldn't meet Veris'. "I must return."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Brody said bitterly.

His gaze lifted to Veris' eyes. The

pain there was unmistakable and Veris recoiled. "You've not understood more than a handful of absolute best liar in the world, Veris. You could bullshit with the greatest. Straight faced, you could tell the most outrageous stories in the world. You could have sold sand to Fatimids and convinced them they were getting the bargain of the century. But you never, ever lied to yourself." Brody's mouth curled down. "Until now." He walked back down the dune without looking back. But Veris was too busy trying

everything else I've told you, but now you understand this?" He pushed his hand through his hair. "You know, you used to be the



Chapter Ten

They reached the oasis just as the sun was at its zenith, which at this latitude meant it was directly overhead. It was frighteningly hot and dry and Taylor had never been so glad to see a pool of water in her

life. But it wasn't just the heat that made the oasis a retreat for her.

About half the size of a baseball diamond, the pool was shaded by palms and surrounded by grasses. Unlike many oases, this one sprang from a shallower source

surface, gushing and bubbling just at the surface in a continual renewal of the supply.

The overflow ran off in a

of water in rocks close to the

narrow curving stream, channeled by rocks, for a league before drying out in the baking heat of the desert and being reabsorbed into the sand.

They had been warned ahead of time by Alexander to dismount and walk to the pool and bring back buckets to water the horses first. In this way they would avoid a stampede that would muddy the

pool and make it useless for days.

Shortly after the noon hour,

would rest there until the next day, while the barrels were filled and food found, before returning to Jerusalem.

It had been one of the few

they had set up camp next to the oasis. Brody had declared they

things he had said that day.

He had returned to the fire sometime during the night for she had found him there, his body curled around hers, when she woke

at first light. But when she turned in his arms and begged him for details, a shadow touched his face. "Not now," he said quietly. "I will

tell you, I promise, but not now."

"Did you make love?" she asked. "You can tell me that much at least."

He hesitated. "Yes," he said at last. But the single word was so heavy and flat, her heart fell.

She stroked his cheek. "We'll figure it out," she whispered, hoping she was right.

Brody rested his head against her shoulder and held her tightly. Surprised, she wrapped her arms about his shoulders and let him cling to her. If he had been human, Taylor wouldn't have been surprised if he had wept against her. He was trembling.

at the same time I miss him badly. I want him back and I'm scared hollow I'm going to fuck this up and lose him forever." His hand touched her shoulder. "I know that's selfish. I know you're dying inside each day he's gone, too. But this is all falling on me, because this other Veris won't look at you even

"I'd be terrified if I were you,

He laughed against her neck.

though he wants you."

too," she said gently.

After a while, Brody let her go

enough to bring his mouth closer to her ear. "He's not the same Veris. He is, but he's not. I love him, but

courage for blood. You'd have defied Veris somehow last night. You would have made it work. I don't know how you do it, but you always manage it somehow." Taylor shook her head. "I stood there and watched him bare his fangs against your neck. Do you know how much I longed for a sword in my hands? To have the sort of power you two do? I was helpless."

"No, you wouldn't. You've got

"You stopped him anyway. It was you, Taylor. He told me so."

She rolled away from him so that she could see his face. His

wasn't lying.

"Then maybe there's hope for Veris yet," she suggested.

Brody drew in a sharp, quick breath. He sat up as if he'd

suddenly been shot full of energy.

black-eyed gaze was steady. He

Taylor rose up as well and he kissed her. "Thank you," he said. "I'd forgotten that. You're right. There's hope."

Taylor clutched at her stomach as it rolled rebelliously.

stomach as it rolled rebelliously. There was no time to hide it or even ride it out like yesterday. It was coming whether she wanted it to or not.

jingling, and vomited into the ashes, hard and long, until her stomach was completely empty. Even before she was done, she felt hands pulling her hair back and a damp cloth on her forehead.

She fell back on her butt tiredly, gray dots floating across her

for the cold fire pit, the chainmail

With a moan she scrambled

vision and her throat burning.

Alexander wiped her face with the cloth, his expression concerned. Brody supported her back.

"Alexander knows eastern medicine," Brody murmured. "He's good." Alexander's gaze flickered to Brody and back to her. "Are you with child, my lady?" "No," Brody said. Taylor stayed silent. Alexander's expression didn't change. "The food you western people eat does not carry well in these parts. It's likely you ate something yesterday that had already begun to decompose." "I'm sure that's all it was," Taylor said. Her voice was strained. "I'll be more careful about what I eat. Thank you, Alexander." He got to his feet and nodded. "Please let me know if I can be of further service." Brody had accepted the bad

food explanation as the only possible one, which added to Taylor's guilt. By the time she had eaten food that had passed Brody's

finely tuned inspection and climbed onto Goliath's back, she was in a foul mood of her own.

It didn't help that the tension

between Brody and Veris was hard enough to bounce off. Alexander seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, rousing only to give the necessary directions to the oasis.

necessary directions to the oasis. It was a relief to slide off three of them when they reached the water. Taylor headed for the nearest patch of shade, laid down and went to sleep.

She woke to find her head

Goliath and move away from the

She woke to find her head pillowed by her folded-up blanket, her hands free of her gauntlets and her feet free of her shoes. Her belts had been loosened and her sword and knife were standing point first

There was a cup of water, too, along with fresh dates—probably from the trees around the oasis—plus more food that would have been checked over by Brody.

gear sat in a pile a yard away.

The shade had lengthened over her. It was close to sunset. She

had slept the afternoon away.

She lifted her head. Brody's

Clearly, her body had needed the restorative. But in the meantime, what had Brody and Veris done to each other?

Carefully, she sat up. Her

stomach tilted, but that was all the protest it gave. So she ate the food and drank the water, consuming all of it mechanically despite a distinct lack of appetite and an urgent need to go in search of Brody.

While she ate, she gazed

wagons of barrels were almost completely filled. The teams of soldiers were working on the last one now, sealing each barrel with hot wax to prevent leakage. Most of the men were stripped to the waist. Both Brody and Veris were overseeing the operations, each looking after their own wagons. Alexander sat on the other side of the oasis, under shade.

Taylor tightened her belts and

added the sword and knife. She

Observing, as usual.

around the bowl of the oasis. There had been considerable progress during the afternoon. The three

wound its way around bedrock for a league or more. She started to follow it.

At one point the stream dropped about three feet onto bare

flat rock, creating a tiny waterfall, before oozing over the rock and continuing on into the desert. Or a miniature shower, depending on a

Taylor stared at the water, her

modern perspective.

made her way around the edge of the oasis, dodging the horses, until she reached the point where the run off created a happy-sounding tinkling stream that had carved a channel out of the desert and "Screw it," she muttered and stripped quickly. She took the knife into the water with her, laying it on the flat rock, close by her hand. But she unbound her hair and let the water cascade through it before sitting up and rinsing off.

skin itching.

"The sword isn't much use if it's not by your side," Brody told her.

She smothered her yelp of

surprised. He stood next to the pile of her clothes. "I have my knife," she said, holding it up.

"Not much use against a

enemy, I now have your sword, which you left here for me to pick up."

She bit her lip. "Damn."

Brody grinned. "Shall I bring

sword," he said. "If I were the

it to you?" He bent down to pick up her sword belt and pulled the sword from it.

sword from it.

"For all the good the blade does me, why not?"

He tramped across the stream to stand in the inch deep water in front of her and hold out the blade.

front of her and hold out the blade. "Sometimes just the offer to fight is good enough."

"Good enough for what?" She

the flat rock just at the edge of the water flow, where it was dry.

"Good enough to test their resolve. To see if they really mean

took the sword and lay it down on

hands on his hips.

"Mean to fight?"

He nodded. "If you pull your

it." Brody stared down at her, his

sword—if you make the offer to fight and their hearts are truly not in it, they'll take off running,

leaving you the victor."

Taylor was having trouble drawing her attention away from the proximity of Brody's thighs to

her face. The knowledge that he

was naked beneath the tunic, that his cock was accessible underneath a thin layer of cloth, was distracting her. She licked her lips. Brody smiled. "You're not

thinking about fighting."

"Damn it, no. It's all your fault."

"No, it's your fault. You suggested I not wear what I'm not wearing."

She could see his cock pushing at the tunic, lifting it.

Taylor pummeled her

attention back to the subject. "What if they don't turn tail and run?"

Brody dropped his hands to

fight him. You probably shouldn't have picked on him in the first place."

"Great. So I can bluff, or fight if I'm called on it."

"That's right." He dropped his

his belt buckle. "Ah. Well, now you're screwed. Now you have to

sword next to hers. The knife clattered next.

"I can't fight with a sword."

"Better stay by my side then,"

he said. "Stay very close." He pulled the rest of his clothes off in less than a minute. They flowed off him like water off a duck's back, with more grace that she'd ever

"You're so beautiful," she said with a sigh as his body emerged. "That's my line, isn't it?" She smiled. "Men can be

manage. He tossed them all onto

the sand a bare yard away.

beautiful, too, and you are. You're perfect."

Brody picked her up and

wrapped her legs around his waist. "You're wet." His hand cupped her ass, the fingers tickling her cleft. He kissed her, his tongue sliding gently inside.

"And you're sandy...and hot, too." Taylor touched his chest. "You've been out in the sun too

very weak by now and feeding among this small group could be a problem."

"Get wet. That'll cool you off"

when I did the other night, or I'd be

Brody nodded. "I'm glad I fed

long."

Brody put her on her feet again and lay down under the tiny waterfall. He gasped as the water covered him. Taylor sat down and washed off the dust he had smeared on her and sat up and waited for him to finish his impromptu shower.

Brody came up from under

the waterfall, laughing and shaking the water out of his hair. "What?" she asked, smiling at

his amusement. "If you look at our location on

a modern map, I think you'll find we're somewhere inside the borders of Jordan."

"That's what's funny?" He laughed again. "What's funny is that it's all your fault that

I've started thinking about stuff like that. How maps change over time.

Language. I've spent all these

centuries resenting the hell out of

time for being stuck with it. Now

I'm finally starting to see how... I

actually am to be able to see the changes first hand. Humans don't get to see that. They don't live long enough." He sobered, his arms around his knees. "There's a lot of things I love about you, Taylor, but for that one alone, I would give you immortality, if you asked me for it. It took me a thousand years and you, but I can see a way for it to be considered a gift, now." Taylor kissed him, trying to hide her tears. It helped that her cheeks were already wet. There was no answer she could give Brody

that wouldn't compromise her

don't know, how privileged I

right now, or make her want to confess everything.

Then the kiss changed and grew erotic as their kisses so often

did. It helped that they were both naked. Brody cupped her breasts and tugged on the nipples, making them hard. The little spurts of

electric pleasure shot straight to her clit, making her gasp and her clit to bloom. Her pussy grew moist all over again.

She stroked Brody's cock, curling her fingers around the massive shaft and felt his hips shift at her touch. She pressed her thumb against the seam on the

underside and he jerked hard.
"Unfair," he muttered.

"All's fair."

"That so?" He grabbed her

hips and flipped her with his considerable strength, bringing her onto her hands and knees in the

water. Taylor felt the touch of water on her wrists and calves, then Brody's cock was pushing against her vagina. His hand curled over her shoulder. "All's fair," he

her vagina. His hand curled over her shoulder. "All's fair," he growled and slid into her in a hard, smooth stroke that buried him to the hilt.

She gasped and may even have cried out. She wasn't sure. All

she was conscious of was Brody's thick cock inside her.

Then he reached between her legs and found her clit with his

fingers and began to pluck at it in time with his thrusts and in time with what his other hand was doing to her nipple.

"No, I'll come too fast!" she protested between ragged inhalations.

"Come around me. Squeeze me," he growled. "Scream for me." She hung her head, feeling the

roiling climax already building from deep inside her belly. Her body began to shake. There was no

putting it off. It was coming.

"Chríost. Veris," Brody whispered.

stood a dozen feet away. How long

Taylor lifted her head. Veris

had he been watching? It didn't matter. She could see he was caught up in their passion. The juncture of his thighs was swollen,

his cock erect under his tunic. His

hands were balled into fists as he stared.

Taylor lifted herself to her knees, letting Veris see Brody's

hands on her breast, and her clit.

Make the offer, Brody had said.

She dropped her hand to her

incredibly arousing to offer herself to a man who was like a virtual stranger in one sense, especially when she was being fucked by another and right on the verge of climaxing. She curled her arm around Brody's neck, needing the support. Her body was trembling, moving in little shifts that matched Brody's heavy thrusts up into her. He had not stopped. "God, I'm coming, Taylor," Brody whispered. "Come," she said. He came with a choked groan and it triggered off her own

breast. Stroked it. Cupped it. It was

pleasure in pulsing hard waves, made more intense by the fact that Veris was watching.

But when she opened her eyes, Veris had gone. She couldn't stop the little moan of disappointment that spilled from

delayed climax. She rolled her head back against Brody's shoulder and closed her eyes as she cried out her

She still trembled when Brody slipped from her body and washed traces of himself away from her.

"He followed us here," she said, trying to sound analytical and calm.

her.

"Followed which one, is the million dollar question," Brody replied. "You, of course."

He shook his head. "It's not that simple anymore."

"Why not?"
As he got dressed, Brody told her of his nighttime tryst with Veris

and the awful ending. Taylor frowned, thinking it through as she carefully dried off and dressed, then strapped her sword and knife

back into place. "He would have even less reason to follow me now." "He's on a knife edge. Davina is fucking with his mind so much, I don't know what he'll do any more. He's not the Veris we know." "But we still have to make

him commit to you." Taylor wiped at her eyes. "We have to get him away from that woman. He's dying inside and he doesn't even know it"

Brody kissed her forehead. "Like you say. We'll figure it out." But he seemed distracted and for the rest of the evening around the campfire, even though he stayed within sight of her and Veris sat on the other side with his men, Brody's conversation was stilted and vague.

Brody frowned. "I'm thinking. Hard. Sorry, Taylor. I'm not good at mentally multi-tasking like you and

Taylor challenged him on it.

Veris. I've got half an idea, but it needs refining before I dare even mention it out loud." Only half-satisfied, Taylor left

Brody to stare into the fire and poke at it with a long stick for the rest of the night. Which left rather more time than she wanted to catch Veris' lingering, speculative stares across the flames.

across the flames.

Taylor declared she was tired and going off to sleep far sooner than she was ready, after the day's

and turned on her blanket, listening to the men talk more freely than they did when she was among them. For that reason alone, it was probably better she not be at the fireside, so she resisted getting up and going back.

long nap. As a result, she tossed

Eventually, she went to sleep, hoping the morrow would be an easier one and that Brody would not find the night too taxing in the meantime.

* * * *

Brody waited barely ten minutes after Taylor left the fire to slip away himself. He caught Veris' between dunes, where the air was still and warm.

It didn't take Veris long to follow. He slid-walked down the side of the dune, his sword slapping his thigh. "You called. I come. What

eye as he left and took the same route out of the oasis as they had last night, but didn't go as far. He waited in a shallow hollow

the dell. It was meant as a sucker punch and it worked. There was no way to take out Veris in a fair fight. Not with his height, weight and

the jaw before he was barely into

Brody's punch took him on

Veris landed on his ass, but he didn't stay there. He came up

reach.

streaming blood from his nose, mad as a bull and swinging.

The fight lasted a few short,

ugly minutes and ended bloody, as Brody had expected it to. Veris got him on his back and beat the crap out of him. Brody deserved it. But he had got his licks in and was willing to pay the price for daring to pick a fight with someone like Veris.

Veris.

Veris got to his feet and let Brody painfully roll over onto his hands and knees, trying to figure

few minutes for the healing to kick in to the point where he could see straight. He stayed, swaying, on all fours. "There was a point you were trying to make, I presume?" Veris said. Brody nodded. "Do you feel you've made it?" Brody nodded again.

out how to breathe through what was left of his face. It would take a

"Really?" Surprise tinged Veris' voice. Brody heard him squat down next to him. "Keep your chin up so the blood runs back down your throat. It'll feed the tissues Brody lifted his chin. In a few seconds he was able to clear his throat with a cough. Vocal chords again. Well, well. How many of

these types of beatings had Veris

helpful.

gone through?

there and help them heal faster. Then you'll be able to speak." The tone was neutral. The words

Veris was sitting on the sand now, his arms on his knees. "Can you speak yet?" "I think so," Brody said. His voice sounded strained. "Make that

yes."
"You were planning or

explaining this, weren't you?"

Brody nodded. He rolled over so he was sitting on his butt facing Veris.

"You don't look pretty anymore," Veris said.

"You never did."

Veris' mouth lifted at the

corner. "At least I fight better than you. A product of a long life, that apparently you are more familiar with than I thought Speak Brody.

with than I thought. Speak, Brody, or I will take great delight in taking apart what is left of your face again.

You are trying my patience."

Brody nodded. "I know. Thing is, I can't explain it. Most of the

cut through a problem faster than anyone I know, except maybe for Taylor, but this is so much about her I'm not going to lay it out for her to fix."

Veris stared at him. "In your

future, you mean?"

time, when I hit a quandary like this, I used to talk it over with you. You're the clear thinker. You could

"Yeah." Brody squeezed the bridge of his nose and felt bones creak. His nose was healing nicely, but still felt swollen. "But it's also about you, asshole. Your future self. Not you sitting there. Although it's

also about you sitting there." Brody

either. But you're all I've got." Veris was silent for a long moment. "I believe you may be underestimating my usefulness. I may lack knowledge, but I can reason as well as my future self." Brody pushed at his cheekbones. One was still broken. The pain of bones moving made him hiss. "And fight." Veris shrugged. "I learned

early, apparently." He shifted and

sighed. "I know you can't follow this. We're not giving you nearly enough information and that's not fair for you and you can't cope with the idiom or the cultural references drop from exploring the damage of his face. "You rejected Taylor today."

Veris drew a slow breath. Brody could hear it. In the stillness

of the dell and with his senses all on hyper alert while he healed, he could hear the inhalation as clearly

my hands." Brody let his hands

settled himself in the sand. "A quandary, you said. There are very few true quandaries in the world."

"I think I've got a real one on

Veris asked.
"No, but that's what made me

"That's what this is about?"

as his own breath.

that kicked me into gear and made me start this discussion with a sucker punch. She didn't say a word, but I know she didn't like the fact that you walked away."

"Most ladies would take that

start thinking. Mostly, Taylor has been doing it up until now and I've let her because she's good at it. But

as a form of politeness, not an insult," Veris growled.

"I keep trying to explain that

Taylor isn't like anyone you've ever met." Brody scrubbed at his hair, which was full of sand now. He

stretched his shoulders and heard them creak, then realized he was "Understandable."

"No, you don't understand,"
Brody said, thumping his fist into the ground. "There's been changes.
There's differences. You're not...

putting this off. "Okay, here it is. You're not like the Veris I remember. You're not like the Veris

right."

Veris stared hard. Then:
"You've been here before. To this...
time. We've met. Here."

Brody took a breath. "In Jerusalem." Veris rubbed his thumb over

his bottom lip thoughtfully. "That's

why you're here."

"Yes." Brody found his hands curling into fists. "I love Taylor. I know you have the hardest time with that idea, but there it is. I love Taylor in a way you don't understand. I love her as much as I love you." Brody clenched his hands together. It was so important

choose between you. He would know I couldn't do that."

"I am demanding that of you?" Veris sounded curious.

that Veris grasp this. "The other Veris—*he* would never ask me to

"You're going to. By rejecting Taylor today, you outlined the

shape of things to come. There will come a time when you ask that of me." "You don't know that," Veris

said softly. "Yes, I do," Brody insisted. "You are denying her. Denying

yourself. You want her. Tell me you don't want her. Tell me that and I will call you a liar."

Veris drew in a breath to speak. But he didn't speak.

Brody nodded. "There is

something stopping you. It's not just Davina, or you would have dealt with her already. Taylor and I don't know how to fix it, because

won't tell us. You don't trust us enough for that. We're running out of time. All sorts of time, that you have no idea about. That's why I must speak tonight, because you will ask me to choose between you and Taylor. It will come to that and when it does, I think...I really think Taylor will be my priority." "Your wife comes first, of

we don't know what it is and you

"Your wife comes first, of course."

Brody groan and clenched his fists to his temples. "Fuck, Veris,

stop being reasonable! I love you. I love Taylor, but if you make me choose, I'm going to choose her! It's

to her! I'm not married to her at all! I'm bonded. She won't marry me. She won't marry you, even though you asked her."

Veris sat forward. "I did?" he said sharply. "When?"

Brody winced. "Sorry, too much information. Forget I

nothing to do with being married

Veris held out his hand.

"When did I ask her? It's important."

"Far, far into your future, as you currently reckon it," Brody said flatly. He slapped the sand by his

hip. "Are you even listening to me,

mentioned it."

her, I have to keep you and I'm not even sure I want you anymore."

Veris recoiled. "I've changed that much?"

Brody sighed. "Physically, you're exactly the same, which makes it confusing. You sound the

same, speak the same, walk the

Veris? Do you grasp the quandary now? I want Taylor, but to keep

same. There's so much about you that is the same that when I first saw you I was fooled. It took a while for me to notice the differences. They only show up when you're put under emotional pressure. I'm guessing that's not

these days. You've learned dozens of tricks in the last few centuries so you can avoid emotions, until Taylor and I came along and messed things up for you." "This other Veris of yours...he is a master at emotional pressure?" Veris asked, his brow lifted. Brody shook his head. "No! Not even close! But he would never have walked away from us this

something that happens to you a lot

Not even close! But he would never have walked away from us this afternoon. He would never make me choose as you are going to."

"You are going to risk everything—the woman you love, even me, my future self—based on

absolutely force you to that choice," Veris said softly. Brody closed his eyes. "Tell me I'm wrong," he begged. Veris was silent for so long that Brody thought he would not answer at all. Then he stirred and sighed. "You already know how Davina entered my life, do you not? You have hinted as much." "She force-bonded you to her," Brody said. "The first night she met me," Veris added. "After she had chained you to

the wall in her dungeon," Brody

the assumption that I will

to other "masters" too. All of them enjoy pain, all of them like blood along with their sex." "It's been seventy-eight years next month," Veris said. He sounded almost wistful. "You asked a curious question yesterday. You wondered why I didn't deal with her in Normandy. How did you know I had been thinking about killing her? Is that what the other one did?"

Brody grimaced. But there

finished. "Then came a night of sexual pain and torture. And every other night she chooses to call you to her. Sometimes she loans you out was no ducking it now. "Yes," he admitted.

Veris nodded. "You wanted to

know why I didn't. Would you like

me to tell you now?"

Brody jumped. "Yes," he admitted. This could unravel the

mystery of Veris.

Veris took a deep breath. "In the country that would become

Norway, around 460 A.D. I had a wife who I took into the woods one night for a tryst after a feast at the king's hall. She disappeared that night. The village mourned the loss of my beautiful wife and said I

murdered her in a jealous rage

"They couldn't prove anything. There was no body. So I was beaten, hung, whipped and smeared with excrement. I was thrown out of the village naked and with no weapons. The kingdom next to mine would have nothing to do with me, because that was the kingdom my wife came from,

because the king favored her.

according to my sister. I had to travel under an assumed name and find work far abroad, with no references. I never saw my sister again. I lived off the land for months until I could start earning

money enough to buy lodgings."

"Some. This all happened before I was turned, so the scars are a permanent reminder." Veris grimaced. "Just in case I ever manage to forget." "What did happen to your wife?" Brody whispered. Veris lifted his shoulders a

tiny fraction. "I couldn't explain to them what happened because I don't remember a single thing about the day, my wife, or the feast. I remember nothing except for

Veris patted the scars on his stomach. "Not all of these are from

humans."

"Bears?"

next morning, naked, next to a pile of women's clothes that Marit said she had given my wife-the woman I can't remember." Brody felt a chill settled around his guts. Surely, if Veris and Taylor had gone back to that time, they would have told him? But, a whole day and night? Then he realized that this time jump had lasted that long already. So it was

waking up beside a cold fire the

Why would they not have told him?

The truth hit him in a rush.

His sense of fear enlarged.

possible.

Veris would have been human. He wouldn't have wanted to tell

Brody, to tease him with a longgone state that Veris had just enjoyed for a whole twenty-four hours.

Brody shuffled forward, closer to Veris. He cupped his jaw, looking into his eyes. "Did they describe your wife to you?" he

asked. "Did you ask them?"

Veris snorted with derision, then his laughter faded as he really saw Brody's expression. "I didn't ask," he said slowly. "They simply extolled her virtue and her beauty.

Her ethereal qualities. Her

glowing skin and..." He drew a shaky breath. "Dark hair," he finished. "Dear God, it was Taylor," he concluded. Brody nodded. Veris put his face in his hands. He stayed that way for many long moments. When he looked up again, his eyes were dull. "Is it going to happen again, here? You will just disappear?" "I won't," Brody said. "But Taylor will. You should be prepared for that. Even I will be...my old self. I won't have my future memories

anymore. You will go on knowing

glowing..." He licked his lips. "Her

the future, but I won't know anything about it." He tried to smile. "You can tell me about it. I promise to be stupefied." "And I will never see Tyra again," Veris concluded. "Oh, you will," Brody assured him. "In time." "If I commit to you now." Brody drew a breath. "Yes." "But if I make you choose between me and Taylor, you'll pick her." Brody held up his hand. "It's

not that black and white, Veris. You're trying to dramatize, like you

the little we have told you about

"Yes or no," Veris growled. "I won't pick one." "I'll presume that your inability to directly answer means you are afraid to say yes, you'll pick my wife over me." "Your wife?" "She was mine before she became yours, no?" Brody sucked in his breath so sharply it hurt. "Veris, for Christ's sake -

always do —"

sake—"
Veris' blow was a sucker punch, just like his. No warning, no telegraphing. Unlike Brody's, it knocked him clean out.

Chapter Eleven

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

Because of the inordinate

edge to drink.

There were hundreds of the miniature deer-like creatures, with their long spiral horns and dainty

men and file down to the water's

made the ground they covered look like a moving carpet of brown fur punctured with raked backed needles.

Food, Taylor realized, carefully

noses. There were so many, they

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 to 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. She planted seven arrows she lowered the bow, looking at the animal. She wasn't sure where to aim.

"The heart is just behind the front leg," Alexander murmured, just to her left.

She jumped, swallowed a gasp. He was standing bare headed

"So you do it," she told him.
"I would, but I cannot use a

bow," he apologized. "Any other

and barefoot, looking at them.

point down in the soft sand by her foot, strung her bow and notched an eighth arrow. Slowly, she raised the bow and sighted on an ibex that wasn't standing in the water. Then

weapon would panic them. It is up to you, my lady."

She took aim again, all her old

high school lessons flooding back. She wondered if Mrs. Craddick had ever thought that her bellowed

instructions about notch-andrelease, breathe-and-relax would ever have been put to such use.

Then Taylor let the arrow loose.

It flew straight and true. The bow was powerful and beautifully

made. The ibex she had been aiming for staggered a little and dropped tiredly to the sand. Taylor honestly tried to feel sorry and sick for the creature, but she and the

the ibex died.

Alexander was murmuring something.

"What?" she asked.

He blushed. "Actually, I was thanking God for sending us this

much needed meat," he confessed.

Taylor suggested and strung another arrow. She lifted the bow

"Thank him for me, too,"

men and everyone waiting for them in Jerusalem would need this meat to survive. So she watched with a disjointed lack of passion as

and took aim.

She downed six ibex with her eight arrows. By that time the herd

the oasis, calling out in their alarm. That woke the sleeping soldiers and knights, who realized that food on

the hoof was among them and withdrew their knives and tried to

panicked and tried to back out of

capture some of the fleet-footed beasts, who began to jump and kick back. Dust rose and shouts. A few more were caught, but the six Taylor hit with her arrows were the

The ibex were hung from palms and the process of skinning and dressing the carcasses begun immediately, before the heat of the day set in. The men gathered

bulk of the hunt.

headed thinking. There was admiration in their voices and faces.

But neither Brody nor Veris was among them.

around Taylor, congratulating her on her marksmanship and level-

Alexander held up his hand toward Taylor. "Behold, our Naila Fathiyya!" he declared. One or two

laughed, but most of them looked

puzzled. Alexander laughed. "In my language, it means she is the lady who conquers and supplies. Today she has truly done both."

The soldier who guarded Taylor's camp drew her to one side.

"My lady, I 'ave Sir William over 'ere. 'E wants a word wiv you."

"Then let him pass, David.

Didn't my husband tell you Will was to be passed through at any time?"

"My lady wiy all due

"My lady, wiv all due respects, I don't like the look of 'im. 'E turned up before the moon woz

up last night demanding your time and I put 'im off by saying you woz sleepin'. And now m'lord ain't come back at all last night either.

I'm not easy about it."

Taylor licked her lips. "Are you saying Will has been waiting to speak to me since about eleven

o'clock last night?" "Aye, m'lady." "And he hasn't got impatient? Or angry?" "No" Then he was already angry and hiding it. Taylor's heart thudded. "You didn't see my husband at all last night?" David shook his head. Where was Brody? Taylor knew that putting Veris off any longer would simply fuel his rage. She smiled at David. see Will. But David...hover nearby would you? Just in case?"

He hurried around the wagon that was the nominal "door" to their quarters. He had barely passed it when Veris strode around it. Veris was moving fast. Too fast for

David saluted. "Yes, my lady!"

As he came closer to her, he pulled the knife from his belt. Her adrenaline surged, but before she could do more than open

human—he was being indiscreet.

her mouth and draw breath, he'd already swiped the tip across the hand she had brought up to defend herself.

The point of the blade burned across her palm. It was a shallow

held by his side. His chest was heaving. His face was red with the effort to control his fury and keep it at human levels.

Taylor turned her hand palm

Veris stepped back, the knife

cut.

Taylor turned her hand palm up to stare at the beads of blood. She looked at Veris again. Nausea

was swirling through her. God, please let her not be sick here in front of this man.

Veris pushed the knife into his belt. "He wants you. I want him. You're the problem, Tyra. Taylor.

You're getting in my way."

She drew a breath, trying to

shakes. "At last. You see me as an equal."

Veris blinked. She had surprised him. Good.

stay on top of the adrenaline

"You look depleted," she added. "From the look of it, you've lost plenty of blood last night. Did Brody do that?" She held up her

hand. "Would you like some of this?"

He sucked in a breath.

"Although the last time you tried mine, you lost control of

yourself. You couldn't figure out if you wanted to eat me, or bond with me. Quite the schizoid dilemma

yourself." Taylor hated using that ultimate moment of vulnerability this way, but Veris would understand, later. She needed all the leverage she had right now. It was her blood dripping into the sand and Veris' knife that had carved into her flesh. "Vampires can't cry," Veris said, but his voice was hoarse. Doubt? "They can when they're pushed very hard and I've got you there once. Do you doubt I can get

you there again?"

you went through. You actually cried when you came back to

His knuckles whitened on the knife.

Attack, Taylor thought.

"It's an interesting coincidence that you have the same

name as my wife. My dead wife, from the fifth century."

She felt her guts turn hot and

churn. How had he figured that out? Did Brody know? Was that why Brody had stayed away all night? Oh fuck, oh God, oh hell...

Veris was watching her face

night? Oh fuck, oh God, oh hell...

Veris was watching her face.

"It was you," he said softly. "You were there." He nodded. "I'll let your husband of this time tell you what they did to me after you left

dread what you will do to my life when you depart this time." He pointed at her. "You have done enough to my life, Tyra-Taylorwhoever you are. I don't want you in it anymore. I have enough scheming women in my life. Leave me alone. Let me have Brody. You don't need him. You clearly have means to prey on unsuspecting men elsewhere." Raw, dreadful pain ripped through her heart. He stepped backward, clearly meaning to depart. Taylor hurried forward.

me on the forest floor that night. I

"Wait, Veris. Please." Her voice was trembling. Veris shook his head. "I have

said my piece." "And I get no say at all?" He hesitated.

That was all the time she needed. Taylor threw her arms around him and pressed her face against his cheek. She closed her eyes. This was Veris. He smelled the

same, sounded the same. He used different words and reacted differently, but he had suffered a centuries-old hurt because of something she did and her guilt was enormous.

"I'm sorry, Väinämöinen," she breathed and felt his shudder at the use of his name.

"I'm so sorry. If I had been able to stay until morning and save you from all that trouble, I would have. I don't know how to control it. Time just takes me. I wanted to

stay. I wanted to stay in your arms and talk about love and about

marrying you. I was so happy that night, you have to believe me." She lifted her head to look into his eyes. She knew her own were tearstreaked, but there was no time to hide them. She knew she had a few short seconds to try to undo the

Pausing to hide tears would rob her of precious time.

Veris' face was stony, but his

damage she had done that night.

eyes told a different story. He was listening to her. Even though he didn't remember the night itself, he was listening.

She stroked his face and tried to smile. "Rid yourself of Davina, Väinä. She's evil and she's making you unhappy."

He drew in his breath "Who

He drew in his breath. "Who are you—" he began.

She touched his lips. "I

know," she said simply. "Trust me in this. You love Brody, Väinä? You

He swallowed. "Yes." His voice was hoarse.

certain of it." She paused to let her

"Then he is yours. I will make

want him?"

kiss goodbye.

voice even out once more. "I love you, Veris. If that is what will make you happy, then that is what you will have." She kissed him, not looking for a response. Simply a

Then she made herself walk away. She managed to get around the end of the wagon, out of his sight before her knees buckled and she fell forward and was comprehensively sick.

her back and her head, pulling her hair out of the way. He soothed her with soft sounds and words even though she was crying as she was sick.

"Taylor!" Brody's voice,

Alexander's hands touched

hoarse and strained, from a distance.

She saw Alexander's boot kick sand over the pile of vomit she had

produced. Alexander picked her up, sitting her farther away from the pile and looked at her hand, brushing sand from the blood. "It's shallow, but it should be

"It's shallow, but it should be cleaned and bandaged," he

"Boiled water," Taylor told him, between hiccups. "Taylor!" Brody called again, much closer this time. "Of course, boiled water,"

decided.

Alexander assured her, with a nod. He got to his feet and headed for the water.

the water.

Brody rounded the wagon and dropped to his knees in front of her.

He was a bloody mess his tunic

He was a bloody mess, his tunic smeared in dark, dried bloodstains from the knees upward. His face was covered in flaked and dried blood, but seemed whole and unbruised. His hands were the

Taylor stared at him. "Where were you?" she asked.

same.

"I saw you confront Veris," he said. "I was too far away - on the other side of the oasis. I couldn't do anything but watch."

"I mean, where were you all night?" "Unconscious for a lot of it."

"Veris did this?"

"He knocked me out then fed me a drug, I suspect, from the way I felt when I awoke...something I suppose Davina uses on him when she wants him biddable. I woke up around sunrise and walked back in and you talk him down." He shook his head. "You have no need for swords. You've courage enough without them."

She could feel her tears beginning to flow again and shook

time to see him take a swing at you

her head. "I've lost him. Completely and utterly this time. He knows about..." She sighed. "He suffered the consequences of a trip he and I made a few weeks ago,

back to fifth century Norway, to Veris' family. That was the key change in his past. That is what has made him so wary of women and hesitant about dealing with Davina. Brody nodded. "I know. He told me about it last night."

Her tears flowed. "Now he won't have anything to do with me. He knows it was me back then. He thinks I did it deliberately and left

He was punished for my

disappearance back then."

uncaring and cruel, like Davina. I've let him go, Brody." She drew in a breath, trying to control herself and only half succeeding. "He's yours now. I told him that. He

him to suffer alone because I'm

wants you. I told him to be happy."

Brody sat in the sand and drew her onto his lap. She let

herself be comforted and cried her eyes out against his disgusting tunic, shutting out the light, safe in his arms.

cleaned her hand and bound it with the clean cloth than Alexander brought.

Alexander hovered but did

Sometime after that, Brody

Alexander hovered but did not speak much. "My taste for this place has soured, Alexander," Brody said as

he worked on her hand. "We have meat now and water. If we pack, we can leave in two hours. Is there somewhere we can camp a day's

Alexander considered the matter. "We have the numbers, my lord, that we could camp where we found ourselves and be safe enough, and now we have the water, too." Brody nodded shortly. "Good. Let's make it so." Alexander nodded and withdrew.

travel from here?"

Brody kissed Taylor's cheek.
"I'm going to wash this blood off
me, then see if there's any possible
way to discreetly feed."

"I'd volunteer," Taylor said

softly, "but there could be all sorts

of unexpected consequences."

He shook his head. "I won't risk using you, not here." He glanced around, making it look casual. "I suspect Veris is off doing the same thing." He smiled grimly.

"It wasn't a totally uneven fight last night." His smile faded. "Then I'm going to talk to Veris."

Taylor caught at Brody's hand. "He thought I was like Davina. You can't blame him for that. All along

can't blame him for that. All along he has been looking at us and thinking you have been caught by a woman like Davina. Everything you told him about me only confirmed it in his mind and when another type of women existing never occurred to him. Not in his world, or for him."

Brody stared at her. "I'll keep that in mind," he said at last and disentangled his hand.

Taylor bit her lip. "Be gentle," she told him.

he found out I was his wife from Norway, it was the icing on the cake. For Veris, the possibility of

asked.

"He could have killed me or beaten me half to death. There are a dozen far worse things than this paper cut he might have done," she

"Like he was with you?" he

pointed out.

"He delivered far more than just a paper cut," Brody shot back angrily.

She looked him in the eye. "So did I."

Brody's mouth lifted in a

smile before he could stop himself. Then he gave a laugh. "Atta girl," he said. "Was he at least limping?"

"Mentally, anyway."

Brody pushed his knife into his belt and picked up his sword belt. "Then I'll go deliver the coup de grâce"

de grâce.""Veris is drawn to strength,"Taylor pointed out.

Brody winked. "I know." * * * * *

Brody brought his head out from under the tiny waterfall to find Veris watching him from the edge of the creek, his arms crossed.

Brody's pulse shot skyward. He sat up, glancing at his sword and knife sitting on the rock next to

the stream.

"You've fed," Veris said. "I

didn't think both of us would get away with it in this tiny camp. We're more creative than I thought."

"Have you come to argue, fight or something else?" Brody

him, but he wanted every advantage in this conversation and he was vulnerable without mail. "You have no need of protection, if that is why you're reaching for your garments," Veris said. "Prove it," Brody said. Veris unbuckled his sword belt and dropped the sword on the

flat rock at Brody's feet, right next to the edge of the running water. The knife that usually lived in his belt—the knife that had sliced open

stood up and snagged his clothes from the rock next to him. Normally, nakedness didn't bother Taylor's hand a scant hour before—landed next to it.

Brody lifted his gaze back to

Veris and was startled when the man continued to shed more. His tunic and boots. A knife that tucked

and mail and undershirt and braies. A knife on a string around his neck. Finally, Veris stood naked at

into the top of them. His leggings

the edge of the stream, his feet planted in the hot sand, a pile of his clothes next to him, his weapons at Brody's feet.

"I am yours," he said simply.

Anger tried to roil through Brody and fizzled out. "She was

defending you, even as I left to find you and beat you again for what you did to her. She was crying her heart out and *defending* you."

Veris drew a breath. "I think... I may have been wrong about her. But she wants me to be happy, and I need you."

Brody's heart jolted. "Why?"

"You're the one piece of sanity and happiness that has come

my way in decades. And *strength*. You have it by the bushel."

"You beat the hell out of me

last night."

"We both know that is not the kind of strength I'm talking about.

You were going to walk away from me last night because of a principal. A priority. Even though you know it will bring disaster upon three

lives. I admire that. I love it."

Brody hated that he was responding to Veris' admiration. To

his love. He wanted to hate him for

refusing Taylor. But that was not why they were here. And they had delivered enough hurt and confusion to this Veris' life already. If they pushed him further, it

He was an admirable man who had done what he could with his life under extreme

would be simple cruelty.

he had not warped more than they had found him.

"You're a good man, Veris,"
Brody said softly.

Veris looked surprised. "I don't think anyone has ever told

circumstances. Taylor was right. Veris had tried hard to overcome adverse conditions. It was a wonder

me that. Not the way you mean it."

"Come here," Brody said.

Veris stepped into the running stream, which brought him within

with him.
Brody picked up Veris' hand and rested it around the back of his

a foot of Brody and face to face

"But...you were a slave, were you not?"

"Much, much longer ago than you were." Brody grinned.
"Besides, I always like being taken

own neck. "You've had more than enough of being dominated and

by you."

Veris' eyes narrowed. "There's a small matter of—"

Brody leaned to the side,

reached into the pouch on his belt and pulled out the small vial of oil that had been sitting in it since the first time they had made love. He placed it in Veris' hand and raised Brody laughed. "No, it's not." He leaned forward the scant few inches between them, intending to kiss Veris. But before his mouth

made contact, Veris pulled him the rest of the way forward with a hungry sound deep in the back of his throat. It startled Brody, but only for a second. His body tensed,

"Mine is bigger," Veris

his brow.

scoffed.

then burned with sudden powerful need that raged through it. It was like he'd never tasted Veris' lips before. Like *this* was the first time. It may as well have been. could do anything he liked with him and Veris would take it.

Trust.

It was the most powerful aphrodisiac Brody knew. He surged

forward and their bodies met. His

Veris was coming to him openly, his defenses down. Brody knew he

was wet, Veris' was dry and dusty, but where they touched all demarcations ceased.

The heat in his groin rose.

Veris was kissing him like he could rip his secrets from him that way...or pour everything of himself into Brody in one intense, intimate

gesture.

power of the moment.

His heart was beating of its own accord. He had no power over it right now. It was fully human, fully autonomic.

Veris' fingers curled around his cock, which was painfully erect.

His hand was stroking.

Brushing over Brody's cock. Tripping over the head. Brody

Brody groaned. "Fuck me."

"Yes."

Brody felt himself sinking

down. He realized Veris was lowering him, taking him down to his knees. He hadn't even felt Veris' hands on his body, such was the arched back, his hips jerking, thrusting upward.

He was being borne backward, his weight lowered

down to the flat rock with its slim

blanket of water slithering over the top. Veris' mouth was on his belly, his hips, his cock, making him hiss in delight so exquisite it was almost painful.

The touch of oil and Veris' fingers spreading it around his anus was almost too much for Brody's hyped up senses to handle. He moaned, anticipating the possession to come.

"Patience," Veris murmured.

breathing. He laughed. It came out short and shaky.

Veris slid into him with slow,

Brody could barely contain his

masterful precision, his blue eyes watching Brody's face for every shred of reaction.

Brody didn't try to hide

anticipated moment and realized that even in his personal timeline, it had been weeks since Veris and he had made love this way.

anything. He writhed at the long

"I've missed you," he said hoarsely. Honestly. Something in Veris' face shifted. He smiled and it was Brody has seen since they had jumped here. "I believe you," he murmured.

Then he thrust and Brody

became incapable of words. He sank, instead, into the long slow

warm. As real as anything that

dance of thrust and counter stroke, Veris' hand around his cock, the wonderful buildup of tension in his balls, the heavy sounds of them both working toward climax, the groans, the male sounds so unlike

sex with a woman that made it such an essential counterpart in his life.

senses reeling. He felt Veris

His climax left him dazed, his

"Oh, good Christ, Brody..."

The touch of wonder in Veris' voice put paid to the last doubts

straining above him, his murmured

Brody had. No man who could wonder at his good fortune to experience pain-free sex could be evil.

Brody and Veris were the last of the head of the column to be ready to leave at the appointed hour.

Alexander was waiting at the head of his horse along with Taylor, while the rest of the contingent scurried around attempting to pack the wagons and their personal gear

Brody had given them.

Taylor had a good idea where
Brody and Veris were, but couldn't

in the scant two hours' notice that

answer the captains' questions when they asked. She had to plead ignorance. She only hoped the pair of them didn't arrive back from

wherever they were together. That

would fuel far too many speculations.

She was relieved when Brody arrived first, carrying a great

bundle of gear that he threw on the wagon, before tramping through the sand to scoop her up around the waist and kiss her soundly on the

fresh, rested and well fed. He also looked very happy. "Thank you," he murmured against her cheek. "You were

lips in front of everyone. He looked

right."

There was no time to say anything more, especially as

Alexander was watching. The

Fatimid with his observant gaze absorbed far more than the average man.

She heard Veris growling orders farther down the line where

orders farther down the line where his men were congregated, but schooled her face into a neutral expression rather than react. Brody,

"Time to move out," he declared. "I appreciate you being ready at the appointed hour, Alexander." Alexander inclined his head. "Your mood seemed to indicate that delay would not have been tolerated." He smiled to take the sting out of his words. "Nor would it have been." Brody grinned. "I'm still more than ready to leave. There's no reason to

Alexander inclined his head

linger here any longer."

again. "As you wish."

too, show no reaction. Instead he settled his sword into a better position and turned to Alexander.

believe it is long past time we left this place," he declared. "With your permission, my lord," he added, looking at Brody. "As I was just saying," Brody

Veris strode up to them. "I

replied.

"The longer we stand around in this hot sun..." Taylor pointed out.

Veris scowled at her. But with the impression of Brody's lips still making hers tingle, she could do nothing but smile back. It seemed

to make Veris even more dour. He turned to the horse a page was holding patiently for him, his should've left at bloody sun-up," he muttered. "Now it's near midday and no mileage to show for it." "But a fat pile of carcasses, all the same," she said brightly. "That was part of your orders, wasn't it, Will? Meat?" He glared at her as he shoved his gauntlet under one arm and rammed the other onto his hand. "Sir William!" The

sword slapping his thigh. "We

peremptory demand for attention came from behind Veris. Even Taylor could feel her skin crawl with alarm at the strident determination in it. Alexander had captain, who was already seated and waiting.

Taylor turned. She felt like she turned with lots of time to spare. The man standing three paces from

moved back behind her, to climb onto his horse. Brody was even farther back, speaking to his

the head of the column was a tall, pale Fatimid. His eyes were showing lots of white. He was holding a long spear, aimed at Veris, who was just starting to turn.

The man took two steps

forward.

There was no thought in it.

No hesitation even. Taylor moved

Veris' heart. She was farther in front and shorter, so it caught her higher up the chest, just under her clavicle. The mail hauberk had, as

usual, slipped off her shoulder

The man had been aiming for

sideways, stepping between the spear point and Veris, who was

vulnerable.

because the neck was too large.

The spear point slid in sharp and hard—she felt it bite against the bone. Silvery pain shot through her.

She heard a gasp, soft and high.
Oh, that's me making that

The man holding the spear looked at her. "No, no," he said, letting go of the spear. The tip pushed upward inside her. She groaned. Veris was holding her, lifting her up. People shouting. Veris speaking softly in her ear. "Not for me. Not for me." "If not for you, who else?" she said, puzzled. She closed her eyes. "It hurts." "I know." Brody. Nearby. She could hear his angry shouts. Threaded with

sound.

panic. "Veris." "Yes?" "I'm going to pass out." "You must stay with us, my lady." Alexander's voice. His fingers on her shoulder. "Can't. Sorry." It was rushing at her. "Let her go. It'll be a kindness for what comes next," Veris said roughly. Then something touched her cheek. "Sleep," Veris told her. It was his hand on her cheek then.

She obeyed.

Chapter Twelve

Veris was still holding her when Brody returned, five minutes later. There was a haunted, stunned look in his eyes. From the limp angle of

in his eyes. From the limp angle of Taylor's head, she had become unconscious.

Brody's gut clenched.

Alexander was working on the bloody shoulder, his face expressionless. He glanced at Brody. "There is blood all over your tunic," he remarked. "I presume it is Fatimid blood?"

"It's English blood," Brody said. He wiped his sword on his tunic, which would never see another wearing. He slid the sword back into its scabbard. He reached inside the neck of his tunic and retrieved the scrap of cloth he'd pulled from inside the assassin's clothing. "We found that next to his heart." He laid it across Taylor's lap, where Veris could see it by glancing down. He patted Veris' shoulder. "I'm sorry, Will." The strip of cloth was in Selkirk colors, with a Selkirk shield embroidered at the end of it, along with a stylized "D". Davina's

Alexander glanced at the cloth. "You have powerful enemies, William. Is that not the shield for the Lady Selkirk, the wife of your current master? Why would she wish to have her man parade as a Fatimid assassin and have you murdered?" "Why indeed?" **Brody** muttered. Veris shook his head.

household shield.

Veris shook his head.

"Enough," he murmured. "Let us take care of Tyra for now."

Brody bent to take her from him. "There's a wagon over here—"

"I will take her," Veris said.

Brody stepped away. "Over here," he said simply, pointing.

Veris turned and carried her toward the wagon without a word.

Brody's gut roiled as he saw blood drip from Taylor's fingers as they trailed down behind Veris. Well, justice had been mete.

The man was as dead as it was possible to be. But he had died with regret on his lips that his duty to Davina had not been fulfilled and

that was something Brody would

fail to tell Veris for now.

Brody followed uselessly behind Veris and Alexander as they settled Taylor on blankets that had

temporary bed for her on top of the water barrels on the lead wagon. Alexander climbed up with her. "I will tend her," he said, dropping a

been quickly folded and set up as a

saddlebag next to him. "Leave her with me." He tore the tunic open and was already unfastening the

first of the buckles on her hauberk,

as if Brody's permission had been given.

Brody rested his hand on Veris' shoulder. "Let's get the hell

out of here," he said softly.

Veris jerked and tore his gaze away from Taylor. He seemed to process Brody's words as if

nodded. "Yes, let us," he agreed. He pointed to Brody's tunic. "Your horse won't let you near him."

Brody swore. "A fast change and then we go, no matter what.

We've been delayed in this place for far too long. I don't care if we only get five miles today. I won't

listening to them again in his head. He frowned, struggling to understand the idiom. Then

spend another night here!" He headed for the wagon that held his gear, trying not to linger on the images in his mind.

The moment when she had taken the spear in her shoulder.

Veris' desperate reach for her.
But the images played on like

The soft sound she had made.

a YouTube video stuck on autoplay, making him re-live the sick realization over and over that he was too far away to do anything at all but watch it happen—and Veris,

all but watch it happen—and Veris, too.

They were both the most powerful creatures ever to have roamed the earth and neither of

them had been able to help her. *She*

had protected Veris, instead—a frail, mortal human.

Brody found himself leaning against the side of the wagon, his

struggling to hold in a pitiful cry of frustration and rage. And if this was his reaction, how was Veris handling it?

He threw on a fresh tunic over

chest heaving, his eyes closed,

his mail, belted it and added his sword as he hurried back to the head of the column.

Veris was seated on his horse, his gaze straight ahead, waiting.

Alexander's and Taylor's mounts had been hitched to wagons farther back. The captains, the next in line in the columns, stayed a respectful dozen paces back. That left Brody

and Veris alone at the head of the

his horse, gave the "forward" signal and moved forward himself, setting a pace that was not quite a brisk

walk. He glanced at Veris. "I keep seeing it happening in my mind,"

Brody threw himself up onto

column.

he said, using Saxon. He wasn't as fluent in it as Taylor, but he was good enough with it that it would keep their conversation secure. "I

hate that I wasn't fast enough to stop it, to help her." Veris glanced at him sharply.

"Then you do not blame me?"

Brody felt his lips part as his jaw dropped open. "Good heavens,

gods' sake, why would you think I would blame you?"

He was staring between the ears of his horse again. "You love her. It is because of me she lies on

no! If there is blame to be apportioned, I will pass it all onto Davina with pleasure. Veris, for the

"That is all you can think of?"
Brody asked harshly. "In all of this,
you worry only that someone
might blame you?"

might blame you?"

Veris turned his head again.

His eyes were filled with agony

His eyes were filled with agony again. "Forgive me. I worry that this might jeopardize what I've just

He drew a breath. "Taylor absolved me before she slept. I want to make sure you feel the same. I want her

to wake and find the world is

found. I'm being selfish. Taylor..."

aright. She has given up much to make it so. I would not ruin her efforts. She deserves far more than that."

Brody felt much like he had when once he had fallen from the curtain wall as a child and winded himself. The inability to breathe, because his stunned lungs would not cooperate.

"What are you suggesting, Veris?" he asked, when at last he Veris shook his head. "I don't know," he said at last, in a whisper. "No one has ever done for me what

could speak.

she did. Not a human. Not a woman. And not out of..." He dropped his gaze.

"Out of love," Brody finished flatly. "Say it, Veris. It doesn't bite."

But Veris fell silent and for the rest of the day his comments were innocuous and in French.

* * * * *

Taylor woke to pain and heat and the smell of dust that told her she was still in the eleventh century. She had been terrified that passing out from the wound would send her back to her time and she was in

no way ready to return yet. It was

Relief trickled through her.

so not the right time to suddenly disappear.

She looked up at the blue sky above. She was being jolted. The wagon, she guessed.

"Keep as still as you can, my lady," Alexander said softly. "It is a delicate thing I do right now." His head appeared above her own, his soft brown eyes narrowed, the brows drawn together.

"And that is?"

"I am stitching your skin and your flesh is so much softer than a man's."

No wonder she was in agony. "I'm guessing there's no such thing as pain relief while you're doing it,

either, huh?" she said.

"Most men grip a piece of wood, or clench it between their

teeth," he suggested.

"Are you at least using sterile string?"

"It was boiled, as I know your insistence upon such things. I am going to stitch again," he warned.

She felt the needle prick and thought, *This is not so bad*. Then it

felt it underneath. It punched through the other side of her already outrageously sensitive wound. Then, the worst came. She felt the string being drawn through the wound. "Oh, God, Alexander," she moaned, trying to sit up. "No, you must lay still, my lady!" "No, no, Alex." She clutched at her stomach. He caught her around the middle and hauled her with surprising strength over to the edge of the wagon. She retched hard,

pushed through her skin and she

thought about the thread running through her flesh. Finally, she could be sick no more.

Alexander helped her lay

over and over, each time as she

down on the blanket pad once more and it was then she realized that she was almost topless. The tunic was torn open, the hauberk

unbuckled at the shoulder and folded down. The undershirt also torn all the way down to her waist. Her left breast was bare, but

covered in almost dried blood.

She shivered, suddenly cold.

"I must finish the stitching."

"I must finish the stitching," Alexander said gravely.

swallowed, clutching the edges of the blanket pad. "Talk to me," she begged. "If you wish. What would you

He began again. Taylor

Taylor nodded.

"Tell me about the wound, then. How bad is it?"

"As wounds go, I think you

are very lucky," Alexander said.

"There were no organs that were touched. No bones were broken. Just skin, muscle, tissue. I cleaned the wound and now I am stitching

it. When I am done, I will put a herb compress on it to increase the

rate of healing. In a day or two, you can take the compress off and a day after that, the stitches, if you do not plan on being very active." "I don't plan to be active, no. But my life has been unexpectedly active all on its own," Taylor said. "Then leave the stitches for another day or two after that," Alexander said placidly. She hissed as the needle tugged.

"My apologies, my lady," Alexander said. He fell silent. "Please, keep talking," she

begged.

"Most eastern masters insist

them," Alexander said. "I am not in the habit of speaking while applying medicine." "Even an old dog can learn new tricks," Taylor insisted. "Yes, I admit that is a puzzle I have been trying to resolve in my own mind." He fell silent again, but before she could prompt him, he began to speak again. She thought it was a change of subject. "The one caution we must watch for now, my lady, is fevers of the blood." "You mean infections?" "Yes, you could call them that, I suppose," Alexander decided.

on utter silence while one tends

from wounds that aren't correctly cleaned. Above all, this must not happen with you. You might survive such a fever, but your babe would not."

She drew in a sharp breath.

"They are what happen sometimes

"Yes, I thought you had guessed," she said softly. "That first day I didn't say anything."

"I am a doctor first and foremost, even though I cannot

practice my craft in this new world I find myself in," Alexander said gently. "There is a man called Hippocrates, an ancient Greek doctor, who is considered to be the try to emulate his philosophies. He believed in the sanctity of the doctor and patient relationship. What we talk about I do not repeat to anyone, my lady."

"I know who Hippocrates is," Taylor assured him.

"You do?" Alexander seemed surprised. "Then I do not need to

father of medicine. Eastern doctors

explain further." He sat back. "The stitching is finished." He lifted her undershirt back over her chest. "I will prepare your compress." He hesitated. "I judge the child you carry to be about forty-two days old. Is that about right?"

Alexander's gaze shifted past her head. "My lord!" Taylor lifted herself up onto

"Forty-six," she said.

her elbows and turned her head. Brody sat on his warhorse, staring

at them, the horse's head almost

grazing the side of the wagon. He had come up alongside the wagon, probably to check on her. Alexander and she had been too involved in their talk to notice.

Shock was written on Brody's face. It was white as marble. He pulled his gaze to Taylor. "You're pregnant?" he asked in English.

"Brody..." But there were no

words there. Nothing she could say would undo this.

He closed his eyes and

squeezed his temples with the

finger and thumb of one gauntlet covered hand. "Forty-six nights ago I was in Vegas with the band. That's when you went back to

Norway with Veris." He lifted his head to look at her. "Back to when

he was human," he said bitterly and pulled at the reins, turning the horse's head.

"Brody, don't leave!" she said quickly.

But he didn't listen.

When Taylor looked back at

Alexander, he was fussing with the herbs in his bag, pretending to be oblivious.

Taylor lay back down on the

blanket and put her hand over her eyes to shut out the sun and hold in the tears. Her chest shuddered as she tried to stop them. But that made her shoulder spasm and just

made her want to cry harder.

Alexander's hand touched her arm. "Drink this," he said. "It will

soothe the pain."

She eased herself up again on her good elbow and took the cup he handed her. Easing the pain sounded really good right now. She

took a big swallow and gagged at the bitter taste. "All of it," Alexander added.

She nodded and tipped the

rest of contents into her mouth and made herself swallow it. "How long does it take to work?" she asked as Alexander settled her back on the blanket.

on the blanket.

"Not long. Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes. It occurred to her that Alexander might leave her alone on top of all

these water barrels while she had her eyes closed. She didn't want to be alone. She opened her eyes again to tell him so and found Brody happiness washed over her. He picked up her hand and kissed the knuckles. "Hey." There was soft whiteness behind his head and she focused her gaze behind him. "I can feel that we're still on the wagon, but what is over your head?" "We rigged up a cloth over the top of you. Alexander said the sun was bothering you." Brody stroked her cheek. "It was only going to get worse as the sun got stronger." "How long have I been

"Brody." Pure warm

watching her.

sleeping?" she asked, astonished. "It's late afternoon," Brody told her. "We'll be stopping soon for the night." She had slept the day away. "How long have you been here?" she asked, struggling with the idea that a whole day could disappear just like that. Brody's shoulders lifted a fraction. "A while." "Watching me just lie here?" Again, the tiny shrug. "And thinking." "You're wondering why I didn't tell you," she guessed. "I know why you didn't." He

when she didn't flinch or protest, he smoothed his hand across her belly. It was a possessive movement. "Veris doesn't know yet. You couldn't tell me until after you told the father." "You're wrong, Brody. So wrong." He lifted his gaze to her face. "Then why?" "I wanted to tell you both together."

He took a massive breath that

lifted his shoulders. His gaze dropped to her hand still held in his. "The day we jumped here,

touched her hip. Hesitantly. Then,

That's when you found out, wasn't it? That's why you were suddenly anxious to track him down."

"Yes."

when you were asking about Veris.

fingers. "You should have told me when we landed here. Niceties aside. I could have protected you,

His thumb brushed over her

made better arrangements—"
"Protected me more than you have?" she asked reasonably.

His head snapped up. "Look at where you lie!" he protested.

She reached for him. "Don't do this to yourself." She grasped his tunic with her good hand and drew

him, lowering himself down closer to her and carefully avoiding her injured shoulder.

Taylor brought his face close

him to her. He allowed her to move

to hers. "This was not your fault," she said carefully.

He rested his forehead gently against hers and closed his eyes

against hers and closed his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?" he whispered. "Don't you trust me?

whispered. "Don't you trust me? Love me enough?" Taylor stroked his hair. "It's

because I love you that I couldn't tell you," she confessed. "I thought... I knew you would be angry that it wasn't your child, and

you were, weren't you? That was your first reaction, this morning." She felt more than heard his sigh. "I'm over it now," he

murmured and lifted his head. He kissed her and sat up. Strangely, he was smiling. "Any child is such a gift we'd all be sheer idiots to question the source."

gift we'd all be sheer idiots to question the source."

"But that's not why you're smiling, is it?"

He shook his head. "No." His

He shook his head. "No." His thumb stroked her jaw. "I've always thought that to you, Veris was the real man and I was just the gentle poet and singer. Most people don't see me properly when Veris is

that. But you do, don't you? You see me perfectly."

"Why wouldn't I?" Taylor asked. "I mean, look at you. You're magnificent. Beautiful, even when you are totally pissed."

in the room and I've got used to

you are totally pissed." He grinned. "Beautiful huh? People don't call Veris beautiful. He'd take their heads off." His smile faded. "It's nice to have my male ego stroked occasionally. You just did, by being afraid to tell me I wasn't the father." He lifted her hand again and kissed the back of it. "My age is showing, I know. But that felt good."

tugged at her. "What did Alexander slip me, anyway? We should ask him for the formula. Patent it...back in...our time." She yawned again. Brody gave a soft laugh. "Sleep. It'll help you heal. I'll have the camp set up by the time you wake up next." "A soft bed..." she murmured. "Done." She felt his lips on her palm. The tickle of his canines. "I love you, Maggie Taylor Yates." "Mmm..." She wasn't sure what she meant to say except it was universal all-encompassing

Taylor yawned suddenly.

Hugely. She frowned as sleep

she loved him back, love was all that mattered. Love followed her into sleep. This time she felt the sleep slip over her and let it.

She woke to a cool breeze on her skin. Night, she knew instantly. She was not on the wagon anymore. She sniffed carefully, listening to the sounds of a camp of

agreement. She accepted his love,

listening to the sounds of a camp of men going about their business. There was a campfire quite close, crackling and popping quietly. Her shoulder ached. She lay, she thought, on more blankets, but these did not have the unforgiving ridges of water barrels beneath

the Jordanian desert.

"You are quite safe, my lady,"
Veris said, next to her. "You don't
have to pretend to be asleep while

you test your surroundings."

them. Just the ever present sand of

eyes. As before, a wagon had been pulled up to make a small private camp site for Brody and Taylor. It appeared to be the wagon she had spent the day upon, for the swathe

of linen that had shielded her from the sun was still propped upon four

Startled, Taylor opened her

spears thrust up between barrels.

There was a big cooking pot sitting on a rock next to the fire.

making him a dark silhouette, his arms crossed as usual. He wore no sword that she could see from her prone position.

She tried to sit up, but pain

Veris stood in front of the fire,

shot through her.

Veris hurried forward, his hand held out. "Do not exert

hand held out. "Do not exert yourself," he said. "The elixir Alexander gave you has worn off and now you will be in pain."

and now you will be in pain."

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly,
falling back on the blanket. Her
shoulder was pulsing with black

falling back on the blanket. Her shoulder was pulsing with black waves of agony that radiated through her body. Her head felt corners of her eyes.

She felt more than saw Veris kneel beside her. His hand hovered over her shoulder. "Will you allow me to look at the wound?" he asked. "I once trained with the ancient Greek doctors in

Pergamum. I know how to treat

"I know that," she said, her

war wounds."

like it would split in two. Two small tears squeezed from the

voice husky.

"Yes, of course you do," he said, sounding vexed.

"There's no need to ask my permission."

yes," he replied, his voice low.
"Brody has agreed. But you must also."

"I agree," she said.

Veris carefully pulled aside her bloodstained tunic. He swore

"You of all people must say

softly when he saw the hauberk. "The mail is too heavy to leave in place over the wound. I will take it off." He opened the buckles on her right shoulder. Taylor thought he would make her sit up, but he pulled the hauberk down her hips. With the clinical detachment of a nurse, he slid his hand under her waist, lifted her hips and pulled the over her feet. He dropped it with a hiss of links into a pile in the sand and came back to her side.

mail down past her hips, then off

She realized then that he was wearing no mail of his own.

He picked up a cup—one she

recognized. It was the small cup that Alexander had made her drink

from that morning. "This will help with the pain," Veris said. "It is the same mix as this morning, only weakened to one fifth of the power. You will not sleep. Brody seemed to feel that you would resist being forced to sleep again."

"I would." Taylor relaxed.

blanket. "You are a persistent woman." He slid an arm under her back and lifted her enough to let her drink from the cup. When the cup was half-empty, he let her back down.

"The stuff works almost

"But pain relief would be welcome." She tried to sit up again and Veris pushed back against her good shoulder, keeping her on the

candle."

Veris folded back the undershirt over the top of the tunic.

Like the tunic, the shirt was crusty

instantly," Taylor told him. "This morning I went out like a...a

all of her breast was exposed.

Alexander's concoction had already set in. Her pain seemed to lift off like a hot air balloon and drift away from her. It was still

attached via a slender thread, threatening to reel in and reinsert itself into her body at any moment, but for now it floated off up in the

with her blood. He carefully tucked it down only just enough to give him access to the wound and the bandages Alexander had tied over it, but that still meant that almost

never-sphere, where she could ignore it.

Taylor focused on Veris' face

were so dear to her. So familiar. Yet this man was an awkward stranger who was staring at her breast while he treated her wound. Her skin was as blood-stained as her clothing and grimy after a

as he leaned over her. His blue eyes

day of heat, pain and sweating under the mail, but she barely cared. Taylor could feel the liquid, languorous heat of arousal rising in her. It didn't matter that Veris couldn't see all of her breast, either. That made it more exciting. He had only to peel the undershirt a half an inch lower and her nipple would be exposed.

painfully at the idea.

Veris lifted the bandages away, then the compress that Alexander had applied. He touched the wound. It didn't hurt.

"Good stitches," he remarked.

"Alexander did well."

The nipple tightened

"I threw up when he was doing them," Taylor confessed. Maybe if she kept the conversation on the disgusting and the normal, her body would cool down.

Veris laughed. "Your first stitches, I'm guessing." "Alexander said they were his first stitches on a woman, too." Taylor grew abruptly aware of Veris' fingers touching her flesh outside the region of the wound. Accidental brushes. Tiny imprints of the tips of his fingers as he worked. Her skin was hypersensitive to his touch.

"There is no sign of bad

blood," he said. "But I want to clean the wound anyway, just to be sure."

He rose and moved to the pot

She nodded.

Veris abruptly sobered. For a

fraction of a second, she saw heat in his eyes. *Anger*. Then an internal shield dropped down and his smaller cup sitting next to it and he dipped it into the pot and carried it back to Taylor. He soaked a cloth in it, concentrating on the task.

Silence was worse. Taylor cast

about for an innocent subject.

sitting next to the fire. There was a

"How far from Jerusalem are we?"

"They figure we should reach the city by early afternoon tomorrow, if we leave at first light."

She focused on his use of the

neutral word "they". It would have been Alexander who would have supplied that information, but Veris was not using his name. He had not

liked the fact that Alexander, a

reminded Veris of that by pointing out that Alexander had never had a female war victim before. Was this jealousy? From

man, had touched her. Taylor had

Veris?

"Then good time was made today despite my slowing everyone down" She was pleased

down." She was pleased.

"You?" He seemed surprised.

She sighed. "It wasn't good

She sighed. "It wasn't good military thinking, stepping in front of you that way. It slowed everyone down and made a late start. If we had been on campaign or rations

had been on campaign, or rations had been short, it could have been a critical blunder. No one said

reacted. I didn't think. Not thinking can be foolish out here. I've read about it. I think even you have told me that, too."

A great weight lifted from her

anything, but I know the men thought me foolish. There were other ways to deal with the man. Possibly dozens of them. I just

as she finished speaking and she realized that this guilt had been with her all day, hovering in her sleep and the few short minutes she had been awake, making her deeply uncomfortable.

Veris paused in his work to look her fully in the eye. "Yes, it

That is your name, is it not? "You and Brody have covered a lot of ground." Veris smiled a little. insisted, after this morning." "You know that knowing too much about your own future can be dangerous, don't you?" "I didn't ask about my future. I asked about you." He went back to work. "There is a difference."

"That's typical of you.

Splitting hairs so minute you need

a microscope to see them."

was foolish, if you are only thinking like a soldier. But you will always have my gratitude. Taylor...Yates.

Veris lifted his head. "I don't understand." "It doesn't matter. I was

teasing. And trying to change the subject."

"Why change the discussion?

"Why change the discussion? You don't like talking about yourself, do you? You've tried to deflect me twice since I expressed

deflect me twice since I expressed my gratitude. Or is it my gratitude that bothers you?" He sat back and put the bowl of water aside,

apparently finished with the cleaning. He simply watched her, waiting for her answer.

Taylor licked her lips.

Taylor licked her lips. "Yesterday, you considered me a changes their minds that fast." His gaze shifted and dropped away from hers. "Brody warned me you do not deal with men as other women do. I keep forgetting that." "I treat men as my equals in all but physical strength," Taylor said. "And I'm used to being treated the same way." Veris snorted. Then he glanced at her. "You do not jest," he said slowly. "This explains much..." He seemed lost in thought.

hindrance." She held up her palm, where the scab from his knife cut was still red and healing. "Now I have your gratitude. No one

he stirred and picked up the filthy corner of her tunic where it laid folded back against her shoulder. "This must be changed, and you should bathe and remove all that

Absorbed for a long moment. Then

blood and filth lest it travel to the wound."

"Good idea," she said dryly.

"I'd love to, except that I'm as weak as a kitten, high as a kite and have

as a kitten, high as a kite and have one good arm."

Veris' mouth lifted in a small

smile. "I believe most of what you just said means you approve the idea in general. I will bathe you." He nodded toward the big pot of

water by the fire. "I have all the arrangements in hand."

Her body seemed to burst into

flames and melt into a pile of nameless goo at the idea. "No, Veris. No. That would

be... That's totally inappropriate. Brody can help me, when he gets back from wherever he is."

"Brody won't be back tonight," Veris said shortly. "He's

camping with his men."

Taylor drew in a short, hot breath that sizzled on the way down. "Why? Why would he do

that?"
"I asked him to."

to bring her galloping heart under control and to find words that wouldn't offend this Veris. *Screw it,* she decided and looked him in the eye. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

Veris smiled a little. "No." He

"Why?" She tried to breathe,

rose and walked back to the fireplace and brought back the big pot, carrying it by the handle. "This is a common service doctors used to provide for their patients, in Pergamum. It seems to be a lost art, these days, or one passed on to servants as being too menial a task." He put the pot on the ground

her, pushing up his sleeves. "I want Brody in my life. You are wedded to his life in a way that the word 'marriage' does not even begin to describe. I want to know more about the woman who shares her man so selflessly, that she will take a spear in the chest in order to save

close by and settled down next to

"That's not the only reason I did it," Taylor replied.

Veris eased her torn tunic from her shoulders and off her

his lover."

from her shoulders and off her arms. "The other reasons?"

Taylor said carefully "In

Taylor said carefully, "In another time and place, I love you."

we are lovers, aren't we?" Veris said flatly. He looked her in the eye and waited for her answer.

"In that other time and place

Taylor nodded. A single tear

squeezed out from her eye despite her blinking. Veris picked it up on his finger. "You told me you loved me yesterday," he reminded her.

"Now it is only in that other time and place?" Taylor closed her eyes. Veris,

the master logician. She might have remembered not to lie around him. She opened them again. He was still waiting for her answer, so she gave him the truth, the only thing be the one to ruin what you and Brody have now," she said, trying to make her voice firm, her tone strong. But it came out sounding wobbly and pathetic. "I won't be the one who gets in the way."

Veris went back to gently removing her clothing. "You have a remarkable mind, Taylor Yates."

Veris would ever settle for. "I won't

But it was her body that was responding to what he was doing. She couldn't help it. This was Veris, her longtime lover, his familiar hands removing her clothing. His scent. His voice. His eyes. His big body.

and laid it out on another blanket, leaving her stripped of everything while the night air brushed over her skin like a caress.

Veris first turned her carefully

He even unbound her hair

on her belly, then soaked a cloth in the water and washed her from neck to toe in long gliding strokes. He didn't spare an inch of her. The

cloth pushed between her legs and washed her cleft as thoroughly as any other part of her, while her face heated against the blanket.

This is Veris, she reminded herself. His tongue has been there. His cock, his hands. Why be coy?

strangeness of this Veris. They didn't know him. He didn't know them.

She heard the cloth drop back into the pot. Then Veris' hands touched her back, spreading out.

It kept coming back to the

Smoothing. The fingertips digging in.

Taylor breathed out as muscles she didn't know she

muscles she didn't know she possessed seemed to all sigh and relax at once. Tendons uncramped, knots disappeared. Veris was not applying as much pressure over her wounded shoulder as he would normally and he wasn't using the

massages were deadly, as Brody and she had both learned over the years. If she was tired or Brody distracted by band business and Veris wanted their energy and undivided attention, a fifteen minute massage would have them relaxed, aroused as hell and ready to go. Taylor swallowed hard. "What are you doing?" she asked, trying to make it sound casual.

"It's called rubbing. An

Shiatsu and acupressure techniques he would pick up in the centuries ahead, but he was giving her one of his infamous massages. These sincere. He either didn't know what he was doing to her, or he was playing the game very deep indeed. She just couldn't figure out

ancient medical technique. Very good for diagnostics. Good for the patient, too." He sounded utterly

why Veris would toy with her this way. He had to be unaware of what he was doing.

So Taylor struggled to subsume her building arousel and

subsume her building arousal and ensure that not a hint of it showed in her movements, nor that she made any sound that would give her away. She tried to relax her as telling a statement, too.

Veris remained silent throughout, which was also a first.

body. Utter stiffness would be just

She was used to him crooning suggestive comments and making other ribald statements as he worked, for Veris usually found the

massages just as erotic as they did. Finally, Veris turned her onto her back, rinsed the cloth and began to wash the blood and gore from her. The touch of the warm cloth and his gaze upon her breasts was almost welcome after the power of the massage. No one ever suffered from a gaze.

disguised it by drawing in a deeper breath and trying to pretend it was a yawn. She kept her gaze away from Veris' eyes. Her heart was already a runaway steam train. No need to stoke it further.

nipples made her hiss and she

The cloth brushing over her

The cloth pushed down her

body, cleaning thoroughly. Veris rinsed more often now, as the blood was much thicker, especially on the left. The cloth worked its way down to her hips.

Taylor clenched the blankets,

fighting not to let her hips flex upward in reaction. The *need* to

like a neon sign in her mind's eye. It was all she could think about. That and what Veris' hand was

doing with the cloth.

squirm now that she could not was

The cloth dipped, rinsed and came back to her thighs. His hand separated her legs and lifted one knee. It was gentle, clinical, cool.

The cloth washed her leg from foot to hip. Veris followed the path of the cloth with his gaze.

Then the other leg.

Then the other leg.

Taylor could barely breathe.

Veris had somehow ended up kneeling between her thighs. It was far too suggestive for her already seriously weakened pulse.

As he washed her leg, running the cloth from hip to ankle, she

shuddered. It was impossible to stop it. Veris could not possibly fail to notice it.

The cloth paused only for a minute fraction of a second. He did not look at her. He finished with a sweep of her ankles and toes.

He tossed the cloth into the pot, but instead of lowering her leg to the ground he turned his head and kissed the inside of her ankle.

His tongue swept across her flesh.

Taylor was helpless to prevent
the shaky breath she drew in

expected him to do that and not on such a sensitive spot. Veris closed his eyes and

reaction, because she simply hadn't

pressed her ankle against his cheek. After a moment he lowered her leg back to the blanket and stood up.

For the first time since she had

shuddered, Veris looked her directly in the eyes.

Taylor saw a maelstrom of emotions on his face. Confusion

was the chief among them, along with a heated arousal that made her own look like a penny candle alongside a nuclear furnace.

Chapter Thirteen

Taylor caught her breath.

Veris dropped his hands to his belt buckle and hesitated and she knew why. This was her moment to say no. To halt it.

Her breath quickened.

Veris' chest lifted as he drew in his own harsh breath. He undressed, his gaze never leaving

hers except for brief moments

when layers got in the way. Finally stood naked before her. Magnificent. Exactly as she remembered. His cock was hard and upright.

The tears blurred her vision and she blinked furiously. She

remembered vaguely that pregnant women cried more. But it was a

stray thought, gone in a nanosecond as she quickly wiped her eyes. Veris laid another blanket next to hers and stretched himself out so that his body touched as

pushed up against her thigh.

Astonishingly, he felt warm to her.

much of her as possible. His cock

Desert heat. He rested over her, his lips like he was afraid to take that last inch.

"I will be gentle," he whispered.

almost touching hers. It was almost

"No, don't be gentle. Just be careful," she told him.

He groaned and took the

He groaned and took the promised kiss.

Taylor clung to him with her

one good arm, trying hard not to be overwhelmed by the sheer delight of being back in Veris' arms again, of being kissed by Veris again. His tongue swept into her mouth.

Touched her lips.
"You taste of...something

never met a woman who kisses like you. A man would be a fool to stop kissing you, ever."

Veris never did want to stop.

delightful," Veris breathed. "I have

Taylor licked his upper lip, just where his canines rested beneath. "I'm inspired by the man

kissing me."

Veris lifted his head to look at her properly. "You do not fear us.

"Not you or Brody, no. You are the only two of your kind I have ever met. Except for one other—and Davina. But only for those few short moments."

again and thoughts faded. She was caught by the sensations of his lips and tongue and teeth on her mouth, her face, her throat, her ears and neck. For long moments, he did nothing but stroke and caress her with his mouth and fingers, discovering her face and neck, as his body lay heavily against hers. But it was enough for her

pulse to remain thready and fast and her clit to throb in anticipation.

below her collarbone, skipping her

When his lips moved carefully

Veris' expression darkened.

"No, we will not speak of her now," he said softly. He kissed her

her body tightened and soared in a spiral of excitement harder and higher than she thought it would. Veris' lingering exploration of her face and neck was driving her arousal to unaccustomed peaks. He was taking full advantage

wound and her aching left arm, on to the soft swell of her upper breast,

of the fact that she was more or less helpless on the blanket. She slid her hand into his hair as he bent over her. Her body was arching, lifting beneath him. Her clit was throbbing painfully and her

pussy was heavy with juices. She felt empty and anxious to have him

would extend the teasing just to drive her frustration levels even higher, while reveling in the effect he was having on her. But she reached a point where

inside her, but knew that if she asked or tried to guide him, he

But she reached a point where she couldn't hide her building need any longer. As his lips closed around her nipple, Taylor groaned and her hips thrust. Hard. "Veris.

and her hips thrust. Hard. "Veris. Please..."

She realized that she was trying to coax him between her legs when he lifted her hand from his

head and looked at her with a slow, promised-filled smile. "Don't hurry

Taylor licked her dry lips. "It is for my sake I must hurry. I won't last, Veris!"

complete assurance. He spoke with the same utter certainty as the Veris of her time. A man sure of himself and his ability to give pleasure.

"You will," he said with

A ripple passed through Taylor's body. "Kiss me," she told him.

Veris lowered his head and pressed his lips against her breast. His tongue slid over the nipple, making her gasp. He did the same to the other breast, only this time

tugged it while his tongue rasped over the tip.

Taylor closed her eyes, trying to keep her wriggling to a

his teeth snagged the nipple and

minimum, for it hurt her shoulder when she bucked too hard. But the heat and moisture pouring from her unfulfilled pussy and the throbbing from her clit was driving

her mad. There was a building, pulsing wave pushing at her. Her climax was starting to quicken. She gasped, her breath shortening.

"Look at me." Veris' voice was low, heavy with his own

excitement.

the tips of his fingers. "You are too close," he breathed. "Such responsiveness..." He lifted himself over her, holding himself above her

Taylor forced her eyes open. Veris touched her lips with

over her, holding himself above her with one stiff arm so that his upper body did not press against her at all.

A thrill chased through her, hot and hard. She began to tremble.

settled between them. His cock pushed up against her slippery cleft. "Ah, God, the heat," Veris said hoarsely. He deliberately lifted

Her thighs separated as his hips

Taylor cried out at the welcome pressure of having Veris inside her once again. Her climax leapt closer. She reached her hand

his gaze to her face, then thrust

deep and hard inside her.

up toward him, but could only reach his out-thrust arm, the flexed muscles, iron-hard now with effort.

He used pure muscle to withdraw and slowly thrust into her again, while putting minimal weight on her body. Taylor realized that she was

almost clawing at him. "Faster," she breathed.

"I won't be of any service to

She realized then that his flexed muscles and tightly held body weren't just for her benefit. Veris was controlling his own reactions with super-human discipline.

"Touch yourself," he gasped.

"You know how?"

She nodded.

you if I do."

Taylor slipped her fingers inside her soaked cleft, up against her clit. The little organ throbbed at her touch, making her arch and moan. As soon as she massaged the bud, her climax spiraled closer, to

"Quickly," he added.

crowded out of her consciousness but the need to come – the delicious striving for the peak, where the breath hitched and even time ceased to have meaning while she floated in a sea of pleasure. Then the climax showered over her like an explosion of sparks and jolts of pleasure that rushed through her. It was made dozens of times better by Veris' cock pistoning into her hard and fast. He thrust one last hard time and

pulsed as he came in a breathless, deep groan and hung his head, his eyes closing. But still he didn't lean

the point where everything was

Taylor caressed his cheek, which she could reach now.

upon her, despite his efforts.

Veris lifted his head and looked at her. He raised a brow. "Is that tear for me?"

Taylor wiped her eye. "I suppose so. Yes."

He carefully eased himself

from her body. His cock was still erect and glistening with her fluids. Veris lay down beside her again

and Taylor hid her smile. He wanted her still. He wanted more. He would talk and seduce her

again. As many times as she could withstand until either the sun came

up or he was drawn away by other demands, or she was. It wasn't just kissing that Veris

couldn't get enough of. Her body and her mind were his playthings, as well as his private joy. Veris leaned over her and

studied the wound on her shoulder. She didn't worry about it being dark. He would be able to see more

in this low light than she could see in full sunlight.

He pulled back, frowning. "That is remarkable," he said. He looked at it again. "It is healing rapidly and extremely well." He looked at her. "How do you feel?"

"Great," she confessed.

He frowned again, puzzled

Taylor considered the matter.

over the word.

"I mean...wonderful. I feel very good. Much better than I

should, under the circumstances. Shouldn't you put Alexander's herbal compress back on, by the way?" Suddenly, she yawned. It caught her by surprise and she tried to suppress it because the last thing she wanted to do was drive Veris away by petty human concerns like

tiredness.

Veris' eyes narrowed. "You need sleep," he accused. "You

"I didn't realize until just now," she said and smothered another yawn as it pushed through her. She reached for him. "I don't want you to go away," she added. "I have no intention of going anywhere," Veris said flatly. "But

should have told me."

you *are* wounded. If your body says sleep, then sleep you must."

"I don't *want* to sleep. Not now you are here, like this." She tried to sit up, but Veris held her

tried to sit up, but Veris held her down easily.

"What fear makes you resist what is best for you right now?" he asked.

She sighed. "You won't come back to me again."

"Ah." He was sitting with one

knee bent. Now he linked his hands around his knee. "You would like me to come back." He did not smile as he said it, which made Taylor's

heart squeeze hard and start to pound. "Despite not wanting to be a wedge between Brody and I." "Yes... No." She bit her lip

"Yes... No." She bit her lip and closed her eyes. She was moving onto quicksand here. With Veris, she always dealt with the truth because with his mind and reasoning abilities, it wasn't worth using any other currency. But now, His lips touched hers. "Be at peace," he murmured. "My teasing is cruel, but I learned from a cruel woman and haven't adjusted my habits yet."

She looked at Veris to ensure

future.

she couldn't use the truth. This Veris wasn't ready for it and the truth would jeopardize his own

didn't appear to be. "Then..." She couldn't voice her hope. She didn't want it dashed again. "Never mind."

Veris settled back down

alongside her. "You cannot tell me

he wasn't laughing at her. He

Taylor considered this. "You already know your own past."

"I do not know about the time you were my wife. The time my sister says I was so happy, that day I

about my future, but you can tell

me about my past, can you not?"

returned to the village."

She jumped a little, inside.
"You spoke to Marit? I thought the village ran you off?"

"They did, eventually. But Marit managed to speak to me once before they had their way." Taylor rolled over onto her

side to face him. She realized that Veris was right. Her shoulder and hurt had backed off by a matter of days - as if modern medicine had intervened. But there was still a dull ache from abused muscles and tendons. Not even modern

throbbed far less that it had a while ago. It was as if all sign of infection

medicine could compensate for that. Veris arranged her left hand up between her breasts. It was a comfortable position, that way. He

dropped his tunic over the top of her. It covered her from shoulder to ankle. Taylor considered his request

as he added more wood to the fire,

apparent concern. His sword and knife, she noted, were both standing point down in the sand by her head—within easy reach if he needed them.

She could tell Veris about the

day and night she had spent in

moving around naked without any

ancient Norway, from his personal past, as long as she kept out any references to his future. If she made it about what had happened in his past, so that he could fill in the missing blank in his memory, it might help him in some small way with how the village had reacted to her disappearance and how they

on the blanket beside her, he rested his head on his hand, watching her. So many times he had settled

When Veris settled back down

had treated him.

down next to her like this, to talk or listen, or argue, or discuss, or... Taylor drew in a breath, fighting against the hard knot of tears. She leapt for the change of subject. And she spoke old Norse, because it would make the telling easier. "We waited in the forest that day, because you were uncertain of your welcome – "

"Dear God," Veris breathed.
"I've not heard the language of

language now, do you know?"

She nodded. "I know," she said softly.

"Dead," he repeated softly,

home for centuries. It is a lost

staring at nothing. He blew out a breath. "It is little things like this that make me envy humans." He grimaced. "But you are not like most humans, are you, Taylor

Yates? You appear in my past, my future, my present. You speak my birth language. You know things about me no mortal should. Yet despite that, you are so vulnerable the mere idea that I may not return

on the morrow moves you to

He considered her for a moment. "You are much more than just a woman. You would not be here, otherwise."

him. "Don't over-think it, Veris."

"I am just a woman," she told

panic."

She tried to figure out what he meant. Veris never handed out a simple compliment.

He touched her lips. "Tell me about the village" he coaved in

about the village," he coaxed, in Norse. "We were in the forest..."

Taylor picked up the story

from there and carefully described the rest of the day as she knew it. There were parts of Veris' day she

gave those details now. They may have been trivial at the time, but they were part of the blank moments that Veris need now. She handed them all over. Every scrap. Every intimate detail, except those that came from the future. She painted for Veris the picture of a husband and his wife from a neighboring kingdom,

visiting his home village for a day and feasting and dancing in the king's hall that evening. Of the

did not know, because she hadn't been with him for all of it, but he had told her what he had been doing in spare moments, and she conversations. The laughter, the closeness, his joy at being home again. Their nighttime tryst in the forest and Taylor's jump back to the future some time during the night, leaving Veris with no memories of the time Taylor had been there. By the time she had finished the story, with all its details, she was very tired, her eyes drifting closed. Veris stroked her temple.

wife's presentation to the king and the king's attention and the husband's jealousy that the whole village saw. With some careful editing, she gave him their real convinced I murdered you. And why they were so passionate about your disappearance. You have a way of winning folk over." "I don't mean to," Taylor told him

"Thank you," he told her. "I begin to see, now, why the village was so

"Why were you there?" he asked. "Why did you go back there?"

She was sleepy and her

defenses were down, so she answered truthfully. "I don't know. We don't know how it works, Veris. We just land somewhere in your

past. That time, it was when you

were human. Now it's here." "We?" "Hmm?" "Sleep," he told her. She agreed. And woke slowly. She was roused to wakefulness by the creep of sensations into her consciousness. Warmth. Building pleasure. Delicious tension. An absence of pain. The sleepy sea where thoughts drifted and all was good in life. There were no

problems. Only a barely there awareness where thoughts were half-dreams, free-association ran loose and inhibitions were still in

But real life was slowly drawing her senses awake. Stimulating them. She didn't hurry to full wakefulness because the sensations were meant to please

hibernation.

senses.

curling her senses around them.
A hand on her breast, cupping it. Her nipple caught between the fingers, drawing it out.

her. Arouse her. She let them,

A body behind her. Bigger. Male. The jut of his cock pushing against her ass. His hand stroking the flesh at the top of her thighs. Fluttering. Teasing. Stirring her

she did, his tongue stroked the length of her neck, following her artery.

Veris. Just the size of him

She drew in a breath and as

caress of her neck was unmistakable.

He gently thrust his tongue

alone told her who it was. But his

into her ear and it sent a ripple through her body.

More information registered

More information registered as she roused. Sometime during the night, Veris had covered her with a blanket instead of his tunic for in

night, Veris had covered her with a blanket instead of his tunic, for in the strange ways of the desert, it had abruptly become cool. He lay under it now, too. A fire crackled at their feet. He pushed at her knees,

bending them. Taylor caught her breath at the rush of heat it caused in her lower belly. She knew what

he intended. Her pussy clenched and her clit seemed to swell as she lay there.

She was fully awake now,

alive to the cool pre-dawn air.

Veris' hand slipped into her

cleft, probing her pussy. He pushed his fingers deep inside her, his invasion made easy by her slick wetness. She gasped, arching. Only then did she realize her head was pillowed on his arm.

"I have a confession, Taylor,"
he murmured by her ear.

She rolled her head back to look at him. "What?"

His fingers pushed into her again, stroking the sides of her vagina and the hard knot of nerve endings that made her moan.

"I watched Brody take you two nights ago, the way men do. It has been burning in my mind ever since."

His fingers thrust into her again. Taylor wasn't sure if her gasp was from that, or from his confession.

"Take her that way now," Brody said. Taylor flinched, turning her

head to look up at Brody where he

stood three paces away from where they lay. He wore his tunic, but no sword. Leggings, but no boots. He had crept from the main camp at

first light to check on her. To check on them both. Taylor's heart began

thunder painfully. Brody lowered himself down to the sand to kneel beside them.

He was watching Veris, not her. Veris had grown still, as still

as a rock.

"You look much better," he said. "But you always look better when you're aroused."

Brody kissed her, briefing.

She could feel herself blushing.

Then he leaned over the top of

her, took Veris' face in his hands

and kissed him. It was not a light peck, either. Taylor watched the sensual, deep kiss for every second it took, her own body responding to the power in it. She could feel

Veris' response in the way his body relaxed against her, but his cock pulsed and pushed against her hip. His hand withdrew from her pussy Taylor licked her lips. Her breasts suddenly felt heavy and

and gripped her thigh, squeezing.

full, the nipples hard.

Brody let Veris go. "Take her the way you take me," he said

hoarsely. "You want to."

Veris was breathing hard. "I won't be the one to cause pain.

won't be the one to cause pain. Never again."

Taylor caught his hand under

the blanket. "I've had you that way before. Many times. There is no pain. Quite the opposite."

pain. Quite the opposite."

Brody reached into the pouch on his belt and withdrew a small bottle and held it out to Veris.

in Veris, against her body, but this time it was as if his entire body was thrumming with it. So she reached out with her

left arm and took the vial. Her arm

Taylor could feel the tension

ached and the movement hurt, but not with nearly the explosion of pain she had been expecting. She held the bottle up to Veris. His breath pushed out of him

in a harsh rush. He kissed her as he

took the bottle, his lips hard and heavy.

Brody lay on the blanket that Veris had abandoned last night, resting on his side so that he was

away the blanket that covered them, though. Beyond the wagon, she could hear the first stirrings of the camp. Soft words. The crackling of cooking fires. Curses, coughing. The light was growing. Veris was moving against her. Shifting away from her. She knew he would be coating his cock in the oil, preparing himself. A shudder moved through her. Then his slick fingers slid

gazing into Taylor's face. He was close enough she merely had to lean forward to kiss him. Veris' elbow was almost touching Brody's cheek. He made no move to lift probed hesitantly, then with more confidence as her anus stretched willingly to accommodate his probing finger.

between her ass cheeks and she moaned at the familiar touch. He

Brody was watching her face and she could see the growing arousal in his. Even though he could not see what Veris was doing, imagination was providing more

than enough stimulus.

The thick blunt head of Veris' cock replaced his finger. His hand curled over her hip. She could hear his breath, heavy and quick, by her

neck. He was almost panting. His

teeth were shielded but she could feel them there, protruding just a little.

He pushed into her slowly,

lips brushed over her flesh. His

although she could feel the fine trembling in him, the need to slam into her like a rutting bull.

Then the pleasure of having Veris inside her again stole all thought from her. She relaxed her body, accepting him into her.

Brody exhaled heavily. "Your face..." he murmured. "As the pleasure takes you. I never tire of it"

Veris inched into her, until

finally he was fully within. "Dear heavens," he breathed. "It is all that," Brody told him. He burrowed his hand beneath the

edge of the blanket. He cupped her knee and slid his fingers along the curve of her thigh until he reached

her ass.

"You seek to inspect my work?" Veris asked. He withdrew his cock. Slowly again.

"As I cannot see it, why not?" Brody replied. Taylor felt his fingers dip

Taylor felt his fingers dip lower, to her anus and Veris' quick catch of breath. His cock twitched inside her, making her gasp. cannot simply lay here and imagine. It isn't nearly enough." He lifted the blanket and eased himself forward a few more inches. "Taylor, let me join you." His hand lifted her knee.

Hot fizzing excitement spilled

from them, shaking his head. "I

Brody pull his hand away

Veris gave a choking sound. "You cannot mean what I think you mean?"

"You he does" Taylor said

through her.

"Yes, he does," Taylor said. Her voice shook with her own rising anticipation. It had been too long since she had shared herself thigh over his as he moved under the blanket. At the same time he hoisted his tunic out of the way. She felt his cock push up against her cleft, hard and more than ready. Brody kissed her again, quickly. His hand swooped along her flank-a quick caress-then back to her hip. He eased into her. She could feel herself separating, accepting him. She caught her breath. "I can feel you," Veris said, sounding surprised...and aroused.

this way. She straightened her lower leg, trusting that Brody would support her. He lifted her "Inside her. I can feel you inside her...against me."

Brody's lips parted in surprise.

"In all these many centuries, you have never shared a woman, Veris?"

Taylor turned her head back to look at him. Veris rested his forehead against hers. "I found no

forehead against hers. "I found no woman worthy of the pleasure," he said quietly.

Taylor glanced at Brody from the corner of her eyes, shocked. He shook his head just a little.

So she tried to absorb her dismay and guilt for the damage she had created that long ago night

meeting Brody and had shared them, too. Brody had acquired the taste for ménage from Veris. Taylor rolled her head back against Veris and let herself dwell

in Norway. The Veris she knew had known women aplenty before

them. Her eyes closed. "Please stay still for a moment, both of you. Let me just enjoy the feel of you." Veris licked her neck, the

in the delight of being possessed by

corner of her jaw and just below her ear, where her pulse throbbed. He pressed his lips against her cheek. "I must move. You are like a fist around me. Stroking even as you lay there. If I do not move I will be of no service to you."

Taylor sighed. "Very well. I am being sentimental."

Brody laughed, another low chuckle. "You know this is not the best part." His hand moved

restlessly against her hip, crowding up against Veris'. He glanced at Veris. "Together."

Taylor caught her breath and held it as they withdrew from her and eased back in. Such a simple movement, but it sent waves of pleasure washing over her. She

clutched at Brody weakly.

They pushed into her in

building as their own excitement levels spiraled. She heard their breathing shorten. Brody's expression changed as his climax drew closer. The fine line between his brows deepened. His black eyes focused inward and his full lips parted so that she could just see the tips of his canines as they descended, proof of the power of his arousal. The sight of them peeking below his upper lip when he was about to climax never failed to thrill Taylor because she knew he was helpless to prevent them

appearing when he was truly

steady, smooth strokes, their speed

excited.

Her climax gathered, pressure building.

Veris' hand slipped from her hip to drop down to her mound. His fingertips pressed between

Brody and her and found her swollen clit, slick with her moisture. He pressed his fingers around her clit.

"Come for us," Veris breathed in her ear.

He barely needed to stroke

He barely needed to stroke her clit. Just the motion of Brody's pelvis against her as he thrust was enough.

Taylor gasped, her gaze losing

and holding her hostage for what felt like minutes as pure pleasure tore through her in fizzing, waves. She could feel her vagina and ass pulsing with the power of it.

focus and turning inward. Her climax leapt, stealing her breath, clamping her muscles and tendons

"Gods!" Veris breathed in a raw and shocked voice. His cock shifted and surged in her as he came, milked to climax by her own orgasm.

Brody gripped her hip with

hard fingers and thrust as soon as her orgasm passed enough to let him move. One more thrust and he came with a low groan, his eyes closing. They all remained still for a long minute or two, their breaths

mingling above the blanket. Taylor tingled from head to foot and knew

she wore a smile she couldn't stop. She opened her eyes and looked at Brody. He was smiling, too. His canines had retracted, but that was okay.
"Good morning,"

she

murmured, in English. His smile grew warmer. "That was 'good morning' was it not?" Veris asked, kissing her neck.

does seem to be a good morning, after such an awful day yesterday."

Veris looked from her to Brody. "Am I the only one here to have any feelings of awkwardness? Hesitation?"

"Yes," Brody said flatly.

"I lie here at this moment

Veris hesitated. "You knew?

turned to smile at him. "And it

"Yes," Taylor confirmed. She

with my...coupled with your wife at the same moment as you. I spent the night with her, although that had not been my intention—"

"I knew you would," Brody interjected.

But you still agreed to let me tend her? Knowing that?"
"Yes."

Under the blanket, Veris'

hand lifted and began to smooth its way along Taylor's side. Up and down, like one might soothe a

restless horse. She wondered if Veris was aware that he was doing it. He often reached for her this

way if he was uncomfortable. The physical man's version of a pacifier.

"I do not understand," Veris

said at last.

Brody nodded. "You can't understand. Not yet. Not for a few

understand. Not yet. Not for a few centuries, anyway. Just between the

three of us for right now, accept it and enjoy it."

Veris' response was slow to come. "I will consider it." His hand

slid up to cup Taylor's breast and he kissed her cheek. "It is a most persuasive offer, after all. Thank you for the night, my lady."

He withdrew from her, which caused Brody's cock to dislodge, too.

"Let me see your wound one

last time." Veris pulled the blanket back enough to look at the still uncovered wound and she lay down to let him see it better.

"Remarkable," he muttered.

Brody leaned over to look as well and whistled a long low note. "Either Alexander knows his stuff or Veris does. That looks like it was done a week ago." "I think they both know their

stuff," Taylor said. "It barely hurts anymore. It's just muscle stiffness now." "Leave off the chainmail," Veris told her. "It will irritate the stitches. But I would suggest riding

on the wagon again today. You cannot go on horseback a day after the wound you received. The men will start muttering about witchcraft."

wagon, but you promise you will visit me?"

Veris looked startled. "Me?"

"Both of you," she insisted. "From time to time at least. When you aren't ordering your men about

silly. I agree that I must stay on the

Taylor sighed. "I will be bored

or watching sand move in front of your horse's nose."

Brody chuckled. "I'll see what I can arrange." He rested his hand on Veris' bare thigh, where he

kneeled next to Taylor. "I suggest you get dressed, Veris. The men are moving about now and they love scandal as much as the women at shoulder toward the wagon that shielded them from the main camp and frowned. "Centuries of masks and quite suddenly I grow tired of it. How strange." He got to his feet, looking down at them, the frown

deepening. It seemed as if he would speak again, but instead he turned

Veris glanced over his

court."

and dressed silently. He left with a simple nod, for by then the camp beyond the wagon was fully active and the chatter of the men loud.

Brody helped Taylor bathe with the last of the water in the pot sitting by the fire, then dress, for

lifting it above her shoulder was difficult.

They spoke of generalities, for the voices of the men beyond the

wagon drifted back to them clearly,

her arm was still stiff enough that

a warning that their own words would carry just as well and they didn't want to draw attention to themselves by using English.

So it was a good two hours after the entourage had got underway before Brody could make his way back to Taylor's wagon, hitch his horse to it and climb

aboard to sit on her blankets and

speak to her.

threaded his fingers, studying her. "You wanted to talk?" he said in English.

"You didn't?" she asked.

"After last night and this morning?" She hugged her knee.

He crossed his legs and

"Haven't you ever wondered why we were here? What mechanism decides when we get to jump back?"

He took a breath. "I've been too worried about making sure Veris and I got together and shoring up our personal histories again to think about it."

"Exactly. We've fixed things.

We've put things right. You and Veris are together again and in a tenuous sort of way, Veris is kind of with both of us. He's thinking about it, anyway. But that part doesn't even really matter in this time and place. He's with you and that's all that counts. So if that's why we're here, then why haven't we jumped back?" "Who says that's why we're here?" Brody asked. "Who says it isn't?" "Because we didn't have the problem when we jumped here,"

Brody pointed out. "We jumped, then we created the problem for ourselves."

Taylor chewed that one over.
"Then why are we here? And when

do we get to go back?"

Brody shook his head. "No

one knows. In four years, we've never been able to figure out a pattern. You know this as well as I do. This is the longest time we've

ever been held in a jump and this is the first time we've never been able to bring one of us back in time." "It's the first time one of us in

our own time hasn't been there physically. Veris was in Europe," Taylor pointed out. "And he was pissed at us."

"Pissed at you," Brody amended. "And he wasn't pissed. That's putting it way too crudely. It's never that simple with Veris." He pushed his hand through his hair. "What do you want me to say? I don't have answers any more than you do. Veris was the one who seemed to understand more about this stuff than either of us. He

certainly spent more time thinking about it."

Taylor hugged herself. "I want to go home," she said truthfully. "I want Veris back. The real Veris. Our

Veris. I like this one. I *love* this one. I do. But he's not the real one who

knows us so well. I want that one back."

Brody's gaze cut away from her.

"What?" Taylor said sharply. He sighed heavily. "I had a long night of staring into the flames

last night," he said at last. "And it occurred to me that we're repeating your mistake from old Norway. We're meddling in history again."

We're meddling in history again."

She felt a cold chill in her gut.
"We're fixing it," she said sharply.

"Are we?" he asked. "The problem with Veris' past was that

problem with Veris' past was that you were in it, when in the *real* past you didn't exist." He spread his

"Here you are again. What changes are you introducing this time?"

Taylor bit her lip. "We're trying to minimize those changes,"

she said slowly. "Putting him back

hand, palm up, to indicate her.

to where he should have been if I hadn't been in Norway." It was a pathetic attempt at denial and she knew it. So did Brody. She could see it in his face.

"Maybe when we get back," he said gently, "the Veris we knew won't be there waiting for us at all. The Veris waiting for us will be totally different because of changes we make here and now."

"Perhaps that's why we're here," Brody said relentlessly. "Perhaps we're here to pay the price for all our time travelling. Perhaps this is where the buck

stops."

Taylor shook her head. "No."

Chapter Fourteen

"Something troubles you, my friend."

Brody stirred himself, looking up from the sand moving just ahead of his horse's head. It grew hypnetic after a while he realized

hypnotic after a while, he realized. He looked at Veris. "I'm sorry. You said something?"

Then he realized that they had both spoken Saxon and that Alexander was turning his head to listen, his eyes narrowing with sharp intelligence, a furrow Brody was not troubled. But he shifted back to French, anyway. "I apologize. My thoughts were elsewhere," he told Veris. "You spoke?"

"I did," Veris agreed. His gaze shifted to Alexander. He did it without turning his head.

between his brows. As Alexander could not possibly understand,

The Fatimid was sitting crosslegged upon his horse, his reins between his calves, balancing a thick leather portfolio upon his knees. The portfolio acted as a simple desk for a parchment and a

piece of thin coal-like substance

it was lead. An early and simple pencil.

"I am not good company this day," Brody replied, for both Veris and Alexander's ears. "My thoughts

bother me." That would give Veris a way to avoid speaking of anything he didn't want Alexander

which he was using to write upon the parchment. Brody wondered if

to hear. They couldn't drop into Saxon in front of him without raising his suspicions.

Veris lifted a brow. "Indeed. I've had thoughts of my own that need sharing. They might serve to cheer you."

"I have considered the matter at length, my lord. It would be my honor if you would accept me into your household as your knight at

"Really? What thoughts would they

be?"

Brody cocked his head.

arms." Alexander paused in his scribbles and looked at Veris, his eyes widening.

"You wish Selkirk to release you?" Brody asked carefully.

"I do." Brody took a breath. His heart

was suddenly hurrying. He tried not to show it in his voice or Selkirk would have any objections to releasing you, Will?"

"Aye, he might have one or two, but I believe I could point out

mannerisms. "Do you believe

benefit." Veris' expression was grim and Brody knew he was thinking of Davina. Veris was actually going to

more reasons that would be to his

tell Selkirk about Davina. A hint or a bald statement. Either way, he was going to use Selkirk's wife as leverage for his freedom.

It might be dangerous. If Davina learned what Veris planned to do, she could try to counter his

attempt to escape her husband's

Brody wanted to protest that Veris didn't have to go to such lengths to barter for his freedom.

History and Brody's memory of the

household...and her dungeon.

siege of Jerusalem told him that Selkirk would die tomorrow in the first attack upon the walls of the city. Veris would be free to seek a

new master without this added danger.

But things were different and now Brody couldn't say for sure

now Brody couldn't say for sure that Selkirk *would* be one of the early victims of the Fatimid swords. He glanced at Veris calmly waiting for his answer. Veris Will. As soon as possible. I'd welcome a knight with your skills into my household with open arms."

Veris nodded. "As soon as

needed to break away from the poisonous Davina for his own sake.

Brody nodded. "Arrange it,

possible, then," he said gruffly.

But he seemed to be holding back a smile.

Brody didn't bother hiding

his. ****

The sun was level with the tops of the highest buildings of Jerusalem when they arrived back at the city.

Theirs was a heroes' welcome,
for water and fresh food had grown

so dangerously low in the nearly three days they had been gone that people from the northern and western camps fell upon the wagons of food and water with almost manic delight. Only quick thinking by the more level-headed senior leaders kept the water barrels whole and unbreached, as they inserted guards in front of the desperate allies and went about ladling out first rations of fresh supplies immediately, straight from the wagons.

the heads of soldiers and camp followers and carried her back to their tent on the back of his horse. Veris accompanied them part of the way.

"I will leave you here," Veris said, reining in his horse.

Brody halted, too. "You meant what you said earlier?" he asked

from her wagon, over the tops of

Brody helped Taylor down

Taylor looked from one to the other, puzzled.

Veris nodded. "Yes, by the gods," he said flatly. "There are reasons for why you came into my

softly, in Saxon.

Veris looked back at Brody.

"This must be at least one reason. If it isn't, I'll make it one. I've been looking for a way...an excuse. You're a damn fine excuse. A worthy one."

"She's not going to agree with

you on that," Brody told him. "Watch your back. I won't be there

his horse and headed north, parallel with the long line of tents and

"I will." He grinned, turned

to ward off spears, this time."

life." He dropped his gaze to

She shivered and Brody's arm

Taylor. "Both of you, I think."

city.

"He's quitting Selkirk?"

Taylor said, in English.

"Yes."

"And coming to work for you?"

"Yes."

encampments sitting out of bowshot of the western walls of the

"Is that what happened before?" Brody shook his head. He was

watching Veris ride away. "Not exactly," he murmured. "But the end result is almost the same. He

ended up a knight in my household. *If* Selkirk lets him go without a fight and if Selkirk can handle Davina."

"What could Davina do to Selkirk?" Taylor asked. "I thought

Selkirk fought in the siege tomorrow. You said he did,

originally. But you sound worried, like Davina might hurt Selkirk, or foul up Veris' plans somehow."

"All bets are off," Brody said gently. "Davina obeys no laws. That

is the reason Veris had to deal with her, the first time around. She

already tried to assassinate him once, out here in the desert. That didn't happen last time. Now, with all the changes that have happened,

do. We are moving through country as undiscovered as the future." He looked down at her and smiled gently. "Let's go get you a more comfortable bed for you to pretend to be frail upon."

I can't begin to guess what she may

Veris paused only long enough to wash up and change before presenting himself to Selkirk. It had been years since his heart had beat in time with his emotions, but now he found it was hurrying along, squeezing and banging against the

inside of his chest. If no other sign had indicated so, this alone told simple pleasures, more human responses and stimulus, instead of being dead to anything but the most extreme forms of pain and pleasure.

him his decision was sound. His body was awakening once more to

Selkirk greeted him with arms spread wide and a big smile. His hand shake was firm and his pat on the back hearty and accompanied by fulsome greetings and praise. "The hero of the hour!"

Selkirk declared. "You have done me and the Selkirk name proud,

William! The northern lords and their households are relieved of their dire circumstances tonight because of you." He grasped Veris' forearm with his left hand while still shaking his hand. "I will not forget this, William." He let Veris' hand go, then turned and picked up a cup of wine from the small table standing by the big shield chair that went everywhere with him. "Tonight in the small hours we roll the siege engines up to the walls of the city. It would have been an impossible task with no water to soothe our mouths and bellies, but you have changed that." He lifted the cup up to Veris and drank a mouthful.

and followed his orders. It was his man who found the water and Norwich's skill and leadership that ensured the water arrived here inside the three day limit that Toulouse demanded."

the matter, my lord," Veris replied. "I reported to Brendan of Norwich

"You exaggerate my part in

"But still, you succeeded!" he insisted.

"I followed a leader," Veris replied. "An excellent leader. One that I would prefer to continue to

Selkirk's cup lowered a little.

follow."

Selkirk put his cup back on

Veris smiled grimly. From the narrowing of Selkirk's eyes, the man knew exactly what he meant. He simply wanted Veris to speak the words aloud. Veris tucked his

the table. "William, you are making no sense at all. Three days in the desert have parched your innards."

thumbs into his belt and looked Selkirk in the eye. It meant dropping his chin a fraction to do it. "I wish to be immediately released from your services and your household, my lord."

Selkirk took a moment to

absorb it. "Immediately? Impossible! We are on the eve of war, man! I cannot possible deprive my retinue of one of my best knights. It is out of the question." "I will be fighting tomorrow,

no matter which shield is on my tunic," Veris replied evenly. "The Christians will not lose my skills. Is that not the more important question here?"

Selkirk hesitated.

"You have for the last three days survived quite happily without my services," Veris pushed on. "You've managed to build a

siege engine without my oversight. I saw it out there as I came into the tent. I presume Richard managed

trained him and know his abilities. He knows how to handle men well. You will not be without a good second once I am gone."

the matter while I was gone. I

Selkirk grew angry. "You already speak as if the matter is settled."

"It is," Veris said sharply.
"Understand, my lord. I am leaving

whether you wish it or no. I am simply trying to help you agree to the matter."

"Agree?" Selkirk's face turned red. "Do you know what I will do

"Agree?" Selkirk's face turned red. "Do you know what I will do to you if you dare leave without my authority?"

"Or my Lady Selkirk's, either?" Veris added. Selkirk sucked in his breath, as

if he were trying to catch back

words. He coughed and cleared his throat. When he finished coughing, his face was mottled white and red. He sank down onto the big chair, breathing hard and rubbed at his

breathing hard and rubbed at his temple.

He bowed his head and for a long moment he said nothing.

Veris understood then that

Selkirk had been trying to fool himself that the rumors were not true, that his wife had not been systematically cuckolding him for the duration of their marriage.

If Selkirk truly understood the depth and style of her betrayal, he

would attempt to kill her and then discover what manner of creature he had married in fact. Veris pulled the length of

cloth from his tunic, stepped forward and dropped it onto Selkirk's knee. The blood was old, now. Crusty and stale, but any

fighting man would recognize the stains for what they were. The stains had soaked across most of the cloth, but the Selkirk shield and Davina's stylized "D" were perfectly clear.

Selkirk didn't try to pick it up. "What is this?" He tried to speak with a demanding, authoritative voice, but it came out weak.

"Norwich took that from the body of the man Lady Selkirk sent to assassinate me, out in the desert.

She had him dress like a Fatimid and shove a spear in me from

Broken.

behind. You have reparations to make to Norwich, Selkirk. His lady took that spear, not I."

Selkirk gripped his chair arm. "She died?"

"She lives, but only because I and one other between us know

it so," Veris told him harshly. "But I won't fight another day wearing the shield of a house that plots against me. I'm quit of Selkirk as of now."

enough about war wounds to make

"You have proof of this?"

"You're holding it," Veris growled.

"A piece of bloody cloth?"

Selkirk picked it up in his fingers. "I could cut any sow's throat, sop up the blood and cry murder, too."

Veris nodded. "Then ask anyone in your household under my command who went on the expedition. They'll confirm the

camp. Inspect the shoulder of Norwich's wife. Look at the wound she carries. Then, when you're ready, try to find a Selkirk archer called John. A tall young fellow with pale skin and blue eyes something like mine. He's been missing since the expedition set out for water three days ago. You won't find him because Norwich buried him in the desert after beheading him, because he tried to kill me with a spear on your wife's orders." Selkirk grimaced. "I know the man of whom you speak," he said tiredly. He sighed. "I release you,

details. Ask around Norwich's

Will. You are right, an immediate release is better." Selkirk couldn't quite meet his eyes.

Veris unhooked his hands,

letting them move away from the

quick drop to his sword hilt. "I will go at once." He moved level with the big chair where Selkirk was still sitting hunched against one arm and hesitated. The words were there. Get rid of your wife, Selkirk. Don't just put her aside. Kill her, take the head and heart, burn the body and

a spear by your bed.

But he remembered, all at once, that Taylor had tried a simple

salt her grave and even then, sleep with

Veris for her husband's expedition. Selkirk had won and refused to give her his best knight. Instead, Selkirk had sent Veris at the head of his own expedition to win political influence with the northern lords.

Selkirk had made Taylor feel

gambit with Selkirk: to borrow

Taylor had beggared herself for Brody's sake.

Veris looked at Selkirk now and his heart hardened. He straightened up and kept walking

like a fool for his own gain, while

straightened up and kept walking toward the tent flap. Let Selkirk stew in his own household troubles. He deserved them. and pleasant out here, for all that it was hot, dry and dusty and the raw, dazzling sunlight bothered his eyes more here than ever it did in England.

As he stood adjusting to the sun, Davina rounded the far corner

stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight. It felt extraordinarily fresh

He pushed aside the flap and

of the tent and came to a halt.

Shock slithered over her face and was quickly gone as she adjusted to the fact that her gambit to kill him had failed.

She painted a smile on her

She painted a smile on her face and came toward him. She was

not unlike Taylor, but that was where all similarity ended. Her slenderness held no feminine softness, even though she covered it with cloth and womanly accoutrements on occasions, or like now, with her own version of her husband's tunics and leggings. Her breasts were small, as were her hips and there was no sweet hour-glass curve at the waist and hip.

slender and tall and dark-haired,

Her eyes were the most alluring thing about Davina. She watched Veris now with what most outsiders might consider to be a

blank, polite expression, but Veris

knew to be a hungry one. "Everyone tells me you are a hero, Will," she breathed, sliding her hand up his chest toward his neck, trying to raise his pulse. He caught her wrist in his.

"Explain why," he growled. "Why have John try to kill me?" Her eyes narrowed. "I sent

him to spy on you, not kill you." Her other hand slithered, snakelike, around his neck. "Her beauty and allure is on the lips of every man in the western camps. Now

rumor is spreading here in the northern ones. I know your drives, your needs. Three days with only "Bullshit," Veris told her, grabbing her other wrist.
She blinked. "What?"
Veris yanked her wrists away from him, so that her hands weren't touching his flesh. He

her loveliness to look upon? I admit, I was jealous. I sent John to watch you and report back to me."

assessed her. "It wasn't Tyra, it was Brendan," he said. "You sent John to spy on Brendan and me. John's attack happened immediately after we—"

Davina's face writhed with anger. "You are mine, Will. You do

not get to choose other lovers!" Her

barely managed to keep them from his face.

He shoved her back from him,

hands curved into claws and he

making her stagger. "Your man failed. You have failed. Next time, if you want the task done aright, do it yourself. I'm quit of Selkirk and you."

"You are not leaving," she said and hissed. It was an ugly sound, one that raised the hairs on the back of his neck and made his hand twitch to reach for the knife in his belt.

"Davina?" Selkirk called from inside the tent.

Her protest had carried and alerted Selkirk to her presence.

Veris held open the tent flap

for her, forcing her to enter the tent and not linger and speak to him while her husband sat in the big chair within earshot.

Veris wondered why had he thought her eyes to be so marvelous. There was no warmth in them, despite their decorative appeal. He watched her step into the tent, dropped the flap down behind her with relief and brushed his hands together to rid himself of the dust from the tent flap and that part of his life.

Then he went to find his page to give him orders about packing the remainder of his gear.

* * * * *

By the time he was done the sun was setting and Veris' mood was turning foul from the delays. In his mind, he was already quit of

Selkirk and his dominion, but there were practicalities that needed

attention before he could turn his horse south and head for Norwich's camp. He set up the promotion of Richard to knight to replace him and arrange Richard's knighthood. There were the positions and armaments for the fighting on the sort out, the dispersal of the water and food they had brought back from the desert and more. Plus the packing and overseeing of the delivery of his personal belongings

morrow, strategies and supplies to

But finally, Veris was free to leave, as the fiery ball of red reached the horizon, with a spectacular display of pinks, reds

and oranges across the sky that left many muttering about warnings and portents.

The siege engines were well outlined by the blazing sunset. The citizens behind the walls of the city could not fail to see the completed structures. Their night would not be an easy one.

Davina set upon him just

south of St. David's Gate, an empty

piece of no man's land between the camps of the northern lords and those camps guarding the western walls, where everyone swung around in a wide western curve to

avoid the congestion between the two wings of the besieging army.

She picked her spot and time well, as men were occupied with eating their first full supper in days.

eating their first full supper in days. She took him from behind, a running leap using vampire speed. the impact of her body drove him from his horse.

They tumbled and rolled for a

The knife sheared off his mail, but

dozen paces as his horse whinnied behind him, rearing. Like a good warhorse, Freyr was trying to fight the enemy for him, but he couldn't

pick this one out when it was wrapped around Veris like a cape.

Davina snarled. It was an inhuman sound. Her canines were

fully extended and the expression on her face as she lifted the knife up over him matched the snarl. "You *dare* presume to leave me," she growled.

throat. Veris grabbed her wrist, holding back the knife from his chest. She intended to cut out his heart. "Whose blood is that?" he demanded, although he already knew.

front of her tunic and down her

There was blood over the

"You do not leave me. I am

service to me is done."

He could barely hold her back.

Her strength was not just inhuman.

Even for a vampire it was

your master. I tell you when your

extraordinary.

"Where is Selkirk?" he asked.

"What did you do to him?"

She laughed. "The fool. He hit me. Me!" Selkirk had taken a husband's

typical reaction. He had tried to punish his wife for her liaison and for her crimes and Davina had killed him for it.

killed him for it.

While she was crowing over Selkirk's stupidity, Veris used her distraction to test the distribution

of her weight. He found the point of unbalance and flexed upward with a roar, tipping her sideways and keeping her knife hand pinned. "Freyr!" he called and rolled

out of the way.

The horse came down

shoulder at best. She cried out. Even through chainmail, the strike of a full grown warhorse's hoof would have damaged her. She kept rolling and got to her feet.

But by then Veris had his sword and knife out, ready to face her.

perfectly, his hooves aiming for her head, but Davina was so fast that he got an imperfect strike, getting her

Davina dropped her knife to her left hand. Her right hung uselessly. "A sword and a knife against a woman's left hand knife only? That's hardly fair," she said softly.

or another now. Fair was not something Davina understood although she liked to fling the word about because it often made others hesitate for the necessary seconds while she found their weak spots. Her knife came up blindingly fast and parried past his blades, despite her apparent weakness. She spun away, blood flowing from another cut to her useless right arm, her chest heaving, studying him. All pretense at softness and

Veris leapt upon her. He

wasn't going to let her shoulder heal while they stood there in idle chatter. He would end this one way womanhood were gone.

She sized him up purely as an enemy now. At last. "I will cut out

your heart, then eat it," she told

him.

A shudder ran through him. Veris had a feeling she was not giving an idle threat. "Is that what you do with all your slaves?"

you do with all your slaves?" She came at him almost before he had finished speaking. Pure instinct got his sword up in time. The flurry lasted longer this time. She was tiring, her left arm weaker than her right. Veris sensed that the tide of the fight was turning his way.

the knife back to her right hand with a cry of delight and slammed the blade deep into Veris' side, through the lacings on the side of his hauberk

That was when she dropped

his hauberk.

She stood with her pale eyes a bare hand's span from his, watching his pain. Then she shoved the knife deeper, turning it. Veris writhed, unable to help the cry of

Davina licked her lips. "You always underestimated me, Will," she whispered. Her foot hooked around the back of his ankle and pulled. He could feel himself falling

agony that escaped him.

with all her might and he was overbalanced. He fell onto the hard, dry earth of Jerusalem and knew she had the upper hand after all. She fell on him with a wicked smile, tearing his tunic aside and yanking the buckles on his hauberk to reveal his chest and the heart beating beneath. "You're mine," she breathed, her canines bared. She had another knife in her hands. A longer one. One Veris recognized. The knife she liked to use to gut fresh kill with, because it was long enough to reach deep

backward, but there was nothing he could do about it. She was pushing

Davina's throat from behind and yanked backward. She was lifted up, so that her whole upper body was arched backward. Another

A hand snaked around

inside. The knife was raised.

hand pulled back the wrist holding the knife, holding it back from Veris' chest. "He's not yours," Brody

growled. "He never was."

Softly, from dozens of feet away, but spoken clearly enough because she knew that he could

hear her anyway, Taylor said in old Norse; "I'm standing behind you, Väinä. Show me where her heart Veris reached up to tear away Davina's tunic. He gripped the edges of her finely made hauberk

should be."

and heard the leather buckles tear and give. The undershirt came away, too. Her upper chest and the small breast gleamed in the last of the red supper

small breast gleamed in the last of the red sunset.

Davina looked past Veris' head and her eyes widened. "No!" she breathed.

"I'm not yours," Veris told Davina. "But you are hers. Take her,

Taylor."

The arrow whistled past his head with a sound he'd heard in so

sweet, like a song. It buried itself exactly in Davina's upper breast. Deeply, almost halfway down the wooden shaft. The shaft that was

many battles. This time, it sounded

just like a stake.

Davina began to struggle, her feet strumming on the dirt. Blood erupted from her mouth.

Brody tossed her away to lie on the sand and struggle, the arrow sticking up like a flag on a conquered castle, wavering as she tossed and kicked and bled and screamed in a voice so high it was almost inaudible. Until suddenly she was still. "The head," Veris croaked.

"Take the head."

Brody scrambled to his feet,

withdrew his sword, raised it and decapitated her in one swift, powerful movement.

powerful movement.

There was a clatter of wood and soft hands on his body.

"Väinä...Veris. Please, tell me you

are fine." Taylor tentatively

touched the hilt of the knife in his side.

"Pull it out," Veris told her, turning to look at her. Her eyes

turning to look at her. Her eyes were huge, smoky soft gray. Concerned. Warm.

"What?" She sounded

"Pull it out. Hurry," Brody urged her.

Her lips trembled, but she

shocked.

nodded and gripped the hilt. He saw her draw a shaky breath and felt the knife slide from him. There was a sucking sound as air replaced the blade.

was a sucking sound as air replaced the blade.

Taylor fell forward, leaning on her hands. "Oh..." She dropped the knife. "Oh..." she repeated. She

crawled away and hung her head and was violently sick. Brody dropped his sword and hurried after her, then stopped and came back to Veris and bent over him. Veris began to laugh. The chuckle caught him by surprise. Then it expanded and became a full

"You are healing?"

throated roar that made his side ache and his head hurt.
But it felt damn fine, all the

But it felt damn fine, all the same.

Chapter Fifteen

It was a strange procession that made its way back to Brody's camp. Brody led Freyr, who by animal instinct had decided Brody was trustworthy and continually nuzzled his shoulder as he walked

docilely behind him.

Veris sat upon Freyr with
Taylor in his lap. They drew stares,
for Taylor still wore the tunic with
Brody's shield upon it and Veris
wore Selkirk's colors, now bloodied
and covered in gore. Brody's tunic

with Davina's body. Both men were streaked with dirt, for they had buried what was left of Davina beneath a rocky outcrop, moving silently in the dark. They had placed the rocks back as they had been. Brody had done most of the work for Veris was still healing—all except the moving of the larger rocks. But the rocks were big enough that no human would be able to move them and they left the place looking undisturbed. Despite the speculative glances sent their way as they

was slashed with blood where he had wiped his sword after dealing walked back to Brody's tent, they offered no explanations. No one asked for them, either.

As they progressed down the line of the western encampments, the activity around the campfires did not die down as it should have

the activity around the campfires did not die down as it should have at that late hour. Every camp was buzzing, with shadowing figures moving around the firelight, carrying their own torches, or the camp blazing with lanterns. "Something is amiss," Veris said softly. "No captain would waste firewood hauled over such distances this way without good cause."

find out in a moment or two."

They slipped into their camp to find it in chaos. Brody's captain was bawling orders, but seemed on the verge of hysterics. He turned to Brody in deep relief. "My lord, thank heavens! They've changed orders! We're rolling the siege

"There must have been a

change of orders since we left to find you," Brody called back, just as softly. "We're nearly there. We'll

grinned back.
"When are the engines to

engines up to the walls in the wee

Brody glanced at Veris, who

hours, in time for first light."

the wall in time for sunrise!" the captain replied, wringing his hands.

Brody held up his in a 'stop' position. "That is at least nine hours away. Even moving slowly, the

engines will take three hours to roll up to the walls from here. We could all get five hours' sleep, an hour to eat and still meet our required

"As soon as they will get to

begin moving?"

calmly.

Brody asked

deadline. Please explain the reason for the panic?"

The captain licked his lips. "I don't rightly know, my lord," he said at last. "I guess...I didn't know Brody nodded. "Pass the word along, would you? Have someone start an hour candle so we know the time here, instead of waiting for

the time crier. And have water and food sent to my tent." He indicated

the sun was that far away."

Veris. "This is Sir William. He will be joining the household as my advisor and knight at arms." The captain nodded and held

out his hand. "Sir William. I'll have

someone take care of your horse for you."

Veris handed over the reins.
"His name is Freyr and he's worked hard tonight."

"That would be appreciated."
Brody held the tent open for
Veris and Taylor. "See to the food
and water," he told the captain.
"And see that we're not disturbed.
This panic is meaningless. Everyone
needs a decent rest. They'll need it

for the morrow."

have some oats tucked away

somewhere. I'll spare a handful."

The captain nodded. "We

Candles were still burning from the few short minutes they had spent in the tent before going in

replied, deep relief in his voice.

"Yes, my lord!" the captain

All three of them stood in a loose circle, staring at each other.
"You're a mess," Brody told Veris.
Veris laughed.
Taylor plucked at Veris'

Selkirk tunic. "You should take this off," she said firmly. "I'm sure Brody's tunics would fit you well enough for now. They're all so

precious, hard-to-find privacy.

search of Veris, making the tent seem even warmer to Taylor than the still air outside. She tried to ignore the heat. In here was a

oversized, anyway." Veris glanced at Brody, who nodded. "She's right. Take it off. Go naked for all I care, or wear mine. It's up to you. Tomorrow, you'll have to wear the Norwich shield. Tonight, do what you will. You've earned it."

"I didn't earn anything," Veris replied, dropping his hands to his belt buckle. "Taylor did it all." He glanced at her, his blue eyes searing her in one sweeping glance. "What

at such a perfect moment?"

Taylor shook her head. "Guilt.
For messing up your life in the first place, back in old Norway. If I hadn't been there, then you

did bring you to that spot just then,

for you. I wouldn't even be here. I thought about that and couldn't lie on my bed and let you deal with it alone. And Brody wouldn't let me go to you alone. So we headed out for Selkirk's camp in the dark, on foot, because that was the stealthiest way we could think of. Then we came upon you and Davina. It was really that simple." He shed the filthy tunic and lifted his arm to look underneath. He was checking the wound in his side. The skin showed pink and

wouldn't have had to deal with Davina at all tonight. Selkirk wouldn't have been such an issue might. In a while, she knew, it would look as it always did.

Taylor tugged the bottom of

healthy, like a newborn baby's

the hauberk. "Take this off, too. You don't need it here." Veris barely paused. He

reached for the buckles, but Brody's

hand got there first. "Let me," Brody said.

Taylor found herself smiling. But there was a roiling in her gut

that was fast becoming in her gut that was fast becoming familiar. She swallowed as coppery-tasting spit filled her mouth and clutched at her stomach. *Not here. Not now. Please.* She had already done this Out. Slow and steady. Moving shakily, she eased herself into Brody's chair, still breathing to stay on top of it. "Taylor?" Brody said sharply. She shook her head, trying to tell him she wasn't able to answer right now. But that made the world tilt and roll. She clutched at the chair and moaned.

once today. Wasn't that enough? She breathed through her nose. In.

"Come!" Brody bellowed. Three pages hurried into the tent, carrying pitches and platters,

call from outside the tent.

"My lord Norwich?" came a

at the air between Brody and Veris, they hurried out again, pushing at each other's backs in their haste to leave.

Brody picked up a hunk of

which they sat upon the table in front of Taylor. With a nervous nod

it to Taylor. "Here. Quickly."

She chewed it and swallowed, forcing down as much of the bread as possible, as fast as possible. Brody handed her a cup of water to

bread, tore off a piece and handed

follow.

After a few minutes the nausea began to ease and she relaxed.

"I thought morning sickness came...well, just in the morning," Brody said in English. "It can come at any time." She

rubbed her temple with a shaky

hand. "Some women are sick all day long for the first trimester." She gave him a weak smile. "I should consider myself lucky it's just this little bit every now and

Brody grimaced. "Will it get worse? Better?" "I don't know." She sighed. "I

again, I suppose."

"I don't know." She sighed. "I know so little about pregnancy. I didn't have a chance to consult with a doctor before this jump."

all?" He sighed and pushed his hand through his hair. "Jesus, Taylor." She smiled at him. "Listen to you. The worried father." Brody stared at her, startled. Then he grinned. "I guess. Yeah. Feels...odd. After all this time." "But you like it." His grin changed into a smile. His eyes grew warm. He touched her hand where it rested on the chair. "Yes. It makes me feel human again." Veris moved up closer to the big chair. He had been listening to

Brody's eyes widened. "At

touching his features. "You are with child," he accused.

Taylor straightened up, alarmed. She put the cup of water back on the table. The first reaction,

their quick exchange in English. Now he pointed at Taylor, anger

to lie and say "No, I'm not" came and went unborn. She couldn't do it. Not with Veris.

Brody turned to him. "You heard that much?"

"Your English is close enough to Saxon in places that I heard enough to confirm it. She is sick, then eats and recovers? I have seen enough women with child do that bastard in her belly. And you stand there and smile at her?" Veris' face darkened with his building fury. Brody gripped Veris' arm.

to know the symptoms. She bears a

"What is there to prejudge?" Veris snarled. He turned his back on Taylor. "You are not able to

"You cannot pre-judge this—"

plant the seed in her. *Ergo* she is a whoring wife."

Taylor winced. In this day and age, wayward wives were dealt

age, wayward wives were dealt with severely. Veris carried the full prejudices of the period. The double standard was typical. He didn't mind that she slept with

Brody dropped his hand. "And what do you suggest I do with her?" he asked.

him. But another man...

her and the bastard she carries," Veris replied coldly, crossing his arms.

"Behead her and be done with

Taylor drew in a shuddering breath.

Brody nodded, as if he were

Brody nodded, as if he were considering the matter. "Perhaps you would like to do the deed, Veris?"

Veris?"

Veris' arms loosened. Slipped a little. Brody had surprised him.
"I?" he asked.

Brody shrugged. "Certainly. You feel she is of little benefit to either you or I. Why not?"

Veris glanced over his

shoulder at Taylor. She held her breath, realizing what Brody was setting him up for.

Veris cleared his throat. "If you insist. I can take care of the matter."

Brody nodded. "Then know this, Veris. When you kill her, you will be killing your own unborn child at the same time."

Veris whirled to look at Taylor again, shock skittering over his face. "Not possible..." he croaked. But

in his eyes—hope, fear, joy—that he already believed it in his heart even if his mind needed dates, data, explanations.

she could see from the expression

Taylor nodded. "You aren't used to thinking about time the way we are, yet. When I was in old Norway with you was six hundred years ago on your personal timeline. It was only six weeks ago

for me. Back then, you were human."

Veris sank down onto his knees in front of her. His big hands hovered over her abdomen, as if he were afraid of hurting her. "Mine?"

He wore an odd little smile. He had hit Veris over the head with this, but the impact had splashed across Brody, too.

Taylor glanced up at Brody.

Veris lifted his gaze to her face. "How can I take back what I just said?" he whispered. "Everything you have done since

you arrived here has proved over

and over that I am a fool to resist opening my life and my arms to you...and now this. Do you know how great a gift this is, Taylor Yates? How much our kind yearn

for this after a century or two, if we have a shred of humanity left in us at all?"

She stroked his face. "I love you too, Veris."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Love is too simple for what I feel," he breathed.

Brody rested his hand on Veris' shoulder. "Try kissing her instead," he suggested. "She won't break."

Veris laughed and swept Taylor up off the seat in a move that made her dizzy with its speed and power, his arms around her in a bear hug. He held her up easily in his arms. And he kissed her.

This time, Taylor could sense

that he had to give, that he could not find the words to describe.

It was all there. Breathed into her.

Taylor wrapped her arms around him and clung for dear life. She could feel her body grow warmer as the kiss lengthened and

the hunger for Brody and Veris which never seemed to fully slumber wakened to full roaring

She moaned and thrust her

need.

the difference in his kiss. Veris was holding nothing back. Everything was in his kiss. All his emotions. His heart and soul. His love. All pressing herself against him.

Veris broke the kiss to look at her. "Now?"

"Is it not the lady's task to

hand into Veris' hair and her tongue into his mouth. She brought her leg up around his waist,

send her men off to war with a proper farewell?"

Brody cupped her chin in his

hand and turned her face to his. "Now," he confirmed and kissed her. His kiss was heated, full of promise and pressure. Taylor

gasped when he let her go.

Veris pulled her face back to him. "Yes, now," he agreed, his

pushed into her mouth, stroking hers. She could feel his canines just above the line of his teeth, slightly lowered.

And pressed between them, his cock, a thick hard line, making the chainmail lift awkwardly.

voice low and hungry. He kissed her again. This time, his hand held her head steady and his tongue

Brody was unfastening the buckles on Veris' shoulder as they kissed. Taylor's mind leapt on to an image of Veris naked and her heart thudded. She pulled her mouth from Veris with a gasp and lowered

herself to the ground, bringing her

tackle the buckles there."What about you?" Veris asked of Brody."I wear no mail," Brody pointed out. "Nor does Taylor. And we are both wearing far less

hands to his other shoulder to

clothing than you to begin with."

"I had noticed that habit of yours for wearing less than... normal," Veris murmured, standing

still between them as they swiftly rid him of the hauberk. "It is intriguing."

They lifted the hauberk away, then the undershirt. Without

pausing or speaking, they

enjoyed the undivided attention. His cock stood up straight and stiff from between his well-muscled thighs. Taylor stroked it and smiled

when Veris hissed and his cock twitched. So she continued to stroke, her fingertips gliding over the soft ridge of tissue, until Veris snatched at her wrist. "Enough," he

It was patently clear he

continued to strip Veris of the remainder of his clothing, until he

stood nude between them.

warned with a growl. "Or you will have this end before it begins." She looked him in the eye. "We have hours yet. You can come more than once before you leave to fight the Fatimids. I want a proper farewell."

Veris' eyes widened. He

looked at Brody.

Brody just laughed. "These matters are spoken of more openly

in our time." He moved next to Taylor and she saw that he was naked. While she had been teasing Veris, he had undressed. Veris would have been able to see Brody do that while she had been stroking him.

She hid her smile as an idea occurred to her. Veris was still holding her wrist, keeping her

hold on her wrist.

Instead, she took off her clothes, keeping her gaze on Veris' face. She turned it into the most provocative, sensual striptease she could manage, given that she was wearing medieval menswear. But

the leggings were a vague substitute for stockings and her hair was a feminine atomic bomb. While Brody stood behind Veris and

hand away from his cock. So she picked up Brody's hand with her other hand and brought it to Veris' cock instead. "As I am not permitted," she said and stepped back a pace from Veris, breaking his

two watched her unbraid her hair and run her fingers through it with utter fascination. She let it stream over her shoulders and down her back and heard Brody sigh. Taylor deliberately ran her hands over her body, staring Veris

in the eye. "If I cannot touch you, I

slowly stroked his cock, his other arm locked over Veris' shoulder. Veris bucked and writhed and the

guess..." She let her hand creep down toward her clit. Veris surged toward her with a sound that was half growl, half roar, breaking out of Brody's grip on him. "Taylor, take pity on him," he said as Veris yet again swept her off her feet. "He's not used to you at full strength."

Brody gave a half-laugh.

Veris pushed aside the curtain

that divided the tent and dumped her on her back on the high mattress of her bed. "I will by God get used to you at full strength," he

declared, separating her thighs. He pulled her closer to the edge of the bed, his hands under her butt, his

arms flexing. "Do that again," he said hoarsely. "What you were going to do just then. Do it for me."

Brody stepped to his side.

hoarse with arousal. His cock was thick and pulsing. Taylor cupped her breasts, her heart raging, as she watched them

"And me," he added, his voice

gaze at her with such peculiar intensity. It made her pussy and clit pulse with hot eagerness to know she had such power over them.

She pulled at her nipples and sucked in her breath, her hips lifting, as the little pleasure arrowed straight to her clit.

Then she laid her hand flat on

her stomach and pushed it down to her cleft. Even she could feel the heat generated from between her between her legs, the slickness and amount of moisture was a surprise to her. She had rarely reached this level of wetness so quickly.

As soon as she pressed her

legs. When she slipped her hand

she was far too close to coming to do much more than that. Her hips bucked and a shiver ran through her. "Oh God..." she breathed. So

finger up against her clit, she knew

much for the great tease.

"I cannot stand it," Veris muttered. He gripped her hips and pushed his cock into her.

"That is a game two can play."

"That is a game two can play," Brody said. He pushed on Veris' hand gripped his shoulder.

Taylor knew Brody had taken
Veris from behind. Just the mental
image, from memories of hundreds
of other occasions, was enough to

raise her pulse even higher and send a cascade of excitement racing through her. She suddenly wished for a mirror, or her special bedroom

shoulder, bending him forward and stepped behind him. Veris' eyes closed and he groaned as Brody's

back home with its multitude of mirrors for occasions such as this. "Harder," she urged Veris. "Faster." Her climax was starting to wash over her, pushed there by the stimulation. She massaged her clit, but the sensitive bud was engorged to the point of painfulness. A gentle touch was all it took.

She arched, crying out her pleasure as her climax broke over

twin tides of memory and

her. She felt Veris' hand on her breast, his cock pounding into her, his gasping shout as he came.

Brody groaned, pumping into Veris in long hard pistoning

Brody groaned, pumping into Veris in long, hard, pistoning strokes. It took him longer, but he threw his head back and growled, his canines showing, as he came in hard, working thrusts that made Veris gasp and push deeper into Then Brody released Veris and fell upon the bed next to Taylor, one knee up in the air.

Taylor.

Veris lifted Taylor up and placed her more securely on the bed, then sat on her other side. He let his fingers drift over her body in

a way that made her nerves twitch and sizzle but not enough to arouse. Not yet, anyway. He

seemed fascinated with her body.

But then, Veris always was.

"I will need to feed soon," he

said. "Certainly, before dawn. It has been a busy few days." Taylor glanced at Brody, who slightly later, depending on which timeframe we're using. But definitely, by now, I should be feeling the call one way or another."

Veris was frowning, too, his

frowned and shook his head. "Not me. I'm fine. That's odd. Technically, I should need to feed slightly sooner than Veris. Or

lips moving. Then he shook his head. "Am I dead in your time?" he asked.

Taylor's "No!" was half-formed before Brody squeezed her

wrist. "Why do you ask that?" Brody you?" Veris demanded. "The only reason I can think of is that something happened to me to prevent me from coming here. I would have to be the gods' court jester to voluntarily stay away from the pair of you. *Ergo*, something

"Why didn't I come back with

said.

nothing short of death would keep me from you."

Taylor sought Brody's hand and held it.

happened to keep me away." He looked grim. "I'd like to think

"We can't tell you about your future," Brody said, sitting up. Even

hated this as much as she did. Veris shook his head. "Tell me that I will at least live long enough

to Taylor it sounded weak. Brody

Brody shook his head. "I can't," he said bleakly. "Not because I won't, but because I don't

to see my child."

know." Veris gave a soft, painful sound.

Taylor covered her eyes to hide her tears. "We don't know

how we're changing the future, Väinä," she said. "We've tried to

minimize it. Fix it. But we don't know what we've done while we've undone the damage we've known about. We don't know what we're going to find when we get back. For us the future is just as blank as for you, now." She reached for Veris' hand. "And I'm scared." He squeezed it. Brody cleared his throat. "If... when we go, Taylor will be here no longer."

Veris looked up, his eyes narrowing. "We've spoken of this already. You won't remember me. Not like this."

"Yes, I know. What I haven't told you about is that there's a

details in it that only I could possibly know about. Give it to me. When I read it, I'll know that only I could have written it. It will help you convince me of these days."

Veris lifted Taylor's hand to his lips and kissed it. "You two are preparing to leave."

"We're trying to minimize the

letter in my chest over there. A letter from me, to me. There's

"We're trying to minimize the damage our departure will make," Taylor told him. "Last time, when I left, I scarred your life in a way that six hundred years later, it was still affecting you. We're trying to make sure that doesn't happen again.

and Brody, who will have no memory of the time we were here —can deal with the aftereffects."

"We don't know when we get to leave," Brody added. "But we've never lingered in a time not our

own for this long. We think it will be soon and we have to work on

We're trying to make sure you -

the assumption that it will happen at any time."

Veris frowned again, staring down at the white coverlet on the bed. His lips were moving again. "Can you hear that music?" he asked. He lifted his gaze to meet

theirs.

Brody shook his head. "What music?"

Veris' frown deepened.

"Listen!" He cocked his head, narrowing his eyes to hear better.

Taylor strained to listen, but

"And words..." he murmured. "Strange ones."

all she could hear beyond the tent was snoring and the crackle of campfires and the odd murmur of men. Horses snorting. And far off, the night winds of the desert. Strange cries of night prayers from

the eastern religions.

No music.
"Can you sing the words?"

"You are the singer," Veris muttered.

"As well as you can, then," Brody coaxed.

Brody asked.

"They're a language I don't know." Veris closed his eyes, concentrating. The frown smoothed out. His lips moved as he listened

to the far off music. Taylor realized that with his vampire senses he would be able to detect something far out of her range. So she lay as silently as she could and waited.

Finally, he sang-chanted softly in English, the words ill-formed and stilted: "...I can take you

higher...I'm on fire..."

"Fuck me!" Brody said, sitting bolt upright.

"That's Bruce Springsteen,"

Taylor whispered.

Veris opened his eyes, looking at them. "What is it?"

Taylor licked her lips. She didn't know what to say. So she settled for the truth. "I don't know

how you can be hearing that music, Veris. It's impossible. You simply can't be. It hasn't been written yet.

It's from our time."

"If it's impossible, then why am I hearing it, then?" Brody asked softly. He was breathing hard. He

Taylor reached for Veris, fright tearing through her, as the distinct beat of Springsteen's '80s

reached for Veris' hand. "I think..."

hit echoed in her mind. "No! Not vet!"

Veris gathered her up against his chest, his lips against hers. "Stay with me. Stay forever. Please...

Brody!"

Chapter Sixteen

The Present

screaming at the top of his lungs about freight trains in his head, which Taylor could fully appreciate right then. It felt like a whole friggin' rail yard was using her

Bruce Springsteen

backward and forward over her brain cells for the hell of it. "Come on, Taylor, open your eyes, damn it. Let me see them."

brain as parking space, running

The light wouldn't go away,

which was worse. She tried to push it away, but it persisted. Finally, she gave up and

opened her eyes. Bad mistake. "Sick," she croaked. That was all the warning she could give. She

tried to turn her head. She was lifted and turned and held expertly and a bucket slid underneath her to catch what she brought up, which

wasn't much. When she was

finished, she was laid back on something soft. Finally, she could see without

being blinded by the low light in the room. She recognized the ceiling. It was the guest room in her house. Their house. Almost afraid to look, she

turned her head to take in the rest of the room. She was lying on one of the guest beds, an IV drip in her arm, the pole next to her bed.

Brody lay on the other bed, an IV pole and a blood bag on his. He was slowly blinking up at the

was slowly blinking up at the ceiling.

Veris sat on a chair between

them. He was rolling up a blood pressure cuff and had a stethoscope around his neck. But he was wearing the college professor suit pants and shirt he would have worn in Europe and he looked like he had been wearing them for days. They had deep wrinkles embedded in them. The shirt was rolled up to

the elbows and open at the collar.

He looked as haggard as
Taylor had ever seen him.

She began to cry, unable to help herself.
Brody yanked his IV out,

Brody yanked his IV out, hauled himself to the side of the bed and threw his arms around Veris' shoulders and buried his face

against his neck. Fine shudders and ripples passed through his body.

Veris tried to hug Brody, but his arms were trapped. So he

Brody finally sat back and pushed his hand through his hair and twisted it back off his

waited

shoulders. "I stopped needing to feed about two days ago. That's when you got back here, yes?" Veris nodded. He reached for

Taylor's hand, gently withdrew the IV and held it, his fingers stroking hers. "I can't even tell you why in realistic terms. Something just told me I had to come back. I chartered a flight and arrived back and found you both in the library. Taylor was bleeding all over the floor from a

deep cut on the shoulder." Veris

deep breath. "I've been too busy tending you to review my history and for all I knew you were back somewhere in Brody's timeline. God knows, that was violent enough." He took off the stethoscope and loosened another button. "So where were you?" Taylor glanced at Brody. She tried to sit up and found herself surprisingly weak. "Take it easy," Veris told her. "You've been without food for

shut his eyes and shook his head for a second. "I've never had my heart stop by itself...until now." He opened his eyes again and drew a thumb and sat on the edge of her bed and looked at Brody. "Brace yourself," Brody told Veris. Veris lifted a brow.

simply. "The first siege. Review your memories. You'll find all you know about what happened has

"Jerusalem," Brody said

days." He helped her sit up and propped her against the headboard. He wiped her tears away with his

changed, now, from the moment we met."

Veris frowned, his focus turning inward.

Taylor glanced at Brody again.

But it was the most efficient way, certainly. His own memories were the most accurate way of telling him what had happened. Veris' breath halted. "Davina..." he breathed. "Dear God." His eyes closed and his breathing began again, more quickly this time, as he worked his way through the four days they had spent in 1099 and their combined seduction of a changed Veris. His head slowly bowed as he

realized just how close he had come

She wondered if this was the best and kindest way for Veris to discover what had happened there. "No," he muttered thickly. Then he jerked his head up to look at Taylor. "A child? You're pregnant?" She nodded. "I was gone. I had gone away," he said helplessly. "I know," she said simply. "In my arrogance..." He bent over again, clutching the arm of the chair, his knuckles white with the

power of his grip. His shoulders

with sheer force, one after another,

Brody detached Veris' hands

bowed, shaking.

to destroying his own future. He pressed his fingers to his head, hunched over, as if he were in pain.

then wrapped his arms around the bigger man.

Veris tried to turn his head

away, but Brody caught his face in

one hand and held it steady.

Veris opened his eyes. Tears, slightly pink, glittered and then

fell. "It hurts. This hurts more than anything I know."

"I know, my lover," Brody

murmured. He held his hand out to Taylor. "But you don't have to hurt on your own."

Taylor worked her way across

the bed using Brody's strength and wrapped herself around Veris. His big hand found hers in a painful He laid his head against Brody's chest and wept.

* * * * *

siege, from complications from the wound you got from the spear you took protecting Sir William," Brody murmured, flipping through a dog-

"You 'died' a few days after the

eared, year-old National Geographic. He was wearing one-way wraparound sunglasses, a long trench coat and his hair was tied back. Even so, Taylor had a sinking feeling the medical receptionist had recognized him, because she was

staring at him almost nonstop.

and grimaced. "Forty minutes he's kept us waiting. This is ridiculous, Taylor. You're a woman of means. You don't have to be kept standing in line like this. I'm not surprised the prick gave you the run around

Veris glanced at his Tag Heuer

the prick gave you the run around last time. He doesn't seem to give a damn about his patients at all."

She squirmed at the reminder.
"The reception area doesn't really look quite the same, though. More

changes?" she asked.

They had been discovering all sorts of small and large changes in their world the last four days. The car that Taylor drove was now a

There were small changes to the layout of the house, the clothes she wore, the people she worked with and her own personal memories.

Brody and Veris had been

Porsche, not the Audi she'd had before. She discovered that she loved driving it and was good at it, too, although both Veris and Brody hated seeing her behind the wheel.

their own personal memories and discovering the changes that had taken place. So far, nothing earthshattering had been uncovered. Most of it had been interesting,

systematically working through

called. "Dr. Cruz will see you now."
She waved from the desk toward the door where, presumably, the doctor's office was.

They all stood up.

"I'm sorry, only your husband is permitted to accompany you in

Doctor's office for the consultation," the receptionist said

"Ms. Taylor?" the receptionist

though.

primly.

Taylor looked her in the eye.

"They are my husbands," she said
flatly.

The receptionist's mouth opened as her jaw descended.

Veris. "Come on." She stalked over to the door marked "Dr. Cruz," her temper already simmering.

Taylor looked at Brody and

When they got inside the consultation room, Brody kissed her cheek soundly. "Damn, I love you, woman."

Veris crossed his arms. "Just

mind her claws there. She's ready to bite."

"Hell, yeah," she growled.
"I'll abide by common sense rules, but being dictated to by a star-

pisses me off."

"Tell us something we don't

struck teenager quoting 'da rulz'

know," Brody suggested. He leaned a shoulder against the wall. "Figure we have another forty minutes in here now?" He dropped his sunglasses to the edge of his nose and looked at her over the end of them. "Your blonde-model fucking doctor is not endearing himself." "Not with me, either," Taylor admitted "Then why are we here?" Veris asked. "Now? To make a point," Taylor told him. Veris smiled. "How much of a point can we make?"

"Just don't be cruel."

"Moi?" He touched his chest. Brody straightened up, pulled the band out of his hair and put away his sunglasses. He dropped

the coat off his shoulders. Underneath, he wore outrageous death metal band clothing—low-rise skinny jeans, ripped in several

places. Two tee shirts in different colors, also with designer rips and tears and chains, and the band's logo in pitted and rubbed iron hanging from his neck. Leather cuffs around his wrists were studded with iron. Neither tee shirt had sleeves, which emphasized his nicely muscled arms. His black eyes

everything and everyone.

He was the complete antithesis to Veris, who wore a silk,

dark-gray business suit that

and brows seemed to scowl at

gleamed with polish, good taste and obscene expense. His blonde hair was pulled back into a neat little band at the back and his blue

little band at the back and his blue eyes radiated power and blazing intelligence.

Taylor looked down at her

pleated skirt, stilettos and stockings. The skirt came to her knees, the stilettos were a conservative three inches high. She wore a cardigan, buttoned up, in

and the gray in the tartan of the skirt. She wouldn't raise browse in the middle of the street like Dr. Edward Cruz's blonde did. But one of the changes that had taken place when they got back was her hair. It was down to her waist now-full, thick and with bangs cut to fall over one eye. She wore it loose as often as was practical and was rewarded by Veris and Brody plunging their hands into it and turning her head for a kiss and more, or simply just

dove gray, that matched her eyes

playing with it.

Under the skirt she wore a garter belt to hold up the stockings

Veris had discovered that new habit they had driven her mad with delight with their habit of running their hands up under her skirt, or simply throwing her over their knee and flipping her skirt up... She had Brody to thank for that inspiration. "Should we sit down?" she suggested. "No, I don't think so," Brody

and nothing else. When Brody and

said.

There was a sound outside the office. Voices talking. "The receptionist," Veris said softly.

"You've been recognized, Brody."

"That'll work for us now," Brody said. The door opened and Dr.

Edward Cruz sailed into the room, only to be brought up short by the fact that Brody and Veris weren't tucked in neat and tidy into the two miniature consultation chairs

sitting in front of the desk. Cruz almost ran into them and stepped back a half a step, looking up at them.

Cruz was a much different

Cruz was a much different man from the cocky, suave doctor Taylor had consulted ten days ago. He looked at least ten years older, although that wasn't possible. The there before and dark rings under his eyes. He wore a wedding ring Taylor hadn't noticed before. His clothing was department store cheap, the striped shirt

straining at the buttons, to cover the excess bulge around his belly.

Cruz pulled his white coat in

thirty or forty extra pounds he carried could account for him looking older. Stress and unhealthy living would claim the rest. He had silver in his hair that hadn't been

Brody, then up higher at Veris. "I... er..." He looked at Taylor. "Ms. Yates, I only need you and your

around himself, glancing up at

"These are my husbands," Taylor said. "Brody Gallagher and Professor Veris Gerhardsson." Brody was the one who held

husband for this consult."

out his hand. Veris crossed his arms.

Cruz nervously shook Brody's hand, then smoothed down his tie and moved around to his side of the desk. "Would you like to sit

down?"

"There's not enough seats,"
Brody pointed out. "We'll stand."

Cruz put down the file he was carrying and glanced at Brody. "My receptionist says that you are in a

ten foot barge pole. Nocturnal Rain does death metal." Cruz cleared his throat. "I see." He turned his attention to Veris. "And are you the Gerhardsson who wrote the paper about the preservation of the Latin language as the language of sciences until the nineteenth century and its contribution to

wouldn't touch rock music with a

"Fuck that," Brody said. "I

rock band, Mr. Gallagher."

Cruz shifted his gaze from Brody to Veris and back. Taylor

"I am," Veris replied calmly.

medical nomenclature?"

with both of them at once.

Brody straightened his shoulders, pushed his hand through his hair, and twisted it back off his shoulders. "Dr. Cruz, you have been in your office for two and a

half minutes and so far you have failed to address any direct medical concerns about your patient at all.

knew he was trying to assimilate the differences between the two and how Taylor could possibly be

Instead you have quizzed me and Professor Gerhardsson on our resumes. Added to that, the fortyminute wait in your reception area, which was neither necessary, nor member of the medical profession. I will be reporting it to the California State Medical Board." Cruz paled. Veris grinned. "Isn't Percy Brown the Chair of the Board there? I was part of the hearing when he defended his professorial thesis at UCLA. We go back a long way, Percy and I." He winked at Cruz. "You might want to add that to your resume check." He picked up Taylor's hand. "Let's go,

Brody pulled out his cell

Taylor."

apologized for. I find this utterly

unacceptable behavior for

makes house calls and he knows how to be on time, too." Cruz stood up as they turned to leave. "I think there has been a

phone. "Yes, I've got someone much more suitable in mind. He

misunderstanding!"

Taylor looked at him over her shoulder. "Yep, you did get it wrong." She shut the door after them.

* * * *

For the first time in weeks, the weather had broken and that night, it was cool enough to light a fire,

it was cool enough to light a fire, although it wasn't cold enough to huddle by it. The firelight was just

decorative, lending ambience to the downstairs level of the library.

Taylor sat on the Craftsman

chair watching the flames, wondering what on earth Brody was up to. He had made her dress up, even picking out the white dress Now she sat here alone

dress. Now she sat here alone.

She heard voices and looked up as Brody and Veris came downstairs, arguing. Not

strenuously. Not seriously. But Brody was forcing some sort of issue that Veris didn't like. Brody had been doing that a

lot, lately, she realized.

"Just shut up and get in

A long moment of silence, while Taylor's heart thundered. She sat up straight, watching the doorway.

Veris finally appeared, Brody

there," Brody finally said, exasperated. "She's waiting for

vou."

behind him, carrying a tray with a bottle of champagne and an ice bucket.

The champagne and ice

bucket and her white dress told her what this was. Brody was recreating her birthday, three months ago. Before

everything had changed. Before she

had destroyed it all by making that awful, fateful request of Veris.
Only, why? What was Brody doing?

Taylor clasped her hands between her knees and remained silent. Veris, wearing the more

casual black leather pants and sleeveless white shirt she preferred than the professor outfits he wore in public, pulled the other matching chair over close by her.

in public, pulled the other matching chair over close by her.

Brody put the champagne on the table next to Taylor. As neither of them could drink the stuff it was a symbolic ritual to open the bottle and pour glasses. But Veris loved

maintained, especially around Taylor. So they had opened the bottle for her birthday. Now, even Taylor could not drink it. Brody pulled up a third chair from across the room and settled into it after handing them all a frosty tall glass. Veris took breath. And another. "This is to be your birthday present. The one we failed

the symbol and the smell. He insisted the human ritual be

She nodded. "I gathered."
His gaze skittered away from
her face and came back. "Brody

insists you need to know this. I...

to give you."

think otherwise."

"Or your courage would have you wish otherwise," Brody said.

Veris twirled the champagne

in his glass. "Yes," he said flatly. "I do not deal well with...these matters. Not when they are

unhappy ones." He held up the flute. "I would give anything to be

able to drink this. Dutch courage."
He put it on the table with a grimace.

Taylor swallowed. "You don't

have to do this, if it makes you feel this bad—"

"Yes, he does," Brody interrupted. "We've shielded him long enough. We've read his mind, interpreted, made allowances, stepped around him and tried to understand him long enough. It's time he met us halfway. It's time. He left you weeping in that chair and fled to Europe to sulk because you asked for a favor. A favor." He put his glass down. "Veris, you have to tell her why. She needs to really understand. She stepped in front of a stake for you, she killed Davina for you. She's going to be the mother of your child. Our child." He paused. "I still have trouble believing that one," he murmured and shook his head. "All that and you're going to baulk over revealing a few ugly truths about your ugly nature?"

Veris' chest lifted as he drew a breath. "Put like that..."

Brody sat back in his chair.

Veris let out his breath again, studying Taylor. "It's still difficult,"

he confessed. "Made harder, now I

know I left you crying that night." He rubbed his temple. "You shocked me, asking to be turned. I wasn't ready for it. I didn't think you would ask for years yet. Not

until you noticed your first gray hairs and your metabolism started to slow. I was so sure of it, I had we were in old Norway and you were so happy to be human. So in love with the pleasures of it. I said something about the compensations of immortality. I don't quite remember what I said, but I remember exactly what you said. It is carved on my heart. You said 'You think watching those you love age and die isn't a high enough price?"" Brody swore softly.

Veris closed his eyes.

Taylor could feel her tears

completely relaxed." He sighed.

"You did," Taylor said. "When

"What made you ask?"

could do about them now. She had to keep going. "We keep time jumping and living this dangerous life and just being human is dangerous enough these days. Disease and crime and heaven knows what. You two are impervious to it all. Do you spend your time worry about if I'm going to come home in a body bag each day? If you're going to get a call from the police about how I got mugged? That I was in an accident? Or I get the bad news from the oncology department about some rapidly spreading cancer? A brain

building, but there was nothing she

"I suddenly realized that you two must live with those fears about me every day. So I thought I would take that fear away from you. Forever. If I was vampire, if you turned me, then you wouldn't have

to worry anymore."

embolism and you can't reach me in time to do anything about it? A stroke?" She wiped her cheeks dry.

and pressed her hands between her knees. "I didn't get the reaction I was expecting when I asked to be turned." She shrugged. Veris leaned forward, his hands together, his index fingers

She put her glass on the table

turned anyone. I'm not sure that I could. It would mean taking away your humanity to do it."

"But you have taken so many lives," Taylor said.

just touching his lips. "I've never

"In battle, yes. In defense. I have never drained a human life as a vampire, watched their life fade in their eyes, made them drink my blood and seen them waken as one of my kind, where all humanity is

gone and they go on changeless, timeless and eternal." Veris shook his head. "Live life as a vampire long enough and you begin to find humanity a precious thing. I have

possible. To be alive, vital, free to live and die. Not trapped outside time like Brody and I are."

"Well, for at least seven months, I will have to be."

Veris smiled. "And at least another six after that."

selfishly enjoyed yours. I want you to stay human for as long as

feeding. Of course, you will want to do it all properly."

"Of course!" Veris said. "It's life! That's my whole point. In the four years we've been together, I've watched you change. Actually

change. Brody and I cannot do that.

Taylor shook her head. "Breast

your face has developed small lines. Especially around the eyes and the corners of your mouth. You've put on weight around your breasts and

Your hair...your beautiful hair. And

hips."

"Mmm..." Brody agreed with an appreciative growl.

Taylor glanced at him,

startled.

"After the baby is born, your hips will spread, too," Veris told

her. "Not fat, but the actual bones. But even a few pounds may creep on, despite all the exercise and sex

you manage to sneak into your day.
I will enjoy every tiny change,

human. It's something that Brody and I have not been able to share with anyone, ever. You asked to take that away from me, from both of us."

Taylor sat back. "I...hadn't

because that's what it means to be

seen it that way," she said softly.

"The worst of it," Veris said,
"Is that if I had managed to
overcome my prejudices and
turned you on your birthday when
you had asked, then you would
have been protected while you

have been protected while you were in Jerusalem with Brody and I would not have raced home from Europe to find you bleeding all

over the floor." He grimaced. "You would have been protected and the baby lost to us."

He picked up her hand and

kissed the knuckles. "You are mine, Maggie Taylor Yates." Brody picked up her other

hand. "And mine." He slid his lips

across her fingers, a delicate nuzzle. "We've marked you in a way that makes you ours forever." He

touched her neck. "No one in our world will ever dispute that. But we aren't interested in the politics of our world and never have been. You've brought us back into the

human world. You've given us life

opened it. A ring was nestled inside. "Stay human, Taylor. For a while longer, anyway. We will do everything in our power to protect you and the babe. Please say you will." He slipped the ring onto her left hand. It was a left-handed swirl of green stones. Emeralds, Taylor assumed.

again." He reached into his pocket and brought out a small box and

can, at your side," Veris said, taking her hand from Brody's. He placed an identical box on the table and slipped a similar ring onto her hand, only the swirl was to the

"Let us be as human as we

swirls locked together like yin and yang curves. Taylor caught her breath. The arrangement looked like one elaborate engagement ring. It was gorgeous.

"Of course I will," she

right and the stones were blue. Sapphires, almost the same color as Veris' eyes. He brought the rings together and twisted them. The

Although how on earth am I going to marry both of you?"

"We'll figure it out," Brody told her. "Sooner or later. Boy genius there has been thinking about it." He lifted Taylor up and

whispered. "How could I not?

future Mrs. Gallagher-Gerhardsson." "What if I want to keep my name?" she asked primly. Brody blinked. "I'll still love you?" She smiled. "Good answer." She kissed him. "Hey, my turn," Veris complained as Brody's hand slid under the hem of her dress and the kiss grew slow, hot and sweaty. Taylor was passed over to Veris. "Hi," she said, her voice thick. "That's a habit you really need

put her on his knee. "I love you, the

to keep up," Brody said approvingly. "I so like that. Jerusalem, right?" "Mmm," she agreed, pressing her lips up against Veris'. "What is he talking about?" Veris asked, his big hand curling her thigh and sliding up under her dress. He pushed higher and higher until he reached her hip, then her ass and found...nothing. His thumb pressed into her naked abdomen and her hip tilted forward in a twitch of nerves. He curved his hand around to cup her ass, his fingertips pressing into the crease of her ass.

"I see," he breathed into her mouth. "So do I," Brody murmured.

"The view from here is spectacular."

The front doorbell chimed.
"Damn, it's nine already?"
Brody complained, standing up.

"This shouldn't take too long, then I'm definitely picking this conversation up where we're leaving it." He kissed Taylor's hand again and went through to the

again and went through to the front door, heading off the maid and answering it himself.

"Another surprise?" Taylor asked Veris, returning to her chair

"This one is all Brody's," Veris replied, easing the front of his pants. "I hope he means it when he

and straightening up her dress.

says it won't take long." He stood up. "I find most of Brody's surprises less than comfortable."

"Baby." Taylor teased him

"Baby," Taylor teased him.
But Veris was already concentrating on sounds coming from the front door, listening to

more than she could hear. His brow lifted. "Son of a..." He laughed and looked at Taylor. "You'll like this." He relaxed and crossed his arms.

About forty seconds later, Brody reappeared, followed by a

suit, carrying a heavy briefcase. The man was familiar... "Alexander!" Taylor

tall, olive skinned man in a good

scrambled to her feet, shock delaying her. Veris helped her up.

Brody led Alexander forward, a hand on his arm. "You remember

Taylor, of course. Our fiancé, Maggie Taylor Yates. Taylor of course remembers you. For her it was only a week ago. Taylor,

Alexander is now Dr. Alexander Karim."

Alexander shook her hand.
"Naila Fathiyya I remember you

"Naila Fathiyya, I remember you most fondly. You changed my life and are the reason I stand here at this moment." Taylor felt her hand fall back

to her side. "I…really?"
Brody laughed. "You might

have built up to it, Alex." He rested his hand on Veris' shoulder. "My partner, Veris Gerhardsson. You

"Yes, of course. Veris. Well met." Alexander held out his hand. "You were the other reason I am

remember him as William, or Will."

here."

Veris lifted his brow as he shook Alexander's hand. "Is that so?"

Alexander smiled, showing

the relationship between you, when Taylor 'died', but then neither of you seemed to mourn her properly. Then there was all the confusion about Lady Selkirk's death. I heard some strange whispers that Taylor herself had killed Selkirk's wife. After the siege was over it became hard to track down facts. It took me years." "But you did," Brody concluded. "And you confronted me with them." "You didn't tell me any of this," Veris accused.

very white, even teeth. "All three of you. I nearly had it figured out,

Richard at the time. Getting killed, as I remember. You were back in Italy. Alexander found me at Acre. He was vampire by then." "It was the three of you who started me on the road to finding vampires in the first place," Alexander explained. "You gave me hope that one day I might once again practice medicine. Real medicine. And now I am." "Which is why he is here, in part," Brody explained. Alexander nodded. He reached into the briefcase and produced a card, which he held out

"I was the Holy Land with

to Taylor. "I am a most sought-after private physician now. One that the stars pay a small fortune to have call upon them. Their fees allow me to do my research and add certain special clients to my roster. I would be honored to add you to my list of patients, as I have already treated you and know part of your history." He smiled. "How is the arm, by the way?" "Fine," Taylor said. "Nearly perfectly healed already." "These days I would use anesthetic and sutures. You were desperately trying to wish yourself back to a simple emergency room Taylor nodded. "But you did well, all the same."

"I can call upon you tomorrow, with a nurse and mobile ultrasound scanning equipment. What is a good time for you?"

"Ten thirty would be good."

Alexander nodded. "Ten

for that, weren't you?" He laughed.

everyone. I'll leave you to your celebrations. Brody told me the good news. Congratulations, all of you." He lifted a book out of his bag and laid it on the table. "For

thirty it is. Good night, then,

you, Taylor." "I'll see you out," Brody

Alexander nodded at Veris and followed Brody from the room.

murmured.

Veris picked up the book and read the title. "Son of a bitch," he said and gave it to Taylor.

She looked at the grainy sepia-styled map on the front, which showed a copy of the old

walled city of Jerusalem underneath the large typeface of the title.

Warrior Wives: The Mysterious Women of the First

Crusade who fought, lived and disappeared from the history books -Naila Fathiyya, Davina of Selkirk, The author was Alexander Karim.

Tyra of Norwich.

"If he knows you killed Davina, then this is a tribute to you," Veris said, tapping the book.

Taylor put the book down and

shivered. "I didn't do anything to impress him that much," she said.

"You impressed me enough to make me change houses, shields and give up a bad habit that had been slowly killing me for seventy years," Veris pointed out. "And you

years," Veris pointed out. "And you did it in four days."

"But you already loved me,"

Taylor pointed out.

Brody's slutty wife and human at that. And you were in my way." She shivered again, staring at him. "What changed your mind?" she whispered, stunned. Veris drew her into his arms and tilted her head back to look up at him. "You did. You and Brody." Taylor felt Brody press up against her from behind. His arms hooked around Veris' neck. "Me and Taylor what?" "Seduced me across time,"

Veris replied. "And saved my life while you were at it." He kissed

"I had no idea who you

were," Veris said flatly. "You were

cottage high up on the side of the Welsh mountains, the one we used when the War of the Roses was at its peak, remember, Brody? We hid out for five years or so, waiting for the turmoil to die down." "There actually were roses all over it in summer and rose hips in spring." "Keep it in mind, Brody," Veris said. "Summer, roses, heat,

the inside of the cottage." He lifted Taylor's chin again. "You get to take us there. If I'm right, we're the

them both. "I want to try something. I've always wanted to make love to you both in that little get to come and go."

"How?"

"Close your eyes and decide

direction, you're the power. You

to jump. And we jump. Stay in physical contact with her, Brody."

Taylor closed her eyes.

And opened them when the air changed and the sound of doves cooing alerted her.

"No..." she breathed fearfully,

"No..." she breathed fearfully, looking around the small dry stone structure. There was a rough, handhewn, pergola-like lean-to outside the window, covered with roses that provided shade against a

mountains painted the backdrop.

"I'm not wearing a red shirt,"
Brody said.

beautiful, summer-blue sky. Jagged

"Then you'll live long and prosper," Veris replied. Taylor was grabbed and

turned. Brody laughed and kissed her. "You bloody well did it!" Veris swept her off her feet, his arm under her back and her

knees. She was wearing some sort of simple kirtle and chemise and her hair was loose. "Exactly where I wanted you," he muttered. He laid her on the built-in bed, with its pushed-back shutters and shed his

Brody came up behind Veris, brushed past and settled next to Taylor. He undressed her, then

clothing as she lay there and

watched.

himself. "If we really can control the jumps..." he began. "Not now," Veris said firmly. "We'll discuss it later. For now we talk of nothing but love and frailty and all that yucky emotional stuff

and all that yucky emotional stuff that makes us more human." He picked up Taylor's hand, curled it around his hard, erect cock and gave a shuddering gasp at her touch. "I'm ready." Brody groaned as Taylor



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The Kiss Across Time Series Book III

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.

Brody for a drug bust in retribution. The jump sends them back to Brody's personal nightmare: Fifth

While Brody survives as a flogged slave, Taylor masquerades

century Constantinople.

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.... Kiss Across Chains will be

available July 1, 2013

About the Author

paranormal and urban fantasy romances. She has published over 50 novels since 1999, been nominated for five CAPAs including Favorite Author, and won the Emma Darcy Award.

She turned to indie publishing

Tracy Cooper-Posey writes

romantic suspense, hot erotic

She turned to indie publishing in 2011. Her indie titles have been nominated four times for Book Of The Year. She has been a national magazine editor and for a decade

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Other books by Tracy Cooper-Posey

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2010 SECOND EDITION: June 2013 ISBN: 9781927423899 Amazon Edition

FIRST EDITION: November

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