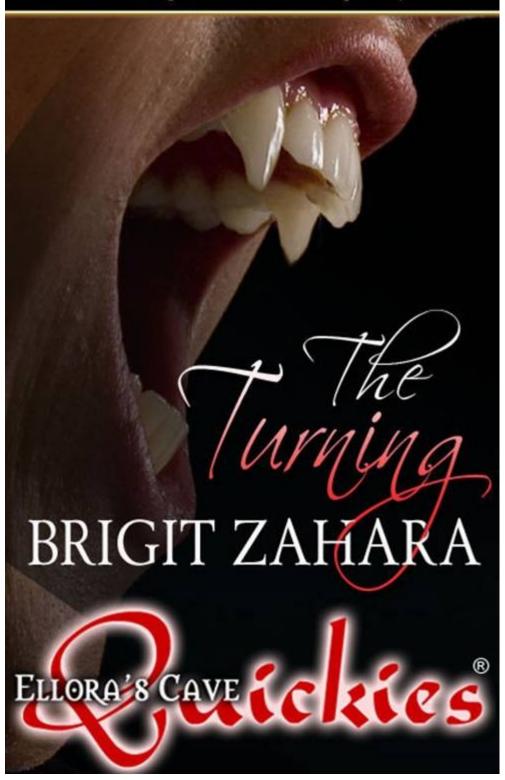
Ellora's Cave Presents



The Turning

Brigit Zahara

Galeria is ready to hit the streets of L.A. for a quick snack. She is a very happy, satisfied woman—having just left her two hot vampire lovers sleeping soundly in her bed.

But their lives weren't always so wonderful, such a long time ago in Rome. Back then Galeria was the emperor's daughter. She wasn't supposed to have a scorching secret affair with the beautiful and passionate Cassian, champion gladiator of Rome. Nor should she have taken comfort in the massive, marble-like arms of Atticus—Cassian's best friend, her night chamber guard and a closet vampire—when informed of Cassian's supposed demise.

Too late, they discover that Cassian lives. Overcome with jealousy, he challenges Atticus to a battle to the death in the arena. Galeria is caught in the middle, tormented by her feelings for these two powerful men. But a mysterious ritual changes all their lives. Forever.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



The Turning

ISBN 9781419927638 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED The Turning Copyright 2010 Brigit Zahara

Edited by Pamela Campbell Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication March 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

THE TURNING

Brigit Zahara

Author Note

This book is a work of fiction. As such, the author took liberties depicting Roman life in 69 BCE.

Chapter One

Los Angeles, CA
Present Day

Galeria awoke as she had for many centuries—lying on her side in a custom-built coffin and feeling one predominant emotion: utter contentment.

Behind her, Atticus was wedged in close, his naked body cozily spooning hers, his arms wrapped loosely about her waist, his face buried in the nape of her neck, his soft snores muffled by her mass of blonde curls. The huge, muscular form of Cassian molded to the front of Galeria's body all the way from her bare breasts down to her pelvis, one of his thick knees enticingly nudged between her thighs, one huge hand resting lightly on the rise of her hip. Murmuring softly, he nuzzled beneath her cheek, brushing her ear, his cool breath making her heart flutter. Wordlessly, Galeria touched his chest, her fingers delicately tracing the numerous raised scars that told the story of their love, the intersecting lines a physical embodiment of their eternal ties.

Closing her eyes, Galeria drew in a long, deep breath—more out of habit than need. Even through the thick steel of the casket's lid, she could feel the warmth of the twilight air, each of her senses permanently intensified by the turning that had taken place so very long ago. Back then she had been the emperor's daughter, Atticus had been her devoted night guard and Cassian had been one of Rome's greatest gladiators.

And her secret lover.

Lightly squeezing one of Atticus' hands and pressing a kiss into the warm bulk of Cassian's shoulder, Galeria disengaged herself from the guys' encompassing embrace, pushed open the lid and jumped lightly to the floor. As night fell, its murky sky smothered the last golden rays of the day, to blanket the city in a dusty navy blue.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw that, still sleeping soundly, neither was alerted to her absence. Normally she would wait until they woke and they would all dine together but tonight she was particularly famished. Deciding to head out for a quick solo bite, Galeria padded quietly over to the dressing area around the corner and began to get ready. She sat before the mirror, brushing her long hair, a happy, satisfied woman.

But none of them had been truly happy, many lifetimes ago in Rome, until something happened and changed the course of all their lives.

Forever.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Rome 69 BCE

Galeria sat at a vanity table in her private chambers staring into the elaborate gilded mirror that graced its center. While still a beautiful woman, the mysterious disorder that had been plaguing her for several weeks was starting to take its toll. Beneath her jade eyes were the beginnings of dark circles, the ghost-like purplish shadows standing out against the flawless ivory hue of her skin. Elsewhere, her creamy flesh was marked by ghastly inexplicable bruises and her already slim body had lost weight, making her look thin and fragile. Certainly, there remained a curvy shape beneath the beautiful toga she wore, her ample breasts and narrow waist made all the more obvious by the gold, braided length of rope that fell from her shoulders to crisscross over her chest and tie just above her hips. But her graceful, bare arms and delicately featured face looked distinctly more slender than usual. To conceal the ravages of the disease—more and more seemingly the same ailment that had taken her mother decades earlier—Galeria covered the telltale marks on her exposed flesh with powder and wrapped a long shawl around her shoulders and upper arms.

Her body, however, was not the only casualty of the sickness. Just as distressing as the changes to her appearance were those to her spirit. Where Galeria had once been filled with exuberance, she now—feeling tired, achy and feverish—was subdued and

listless. This too, she hid as much as possible by feigning her former zeal. She was already of little value to her father, the emperor—a violent bully of a man who had always wanted a son and been bitterly disappointed in her from the moment she was born. If he suspected she was dying, she would be of even less value.

Initially, Galeria had wondered if grief were the culprit behind her deteriorating state. Only weeks earlier she had learned of Cassian's death in the famed Tour of Champions—a traveling fight club of sorts that pitted various countries' best contenders against each other. Cassian the Courageous was one of Rome's greatest gladiators and all of Rome mourned his passing. Galeria herself had been instantly overwhelmed, her anguished sorrow made all the worse because the vast extent of it had to be concealed even more so than her failing health.

Mind you, hiding her feelings for Cassian was nothing new.

From his very first appearance in the gladiatorial arena, Cassian had won the heart of every Roman citizen, including Galeria. What began for her as professional respect and admiration for the combatant's physique and natural athletic finesse soon grew into a searing adoration and desire. Of course it didn't hurt that Cassian was masculine, strong, handsome and exuded enough sexual appeal to entrance the entire arena in which he fought and always won. Beyond that though, there was something about the burly champion that called to Galeria's very soul—a spiritual summoning she was thrilled to discover he too passionately felt.

And acted upon.

But not without help.

Were it not for the aide and loyalty of Cassian's closest confidante and Galeria's private chambers night guard Atticus—a former gladiator champion himself, known as The White Night Warrior because of his unusual pallor and evening-only contests by torchlight—Galeria and Cassian would not have been able to explore and celebrate the blossoming love they felt for one another. It was unlikely that any other palace guard

would have placed his position, and more importantly his very life, on the line to assist the star-crossed lovers.

As the social and political ramifications of the emperor's only daughter being bedded by a lowly slave were countless, Galeria and Cassian's involvement was strictly forbidden by the law of the day. Should the emperor ever learn of the affair, he would have all three of their heads on a plate—Galeria, Cassian and Atticus for aiding them.

Cassian and Atticus shared such a deep, abiding friendship, dating back many years. When approached, Atticus willingly arranged for the clandestine meetings between his long-time comrade and his lover. Without hesitation, he personally secured the back stairwell that led to the gladiators' quarters and arranged for Cassian's transport to the palace, guaranteeing his friend could steal in and out of Galeria's room at night unnoticed by the other guards. Additionally, Galeria categorically refused her attending slaves in the name of privacy.

Eternally grateful for his assistance, Galeria came to trust Atticus as much as Cassian did. While she never heard him request it, Galeria suspected Cassian always asked Atticus to take care of her when he was away.

And Atticus always did.

Especially the night he told Galeria that Cassian had been slain in a match.

With a tormented groan, Galeria buried her face in her hands, a barrage of images assaulting her as one memory after another of that particular moment played across her mind's eye—Atticus entering her room on that fateful evening, his face markedly sullen and strained, his body and voice tense as he spoke the words that shattered her soul. The strange, disembodied sound of her own scream echoed in her ears as she collapsed into his powerful arms. He pulled her close, only to delicately stroke her back.

Things might have been fine if he'd stopped there. But when the coolness of his breath brushed her throat, his soft words of comfort converted the blinding pain that burned her soul into a desperate need for release—release from a reality she couldn't bear.

There was fire in Atticus' kiss as Galeria's mouth urgently found his. His lips were tender as they moved over her tear-streaked cheeks and pressed softly against her eyes that, even closed, leaked continuously. His tongue loved her neck, her breasts, her nipples as his fingers threaded through her long, saffron-colored hair to soothe her shattered heart and quiet her conflicted whimpers. The brawny strength of his chest and thigh muscles pressed against her as thick and hard as his earnest erection, poking first into her pelvis then soon after filling her aching channel so thoroughly that her cries of anguish were transformed into moans of pleasure as he thrust his swollen shaft into her pleading pussy with abandon, making her come over and over again. When at last his enormous figure shuddered helplessly atop her and he emptied bountiful amounts of his seed into her dewy tightness, Cassian dug his teeth hard into her shoulder, effectively muffling his own groan of rapturous ecstasy. The hot suction on her skin that followed sent Galeria over the edge, tumbling uncontrollably into the abyss of pain and rapture and a love unbeknownst even to themselves. A shot of pain where his mouth met her flesh snapped Galeria back from her blissful leave but almost immediately the moist, warm feel of Atticus' tongue licking her tender flesh dispelled the discomfort. Afterward, they lay motionless, their hot, moist bodies still intimately joined, the sound of their panting as it slowed like hushed whispers in the silence of the room.

The moment was theirs and theirs alone.

And then it was gone.

Pushing him off, Galeria rolled over onto her side and curling into a ball, began to weep softly. The feel of his warm semen on her thighs sent a knife of pain into her heart and she wailed woefully at the thought of what they'd just done. When she felt Atticus' tentative touch on her shoulder, she whirled around, her face contorted and screamed at him to get out until she was hoarse, tears coursing down her cheeks to drench her quivering lips.

They never made love again.

Galeria also refrained from looking Atticus in the eye after that. To peer into those blue-green depths, so striking in contrast to the smooth alabaster hue of his skin, was to lose her soul completely...or what remained of it.

Still, she couldn't help but steal the odd glance here and there. Whenever possible, as she left her room for a meal, an evening contest or a meeting with the emperor, and was in essence handed off by Atticus, her stationary doorman, to two mobile guards, she would slide him a quick look, taking in every little detail.

Standing erect, eyes front and perfectly still, Atticus looked every bit the part of a palace guard—the emperor's personal defenders—that is, with the exception of his thick, dark-auburn hair that fell in full waves to his shoulders. Every other male of the day sported far shorter cuts but Atticus was allowed this one departure from protocol namely because Galeria had demanded it when he became her personal guard. His lengthy tresses were of such a luxurious hue and texture that she couldn't bear to see them cut. She also insisted his long locks be left uncovered so he was additionally excused from wearing the traditional helmet, though it was always close at hand. However, the rest of his uniform was traditional from neck to toe. His body armor of greaves and gauntlets molded about his massive alabaster body. The woolen tunic he wore between the armored leather strips of the costume's *cingulum* matched the colors of the shield he clutched in his right hand. His shins and feet were covered in leather and one strong, well-shaped hand lightly clasped the ornate hilt of his *gladius*—a dangerous, specialized sword—ready to be drawn in a flash.

Galeria had seen Atticus many times in that exact stance and attire and yet, now when she glimpsed him, she was instantaneously reminded of the tenderness with which he had kissed and touched her, the way he had, for a few brief blissful moments, filled the aching voids in her heart and between her legs.

She knew why too.

Believing that all sins against the heart are punishable by the gods, Galeria accepted that she was being chastised for her lone night with Atticus, forevermore haunted by

one excruciating question—was the fluttering in her stomach she now felt in Atticus' presence due to their one-time lovemaking or had she twice betrayed Cassian, her heart's desire, by falling in love with his oldest friend?

Certainly, Atticus had evoked something powerful in her after he returned from one particular Tour of Champions and became known as The White Night Warrior. Where Galeria had barely noticed him before, she abruptly realized he was not like any other man she had ever seen—a tower of white marble with glowing turquoise eyes and a still, solemn strength that made Galeria's heart skip a beat. Could it be that she had fallen in love with him back then?

Lifting her head from her hands, Galeria drew in a shaky breath and, after wiping the tears from her cheeks, began to pin up her waist-long hair. The evening meal was near and she would just have to put on a brave face.

Again.

Her mother used to say, "Acceptance to life and its many turns is the key to happiness." Perhaps she'd been right. After all, weren't all things destined? The Greeks certainly believed so. To be sure, their word $-f\bar{a}tum$ —meant as much. In actuality, the conundrum she presently found herself in had begun with the Tour of Champions' stop in Greece where the country was inadvertently responsible for stealing Cassian, her very reason for living.

Even now, she could still feel Cassian, sense his soul reaching out to hers, almost as if he weren't dead at all. As the memory of his face appeared in her mind's eye, his full lips moving to release his satiny deep voice to whisper, "I will love you forever," Galeria once more covered her face and cried, her grief-stricken wail piercing the quiet of the room. Seconds later, the door to her chambers burst open, a distressed Atticus barging in uninvited.

"Galeria?"

For the first time in too long a while their eyes met—a drawn out, emotion-laden, wordless exchange, the power of their one moment in time together flashing between

them. Confused, Galeria turned away. With the break in the circuit of chemistry, she was more able to remember her place.

And his.

Turning to face Atticus once more, Galeria's chin jutted out with the air of superiority she was expected to have automatically assumed from birth but in reality had taken decades to perfect. When she finally addressed him, her cold, crisp tone was in direct contrast to the warm softness she felt in her heart at the sight of him.

"You are too familiar. I'm sure you meant to address me properly."

Atticus' response was immediate. And assured. "No. I said what I meant. I always say what I mean."

There was a definite edge to his voice and a flicker of something danced in his eyes, something intense and powerful as he stepped further into the room and closed the door behind him.

Galeria's heart caught in her throat. They had not been alone together since that night and not only because of Galeria's distressed emotional state—palace protocol strictly prohibited a guardsman from being alone with her in her chambers. It had only been through the grace of the gods that they weren't caught before, breaking not one, but two Roman rules. Even so, a burning need that Galeria couldn't even identify overwhelmed any common sense she had and, throwing all caution to the wind, she pushed on, eager to see if Atticus would give further voice to his feelings.

"And what is it you would like to next say, guard?"

Straight away she regretted tacking on the lowly designation, all the more so when she caught the cringe that darkened Atticus' face at the slight. Closing her eyes, she tilted her face downward, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Forgive me."

The touch of his hands on her forearms brought her head up with a jolt as she gasped. She hadn't heard him cross the room, could not even fathom how he had done it so quickly.

"There is no need for apologies. Not now. Not ever." He crooked one finger under her chin and gently raised her face upward. His touch was cool and reassuring. His incredible eyes glittered with warm intensity as he smiled, his straight white teeth seductively framed by his full pale mouth. "I do not regret anything that has passed between us. Do you?"

Galeria stared at him long and hard, silently considering the question. She allowed herself to recall once more the intimate moments they'd shared while fully feeling the strength of the connection that had existed between them.

Still did.

When at last she answered, her heart shouted the response though her steady voice was quiet.

"No."

Atticus responded with an even more dazzling grin that Galeria could feel all the way down to her sandaled feet.

And back again.

"Good. Now," he began with a wink before his dark brows swiftly drew together in unrest, "shall I summon the physician?"

Galeria's eyes widened.

"Whatever for?"

Nodding slightly in deference, he said, "You cried out. Were you in pain?"

Galeria smiled sadly as she shook her head.

"Worry not, I am well. It is not my body that aches."

Atticus nodded, a look of tenderness and understanding brightening his solemn face.

"I know of your sorrow. But come now, tell me. I can see how your condition worsens."

Galeria took a quick step back, her hand flying to her throat in shock. The movement loosened the wrap that covered her shoulders. As it fell to one side, one thin, bruised arm was revealed. Atticus merely glanced at the mark before eyeing her closely.

"Why...I...you mustn't..."

"Fear not," he said, tenderly lifting the garment to cover her once more, his fingers brushing her flesh to leave a trail of fire in their wake. "Your secret is safe with me."

Quivering, Galeria forced her thoughts from his tantalizing touch back to her health. "Has it been that obvious?"

"It has to me." When Atticus saw the distressed look on Galeria's face, he very quickly added, "But then I have certain advantages the others do not."

Galeria looked surprised.

"What advantages?"

"I..." He paused, staring off over her shoulder for a long moment before finishing.
"I see you more often than anyone else."

"So it is. Indeed, you are correct Atticus." She halted, momentarily shaken by the realization that she had never used his first name before. "I am not well."

"It's your blood," he said with conviction. "It poisons you."

Again, Galeria was taken aback by the directness with which Atticus spoke.

"How do you know?"

"I can...the symptoms are the same as with your mother."

"I fear you're right again. I think I'm not long for this place."

Atticus' head came up with a jerk and he quickly took Galeria's hands in his. They were huge and easily covered hers completely but despite the heat of the evening, and the moment, his skin was cool.

"I beg you, don't speak of such things. I promise you, you shall not leave this earth before your time." He then lifted her hands to his lips and kissed each one of her knuckles.

Taking one trembling hand from his gentle clutch, Galeria delicately stroked his luscious hair as her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh sweet Atticus, you shouldn't make promises you cannot keep."

His gaze grew steely as he straightened.

"I'm not."

He then drew her into his arms, his face dipping down to brush her lips with his own. But before their mouths could meet again, Galeria pulled away.

"I'm sorry, I cannot. If only things were...different."

Again her eyes found his and as before, Atticus' gaze seemed to speak volumes. But all he said was, "I know."

With a pronounced air of reluctance, he took a step back and turning, headed for the door.

"Atticus?"

Galeria's quavering query made him pivot sharply, a look of hopeful expectation on his breathtakingly beautiful face.

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For...everything."

With a picture-perfect bow that almost hid the disappointment on his face, Atticus left Galeria's chambers and quietly closed the door behind him.

* * * * *

Once outside, Atticus collapsed against the wall, grimacing as his long, white eyeteeth lengthened into twin razor-sharp daggers with each passing second. Intense emotion always brought out the animal in him. Clamping a hand over his mouth and willing himself to calm down, Atticus squeezed his eyes shut.

God he loved her.

He had from the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

At the tender age of eighteen, Atticus had seen fifteen-year-old Galeria for the very first time as he stood in the center of the dusty arena, addressing the emperor in the standard salutation before his premiere match was to begin. She was perched high above the stadium on a throne situated to the emperor's left but even from that distance, Atticus could discern the regal carriage, the sheer elegance and stunning beauty of her delicate form. Where Atticus was hulking and muscular, she was petite and pristinely pale. Only months before his massive body and physical prowess had attracted the attention of the emperor during one fortuitous meeting along a road where Atticus was toiling as a farmhand. Right there and then he was specially "selected" to train in Rome's premiere gladiator school, until he was ready to showcase his strength and speed, testing his keen instincts of survival in matches against other similarly endowed males for the delight of an audience.

An audience that included Galeria.

At the end of each victorious contest, Atticus would approach the raised section of the stadium where the privileged sat. He would bow, his gaze trained on the ground. It was considered a show of disrespect to make eye contact with any member of the royal family post-match so he never looked at the emperor.

Or his daughter.

But Atticus felt her – felt her gentleness, her feminine power, her seductive beauty.

For many years, Atticus fought valiantly, always winning, albeit frequently saved from various near-fatal injuries in a number of different ways. However none quite so fatefully as the last time.

It was during one of the Tour of Champions' stops in a strange country filled with ancient legends and superstitions that, nestled in the Carpathian Mountains, bordered the Black Sea. It was there that a mysterious healer performed some strange kind of bloodletting on Atticus to treat his life-threatening wounds sustained in a match. It appeared a miracle cure had been administered but in reality, Atticus had unwittingly turned into a *strigoi*—a creature of the night who survived solely on the blood of warmblooded beings.

From then on, he had to endure many changes.

Along with his eyesight, Atticus' other senses were greatly amplified, sometimes to the point of pain. Noises were too loud, smells too pungent, touch too strong. For certain, Atticus had to play around with getting just the right pressure to handle yet another magnified transformation—since his turning, Atticus' libido had shot through the roof. Or more accurately his ejaculate did when he masturbated first thing each evening to alleviate the enormous erection with which he now awoke every evening. Initially, he tried to ignore the near-painful, pounding ache between his legs but the pressure would grow unbearable within minutes. Even if he could have withstood the forceful throbbing, there was no hiding the reason for it—the front of his tunic protruded so noticeably there was no way he could stand in front of tens of thousands with such an obvious hard-on.

To eliminate the problem, he would slip one hand under his thigh-length tunic and close a tight fist around his vein-ridged cock, the heavy twin weights beneath drawing up tight against its base. The first time he did though, he let out a startled cry and at once loosened his grip. Though Atticus was accustomed to pleasuring himself, his hands were much stronger since his turning. Adjusting his hold, he began stroking the thick shaft, his thumb expertly pressing into one broad vein on the underside and tracing it up to the little groove at the bottom of the distended head, which he gave an extra squeeze and twist before sliding down again. As his cock hardened even more in his hand and his contracted sac twitched in anticipation, Atticus felt his canines extend down to dig into the curve of his bottom lip. The calluses on his palms added extra friction to his now-ready-to-explode erection and after only a few more exuberant

pumps, Atticus obtained release. Biting down hard, he swallowed the loud groan that welled up from his chest and threatened to spill out as, arching his back, he let loose one forceful, extensive spray of hot semen after another, the violent jets of white foam splattering the ceiling and coating his hand. The cadenced ejaculations that went on for well over a minute didn't lessen in intensity, length or volume but rather grew stronger, longer and of greater quantity with each one, rendering Atticus powerless against the relentless and euphoric physical release. When the contractions minimized, slowed and finally stopped, he lay there, stunned, exhausted and only distantly aware of the two rivulets of blood that coursed from his bottom lip down his chin and neck.

Every evening thereafter was the same. In fact, he had become so adept at pleasuring himself that none of the guards passing by or the other gladiators even realized what he was doing.

But superior senses, including a super-sexual appetite, were not the only differences in Atticus' life.

He could no longer walk in the light of day, drinking in the warmth of the sun on his now bizarrely pale skin or enjoy those things he had taken for granted—the blue sky, the brightly colored flowers, the warmth of the soil…life. He couldn't even open his light-sensitive eyes until dusk. Nor could he eat or drink his usual fare—a diet rich in olives, fruit and grains. Instead he now consumed copious wineskins of fresh, warm animal blood brought to him each evening. After his miraculous recovery, the local healer informed Atticus' handlers that his wounds and consequent treatment required a special diet and a permanent absence from sunlight. Though whispers ran rampant, Atticus was permitted the requests made. From there forth, he began competing in evening contests lit by torches and was soon after deemed the infamous White Night Warrior.

Of course, Atticus had always been an incredible contender before his turning. Strong, fast, to be feared.

But now?

He was certain death.

It was a charade—drawing out matches and pretending to be hurt when he wasn't, but for a time it was a game he enjoyed playing. His ego loved the adoration and accolades of being Rome's greatest gladiator and the title didn't come without a few perks. He got his own cell and a personal slave boy who idolized Atticus' bravery and strength and would do anything to help his hero, including aiding Atticus when he smuggled Cassian in and out of the palace. Atticus was also permitted the right to choose whom he would and wouldn't fight. That was actually the hardest part—selecting who would die next at his hands.

And they all did.

But after a time, Atticus grew weary of his faux existence. He was just about to pull apart the bars of the cage that housed him, something he could do with great ease, and leave the lie he was living when Galeria handpicked him to serve her.

Once he laid eyes on her up close and smelled the enticing blend of her blood, flesh and feminine scent, for him, there was no leaving Rome.

Not then.

Not ever.

Right then and there, Atticus resigned himself to staying with Galeria for the rest of her life, even if that meant loving her in silence from beyond the chamber door that separated them. Being what he now was, he assumed they had no future together so while it pained him greatly, Atticus gallantly accepted her love for Cassian. At least the love of his life was happy. That was Atticus' only desire.

That and the far-off hope that one day Galeria might love him as he was.

Heart and soul.

And body.

After his turning, Atticus never once unleashed his insatiable sexual desire on anyone, despite being offered many slaves—men and women—for his pleasure.

Sickened by the thought of merely using their bodies for his own gratification, he refrained from taking another.

Until that one night with Galeria.

And he had given her a lot more than just his body.

He had given her his whole heart.

He hadn't planned it. Dreamed of it, yes. Planned it, no. And now, no matter what happened, he would be bound to her, even more than before, for the rest of her days. But with the arrival of the blood disease that was clearly stealing her life, Atticus knew his time with her would be much shorter than he had ever dreamed.

Unless...

Atticus shook his head as if to clear it. Who would ever willingly choose the kind of life he had been given without consent?

With a heavy-hearted sigh, Atticus opened his eyes and stared at the thick wall opposite him, forcing his thoughts back to a far more pressing issue. When he'd barged into Galeria's room upon hearing her scream moments earlier, Atticus had been granted a golden opportunity to tell Galeria something, something he had just learned from his former slave boy, something he would have been ecstatic to tell Galeria before they'd made love.

But now?

He felt conflicted.

Taking another deep breath—a longstanding human reflex—Atticus squared his shoulders and turned to face the door.

Once a gladiator, always a gladiator.

Above all else, even love, honor must prevail.

It was the honorable thing to tell Galeria the truth.

With a hand that trembled slightly, Atticus rapped on the door and waited for Galeria's invitation to enter.

"Come," came her soft reply on the other side.

Atticus stepped in and quietly closed the door, his gaze locked on the floor as he spoke. "Forgive the intrusion but there is something I must speak to you about."

When he finally risked a glance at Galeria's face, he confirmed what he'd felt from the moment he had entered—her eyes were intently fixed on his face. With a faint smile, she nodded slightly.

"Go on."

Atticus opened his mouth to speak but his voice failed him. Clearing his throat, he tried again.

"Galeria...I...I don't know how to tell you this."

Her face softened as she moved across the room to stand in front of him—close enough to touch, close enough to kiss, close enough to hold. He could smell her perfume, her hair, her feminine place and her blood—all of which drove him crazy but he was nevertheless glad she was so near. Her voice, when at last she spoke, was gentle and encouraging.

"Fear not Atticus. Speak your mind. And, I pray, your heart."

Atticus looked deeply into Galeria's eyes, wincing at the lure of her beauty and tenderness. It would be so easy just to take her in his arms and let her make him forget the reason for his presence there at that very moment, make him forget everything.

But he could not deceive her any longer.

"Galeria," he began again, his voice and gaze both dropping dramatically, "Cassian...is...alive."

Galeria's soft gaze shifted slowly to a bewildered stare. "What?"

"Cassian didn't die. He's very much alive, and on his way back to Rome as we speak."

In a matter of seconds, the little bit of color in Galeria's cheeks drained away, her eyes fluttered closed and her body crumpled.

The Turning

For the second time in minutes, Atticus was glad he was so near Galeria. Only this time, it was because he easily caught her before she hit the floor.

Chapter Two

"Cassian the Courageous? Can it really be you? I heard you were dead."

Cassian turned to peer out from beneath the tattered blanket that shrouded his head and shoulders into the darkness at the soaring figure in front of him. The question had come from a young man, perhaps not yet twenty, his body hard and lean and clearly chosen for the fight. The jostling movement of the caged transport cart that carried them made both their stances unsteady but they stood alone—the other slaves were huddled in groups at their feet, fast asleep. Cassian grinned, his tone conspiratorially hushed as he said, "Lower your voice. You'll wake the others. What is your name?"

The young man's chest puffed out to make his broad torso appear even more massive.

"I am Titus the Tower."

Cassian's eyes widened.

"You are a gladiator?"

"Not yet. But I have been picked by emperor himself to be one."

Cassian smothered the sigh that rose in his chest. How strange and sad it was that when young, men took a kind of pride in killing for their country. But as the years went by, one was left with only the dull, heavy ache of remorse that sank like a large stone to settle in the pit of the stomach. But now was not the time for life lessons.

"Heed this Titus. It is indeed I, Cassian. But until we are back safely in Rome, you must keep this truth between you and me. Agreed?"

The enormous man took a step closer and examined Cassian more closely. He shook his head slowly, in awe.

The Turning

"By the gods, it is you." Titus poked Cassian's shoulder with a thick finger as if to ensure he were real. "I swear on all of Rome, I will tell no one. And here, I thought with you gone, I could be the new champion."

"Perhaps one day you shall."

Titus waved away the encouragement. "It is of no matter. But come now, tell me, how it is you have returned from the grave?"

Cassian turned his head to look out at the passing countryside. Very soon he would be back at the Colosseum where Atticus had arranged for yet another secret transport to see Galeria. After weeks away, and this time under false pretenses, Cassian couldn't wait to see her again—see her, kiss her, touch her, make love to her. Every absence away from the warm embrace of her arms and the creamy chasm between her legs pained him terribly—more so as time went on. More than anything, Cassian wanted to freely spend every day and night with Galeria without having to hide their love.

But how could that ever be?

Shaking off his dreams and desires, Cassian returned his gaze to Titan's inquiring face.

"Politics," he answered.

The mountainous figure frowned.

"Politics resurrected you. How so?"

"I won the contest in Greece, readily slaying their champion."

"Milos the Masked. Yes, that was the initial report. But then we heard the opposite was true."

"I know. The truth is, the Greek emperor was so upset that Rome had beaten Greece in the arena that he altered the facts to suit his own ego. And his country's reputation."

"What are you saying? That he lied?"

"Precisely. In a public announcement, the Greek emperor declared that Milos had not been mortally injured as originally thought. And conversely, after leaving the arena, I had succumbed to my injuries."

Titus looked confused.

"But why would he do that? To what end? He couldn't continue the lie that Milos was alive."

Cassian shook his head, his short dark hair blown by a gust of wind. "He didn't care about Milos. He cared only that he had a champion. And he had one." Cassian pointed to his own chest. "Milos the Masked's helmet hid his face, as all Secutors' helmets do, so the emperor proposed I take Milos' place, assume his identity and fight for Greece. We were of similar size, build and fighting styles. None would be the wiser."

"And if you refused?"

"Someone else would be 'granted the honor' and I would be secretly put to death."

"Why that bearer of filth! You, of course, agreed."

"Until I could find a way to get back to Rome and my...emperor, I had no other choice."

"But where have you been all this time?"

"Kept in a private cell and tended to in confidence by the emperor's personal physician. I was hurt in the match and needed a few weeks to recuperate. Again, the emperor manipulated the facts to say that Milos required some healing time and that I had been cremated and my remains buried."

"And none of your countrymen were suspicious?"

"On the contrary. The palace was up in arms as were my fellow gladiators and I suspect, many citizens."

Titus nodded emphatically. "I myself had trouble believing word of your passing."

"Few didn't. But it was my trusted friend Atticus who persevered until the truth was revealed. He secretly dispatched a young slave to find out what had really happened. As the streets and arenas of Greece are filled with many a boy, it was of no hardship for him to infiltrate the country and grounds where I was being held to break me out."

"No hardship?"

Cassian chuckled softly. "He is a crafty one to be sure. Indeed, I've never seen such stealth in so young a male. He simply waited until the guard who watched my door fell asleep. Then he stole the key attached to his scabbard and released me from my prison cell. After dressing in the slave attire that he brought, we wound our way through the underground tombs until we were outside then ran several miles where we were picked up by a slave cart bound for Rome."

Titus' face lit up with astonishment and joy.

"And here you are! Alive and well and on your way home. Tell me truthfully, what's the first thing you will do upon returning to Rome?"

Cassian just smiled and returned his gaze to the passing roadside. He knew what he wanted to do first—bury himself in Galeria's velvety heat and not only that part between his legs that jumped to attention whenever he was with her. He ached to bury his face in her feminine place, love her womanly lips with his, worship her sweet, wet cavern with his tongue, make her shudder and her love juices gush with only the power of his mouth. In truth, the very last time they were together, Galeria had allowed him to pleasure her in this way and it was beyond anything Cassian had ever experienced. The intimacy of his lips on her secret flesh, the sultry scent of it, the excitement of her thighs trembling on either side of his head just about made him spill his seed. It was a sacred honor he couldn't wait to repeat with her. But a visit with the emperor would be the first order of the day. Once he got that out of the way, he would steal through the back passage to the chambers, and the bed, of his beloved Galeria. The only consolation he'd

had during those agonizingly deceptive weeks in which they were separated was that Cassian knew she'd been cared for by Atticus while he was away.

He just didn't how well.

Yet.

* * * * *

A soft knock at the door of Galeria's private chambers brought her head around. She let out a shaky breath, trying in vain to steady the quivering of her heart. Since news of Cassian's mistaken death and consequent resurrection, she had been anxiously anticipating seeing him again—desperately aching for his strong, warm hands and lips on her flesh, his hard masculine length stroking and filling the throbbing core between her thighs until her soul soared to the very heavens that stared down on all of Rome and she exploded into stardust. But laying eyes, and hands, and lips on him again meant only one thing—they were one step closer to the end.

Her end.

And quite possibly, his too.

The door opened a little to allow Atticus to peer in. His expression was as usual—guarded, professional, blank. He bowed slightly and spoke. "He is here."

Galeria stood, careful to disguise the shaking she felt in her limbs. She gave him a weighted smile.

"Thank you Atticus. Send him in."

Atticus nodded, his teal eyes lowering as he opened the door and bowed then moved aside to make room for the hulking man who stood behind him. Even in a filthy tunic, Cassian looked confident and handsome as he strode into the room. His gaze was not respectfully trained on the floor as had become his safeguard lest the expression within his eyes give him away, but instead burrowed brazenly into Galeria's eyes. Without once moving her enamored stare from his face, Galeria dazedly whispered to Atticus.

"Please leave us."

Atticus watched Galeria for a long moment, a flicker of something flashing across his gorgeous face as he bowed once more and closed the door.

No sooner were they alone than Galeria bolted to the entrance and slipped the lock in place. Now there was nothing to stop them from showing their feelings freely without fear of discovery or interruption. Relieved, she let out a deep breath. Cassian too must have felt the same sense of liberty for he swiftly clutched her forearm and spun her around. Throwing her arms around Cassian's broad shoulders, Galeria pressed her lips to his face over and over and over again, her tears soon spilling down to mingle with the tracks of her moist kisses. When at last their mouths met, the heat and passion and pain of their separation exploded in a torrid swirl of tongues and moans while their hands moved restlessly over cloth and skin that grew warmer by the second.

Breathlessly tearing her lips away from Cassian's mouth, Galeria's hot whispers filled his ear.

"I so prayed for your return. Even when there was no reason. I begged the gods for our reunion."

"So did I."

Cassian's gaze flashed with a passion-founded love as he peered into Galeria's eyes. It mattered not which began first—the love or the passion. In the end, they both had arrived at the same place—they wanted and loved each other more than life itself.

But all of a sudden, Cassian's gaze clouded as it moved over her face and body.

"Beloved, what's this? You are so..." He took a step back to look up and down her body, his worry-filled gaze drifting back up to her face. "So..."

Galeria quickly pressed a long slender finger to his lips. "Hush. Now is not the time to talk."

Desperate to feel his hard form against her, Galeria wrapped her arms about Cassian's broad shoulders and laid an ardent kiss on his lips. Immediately he responded, his mouth automatically opening to return her kiss. Galeria whimpered at the feel of his lips on hers, his tongue agitatedly winding its way into her mouth, caressing her teeth and gums. His fingers ripped through Galeria's hair to cradle her neck and hold her head steady for a time before his rough hands, dirty from the long journey, slid down the flimsy fabric of her toga.

With a look of embarrassment, Cassian stopped, swiftly withdrawing his hands from the gossamer-like material that so lightly touched her hips.

"So beautiful," he said almost reverently. "I don't want to soil you."

Galeria caught his hands and firmly placed them back on her body. "Worry not. The garment can be washed and should you mark my skin, you can bathe it with your lips and tongue."

Cassian's eyes blazed again and he let out a low growl, clearly too turned-on to ultimately care. Speedily his caress moved in two different directions—one lifting to stroke Galeria's left breast, the other dropping to cup her right buttock, pulling her fully against the massive, straining girth of his hard-on beneath the leather panels of his tunic.

Galeria murmured, her pelvis involuntarily straining toward the rigid length that pushed so insistently against her flesh. With total abandon, she kissed every inch of his face, from his lips to his long broad nose and high angular cheekbones, to his smooth forehead before running her fingers through his shiny black hair. Sucking in a sharp breath, Galeria watched as Cassian knelt at her feet and gently tried to remove the undergarment that covered her feminine parts. But when his impatience became too great, with a grunt, he tore the thin fabric from her body, discarding the ragged item without so much as a backward glance. As he stood, Galeria stretched one leg out to hook over Cassian's thigh, sighing as he lifted her onto his hips, the head of his stiff cock knocking against her drenched opening and rubbing up the length of her pussy to

her swollen clitoris. Galeria pulled him close, their lips hungrily meeting once more. Steadying her against the wall, Cassian withdrew his hips just far enough to align his rigid shaft with her aching entrance before plunging deep into her tight center. Galeria bit his lip at the exquisite sensation of his thick cock spreading and filling her to capacity while his tongue filled her mouth even as she moaned. Holding Galeria's bottom in his large hands, Cassian began rhythmically pumping his broad cock into Galeria's pussy. On many occasions the feel of his thick shaft moving in and out of her had urged impassioned exclamations from Galeria's lips but neither was expecting what burst forth this time.

"Stop!"

Cassian froze, stunned by the command as well as the urgency with which Galeria shouted it. Pulling back, he looked into her face, one thick eyebrow rising in query.

"Stop? What for, love? Did I hurt you?"

"No. But I..."

Extricating herself from him, Galeria lowered her feet to the ground, all the while avoiding Cassian's puzzled face.

Evidently flustered, Cassian pressed her for an explanation, his straining erection bobbing out into the space between them.

"Pray tell, what is the matter?"

Galeria still couldn't meet his eyes.

"I have to tell you something."

A pronounced look of amazement illuminated Cassian's face.

"Right now? Can it not wait?"

"No. No it can't," Galeria said a little icily.

"Very well," Cassian replied, raising his arms in surrender. "Your wish is my command. What is it?"

Galeria began pacing back and forth, praying for courage. Finding none, she steeled herself as she turned and, at long last, met his quizzical gaze.

"Cassian, my love?"

He smiled, making her want to laugh, cry, jump back into his arms and run away. "Yes, my love?"

"Something happened the night I learned of your death."

Chapter Three

Atticus stood outside Galeria's chambers in a soldier's stance—feet apart, back poker straight, arms at his side, gaze forward. He tried not to think about what was happening on the other side of the door but with his superior hearing he could easily perceive Cassian and Galeria's passionate kisses, their whispered moans, their rapid heartbeats. The sound of the steadily increasing rush of blood through their veins mesmerized him to such a point that he didn't even notice when the door opened behind him. Only the blast of air from the movement alerted him to the fact.

Turning, Atticus was stunned more than hurt by the hard fist that slammed into his nose. As the flow of warm blood flooded down over his lips, he had enough sense to keep them pressed tightly together lest his swiftly lengthening fangs become visible. Galeria's plea of "Cassian, no!" caused him to glance up into the enraged face of his childhood friend who punched him in the face again before lunging headfirst into Atticus' torso. The attempt to bowl the gigantic guard over didn't work—he remained as immoveable as a statue. Only his arms rose to enfold Cassian in a rough bear hug.

"Damn you, you traitor!" Cassian shouted as he righted himself and, stepping back, withdrew his weapon from its scabbard.

"Cassian, I beseech you," Galeria whispered. "Someone will hear. Please come inside. We must talk."

Clearly, conversation was the farthest thing from Cassian's mind. His whole body trembled with rage as he glared fixedly at Atticus.

"The time for talk is past."

Atticus' bloodied lips parted. "She is right, friend. We can't alert the palace to your presence."

"Friend? Friend? How dare you call me friend after what you've done."

As the sound of quickly approaching footsteps echoed down the long hall, Galeria turned to Atticus.

"What shall we do?"

Cassian stiffened as he shot a sharp look at Galeria.

"So he is the one you seek counsel from now?"

Seconds later, two pairs of palace guards rounded the corner and came to a full stop in front of Galeria's door. The eldest of the first duo stepped forward and glared at the two big men. "Is there a problem here?"

At a loss for words, Galeria could only shake her head. But the shock and fear on her face drew the suspicion of the lead sentinel. This time he demanded an answer from Atticus and Cassian, his gaze moving from one to the other. "What's the meaning of this?"

Wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand, Atticus began to speak but Cassian quickly cut him off.

"Worry not. I have just come from an audience with the emperor and he asked that I personally choose the combatant I will fight in a celebratory contest to be held tomorrow evening in honor of my return. I choose The White Night Warrior."

Galeria's audible gasp drew the questioning glances of all present.

"But...Atti...The White Night Warrior is retired."

Cassian's cool gaze drifted across her face.

"The emperor said whomever I choose." Cassian then set his sights on Atticus.

"And I choose you. Tomorrow night. We will fight."

* * * * *

The next evening, Galeria had difficulty walking to the emperor's lofty area of the Colosseum. Lightheaded, weak and near the point of fainting, she struggled to maintain the façade of health. Swaying, she clutched at the back of her throne as she approached it from the rear.

"Are you not well?" the emperor asked as, taking his own seat that oversaw the whole arena, he waved her over. Galeria's reply was barely above a whisper.

"I am fine, thank you, but forgive me, Father, I must say I am not in favor of this contest."

One of the emperor's bushy eyebrows rose heavenward. "You don't feel a match to celebrate Cassian's triumphant return is in order?"

"I do, yes. But I feel another opponent would be better."

The emperor stared at her for a long moment before dismissing her concern with a plump right hand, the huge ruby ring on his finger glinting in the light of the torches that surrounded the amphitheatre.

"Ah! What are you talking about? This will be a magnificent match! Atticus retired undefeated and Cassian has proven to be invincible in his career thus far. The gods themselves couldn't have arranged for a better pairing."

"Please...I beg of you," Galeria pleaded, her eyes filling with tears. "Please don't do this."

The emperor took a bunch of grapes from the tray to his left and began plopping one after the other into his mouth, his squinty eyes still focused on Galeria's face. "Why? Of what matter is it to you?"

Licking her lips, Galeria sought to choose her next words very carefully. "I have grown...fond of both champions and should not want either one injured."

"Killed."

"Killed?"

"Have you forgotten the rules of the game? This is a fight to the death. One of them will most certainly be killed."

Galeria swooned at this vivid reminder and just barely caught hold of the back of the emperor's throne to keep from falling. He stopped mid-grape toss. "Are you sure you're not ill? Given your distain for this evening's event, perhaps she should retire to your chambers?" While his words sounded kind, there was a hint of irritation in his tone.

Galeria lowered her gaze and bowed slightly, knowing the conversation was close to over. "No, Emperor," she murmured. "If it please you, I would like to stay."

"Do as you wish," he said, turning his attention to the gates as trumpets blasted, announcing Cassian's arrival.

Taking the seat to this left, Galeria glanced over at the empty throne to the emperor's right. It was times like this that she missed her mother most.

The explosive roar of the fifty thousand-plus crowd of spectators snapped Galeria back to the moment. At the far end of the arena, the iron gates opened to allow a bronzed chariot drawn by four prancing white horses to enter, the plumed red feathers atop their heads fluttering in the warm evening breeze as they began the long circle around the amphitheatre. At the chariot's helm stood Cassian dressed in full Retiarius gear—what little there was of it. A beige loincloth just barely covered his maleness, leaving plenty of his muscular body bare and glistening with sweat, except for his left shoulder which was fitted with the curving metal *galerus*. Beyond that, only his powerful shins and feet were attired, laced into leather sandals. Cassian waved to the wildly cheering crowd. Just as he completed one full circle of the stadium, the trumpets sounded again, announcing Atticus' arrival on the scene.

Leaning forward, Galeria turned to the area where he would exit on foot from the *hypogeum*. Another massive bellow of approval rang out as Atticus strode to the center of the arena. He too wore a beige loincloth but given his startlingly white complexion, there would be little difficulty differentiating the two gladiators. In fact, Atticus' pale skin shone eerily in the torchlight, the muscles in his arms and legs rippling as he moved with catlike grace, his auburn hair floating about his shoulders like a fiery-haired angel as he chose to forego the helmet that was part of his Thracian gear.

However his shins were bound in *ocrea*—metal leggings lined with wool—and he carried a small square shield and a *gladius* as was tradition.

By this time, Cassian had handed off the chariot to a couple of waiting slaves and made his way to stand beside Atticus. While a couple inches shorter and not as stocky as Atticus, Cassian looked like what he was—the reigning gladiatorial champion. His black eyes glittered, his dark skin and hair creating a virtual night and day contrast to Atticus' fair coloring. Neither looked at the other. Rather, their gazes were jointly fixed on the sand at their feet.

The emperor stood, calling for silence with his raised hands, and after a lengthy and congratulatory introduction that sang the praises of both Cassian and Atticus, he officially proclaimed the contest underway.

A cry of excitement and enthusiasm rose from the masses again, the pervading noise and heat and stress of the moment sending another wave of dizziness through Galeria. Through eyes blurred with fatigue and tears, she watched as both men stoically approached the area where she sat with the emperor. In unison, they offered the usual salutation, this time the words taking the very breath from Galeria's lungs.

"Hail, Emperor! Those who are about to die salute you."

Cassian was clearly avoiding her gaze but, for a flicker of a moment, Atticus' eyes found hers. He tried to smile but Galeria could sense the falseness in his attempt. Turning away, he said something to Cassian who, whirling to face him, shouted his reply before taking his dedicated weapons—a net, dagger and trident—from an attending slave and storming to the center of the ring. With obvious reluctance, Atticus followed him.

One final trumpet blast sounded as the crowd once again bellowed in bloodthirsty anticipation. Galeria closed her eyes and fervently prayed to the gods just as Cassian spun around to face Atticus and lunged forward to drive his dagger into Atticus' side.

The thunderous roar of the multitude seconds later turned into a combined chant of "Cassian! Cassian!" With a start, Galeria opened her eyes. Seeing what caused the

commotion, she shot to her feet with a loud cry, her hands flying to her face at the sight of the blood that poured from Atticus' ribcage. Swiftly drawing his shield in close to his body, in essence concealing the wound from sight, Atticus raised his sword and dove at Cassian, missing him. Sounds of shock rippled throughout the boisterous throng.

Atticus never missed.

Sweeping around behind his foe, Cassian tossed the heavy net over Atticus and in another astonishing upset, grappled him to the ground, the attack sending Atticus' weapon flying. In a complete departure from his usual style, Cassian then abandoned the use of his dagger and trident, which he restlessly cast aside, in favor of his fists. Delivering one passionate wallop after another to Atticus' head and torso, Cassian wailed upon the unresponsive form beneath him, violent, angry cries erupting from him with every clout. A few times he struck the shield that Atticus still clutched to his side but more times than not he connected with flesh. And bone. Galeria turned her head away, her face crumbling as she fought back more tears. She understood Cassian's fury but she couldn't bear to see Atticus hurt.

And vice versa.

Knowing the champion Atticus had been, Galeria knew that he would soon erupt and unleash his hulking form on Cassian.

Occasional murmurs of disappointment from those around her soon extended out to the hoard to grow in numbers and volume until the entire arena was echoing with loud boos. Returning her attention to the fight, Galeria quickly determined what the problem was. Contrary to her fears, Atticus was not putting up a fight.

At all.

And that meant only one thing to the salivating spectators—the contest would be over far too soon and they were being cheated of a good night's entertainment. But just as quickly as their enthusiasm had turned before, the disapproving crowd's jeers were converted to cheers when Atticus rolled Cassian onto his back and held him down, shouting into his face. The two gladiators' muscle-knotted torsos pressed close as

Cassian fought Atticus, bronze sliding on white, his thick knee punching up between Atticus' legs as he thrust his hips forward, trying to buck Atticus off. A series of rough and awkward rolls resulted, the two brawny champions wrestling wildly for dominance in a cloud of dust and delirious screams from the excited mass. When at last they were still again, Atticus was on top, his gleaming body straddling Cassian's, his non-shield-bearing hand tightly clamped around Cassian's neck. With the weight of his entire body, he eased down, slowly cutting off Cassian's air as he crushed his throat. The crowd went into a frenzy, shouting Atticus' name over and over again.

Beneath Atticus, Cassian's legs kicked wildly, his arms flailing to connect with something, anything to give him the upper hand once more.

"Stop! Stop!" Galeria shouted, her desperate cry drowned out by the multitude of encouraging yells to the contrary.

Regardless, Atticus appeared to heed her plea. Loosening his grip on Cassian, he slumped forward for a moment, panting heavily before slowly getting to his feet. While he still clutched the shield to his injured side, he had long since dropped his Thracian sword. Picking it up, Atticus turned his back on Cassian and headed toward the emperor. Behind him, Cassian had rolled over onto all fours. After an intense coughing fit that allowed him to catch his breath, Cassian reached out and clasped the trident he'd tossed aside earlier. With surprisingly swift speed, he rose and ran at Atticus, who continued to approach the throne. When he got within a few feet, Cassian called out to Atticus. Atticus turned just as Cassian leapt high and, kicking one leg back for maximum momentum, thrust the trident at Atticus' chest. Galeria screamed Atticus' name as the tip of the trident pierced his chest just below his collarbone and dug deep. Quickly recovering, Atticus reflexively lunged forward and drove his sword into Cassian's abdomen.

Galeria screamed as the arena fell silent. Cassian dropped to his knees, his bewildered gaze shifting from the sword still lodged in his gut to Atticus and then to Galeria for a long moment before he collapsed to one side.

Angrily pulling the trident from his shoulder and dropping his shield, Atticus swiftly picked up Cassian, the mortally wounded gladiator's body concealing Atticus' wounds on his ribs and chest, and bolted from the arena.

Pandemonium reigned as the crowd went wild in response to the bizarre turn of events.

* * * * *

Far beneath the arena, Galeria rushed to Cassian's cell, where she had learned Atticus had taken him. Giving strict orders that none should enter, she then knelt at his side and looked upon her fallen love, tears streaming down her face. Taking his limp hand in hers, she pressed her lips to his knuckles over and over again, murmuring soft endearments between sobs and kisses. Glancing up, she noticed that Atticus stood opposite on the other side of the table, his own cheeks flushed and wet from crying.

"I didn't mean to do it," he murmured in a voice so low that Galeria strained to hear him. "It all happened so fast. When I felt the pain, I just reacted."

"I know, Atticus."

"All the way through the battle, I resisted retaliation. It was easy. I never wanted to fight him. Not once. I never wanted any of this."

"I know you didn't," Galeria replied gently. "This isn't your fault."

But Atticus continued, clearly inconsolable. "I tried," he sputtered, blinking rapidly. "I tried to tell him that you were dy— That your health was failing. But he wouldn't listen. He accused me of being a coward, stooping to incredible depths, even lying to keep from allowing him the right to defend your honor."

Overcome with sympathy, Galeria touched his shoulder, all of a sudden stunned to realize the gaping wounds he'd sustained on his chest and ribcage had all but disappeared.

"What is this?" she whispered, both amazed and afraid as her fingers moved over his clavicle and the bulging pectoral muscles before tracing his rock-hard abdomen. "How is it that your wounds are healed so soon?"

Dazed, Atticus looked up from where he had been staring blankly at the soon-to-be fatal wound in Cassian's abdomen.

"I...it was...part of my healing on the Tour of Champions."

Galeria stared at him a long moment, then realization struck. "You can give Cassian the same medicine."

Atticus looked at her blankly for a time until comprehension dawned in his eyes. Slowly he shook his head.

"Yes," Galeria persisted, gently releasing Cassian's hand to move around and take Atticus'. "Whatever was done to save you back then, you must do for Cassian now."

Atticus noticeably recoiled.

"You don't know what you're asking. You don't know what was done to me."

"It doesn't matter. Don't you see? It's the only way. I can't lose him. I won't. Please, Atticus. Must I beg you?"

Atticus winced, turning his head away to avoid the imploring power of her gaze. "It is I who must beseech you. Galeria, I beg you not to ask this of me. You've no idea what it is you request."

Galeria didn't respond but Atticus could feel her eyes burning into him. When at last he chanced a glance in her direction, he nearly gasped at the icy expression on her face.

"You would let him die then?" she asked crisply, her voice suddenly controlled and quiet. "I thought you loved him. I thought you loved me."

Atticus groaned, his head falling back as he closed his eyes. "Oh, by the gods, have mercy."

"No! You have mercy. Have mercy on him. I know your friendship has been strained but you must put all that behind you now. Atticus, I can't live without him. I won't."

Atticus opened his eyes, startled. "What are you saying?"

"You know exactly what I'm saying. My days are numbered as it is. If you do not do this for me, I will be forced to shorten them even further."

Now it was Atticus' turn to plead. "Oh no, woman. That cannot be. You are far too precious to contemplate such a thing."

"It can and will be if you let Cassian die."

A flicker of anger flashed through Atticus. "Let him? I don't even know if I can save him. I've never done it before."

Galeria slowly shook her head, her eyes locked on his as she set aside his last line of reasoning. "You can try. That's all I ask of you Atticus. Just try." Then she made the one argument he had no defense against. "If you really love me, you will do this. For me."

That was the kiss of death.

For both him and Cassian.

"Very well," he said softly, grimacing as Galeria rushed into his arms, and squeezing him tightly, whispered "I love you" in his ear. "Leave us."

Once she was gone, Atticus bent over Cassian and drew his lips back from his glass-edge-sharp canines. Before he bit down, he wondered if Galeria would still love him when she learned how he had "saved" the other man she loved. But that was a risk he was just going to have to take. For now, he had to concentrate. Digging through his memory, he remembered how the strange healer had bled and fed and bled and fed him until he rose of his own accord. Atticus was so engrossed in remembering, then commencing the process, that he barely noticed the commotion outside the door, didn't even wonder at the sound of rushing guards and raised voices.

Chapter Four

Cassian had a strange feeling in his gut.

He frowned, his dark brows furrowing as he inwardly analyzed the long-lost sensation. If memory served him correctly, it was nervousness. He hadn't felt anything even remotely akin to the emotion in years. Fighting in the arena had long since beaten out any degree of fear or nerves he'd had. And yet there could be no other logical explanation for the gnawing, grinding movement in the pit of his stomach. If he were human, no doubt he would be sweating too.

With a newly acquired sharpness, he could also feel Atticus' eyes on him. Turning, he shot a quick look in the direction of the other vampire. Atticus wore his usual stern face—the same expression that dated to when the two were childhood friends. But right now, Atticus was even more serious than usual.

"You really want do this?" he asked quietly, a strand of his unruly hair fell across his teal-colored eyes as he watched Cassian closely. The two had easily gained access to Galeria's chambers after nightfall in between visits from the palace physician and now stood talking at the foot of her bed.

"What choice do I have? I love her."

Atticus' reply was immediate. "I love her too."

After a long moment in which he simply stared at Atticus, Cassian sighed in resignation. "I know you do. And now neither of us can bear to lose her. But is this the right way?" Uncertainty almost overwhelmed him.

Atticus looked distraught. Grimacing, Atticus rubbed his forehead with a large hand as he averted his eyes from Cassian's gaze. "Yes. No." The pain on his face deepened. "I don't know."

"I think you do." Cassian looked at Atticus, seeing him with his vampire eyes as he'd never seen him before—a colossal collection of pulsing energy and power. Despite the transgression that had stood between them, he'd always loved Atticus as a brother. Now they were blood brothers, destined to be so forever. A barely perceptible sense of acknowledgment and finality passed between them. Wordlessly, Atticus slowly nodded.

"Then it is settled," Cassian said softly.

"But we must do it together. I will never enter her again in any way without your approval. And involvement."

Cassian smiled. "Agreed." But just as quickly, his smile faded. There was no pleasure in the agreement they had just settled upon. What possible joy could there be in taking the life from a vibrant, breathing, warm-fleshed, hot-blooded human woman and turning her into what they now were?

Only one.

They were saving her from the clutches of certain death.

At that very moment, a soft moan escaped Galeria's lips to capture their attention. Her red-rimmed eyes fluttered open to stare unfocused about her. When her gaze at last came to rest on first Atticus then Cassian, a trembling smile lifted her lips.

"I am dreaming, am I not?"

With a blur of motion, Cassian moved to her side and tenderly took her hand in his.

"No, my love. You are very much awake."

"Oh, Cassian," she breathed heavily, clearly exhausted by the effort it took to speak.

"You are here. The remedy Atticus gave you worked."

"It did indeed," Atticus said, showing up on the other side of the bed to take her free hand.

"And how wonderful...you both look," she said, her voice growing faint as she began slipping into unconscious. "So beautiful. You are like angels. My angels. My

The Turning

loves." She shuttered suddenly as one last chill overtook her. "I love you both. Forever."

Slowly her eyes closed and her breathing grew so shallow that even Atticus, with his acute hearing, could barely detect it.

Tears brimmed in Cassian's dark eyes as he kissed Galeria's hand and tenderly brushed back the damp strands of hair from her clammy forehead.

"Yes my love. You will. And us, you."

"Forever," Atticus solemnly echoed.

Atticus locked eyes with Cassian and together, they each raised one of Galeria's wrists to their lips and sank their long, hard fangs into her creamy, cold flesh.

* * * * *

Los Angeles, CA Present Day

Galeria drove through the gridlocked core of downtown. It was not quite seventhirty p.m. and the winter sun had long since gone to bed for the night but the streets were still jammed with rush-hour traffic. Exasperated, she blew out a sharp breath, the movement of air briefly lifting her blonde bangs. The guys would be up by now. And in more ways than one. The three lovers' immortal lust for one another had not lessened through the years. In fact, not a single day had gone by since her turning in which they had not made love.

And made it really well.

Arriving home, Galeria jumped out of the car and bounded into the house, going straight to the sitting room where Atticus lay, stretched out on a couch, reading a magazine. He peered at her over the edge of the page.

"Where you been?"

Galeria shrugged. "I was hungry."

"Oh yeah? Well, we're both famished. But not for blood," Cassian said as, coming up behind her, he wrapped his strong arms about her waist and hugged her for a quick second before whirling her about. Their cozy clinch and steamy kiss quickly progressed and before long, Atticus leaped from his reclining position to join in.

Lost in the warmth and wonder of Cassian's passionate kiss, Galeria felt the gentle strength of Atticus' hands on her hips, his resolute hard-on nudging into the cleft of her buttocks as he nuzzled the back of her neck. Pulling her lips away from Cassian's blazing kiss, Galeria leaned back against Atticus and turned her head toward him. Immediately, his mouth claimed hers, his tongue delving deep to excite and electrify Galeria in such a way that buckled her knees. When she toppled, Cassian caught her long before she hit the ground and in a heartbeat, carried her through the archway to the bedroom.

Stripping her quickly, the guys then delicately laid her out on the nearby bed. Fully naked and arching her back in anticipation, Galeria stretched her arms up over her head, breathlessly watching them as they began to remove their clothes.

For his part, Cassian was still every bit the gladiator he used to be. His massive, hulking body rippled with large bulging muscles under alabaster skin, smooth save for the series of jagged scars that road-mapped his bulky chest, back and arms. Galeria stared at him in awe, the throbbing area between her legs growing warmer and wetter as he peeled off his shirt and unzipped his pants, his thick, vein-ridged cock springing from its fabric prison to extend toward her in invitation. Cassian went commando—something Galeria always found sexy. The sight of his broad, rigid cock standing at the ready right off the bat make her salivate—she could almost taste the cum that was spotting the swollen orb at the top, feel its smooth, soft texture as she glided it in and out of her mouth. Feel its wide, hard weight as it moved in and out of her creamy pussy.

Sighing, Galeria turned her head to look at Atticus. He too had the body of a champion gladiator—enormous, sculpted muscles marked by numerous scars from the

many wounds of brutal battle. Likewise, his skin was snow white, flawless and almost feminine in its beauty, but there was nothing female about the way his teal-colored eyes flashed with fire as he removed his black boxers, nor the slight sway of his large sac as he stood up, the jutting angle of his impressive erection protruding from a mass of dark-auburn curls. His fangs overhung his bottom lip when he smiled as he cupped his balls and gave them a little downward tug. Galeria knew that turned him on and had every intention of gently tugging his balls just as soon as he was within arm's reach.

But first, Cassian and Atticus had plans to lavish attention on every inch of Galeria's body.

With their warm lips pressing into the flushed flesh of her face and neck, Atticus and Cassian then each claimed one of Galeria's full, pliant breasts, skillfully using their hands and mouths to knead them while worshipping them with slow up and down strokes of their hot tongues. Once Galeria's large, tawny nipples were rock hard, her areolas bumpy and taut, Cassian and Atticus then wrapped their lips around the throbbing points and sucked them until she came. Stimulation of her vampirically supercharged nipples could often lead to orgasm—a fact the guys had very quickly deduced.

And latched onto.

Quite literally.

As Atticus gently pushed her breasts together and sucked first one achingly rigid tip then the other, Cassian created a wet trail of fire as he licked his way south. Moving through the moist down at the crest of her cunt, he parted the slippery, drenched folds to expose the little swollen nub between them. Using the tip of his tongue, Cassian then flicked back and forth over Galeria's clit, inserting a couple of thick fingers into her hot core and stroking in and out. Galeria's whole body tensed, her breaths short and hard as she came again, covering Cassian's fingers and palm in her warm cum. Licking his hand clean, Cassian continued down, covering the entrance to her vagina with his mouth, his tongue exploring her velvety, slick cave. Waves of intense pleasure

undulated through Galeria's entire body, her heart pounded, her skin glistening as she breathlessly rode the surge of sensation once more.

Galeria knew Atticus was eager to pay his own attention to her pussy. Following Cassian's lead, Atticus closed his mouth around Galeria's still-throbbing clitoris and began sucking, even as Cassian fervently tongue-fucked her. Tears filled Galeria's eyes, her immortal soul blown apart, a cascade of orgasms following as the guys ceaselessly worked her respective sweet spots. Running her fingers through Atticus' hair, she urged his face up to look at her.

"I need you," Galeria whispered breathlessly.

A look of desire-tinged comprehension filled the blue green depths of his eyes. He abandoned the aching little bud he had been working and planted a quick kiss on her abdomen then moved to his knees between her legs just as Cassian came around behind her, at her head, and settled on his knees as well. Atticus effortlessly picked her up and, with her legs straddling his muscular thighs, guided her onto his throbbing cock. Galeria gasped as his bulk filled her to capacity. Leaning back, he cupped her ass and rhythmically pulled her against him as he pulsed his hips forward. Galeria fell against his chest, her eyes closing as her vagina molded around his hard length, clutched at it, ever needing more of it. A wet heat bathed her bottom as Cassian licked her crease then encircled the puckered hole, centering it with his tongue—a strange but oddly stimulating sensation. Groaning, Galeria felt the wave of another climax mounting as the points of Atticus' teeth grazed her skin when he kissed her neck. She bit down full and hard on Atticus' shoulder when Cassian nudged the head of his cock into her rectum. Instinctively she tensed at the burning ache, but the warm strength of Cassian's hands and voice quickly worked their magic.

"Just relax," Cassian murmured, his lips pressing against her spine between her shoulders as his hands moved around to caress her breasts. Automatically she felt her muscles loosen, the soreness where he entered her shifting to pressure. "That's it," he whispered as he kissed his way up her neck. Pulling back her hair, he nibbled her earlobe before winding his tongue into her ear. Stretching back with one hand, Galeria reached to cup Atticus' sac but couldn't quite reach it.

"That's okay baby," he said with a sexy grin. "Another time."

He then leaned even farther back until he was nearly horizontal, drawing Galeria forward and her pussy even more onto his stiff cock. She braced herself by placing her hands on either side of Atticus' head as Cassian held her tighter and moved his body forward to slide more of his cock inside her. The feeling of being packed tight and full in two adjacent places was one she always found to be incredibly hot and Galeria moaned as the guys proceeded to delicately but steadily thrust their cocks forward. It was a gradual progression but when at last both Atticus and Cassian were fully buried balls-deep inside her, they began withdrawing their hard, slick cocks nearly all the way out only to slide them back in, moving in syncopation to intensify the sensation for all of them—slow and gentle at first, testing the waters to see how much Galeria wanted. It wasn't long though before she was moaning and bucking, eager for more force and speed from their combined thrusts. Heeding her unspoken pleas, they increased the power and pace of their thrusts until they were all shuddering and moaning, teetering on the brink of orgasm—the kind that only vampires could have.

Anticipating the rapturous release, Galeria's canines grew long and hard as her senses drank in all the titillation of the act—the sound of moist flesh slapping together, the smell of warm cum and blood, the feel of not one but two thick, hard cocks stretching her tight, filling her, bumping her cervix and rubbing her G-spot, the soft cushion of Atticus' sac against her perineum on each down stroke, the sight of him moving beneath her, his eyes flashing, his teeth lengthening as he reached up to touch her face.

Only one sense remained unfulfilled.

Holding his hand lightly, Galeria kissed his thick fingers, sucking one into her mouth as she squeezed her vagina around his rigid cock. When Atticus moaned and drove his cock even deeper into her, Galeria bit down into the fleshy part on his palm just below his thumb, reeling at the taste of the hot, metallic liquid that filled her mouth.

Nearing orgasm, Atticus turned his head and, grabbing one of Galeria's arms, guided her hand to his mouth and bit her wrist. Rivulets of crimson escaped from his lips, clamped on her flesh, to course down his chin and pool at his neck. As Galeria's pussy began to ripple with telltale sensations, she felt the pinch of Cassian's teeth on her shoulder as he sank his fangs into her flesh, never once losing the pace of his powerful thrusts. The endless convulsions ricocheted through her body over and over, each wave more powerful than the other. The keen awareness and sensation of the guys' hot cum being forcefully ejected into her body in two places—she could feel their shafts jerking inside their respective snug sheaths as torrid jets rhythmically spurted from the tight slits in their cock heads—sent tremors of euphoria over her. Each and every time was the most amazing experience she'd ever had.

Well, almost the most amazing.

Beyond being able to come as never before, thanks to the blood Galeria shared with Atticus and Cassian, she could also share their experience of the act—a perk she never grew tired of. Quivering as her own contractions grew stronger and longer, she allowed the guys' sensations to flood and her senses.

Galeria's hot, velvet, elastic-tight tunnel that Cassian claimed did such a number on his hard cock that, powerless to stop, he deliriously thrust into it instinctively over and over again, uncontrollably depositing profuse amounts of semen into the silken, snug wrap that stroked his shaft and tugged the aching knob at its top. The taste of Galeria's blood on his tongue, hot and rich and tinged with Atticus' flavor as well, only intensified each shuddering ejaculation, his groans of ecstasy only muffled by his sucking of her shoulder.

Beneath them, Atticus convulsed in the throes of his own release. The steady, descending drive of Galeria's constricted cunt, so tight and creamy and sultry upon his angling cock, sent him into heavenly euphoria. Much to his amazement, Atticus' semen

production went into overload each and every time he came with Galeria, making his masturbation of the past look like a drop in the bucket. With his massive balls drawn up hard and full against the base of his twitching cock, he exploded one drawn-out, ferocious fountain of cum into her slick sheath after another, his throbbing shaft growing only more acutely sensitive and responsive with each unbelievable discharge. Her blood in his mouth translated directly to this spurting shaft, enhancing his pleasure to the point of euphoria. No longer in control of his body, he swallowed Galeria's blood just as hard and fast as his cum blasted into her time and time again.

Time meant nothing to Galeria, to any vampire. But she knew the minutes-long orgasms that they routinely experienced made time stand still for all of them. When at last they all lay tossed together, arms and legs entwined, skin moist and pink with the residual blush of climax and breaths still hot and uneven, Cassian whispered into Galeria's hair. "You said 'forever'. Are you ever sorry we took you at your word?"

Without a doubt, Galeria knew he was referring to the turning—her turning—all those centuries ago. She twisted around to look him in the eye. "What prompted this?"

Cassian shrugged. "I just wonder sometimes. It's not like we gave you a choice."

"Do you wonder too?" she asked, turning to Atticus.

He stroked the side of her breast with one index finger. "Sometimes."

Galeria let out a deep sigh.

"I told you I would love you both forever. You made that a reality for me." Darkness suddenly clouded her face as she looked from Atticus to Cassian. "Why? Are either one of you sorry?"

The men exchanged a weighted look before they both burst out laughing.

"Oh yeah," Cassian said. "We both really hate this."

"Yeah," Atticus added, chuckling, "If I have to make love to you one more time, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Galeria suppressed a smile as she eyed one after the other, her gaze coming to rest on Atticus as her hand drifted down to encase his cock. "I tell you what you're going to do. You're going to get big and hard for me when I take every inch of you into my mouth. Then you're going to fuck me feverishly until you don't have one single ounce left in those beautiful balls of yours." With a wink, she let her hand drop down to his sac and tugged it lightly.

Atticus' eyes rolled back and he groaned as she continued gently working and pulling his sac.

"And you," she said, tenderly grasping Cassian's ready hard-on. "I'm going to climb on top of you and let you use your mouth and tongue on my pussy. Then after I leisurely reciprocate until you are begging for release, I'm going to ride your stiff sword until it can no longer stand up straight."

Cassian's eyes grew dark with desire. "That may take some riding."

Galeria gave him a lusty laugh. "I've got it in me."

"Not yet. But you're going to."

Swiftly repositioning Galeria so she was straddling his head, Cassian cupped her butt cheeks and pulled her wet pussy down to his mouth. She trembled at the feel of his tongue rimming her labia and flicking against her clit, stroking up and down the long, drenched trail then circling into the tight opening that ached for his touch. In the meantime, Atticus moved around and, perching his butt on the headboard, spread his legs so that his protruding erection lined up just perfectly with Galeria's mouth as she leaned forward. Taking the thick length of his vein-ridged cock into her mouth, she kept her gaze fixed on his face even as her head dipped down and up, creating the sweet suction he so loved.

As he lovingly stroked her hair, his teal eyes fluttering closed, the answer to Cassian's question resounded in Galeria's head—the answer she had not given—the answer she knew that, even in their escalating passion, both Cassian and Atticus could hear.

The Turning

No, I am not sorry you turned me. I am grateful. And always will be. Forever.

About the Author

A former operative for the CIA, Brigit Zahara previously unleashed her passion for excitement and adventure through her work, spending a good deal of her time traveling throughout the United States and Europe, with lengthy spells in New York, Los Angeles, Louisiana, Venice, London, Florence and Malta.

After Brigit took an early retirement, she then looked to her closet habit of writing fiction as a means of indulging her need for pulse-pounding action. From there, her taste very quickly turned to the tantalizing arena of erotica. Brigit has written a number of sizzling titles for Ellora's Cave. She looks forward to writing and publishing many more torrid tales of love and sensuality with this top publisher or erotic literature.

Currently Brigit lives in a seaside villa in Majorca, spending the steamy days penning even steamier stories and the cool, ocean-breeze-kissed evenings researching love scenes with her heart's destiny and husband of nearly eight years.

Brigit welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by **Brigit Zahara**

Bar None

Catch of the Day

Chocolate Craving

Conjured Bliss

Creamy Delights

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy IV anthology

Front Page Fate

Kissing the Blarney Stone

Lollipop Kings

Papaya Paradise

Sandwich Play



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com