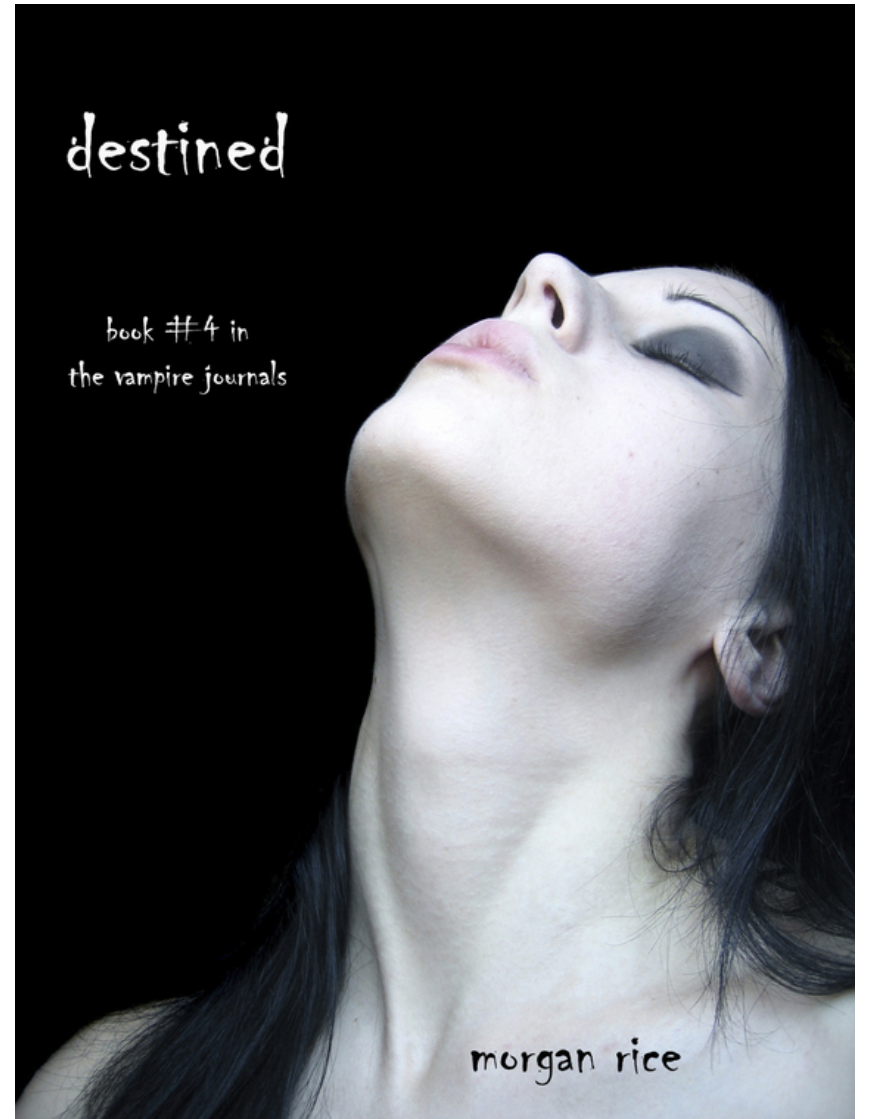


destined

book #4 in
the vampire journals

morgan rice



Morgan Rice

Destined

Серия «Vampire Journals», книга 4

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Аннотация

In DESTINED (Book #4 in the Vampire Journals), Caitlin Paine wakes to discover herself back in time. She finds herself in a cemetery, on the run from a mob of villagers, and seeks refuge in the ancient cloisters of Assisi, in the countryside of Umbria, Italy. There, she learns of her destiny and her mission: to find her father and the ancient vampire Shield needed to save mankind.

But Caitlin's heart still pines for her lost love: Caleb. She desperately needs to know if he has survived their trip back in time. She learns that her mission requires her to go to Florence, but if she wants to pursue matters of the heart, she must go to Venice. She chooses Venice.

Caitlin is overwhelmed at what she finds. Venice of the eighteenth century is a surreal place, men and women dressed in elaborate costumes and masks, celebrating an endless, lavish party. She is thrilled to discover and reunite with some of her close friends, and to be welcomed back into their coven. And she is excited to join them in Venice's Grand Ball, the most important costume dance of the year, where she hopes, once again, to find Caleb.

But Caitlin is not the only one who can travel back in time: Kyle soon arrives, too, and is determined to hunt her down and kill her once and for all. Sam, too, arrives, determined to save his sister before it is too late.

At the Ball, Caitlin searches everywhere, and finds no sign of Caleb. That is, until the very last dance. She dances with a masked man who takes her heart away, and she feels certain that it is him. But as the partners change, she loses him again. Or does she?

Caitlin soon finds herself torn between the two loves of her life, and discovers that she has to be careful what she wishes for. Her joy at finding what she wants might just come mixed with tragedy and heartbreak.

In a climactic, action-packed ending, Caitlin finds herself up against true evil, Rome's ancient vampire coven, and the most powerful vampire coven that ever existed. Surviving will demand all her skills, as she finds herself battling for her very life. She will have to sacrifice more than ever, if she is to save the one she loves...

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Morgan Rice

Destined

(Book #4 in the

Vampire Journals)

*“O my love! my wife!
Death, that hath suck'd the honey of thy breath,
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty:
Thou art not conquer'd; beauty's ensign yet
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks...”*

– William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

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Acclaim for the Vampire Journals

“Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting... Nicely written and an extremely fast read.”

– *Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding Turned)*

“An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist... Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl... one extraordinary girl!... Easy to read but extremely fast-paced... Rated PG.”

– *The Romance Reviews (regarding Turned)*

“Grabbed my attention from the beginning and did not let go... This story is an amazing adventure that is fast paced and action packed from the very beginning. There is not a dull moment to be found.”

– *Paranormal Romance Guild (regarding Turned)*

“Jam packed with action, romance, adventure, and suspense. Get your hands on this one and fall in love all over again.”

– *vampirebooksite.com* (regarding *Turned*)

“A great plot, and this especially was the kind of book you will have trouble putting down at night. The ending was a cliffhanger that was so spectacular that you will immediately want to buy the next book, just to see what happens.”

– *The Dallas Examiner* (regarding *Loved*)

“A book to rival TWILIGHT and VAMPIRE DIARIES, and one that will have you wanting to keep reading until the very last page! If you are into adventure, love and vampires this book is the one for you!”

– *Vampirebooksite.com* (regarding *Turned*)

“Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller... This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked.”

– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Loved*)

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of THE VAMPIRE

JOURNALS, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series **THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY**, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series **THE SORCERER'S RING**, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

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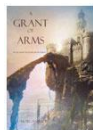
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THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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FACT:

In 2009, the first intact corpse of a supposed vampire was discovered, on the small island of Lazzaretto Nuovo, in the Venice lagoon. The vampire, a woman who died by plague in the 16th century, was found buried with a brick in her mouth – supporting the medieval belief that vampires were behind plagues like the Black Death.

FACT:

Venice in the 1700s was unlike any place on earth. People flocked there from around the world to join in its lavish parties and balls, and to dress in elaborate costumes and masks. It was normal for people to walk the streets in full costume. For the first time in history, there was no longer gender inequality. Women, previously kept down by authority, could now disguise themselves as men, and could thus gain access to anywhere they wished...

Chapter One

Assisi, Umbria (Italy)

(1790)

Caitlin Paine awoke slowly, completely enveloped in the blackness. She tried to open her eyes, to get her bearings on where she was, but it didn't do any good. She went to move her hands, her arms – but that didn't work, either. She felt covered, immersed in a soft texture, and she couldn't figure out what it was. It was heavy, weighing her down, and with each passing moment, it seemed to get heavier.

She tried to breathe, but as she did, she realized her passageways were blocked.

Panicking, Caitlin tried to take a deep breath through her mouth, but when she did, she felt something get lodged deep in her throat. Its smell filled her nose, and she finally realized what it was: soil. She was immersed in soil, covering her face and eyes and nose, entering her mouth. She realized it was heavy because it was weighing down on her, getting heavier by the second, suffocating her.

Unable to breathe, unable to see, Caitlin entered into full-fledged panic. She tried to move her legs, her arms, but they, too, were weighed down. In a fit, she struggled for all she was worth, and finally managed to dislodge her arms just a bit; she

eventually raised them up, higher and higher. Finally, she broke through the soil, and felt her hands make contact with the air. With a renewed strength, she flailed with all she had, frantically scraping and clawing the soil off of her.

Caitlin finally managed to sit up, soil pouring all over her. She brushed at the dirt clinging to her face, her eyelashes, pulled it out of her mouth, her nose. She used both hands, hysterical, and finally, cleared enough to be able to breathe.

Hyperventilating, she took in huge, gulping breaths, never more grateful to be able to breathe. As she caught her breath, she began coughing, wracking her lungs, spitting out soil from her mouth and nose.

Caitlin pried open her eyes, eyelashes still caked together, and managed to open them enough to see where she was. It was sunset. The countryside. She was lying immersed in a mound of soil, in a small, rural cemetery. As she looked out, she saw the stunned faces of a dozen humble villagers, dressed in rags, staring down at her in utter shock. Beside her was a gravedigger, a beefy man, distracted by his shoveling. He still didn't notice, didn't even look her way as he reached over, shoveled another pile of dirt, and threw it her way.

Before Caitlin could react, the new shovelful of dirt hit her right in the face, covering her eyes and nose again. She swatted it away, and sat up straighter, wiggling her legs, using all her effort to get out from under the fresh, heavy soil.

The gravedigger finally noticed. As he went to throw another

shovelful, he saw her, and jumped back. The shovel dropped slowly from his hands, and he took several steps back.

A scream punctured the silence. It came from one of the villagers, the shrill shriek of an old, superstitious woman, who stared down at what should have been the fresh corpse of Caitlin, now rising from the earth. She screamed and screamed.

The other villagers were divided in their reactions. A few of them turned and fled, sprinting to get away. Others simply covered their mouths with their hands, too speechless to say a word. But a few of the men, holding torches, seem to vacillate between fear and anger. They took a few tentative steps towards Caitlin, and she could see from their expressions, and from their raised farm instruments, that they were getting ready to attack.

Where am I? she desperately wondered. *Who are these people?*

As disoriented as she was, Caitlin still had the presence of mind to realize she had to act quickly.

She scraped away at the mound of soil keeping her legs pinned down, clawing at it furiously. But the soil was wet and heavy, and it was slow going. It made her remember a time with her brother Sam, on a beach somewhere, when he had buried her up to her head. She hadn't been able to move. She had begged him to free her, and he had made her wait for hours.

She felt so helpless, so trapped, that, despite herself, she began to cry. She wondered where her vampire strength had gone. Was she merely human again? It felt that way. Mortal. Weak. Just like everybody else.

She suddenly felt scared. Very, very scared.

“Somebody, please, help me!” Caitlin called out, trying to lock eyes with any of the women in the crowd, hoping for a sympathetic face.

But there were none. Instead, there were just looks of shock and fear.

And anger. A mob of men, farm instruments held high, was creeping towards her. She didn't have much time.

She tried to appeal directly to them.

“Please!” Caitlin cried, “it's not what you think! I mean you no harm. Please, don't hurt me! Help me get out of here!”

But that only seemed to embolden them.

“Kill the vampire!” a villager yelled from the crowd. “Kill her again!”

The cry was met by an enthusiastic roar. This mob wanted her dead.

One of the villagers, less afraid than the others, a big brute of a man, came within feet of her. He looked down at her in a callous rage, then raised his pick-axe high. Caitlin could see he was aiming right for her face.

“You will die *this* time!” he yelled, as he wound up.

Caitlin closed her eyes, and from somewhere, deep inside of her, she summoned the rage. It was a primal rage, from some part of her that still existed, and she felt it rising through her toes, coursing through her body, up through her torso. She burned with heat. *It just wasn't fair*, her dying like this, her being attacked,

her being so helpless. She hadn't done anything to them. *It just wasn't fair* echoed through her mind again and again, as her rage built to a fever pitch.

The villager swung hard, aiming right for Caitlin's face, and she suddenly felt the burst of strength she needed. In one move, she jumped up out of the soil and onto her feet, and she caught the axe by its wooden handle, mid-swing.

Caitlin could hear a horrified gasp from the mob – startled, they stepped back several feet. Still holding the axe handle, she looked over to see the brute's expression had changed to one of utter fear. Before he could react, she yanked the axe from his hand, leaned back, and kicked him hard in the chest. He went flying back, through the air, a good twenty feet, and he landed into the crowd of villagers, knocking several over with him.

Caitlin raised the axe high, took several quick steps towards them, and with the fiercest expression she could muster, snarled.

The villagers, terrified, raised their hands to their faces, and shrieked. Some took off for the woods, and the ones that remained cowered.

It was the effect Caitlin wanted. She'd scared them just enough to stun them. She dropped the axe and ran right past them, racing through the field, and into the sunset.

As she ran, she was waiting, hoping, for her vampire powers to come back, for her wings to sprout, for her to be able to simply lift off, and fly far away from here.

But she wasn't so lucky. For whatever reason, it wasn't

happening.

Have I lost it? she wondered. *Am I merely human again?*

She ran with the speed of a mere, regular human, and felt nothing in her back, no wings, no matter how much she willed it. Was she now just as weak and defenseless as all the others?

Before she could find out the answer, she heard a din rising behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw the mob of villagers; they were chasing after her. They were screaming, carrying torches, farm instruments, clubs and picking up stones, as they chased her down.

Please God, she prayed. *Let this nightmare end. Just long enough for me to figure out where I am. To become strong again.*

Caitlin looked down and noticed what she was wearing for the first time. It was a long, elaborate black dress, beautifully embroidered, and it went from her neck down to her toes. It was fit for a formal occasion – like a funeral – but certainly not for sprinting. Her legs were restricted by it. She reached down and tore it above the knee. That helped, and she ran faster.

But it still wasn't fast enough. She felt herself getting tired quickly, and the mob behind her seemed to have endless energy. They were closing in fast.

She suddenly felt something sharp on the back of her head, and she reeled from the pain. She stumbled as it hit her, and reached up and touched the spot with her hand. Her hand was covered in blood. She had been hit by a stone.

She saw several stones fly by her, turned, and saw they were

throwing stones her way. Another one, painfully, hit her on the small of her back. The mob was now only 20 feet away.

In the distance she saw a steep hill, and at its top, a huge, medieval church and cloister. She ran for it. She hoped that if she could just make it there, perhaps she could find refuge from these people.

But as she was hit again, on the shoulder, by another rock, she realized it would do no good. The church was too far, she was losing steam, and the mob was getting too close. She had no choice but to turn and fight. Ironic, she thought. After all she'd been through, after all the vampire battles, after even surviving a trip back in time, she might end up dead by a stupid mob of villagers.

Caitlin stopped in her tracks, turned and faced the mob. If she was going to die, at least she'd go down fighting.

As she stood there, she closed her eyes and breathed. She focused, and the world around her stopped. She felt her bare feet in the grass, rooted to the earth, and slowly but surely felt a primal strength rise up and wash over her. She willed herself to remember; to remember the rage; to remember her innate, primal strength. At one time she had trained and fought with a superhuman strength. She *willed* for it to come back. She felt that somewhere, somehow, it still lurked deep inside of her.

As she stood there, she thought of all the mobs in her life, all the bullies, all the jerks. She thought of her mother, who begrudged her even the smallest kindness; remembered the

bullies who'd chased her and Jonah down that alleyway New York. She thought of those bullies in that barn in the Hudson Valley, Sam's friends. And she remembered Cain's introduction on Pollepel. It seemed that there were always bullies, bullies everywhere. Running from them had never done her any good. Like she'd always done, she'd just have to stand and fight.

As she dwelled on the injustice of it all, the rage built, coursed through her. It doubled and tripled, until she felt her very veins swelling with it, felt her muscles about to burst.

At just that moment, the mob closed in. A villager raised his club and swung for her head. With her newfound power, Caitlin ducked just in time, bent down, and threw him over her shoulder. He went flying several feet in the air, and landed on his back in the grass.

Another man reached back with a large stone, getting ready to bring it down on her head; but she reached up and grabbed his wrist and snapped it back. He sank to his knees, screaming.

A third villager swung at her with his hoe, but she was too quick: she spun around and grabbed it mid-swing. She yanked it from his hands, wound up, and cracked him in the head.

The hoe, six feet long, was just what she needed. She swung it in a wide circle, knocking down anyone within range; within moments, she established a large perimeter around her. She saw a villager reach back with a large stone, gearing up to throw it at her, and she hurled the hoe right at him. It hit him in the hand and knocked the stone from it.

Caitlin ran into the dazed crowd, grabbed a torch from the hand of an old woman, and swung it wildly. She managed to light a section of the tall, dry grass on fire, and there were screams, as many villagers rushed back, in fear. When the wall of fire got large enough, she reached back and hurled the torch directly into the mob. It went flying through the air and landed on the back of a man's tunic, lighting him and the person next to him on fire. The mob quickly gathered around them to put it out.

It served Caitlin's purpose. The villagers were finally distracted enough to give her the running room she needed to take off. She wasn't interested in hurting them. She just wanted them to leave her alone. She just needed to catch her breath, to figure out where she was.

She turned and raced back up the hill for the church. She felt a newfound strength and speed, felt herself bounding up the hill, and knew she was outrunning them. She only hoped that the church would be open, and would let her in.

As she ran up the hill, feeling the grass beneath her bare feet, dusk fell, and she saw several torches being lit in the town square, and along the cloister's walls. As she got closer, she spotted a night watchman, high up on a parapet. He looked down at her, and fear crossed his face. He reached a torch above his head, and screamed: "Vampire! Vampire!"

As he did, the church bells rang out.

Caitlin saw torches appear on all sides of her. People were coming out of the woodwork in every direction, as the watchman

kept screaming, and as the bells tolled. It was a witch-hunt, and they all seemed to be heading directly for her.

Caitlin increased her speed, running so hard that her ribs hurt. Gasping for breath, she reached the oak doors of the church just in time. She yanked one of them open, then wheeled and slammed it behind her with a bang.

Inside, she looked frantically around, and spotted a shepherd's staff. She grabbed it and slid it across the double doors, barring them.

The second she did, she heard a tremendous crash at the door, as dozens of hands pounded on it. The doors shook, but did not give way. The staff was holding – at least for now.

Caitlin quickly surveyed the room. The church, thankfully, was empty. It was huge, its arched ceilings soaring hundreds of feet high. It was a cold, empty place, hundreds of pews on a marble floor; on the far side, above the altar, hung several burning candles.

As she looked, she could have sworn she saw movement at the far end of the room.

The pounding grew more intense, and the door began to shake. Caitlin burst into action, running down the aisle, towards the altar. As she reached it, she saw she had been right: there was someone there.

Kneeling quietly, with his back to her, was a priest.

Caitlin wondered how he could ignore all this, ignore her presence, how he could be so deeply immersed in prayer in a

time like this. She hoped he wouldn't turn her over to her mob.

"Hello?" Caitlin said.

He didn't turn.

Caitlin hurried over to the other side, facing him. He was an older man, with white hair, clean shaven, and light blue eyes that seem to stare into space as he knelt in prayer. He didn't bother looking up at her. There was something else, too, that she sensed about him. Even in her current state, she could tell that there was something different about him. She knew that he was of her kind. A vampire.

The pounding grew louder, and one of the hinges broke, and Caitlin looked back in fear. This mob seemed determined, and she didn't know where else to go.

"Help me, please!" Caitlin urged.

He continued his prayer for several moments. Finally, without looking at her, he said: "How can they kill what's already dead?"

There was a splintering of wood.

"*Please,*" she urged. "Don't turn me over to them."

He rose slowly, quiet and composed, and pointed to the altar. "In there," he said. "Behind the curtain. There's a trap door. Go!"

She followed his finger, but saw only a large podium, covered in a satin cloth. She ran over to it, pulled back the cloth, and saw the trap door. She opened it, and squeezed her body into the small space.

Tucked in, she peered out through the tiny crack. She watched the priest hurry over to a side door, and kick it open with

surprising force.

Just as he did, the main front doors were kicked in by the mob, and they came tearing down the aisle.

Caitlin quickly slid back the curtain all the way. She hoped they hadn't spotted her. She watched through a crack in the wood, and saw just enough to see the mob racing down the aisle, seemingly right for her.

"That way!" screamed the priest. "The vampire fled that way!"

He pointed out the side door, and the mob rushed right past him, and back into the night.

After several seconds, the never-ending stream of bodies fled from the church, and all was finally silent.

The priest closed the door, locking it behind them.

She could hear his footsteps, walking towards her, and Caitlin, shaking with fear, with cold, slowly opened the trap door.

He slid back the curtain and looked down at her.

He extended a gentle hand.

"Caitlin," he said, and smiled. "We've been waiting a very long time for you."

Chapter Two

Rome, 1790

Kyle stood in the darkness, breathing hard. There were few things he hated more than confined spaces, and as he reached out in the blackness and felt the stone encasing him, he broke into a sweat. Trapped. Nothing was worse for him.

He reached back and with his fist and smashed a hole right through the stone. It shattered into pieces, and he shielded his eyes from the daylight.

If Kyle hated anything more than being trapped, it was being struck head-on by daylight, especially without his skin wraps on. He quickly jumped through the rubble and took shelter behind a wall.

Kyle breathed deep and surveyed his surroundings, disoriented, as he wiped the dust from his eyes. This was what he hated about time travel: he never knew exactly where he'd surface. He hadn't attempted it for centuries, and he wouldn't have now if it weren't for that never-ending thorn in his side, Caitlin.

It hadn't taken long after she'd left New York for Kyle to realize that his war was only partially won. With her still on the loose, with her tracking down the shield, he realized he could never rest at ease. He had been on the brink of winning the war,

of enslaving the entire human race, of becoming the unilateral leader of the vampire race himself. But she, this pathetic little girl, was stopping him. As long as the shield was at large, he could not assume absolute power. He had no choice but to track her down and kill her. And if that meant going back in time, then that was what he would do.

Breathing hard, Kyle quickly extracted a skin wrap and wrapped his arms, neck and torso. He looked around, and realized he was in a mausoleum. It looked Roman, from its markings. *Rome.*

He hadn't been here in ages. He had stirred up too much dust by smashing the marble, and the sediment hung thickly in the daylight, making it hard to tell. He took a deep breath, braced himself, and headed outside.

He was right: it was Rome. He looked out, saw the Italian Cypress trees, and knew he could be nowhere else. He realized that he stood at the top of the Roman forum, its green grass, its hills and valleys and crumbling monuments stretched out before him in a gentle slope. It brought back memories. He had killed many people here, back when it was in use, and he had nearly been killed here once himself. He smiled at the thought of it. It was his kind of place.

And it was the perfect place to land. The Pantheon was not far away, and within minutes, he could be before the judges of the Roman Grand Council, its most powerful coven, and have all the answers he needed. He would soon know where Caitlin was,

and if all went well, have their permission to kill her.

Not that he needed it. It was just courtesy, vampire etiquette, the following of thousand-year-old tradition. One always sought permission for a kill in someone else's territory.

But if they refused, he would hardly back down. It could make his life difficult, but he would kill anyone who stood in his way.

Kyle breathed deep in the Roman air, and he felt at home. It had been too long since he'd been back. He had gotten too caught up in being in New York, in vampire politics, in a modern time and place. This was more his style. He could see the horses in the distance, the dirt roads, and guessed he was likely in the eighteenth century. Perfect. Rome was urban, but still naïve, still had 200 years of catching up to do.

As Kyle checked himself, he saw he had survived the trip back in time fairly well. In other trips, he had been far more beaten up, had needed more recovery time. But not this time. He felt stronger than he ever had, ready to go. He felt his wings would sprout right away, that he could fly directly to the Pantheon if he wished, and put his plan into action.

But he wasn't quite ready. He hadn't had a vacation in a long time, and it felt good being back. He wanted to explore a bit, to see and remember what it had been like to be here.

Kyle bounded down the hill with his incredible speed, and in no time at all, he was out of the Forum and onto the bustling, crowded streets of Rome.

He marveled that even 200 years earlier, Rome was still

crowded as could be.

Kyle slowed his pace as he blended into the crowd, walking alongside them. It was a mass of humanity. The wide boulevard, still made of dirt, held thousands of people, hurrying in every direction. It also held horses of all shapes and sizes, along with horse-drawn carts, wagons and carriages. The streets stank of body odor and horse manure. It was now all coming back to Kyle, the lack of plumbing, the lack of bathing – the stench of old times. It made him sick.

Kyle felt himself being jostled in every direction, as the crowd grew thicker and thicker, people of all races and classes hurrying to and fro. He marveled at the primitive storefronts, selling old-fashioned Italian hats. He marveled at the small boys, dressed in rags, who ran up to him, holding out pieces of fruit to sell. Some things never changed.

Kyle turned down a narrow, seedy alleyway, one he remembered well, hoping that it was still as it once was. He was delighted to find that it was: before him stood dozens of prostitutes, leaning against the walls, calling out to him as he walked.

Kyle smiled wide.

As he approached one of them – a large, buxom woman with dyed, red hair and too much makeup – she reached up and stroked his face with her hand.

“Hey big boy,” she said, “looking for a good time? How much do you have?”

Kyle smiled, draped his arm around her, and directed her down a side alleyway.

She gladly followed.

As soon as they turned the corner, she said, “You didn’t answer my question. How much do you got – ”

It was a question she would never finish.

Before she could finish speaking, Kyle had already sunk his teeth deep into her neck.

She tried to scream, but he clamped her mouth shut with his free hand, and pulled her closer, drinking and drinking. He felt the human blood rush through his veins, and felt exhilarated. He had been parched, dehydrated. The time travel had exhausted him, and this was exactly what he’d needed to restore his spirits.

As he felt her body go limp, he sucked more and more, drinking more than he could possibly need. Finally, feeling completely sated, he let her limp body drop to the floor.

As he turned and prepared to exit, a huge man, unshaven, missing a tooth, approached. He extracted a dagger from his belt.

The man looked down at the dead woman, then up to Kyle, and grimaced.

“That was my property,” the man said. “You better got money for that.”

The man took two steps towards Kyle, and lunged at him with the dagger.

Kyle, with this lightning fast reflexes, easily sidestepped, grabbed the man’s wrist, and pulled it back in one motion,

breaking his arm in half. The man screamed, but before he could finish, Kyle snatched the dagger from his hands and in the same motion, slashed his throat. He let the dead body fall limp to the street.

Kyle looked down at the dagger, an intricate little thing with an ivory handle, and nodded. It wasn't half bad. He tucked into his belt and wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. He breathed deeply, and, finally content, walked down the alleyway and back onto the street.

Oh, how he had missed Rome.

Chapter Three

Caitlin walked with the priest down the aisle of the church, as he finished barring the front door and sealing off all the other entrances. The sun had set, and he lit torches as he went, gradually lighting its vast rooms.

Caitlin looked up and noticed all of the huge crosses, and wondered why she felt so at peace here. Weren't vampires supposed to be afraid of churches? Of crosses? She remembered the White Coven's home in the New York Cloisters, and the crosses that had lined the walls. Caleb had told her that certain vampire races embraced churches. He had launched into a long monologue about the history of the vampire race and its relationship with Christianity, but she hadn't listened closely at the time, too enamored of him. Now, she wished she'd had.

The vampire priest led Caitlin through a side door, and Caitlin found herself descending a flight of stone steps. They walked down an arched, medieval passageway, and he continued to light torches as he went.

"I don't think they'll be back," he said, locking another entrance as he went. "They'll comb the countryside for you, and when they don't find you, go back to their homes. That's what they always do."

Caitlin felt safe here, and she was so grateful for this man's help. She wondered why he had helped her, why he had put his

life on the line for her.

“Because I’m of your kind,” he said, turning and looking right at her, his piercing blue eyes boring through her.

Caitlin always forgot how easily vampires could read each other’s minds. But for a moment, she had forgotten that he was one of hers.

“Not all of us fear churches,” he said, answering her thoughts again. “You know that our race is splintered. Our kind – the benevolent kind – need churches. We thrive in them.”

As they turned down another corridor, down another small flight of steps, Caitlin wondered where he was leading them. So many questions raced through her mind, she didn’t know what to ask him first.

“Where am I?” she asked, and realized, as she did, that it was the first thing she’d said to him since they’d met. All her questions came pouring out in a rush. “What country am I in? What year is it?”

He smiled as they walked, the age lines bunching up in his face. He was a short, frail man, with white hair, clean-shaven, and a grandfatherly face. He wore the elaborate garments of a priest, and even for a vampire, he looked very old. She wondered how many centuries he’d been on this earth. She felt kindness and warmth radiate from him, and felt very at peace around him.

“So many questions,” he finally said, with a smile. “I understand. It is a lot for you. Well, to begin with, you are in Umbria. In the small town of Assisi.”

She wracked her brain, trying to figure out where that was.

“Italy?” she asked.

“In the future, yes, this region will be a part of a country called Italy,” he said, “but not now. We are still independent. Remember,” he smiled, “you are no longer in the 21st century – as you may have guessed from the dress and behavior of those villagers.”

“What year is it?” Caitlin asked quietly, almost afraid to know the answer. Her heart beat faster.

“You are in the 18th century,” he answered. “To be more precise: the year 1790.”

1790. Assisi. Umbria. Italy.

The thought of it overwhelmed her. It all felt surreal, as if she were in a dream. She could hardly believe this was really happening, that she was really, actually, *here*, in this time and place. That time travel really worked.

She also felt a bit relieved: of all the times and places she could have landed, Italy in 1790 didn't sound too foreboding. It wasn't like landing in prehistoric times.

“Why were those people trying to kill me? And who are you?”

“Despite all of our advances, this is still a somewhat primitive and superstitious time,” he said. “Even in this age of luxury and decadence, alas, there are still scores of commoners who live very much in fear of us.”

“You see, the small mountain village of Assisi has always been a stronghold for our kind. It is frequented by vampires,

and always has been. Our kind of vampire only feed on their livestock. Still, over time, the villagers begin to take notice.

“Sometimes they’ll spot one of us. And when they do, the situation becomes intolerable. So every now and again, we let them bury us. We let them go through their silly little human rituals, let them feel as if they’ve gotten rid of us. And when they’re not looking, we simply rise again and return back to our lives.

“But sometimes, a vampire rises back too soon, or is seen rising back, and then there comes the mob. It will blow over. These things always do. It brings unwanted attention to our kind, but only temporarily.”

“I’m sorry,” Caitlin said, feeling badly.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “This was your first time travel. You couldn’t control it. It takes some getting used to. Even the best of us can’t control re-surfacing very well. It’s always hard to say exactly when or where we’ll end up. You did fine,” he said, gently placing a hand on her wrist.

They walked down another corridor, this one with low, vaulted ceilings.

“Besides, you didn’t do all that bad,” he added. “After all, you knew enough to come here.”

Caitlin remembered spotting the church as she’d sprinted through the field.

“But it just seemed like the logical place to go,” she answered. “It was the first building I saw, and it seemed like a fortress.”

He smiled, shaking his head. “There is no such thing as coincidence in the vampire world,” he said. “Everything is destined. A building that seems secure to you might seem frail to someone else. No, you chose this spot for a reason. A very specific reason. And you were led to me.”

“But you’re a priest.”

He shook his head slightly. “You’re still very young, and you still have a lot to learn. We have our own religion, our own creed. It is not very different from that of the church. One can be a vampire and still involved in religious life. Especially our type of vampire,” he said. “I even help the humans in their daily spiritual life. After all, I have the benefit and wisdom of thousands of years on this planet – unlike human priests. Luckily, the humans don’t know I am not of their kind. For all they know, I am the town priest, and always have been.”

Caitlin’s mind spun, as she tried to reconcile it all. The image of a vampire priest seemed so paradoxical to her. The notion of a vampire religion, of its working within the church... it all seemed so strange.

As fascinating as all of this was, what she really wanted to know was not about vampires, or churches, or religion. She wanted to know about Caleb. Had he survived the trip? Was he alive? Where was he?

And she wanted desperately to know about their child. Was she still pregnant? Had the baby survived?

She thought these questions very strongly, and hoped the priest

would pick them up, and answer her back.

But he didn't.

She knew he'd heard her thoughts, and was choosing not to respond. He was forcing her to ask these questions aloud. And, as he probably knew, they were questions she was afraid to ask.

"And what of Caleb?" she finally asked, her voice shaking. She was too nervous to ask about her child.

She looked over at him and saw his smile fade, as the slightest wince crossed his face.

Her heart dropped.

Please, she thought. Please don't tell me bad news.

"Some things you're going to have to find out for yourself," he said slowly. "Some things I am not meant to tell you. It is a journey you must take. You and you alone."

"But is he here?" she asked hopefully. "Did he make it?"

The priest, walking alongside her, tightened his lips. He let her questions hang in the air, unanswered, for what felt like forever.

Finally, they stopped before another flight of steps, and he turned and looked at her. "I wish I could tell you more," he said. "I really do."

He turned, raised his torch, and led the way down another small flight of steps.

They entered a long, vaulted corridor, all the ceilings here gilded and intricately designed. They were entirely covered with frescoes, brightly designed, and in between them were arches, lined with gold. The ceiling shone.

So did the floor. It was a beautiful, pink marble, and looked freshly cleaned. This subterranean level of the church was gorgeous, looked like an ancient treasure chamber.

“Wow,” Caitlin heard herself say out loud. “What is this place?”

“It is a place of miracles. You are in the church of Saint Francis of Assisi. This is also his resting place. It is a very holy place in our religion. People – humans and vampires alike – pilgrimage here, from thousands of miles away, just to be in this spot. Francis was the saint of animals, and he was also the saint of all living creatures outside of the human race – including our kind. It is said that miracles happen here. We are protected here by his energy.

“You did not land here by accident,” he continued. “This place is a portal for you. It is a launching pad for you to begin your journey, *your* pilgrimage.”

He turned and faced her.

“What you still fail to see,” he said, “is that you are on a journey. And some pilgrimages take years, and many, many miles.”

Caitlin thought. It was all overwhelming to her. She did not want to be on a journey. She wanted to be back home, with Caleb, safe and secure, in the 21st century, this whole nightmare behind her. She was tired of traveling, of always being on the run, of always searching. She just wanted a normal life again, the life of a teenage girl.

But she stopped herself from that way of thinking. It wasn't helpful, she knew. Things had changed – permanently – and they would never be the same again. She reminded herself that change was the new normal. She was no longer the same old, average, human Caitlin. She was older now. Wiser. And whether she liked it or not, she was on a special mission. She just had to accept it.

“But what is my pilgrimage?” Caitlin asked. “What is my destination? Where is it exactly that I'm going?”

He led her to the end of the final corridor, and they stopped before a large, elaborate tomb.

Caitlin could feel the energy coming off of the tomb, and she knew right away that this was the tomb of Saint Francis. She felt recharged just standing near it, felt herself growing stronger, coming back into her own. She wondered again if she had come back as a human or as a vampire. She missed her powers dearly.

“Yes, you are still a vampire,” he said. “Do not worry. It is just taking time for you to come back to your own.”

She was embarrassed that she forgot, again, to guard her thoughts, but she felt comforted by his words.

“You are a very special person, Caitlin,” he said. “You are very much needed to our race. Without you, I would even go so far as to say, our entire race, and the entire human race, will be on the brink of extinction. We need you. We need your help.”

“But what am I supposed to?” she asked.

“We need you to find the Shield,” he said. “And in order to find the Shield, you will need to find your father. He, and only

he, holds it. And in order to find him, you will need to find your coven. Your *true* coven.”

“But I have no idea where to begin,” she said. “I don’t even know why I’m in this place and time. Why Italy? Why 1790?”

“The answers to these questions you are going to have to find out for yourself. But I assure you you have very special reasons for being back in this lifetime. Special people to see, actions to fulfill. And that this place and time will lead you to the Shield.”

Caitlin thought.

“But I have no idea where my father is. I have no idea where to begin.”

He turned to her and smiled. “But you do,” he answered. “That is your problem. You don’t trust your intuition. You need to learn to search deep within yourself. Try it now. Close your eyes, breathe deeply.”

Caitlin did as he said.

“Ask yourself: where do I need to go next?”

Caitlin did so, wracking her brain. Nothing happened.

“Listen to the sound of your breathing. Let your mind still.”

As Caitlin did so, as she really focused and relaxed, images began to flash in her mind. She finally opened her eyes and looked at him.

“I see two places,” she said. “Florence, and Venice.”

“Yes,” he said. “Very good.”

“But I’m confused. Where do I go?”

“There are no wrong choices in a journey. Each path just

brings us to a different place. The choice is yours. You have a very strong destiny, but you also have free will. You can choose at any step. Now, for example, you are faced with a pivotal choice. In Florence, you will fulfill your obligations, come closer to the Shield. It is what is needed of you. But in Venice, you will fulfill matters of the heart. You will have to choose between your mission and your heart.”

Caitlin’s heart soared.

Matters of the heart. Did that mean that Caleb was in Venice?

She felt her heart drawn to Venice. Yet, intellectually, she knew that Florence was where she *should* be in order to do what was expected of her.

She felt torn already.

“You are a grown woman now,” he said. “The choice is yours to make. But if you follow your heart, there will be heartbreak,” he warned. “The road of the heart is never easy. And never expected.”

“I feel so confused,” she said.

“We do our best work in dreams,” he said. “There is a cloisters next door, and you can sleep here for the night, rest, and decide in the morning. By then, you’ll be fully recovered.”

“Thank you,” she said, reaching out and taking his hand.

He turned to go, and as he did, her heart pounded. There was one more question she needed to ask him, the most important one of all. But a part of her was too scared to ask it. She was trembling. She opened her mouth to speak, but it turned dry.

He was walking down the corridor, about to turn away, when finally, she mustered the courage.

“Wait!” she yelled. Then softer, “Please, I have one more question.”

He stopped in his tracks, but kept his back to her. Oddly enough, he did not turn back around, as if he sensed what she was about to ask.

“My baby,” she said, in a soft, trembling voice. “Is he... she... did it make it? The trip? Am I still pregnant?”

He slowly turned, faced her. Then he lowered his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, so soft that she wasn’t sure if she heard it. “You’ve come back in time. Children can only move forward. Your child lives, but not in this time. Only in the future.”

“But...” she began, trembling, “I thought vampires can only travel back in time, not forwards.”

“True,” he said. “I am afraid that your child lives in a time and place without you.” He lowered his eyes again. “I am so sorry,” he added.

With those final words, he turned and left.

And Caitlin felt as if a dagger had been plunged into her heart.

Chapter Four

Caitlin sat in the stark room of the Franciscan monastery and looked out through the open window, into the night. She had finally stopped crying. It had been hours since she'd left the priest, since she'd heard the news of her lost child. She hadn't been able to stop the tears, or to stop thinking about the life she would have led. It was all too painful.

But after many hours, she cried herself out, and now all that was left were dried up tears on her cheeks. She looked out the window, trying to distract herself, and breathed deep.

The Umbrian countryside spread out before her, and from this vantage point, high up on a hill, she could see the rolling hills of Assisi. There was a full moon out, enough light for her to see that this was a truly beautiful countryside. She saw the small, country cottages dotting the landscape, the smoke rising from the chimneys, and she could already feel that this was a quieter, more relaxed time in history.

Caitlin turned and surveyed her small room, lit only by the moonlight and a small candle burning on a wall sconce. It was made entirely of stone, with only a simple bed in the corner. She marveled at how it seemed to be her fate to always end up in a cloister. This place couldn't be more different than Pollepel, yet at the same time, the small, medieval room reminded her of the room she'd had there. It was designed for introspection.

Caitlin examined the smooth, stone floor, and saw, near the window, two slight imprints, a few inches apart, in the shape of a knee. She wondered how many nuns had prayed here, had knelt before the window. This room had probably seen hundreds of years of use.

Caitlin went over to the small bed, and laid down. It was just a stone slab, really, with the tiniest bit of straw. She tried to get comfortable, rolling on her side – and then she felt something. She reached over and extracted it, and realized with delight what it was: her journal.

She held it up, so happy to have it by her side. Her old trusted friend, it seemed to be the one thing that had survived the journey back. Holding it, this real, tangible thing, made her realize that this was not all a dream. She was really here. Everything had really happened.

A modern pen slipped out of its pages and landed on her lap. She held it up and examined it, thinking.

Yes, she decided. That was exactly what she needed to do. To write. To process. Everything had happened so fast, she'd hardly had time to catch her breath. She needed to play it through in her mind, to think back, to remember. How had she gotten here? What had happened? Where was she going?

She wasn't sure if she knew the answers herself anymore. But by writing, she hoped she could remember.

Caitlin turned the brittle pages over until she found an empty page. She sat up and leaned against the wall, curled her knees to

her chest and began to write.

* * *

How did I end up here? In Assisi? In Italy? In 1790? On the one hand, it doesn't seem like long ago that I was back in the 21st century, in New York, living a normal teenage life. On the other hand, it seems like forever... How did it all begin?

I remember, first, the hunger pangs. My not understanding what they were. Jonah. Carnegie Hall. My first feeding. My inexplicably turning into a vampire. A half-breed is what they called me. I'd felt like I'd wanted to die. All I'd ever wanted was to be like everybody else.

Then there was Caleb. His saving me from the evil coven, rescuing me. His coven in the Cloisters. But they cast me out, as human and vampire relationships were forbidden. I was on my own again – that is, until Caleb rescued me again.

My quest for my father, for the mythical sword that could spare the human race from a vampire war, led Caleb and I all over the place, from one historic place to another. We found the sword, and it got taken from us. As always, Kyle was waiting to ruin things.

But not before I had time to realize what I was becoming. And not before Caleb and I had time to find each other. After they stole the sword, after they stabbed me, as I was dying, he turned me, and saved me once again.

But it didn't turn out like I'd thought. I saw Caleb with his ex-

wife, Sera, and I imagined the worst. I was wrong, but it was too late. He fled, far from me, and into danger. On Pollepel island, I recovered, and trained, and made friends – vampires – closer than I'd ever had. Especially Polly. And Blake – so mysterious, so beautiful. He almost stole my heart. But I came to my senses just in time. I learned I was pregnant, and I realized I had to find and save Caleb from the vampire war.

I went to save Caleb, but it was too late. My own brother Sam, deceived us. He betrayed me, made me think he was someone else. It was because of him that I thought Caleb was not really Caleb, and I killed him, my love. With the sword. With my own hands. I still can't forgive myself.

But I brought Caleb back to Pollepel. I tried to revive him, to bring him back, if there was any possible way. I'd told Aiden that I would do anything, sacrifice anything. I asked him if he could send us back in time.

Aiden had warned me that it might not work. And that if it did, we might not be together. But I'd insisted. I had to.

And now, here I am. Alone. In a foreign place and time. My child gone. And maybe even Caleb gone, too.

Did I make a mistake to come back?

I know I need to find my father, to find the shield. But without Caleb by my side, I don't know if I'll have the strength to go on.

I feel so confused. I don't know what to do next.

Please, God, help me...

* * *

As the sun rose in a huge ball over the horizon, Caitlin ran through the streets of New York. It was the apocalypse. Cars were turned over, bodies lay about, and there was devastation everywhere. She ran and ran, down avenues which never seemed to end.

As she ran, the world seemed to turn on its axis; as it did, the buildings seemed to disappear. The landscape changed, with the avenues turning into dirt paths, the concrete turning into rolling hills. She felt herself running back in time, from a modern age to another century. She felt that if she just ran faster, she could find her father, her true father, somewhere on the horizon.

She ran through small country villages, and then these, too, faded away.

Soon all that was left was a field of white flowers. As she ran through them, she was delighted to see that he was there, on the horizon, waiting. Her father.

As always, he was silhouetted against the sun, but this time, he felt closer than usual. This time, she could see his face, his expression. He was smiling, waiting for her, arms extended for a hug.

She reached him. She embraced him, and he hugged her tight, his muscled torso holding her.

“Caitlin,” he said, his voice exuding such love. “Do you know

how close you are? Do you know how much I love you?"

Before she could respond, she spotted something to the side, and saw that, standing on the other side of the field, was Caleb. He held out a hand towards her.

She took several steps towards him, then stopped and faced her father.

He, too, held out a hand.

"Find me in Florence," her father said.

She turned to Caleb.

"Find me in Venice," Caleb said.

She looked back and forth between the two, torn over which way to go.

* * *

Caitlin woke with a jolt, and sat upright in bed.

She looked around her small room, disoriented.

Finally, she realized it was a dream.

The sun was rising, and she went over to the window, and looked. Assisi in the early morning light was so still, so beautiful. Everyone was still indoors, and smoke rose from the occasional chimney. An early morning mist hung over the fields like a cloud, refracting the light.

Caitlin suddenly wheeled as she heard a creaking noise, and braced herself as she saw her door starting to pry open. She bunched her fists, preparing herself for an unwanted visitor.

But as the door opened wider, she looked down, and her eyes opened wide in delight.

It was Rose, pushing the door open with her nose.

“Rose!” she screamed.

Rose pushed the door open all the way, ran in and leapt up into Caitlin’s arms. She licked her face all over, as Caitlin cried in joy.

Caitlin pulled her back and looked her over. She had filled out, grown bigger.

“How did you find me?” Caitlin asked.

Rose licked her back, whining.

Caitlin sat on the edge of the bed, petting her, and thought hard, trying to clear her mind. If Rose had made it back, perhaps Caleb had, too. She felt encouraged.

Intellectually, she knew she needed to go to Florence. To continue the search. She knew that the key to finding her father, the shield, lay there.

But her heart pulled her to Venice.

If there was even a remote chance that Caleb could be there, she had to find out. She just had to.

She decided. She picked up Rose tightly in her arms, took a running start, and leapt out the window.

She knew that she was recovered now, that her wings would sprout.

Sure enough, they did.

And in moments, Caitlin was flying through the early morning air, over the hills of Umbria, and heading north, on the way to

Venice.

Chapter Five

Kyle walked down the narrow streets of the ancient district of Rome. All around him people were closing shops, retiring for the day. Sunset had always been his favorite time of day, the time he began to feel the strongest. He felt his blood pulsing quicker, felt himself growing stronger with each step. He was so happy to be back in the crowded streets of Rome, especially in this century. These pathetic humans were still hundreds of years away from any type of technology, any type of surveillance. He could tear this place apart with a relaxed and easy heart, and not have to worry about being detected.

Kyle turned down Via Del Seminario, and within moments, it opened up, and he found himself in a large, ancient square, The Piazza Della Rotonda.

And there it stood. Kyle stood there, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. It felt so good to be back. Directly across from him was a place he'd called home for centuries, one of the most important vampire headquarters in the world: the Pantheon.

The Pantheon stood, Kyle was happy to see, as it always had, a massive, ancient stone building, the rear of it jutting out in a circular shape, and its front heralded by huge, imposing stone columns. By day, it was still open to tourists, even during this century. It hosted unseemly mobs of human beings.

But at night, after they closed the doors to the public, the real

owners, the *real* occupants of this building, came out in force: the Grand Vampire Council.

Vampires from covens large and small, from all corners of the world, flocked to it, to attend every session every, all night long. The council ruled in all matters, gave permission, or took it away. Nothing happened in the vampire world without their knowing about it, and in most cases, without their approving.

It all fit so perfectly. This building had originally been built as a temple to the pagan gods. It had always been a place of worship, of gathering, for the dark vampire forces. For anyone with eyes to see, it was obvious: there were odes to pagan gods, frescoes, paintings, statues everywhere. Any human sightseer who took the time to read the mission of this place, could only realize what its true purpose was.

And if that were not enough, there were also all the great vampires buried there. It was a living mausoleum, the perfect place for Kyle and his kind to call home.

As Kyle ascended the steps, it felt like a homecoming. He walked right up to the enormous iron double front doors, slammed the metal knocker four times – the vampire signal – and waited.

Moments later, the heavy doors slid open just a few inches, and Kyle saw an unfamiliar face. The door opened wider, just enough to let Kyle in, and then was slammed quickly behind him. The massive guard, even larger than Kyle, looked down. “They are expecting you?” he asked warily.

“No.”

Kyle, ignoring the guard, took several steps towards the chamber, when suddenly, he felt a cold, icy grip on his arm and stopped. Kyle fumed, burning with rage.

The vampire guard stared down at him with equal rage.

“No one enters without an appointment,” he snapped. “You’re going to have to leave and come back another time.”

“I enter anywhere I choose,” Kyle seethed back. “And if you don’t remove your hand from my wrist, you’re going to suffer greatly.”

The guard stared back, and they were in a deadlock.

“I see that some things never change,” came a voice. “It’s okay, you can let him go.”

Kyle felt the grip release, and turned and saw a familiar face: it was Lore, one of the chief advisers to the Council. He stood there, staring at Kyle, smiling, slowly shaking his head.

“Kyle,” he said, “I never thought I’d see you again.”

Kyle, still fuming from the guard, straightened his jacket and slowly nodded. “I have business with the Council,” he said. “It can’t wait.”

“I’m sorry, old friend,” Lore continued, “it’s a full agenda for today. Some of them have been waiting for months. Pressing vampire business in every corner of the world, it seems. But if you come back next week, I think I might be able to accommodate – ”

Kyle stepped forward. “You don’t understand,” he said tensely,

“I didn’t come from this time. I came from the future. Two hundred years into the future. From a vastly different world. The final judgment has arrived. We are on the brink of victory – total victory. And if I don’t see them right away, there will be grave consequences for us all.”

As Lore stared back, his smile dropped, as he realized the seriousness; finally, after several tense moments, he cleared his throat. “Follow me.”

He turned and strode off, and Kyle followed closely on his heels.

Kyle passed down a long, wide corridor, and within moments, he entered the huge, open chamber. It was immense, wide open, with a soaring, circular ceiling and a marble, shining floor. The room was shaped in a circle, and its periphery was filled with ornate columns and statues looking down on the room, mounted on pedestals.

Standing along the periphery of the room were hundreds of vampires, of every possible race and creed. Kyle knew that these were mostly mercenaries, all as evil as he. They all watched patiently as the Grand Council, on the far side of the room, sat behind their bench and doled out judgment. He felt the electricity in the room.

Kyle walked in, taking it all in. Going to the Council was the right thing to do. He could have tried to ignore them, could have just hunted Caitlin down on his own, but the Council would have intelligence, be able to guide him to her more quickly.

More importantly, he needed their official sanction. Finding Caitlin was not just a personal matter, but a matter of the utmost importance to the vampire race. If the Council endorsed him, and he felt sure that they would, he would not only have their sanction, but their resources. He could kill her quicker, and be home faster, ready to finish out his war.

Without their sanction, he would be just another rogue, mercenary vampire. Kyle had no issue with that, but he didn't want to spend his time watching his back: if he acted without their sanction, they might send vampires out to kill him. He felt confident he could handle himself, but he didn't want to have to waste his time and energy that way.

But if they rejected his demands, he was fully prepared to do whatever he had to to hunt her down.

It was ultimately just one more formality in an endless stream of vampire formalities. This etiquette was the glue that held them all together – but it also annoyed him to no end.

As Kyle walked deeper into the chamber, he looked at the Council. They were just as he remembered them. On the far side of the chamber, the 12 judges of the grand Council sat on a raised dais. They were dressed in stark, black robes, all wearing black hoods which covered their faces. Kyle nonetheless knew what these men were. He had faced them many times over the centuries. Once, and only once, had they pulled back their hoods, and had he actually seen their grotesque, aged faces, faces that had walked the planet for millions of years. He flinched at the

memory. They were hideous creatures of the night.

Yet they were the Grand Council of his time, and they had always resided here, ever since the Pantheon was built. It was really a part of them, this building, and no one of his kind, not even Kyle, dared cross their judgment. Their powers were just too intense, and the resources at their fingertips too vast. Kyle could maybe get away with killing one or two of them, but the armies they could summon, from every corner of the world, would eventually hunt him down.

The hundreds of vampires in the room came to witness the Council's judgments, and to await their audience. They always lined up neatly along the sides, stood at attention, in a huge circle, on the outskirts, leaving the center of the room entirely open. Save for one person. That was always the person who needed to stand before them in judgment.

Right now, it was some poor soul, standing by himself, trembling in fear as he stood across from them, staring at their inscrutable hoods, waiting for their judgment. Kyle had been in that spot before. It was not pleasant. If they did not like the matter with which you approached them, they might, on a whim, kill you on the spot. You never went before them lightly – it was always a matter of life and death.

“Wait here,” Lore whispered to Kyle, as he headed off into the crowd. Kyle stood on the periphery, watching.

As Kyle watched, a judge nodded, ever so slightly, and two vampire soldiers appeared from either side. Each grabbed one

arm of the person facing the Council.

“No! NO!” he screamed.

But it didn't do him any good. They dragged him away, as he screamed and struggled, knowing that he was being carried off to death, and knowing that nothing he said or did would do any good. He must have asked them for something they had not approved of, Kyle realized, as the vampire's screams echoed throughout the chamber. Finally, a door opened, he was led outside, and the door slammed behind him. The room fell silent again.

Kyle could feel the tension in the air, as the other vampires looked at each other, dreading the moment of audience.

Kyle saw Lore approach an attendant, close to the Council, and whisper in his ear. The attendant, in turn, walked up to a judge, knelt down, and whispered in his ear.

The judge turned his head ever so slightly, and the man pointed, right to Kyle. Even from this great distance, Kyle could feel the judge's eyes bore into him, hidden in his hood. Despite himself, Kyle felt a shiver. Finally, he was in the presence of true evil.

The attendant nodded, and that was Kyle's cue.

Kyle pushed his way through the crowd, and walked right out to the center of the empty floor. He stood in the small circle in the center of the room – the spot. He knew that if he looked up, directly above his head would be the hole in the ceiling, the oculus, open to the sky. In the daytime, it allowed in a shaft of

sunlight; now, at sunset, the light was filtered, and very weak. The room was lit mostly by torches.

Kyle knelt and bowed, waiting for them to address him, as was proper vampire etiquette.

“Kyle of the Blacktide Coven,” a judge announced slowly. “You are bold to approach us unannounced. If your request does not meet our approval, you know that you risk the death penalty.”

It was not a question; it was a statement. Kyle knew the consequences. But he didn’t fear the outcome.

“I am aware, my master,” Kyle said simply, and waited.

Finally, after a slight rustling, there came another pronouncement: “Then speak. What do you request of us?”

“I’ve come from another time. Two hundred years in the future.”

A loud murmur rose throughout the room. An attendant banged on the floor with his staff three times, and screamed, “Silence!”

Finally, the room quieted down.

Kyle continued. “I do not time travel lightly, as none of us do. There was an urgency. In the future, in the time that I live, there will be a war – a glorious vampire war. It will begin in New York and spread from there. It is the vampire Apocalypse we have dreamed of. Our kind will finally be victorious. We will wipe out the entire human race and enslave them. We will also wipe out the benevolent vampire covens, anyone who stands in our way.

“I know, because I am the leader of this war.”

There arose another loud murmur, followed by the banging of the staff.

“But my war is not complete,” Kyle yelled over the din. “There remains but one thorn in my side, one person who can ruin everything we’ve achieved, who can ruin this glorious future for our race. She comes from a special lineage, and she has come back in time, likely to escape me. I’ve come back to find her, and to kill her once and for all. Until I do, the future remains uncertain for us all.

“I come before you today to ask permission to kill her, here in your place, and time. I also would like your assistance in finding her.”

Kyle lowered his head again and waited. His heart beat faster, as he awaited their judgment. Of course, it would be in their best interest to help him, and he could see no reason why they wouldn’t. But then again, these creatures, alive for millions of years, older even than he, were completely unpredictable. He never knew what agenda the twelve of them had, and their rulings always seemed as arbitrary as the wind.

He waited amidst the thick silence.

Finally, there was the clearing of a throat.

“We know of whom you speak, of course,” came the gravelly voice of a judge. “You speak of Caitlin. Of what will be the Pollepel Coven. But who is, really, of a different, and far more powerful coven. Yes, she arrived in our time yesterday. Of course we know this. And if we wanted to kill her ourselves, don’t you

think that we would have?”

Kyle knew better than to respond. They needed their little point of pride. He would just let them finish their speech.

“But we do admire your determination, and your future war,” the judge continued. “Yes, we admire it very much.”

There was another moment of thick silence.

“We will let you track her down,” continued the judge, “but if you find her, you will not kill her. You will capture her alive, and bring her back to us. We would rather enjoy killing her ourselves, and watching her die slowly. She will be a perfect candidate for the Games.”

Kyle felt himself seething with rage. *The Games. Of course.* That was all that these sick, old vampires ever cared about. He remembered now. They converted the Coliseum into an arena for their sport, pitted vampire against vampire, vampire against human, vampire against beasts, and loved to watch them all tear themselves to pieces. It was cruel, and in his own way, Kyle admired it.

But it was not what he wanted for Caitlin. He wanted her dead. Period. Not that he minded her being tortured. But he didn't want to waste any time, to leave any room for chance. Of course, no one had ever escaped or survived the Games. But at the same time, one never knew what could happen.

“But, my masters,” Kyle protested, “Caitlin, as you said, hails from a powerful lineage, and she is much more dangerous and elusive than you imagine. I request your permission to kill her

instantly. There is too much at stake.”

“You are still young,” said another judge, “and so we will forgive your guessing our judgment. Anyone else, we would kill on the spot.”

Kyle lowered his head. He realized he had gone too far. No one *ever* argued against the judges.

“She is in Assisi. That is where you will go next. Go quickly, and do not delay. Now that you’ve mentioned it, we quite look forward to watching her die before our eyes.”

Kyle turned to go.

“And Kyle,” one of them called.

He spun around.

The lead judge pulled back his hood, revealing the most grotesque face Kyle had ever seen, covered in bumps and lines and warts. He opened his mouth and smiled a hideous smile, showing yellow, sharp teeth, and shining black eyes. He grinned even wider: “Next time you show up unannounced, it will be *you* who dies slowly.”

Chapter Six

Caitlin flew over the idyllic Umbrian countryside, passing over hills and valleys, surveying the lush, green landscape in the early morning light. Spread out below her were small farming communities, small, stone cottages surrounded by hundreds of acres of land, smoke rising from their chimneys.

As she headed north, the landscape changed, shifting to the hills and valleys of Tuscany. As far as she looked, she saw vineyards, planted in the rolling hills, and workers with large straw hats already at work, tending the vines in the early morning. This country was incredibly beautiful, and a part of her wished that she could just descend right here, settle down and make herself at home in one of these small farm cottages.

But she had work to do. She continued on, flying further north, holding Rose tightly, curled up inside her shirt. Caitlin could feel that Venice was approaching, and she felt like a magnet drawn to it. The closer she came, the more she could feel her heart beat in anticipation; she could already sense people there that she once knew. She was still obscured as to who. She still couldn't sense whether Caleb was there, or whether he was even alive.

Caitlin had always dreamed of going to Venice. She had seen pictures of its canals, of gondolas, and had always imagined herself going there one day, maybe with someone she loved. She had even imagined herself being proposed to on one of those

gondolas. But she had never expected to be going like this.

As she flew and flew, getting ever closer, it struck her that the Venice she'd be visiting now, in 1790, might be very different from the Venice she'd seen pictures of in the 21st century. It would probably, she imagined, be smaller, less developed, more rural. She also imagined that it would not be as crowded.

But she soon realized that she couldn't be more wrong.

As Caitlin finally reached the outskirts of Venice, she was shocked to see, even from this height, that the city beneath her looked startlingly similar to its pictures in modern times. She recognized the historic, famous architecture, recognized all the small bridges, recognized the same twists and turns to the canals. Indeed, she was shocked to realize that the Venice of 1790 was not, at least in outward appearances, all that different from the Venice of the 21st century.

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Venice's architecture was not just 100 or 200 years old: it was hundreds and hundreds of years old. She remembered a history class, in one of her many high schools, teaching about Venice, about some of its churches, built in the 12th century. Now she wished she had listened more carefully. The Venice below her, a sprawling, built-up mass of buildings, was not a brand-new city. It was, even in 1790, already several hundred years old.

Caitlin felt comforted by the fact. She had imagined that the year 1790 would be like a different planet, and she was relieved to know that some things actually hadn't changed that much. This

looked to be essentially the same city she would have visited in the 21st century. The only immediate difference she could see was that its waterways did not contain a single motorized boat, of course. There were no speedboats, no large ferries, no cruise ships. Instead, the waterways were packed with huge sailing vessels, their masts climbing dozens of feet high.

Caitlin was also surprised by the crowds. She dove lower, now only a hundred feet over the city, and could see that even now, in the early morning, the streets were absolutely packed with people. And that the waterways were absolutely packed with boat traffic. She was shocked. This city was more congested than Times Square. She had always imagined that going back in history would mean fewer people, smaller crowds. She guessed she was wrong about that, too.

As she flew over it, as she circled it again and again, the thing that surprised her most, though, was that Venice was not just one city, just one island – it was spread out over many islands, dozens of islands stretching in every direction, each holding its own buildings, its own small city. The island on which Venice sat clearly held the most buildings, and was the most built-up. But the dozens of other islands all seemed interconnected, a vital part of the city.

The other thing that surprised her was the color of the water: a glowing, blue aqua. It was so light, so surreal, the kind of water she might have expected to find somewhere in the Caribbean.

As she circled over the islands, again and again, trying to

orient herself, to figure out where to land, she regretted never having visited it in the 21st century. Well, at least she'd have a chance now.

Caitlin was also a bit overwhelmed. It seemed such a large, sprawling place. She had no idea where to set down, where to even begin to look for the people she might have once known – if they were even here. She had foolishly imagined Venice to be smaller, more quaint. Even from up here, she could already tell that she could walk this city for days and not go from one end to the other.

She realized that there would be no place to set down inconspicuously on the actual island of Venice. It was too crowded, and there was no way to approach it without being conspicuous. She didn't want to call that kind of attention to herself. She had no idea what other covens were down there, and how territorial they were; she had no idea if they were kind or malevolent; and she had no idea if the humans here, like those in Assisi, were on the lookout for vampires, and would hunt her down. The last thing she needed was another mob.

Caitlin decided to land on the mainland, far from the island. She noticed huge boats, filled with people, that seemed to be setting out from the mainland, and she figured that would be the best staging off point. At least the boats would take her right into the heart of the city.

Caitlin landed inconspicuously behind a grove of trees, on the mainland, not too far from the boats. She sat Rose down, who

immediately ran to the closest bush and relieved herself. When she was done, Rose looked up at Caitlin and whined. Caitlin could see in her eyes that she was hungry. She empathized: she was, too.

The flying had tired her out, and Caitlin realized that she wasn't fully recovered yet. She also realized that she had worked up an appetite. She wanted to feed. And not on human food.

She looked around and saw no deer in sight. There wasn't time to go searching. A loud whistle came from the boat, and she felt it was about to depart. She and Rose would have to wait, and figure it out later.

With a pang, Caitlin felt homesick, missed the safety and comfort of Pollepel, missed being by Caleb's side, his teaching her how to hunt, his guiding her. By his side, she always felt that everything would be all right. Now, on her own, she wasn't so sure.

* * *

Caitlin walked, Rose by her side, to the closest boat. It was a large, sailing boat with a long rope ramp leading down to the shore, and as she looked up, she saw that it was completely packed with people. The final passengers were heading up the ramp, and Caitlin hurried up, with Rose, hurrying to get on before it was removed.

But she was surprised by a large, beefy hand, which slapped

her hard on the chest, reaching out and stopping her.

“Ticket,” came the voice.

Caitlin looked over and saw a big, muscular man scowling down at her. He was uncouth and unshaven, and he smelled even from here.

Caitlin’s anger rose. She was already on edge from not eating, and she resented his hand stopping her.

“I don’t have one,” Caitlin snapped. “Can’t you just let us on?”

The man shook his head firmly and turned away, ignoring her. “No ticket, no ride,” he said.

Her anger rose another notch, and she forced herself to think of Aiden. What would he have told her? *Breathe deep. Relax. Use her mind, not your body.* He would have reminded her that she was stronger than this human. He would’ve told her to center herself. To focus. To use her *inner* talents.

She closed her eyes and tried to focus on her breathing. She tried to gather her thoughts, to direct them at this man.

You will let us on the boat, she willed. You will do it without our paying you.

Caitlin opened her eyes and expected him to be standing there, offering her passage. But, to her chagrin, he wasn’t. He was still ignoring her, untying the last of the ropes.

It wasn’t working. Either she had lost her mind control powers, or they hadn’t fully come back yet. Or maybe she was just too frazzled, wasn’t centered enough.

She suddenly remembered something. Her pockets. She

quickly searched them, wondering what, if anything, she had brought back from the 21st century. She found something, and was relieved to see it was a \$20 bill.

“Here,” she said, handing it to him.

He took it, crumpled it, and held it up, examining it.

“What is this?” he asked. “I don’t know this.”

“It’s a \$20 bill,” Caitlin explain, realizing, even as she explained it, how stupid she sounded. Of course. Why *would* he recognize it? It was American. And it wouldn’t exist for another two hundred years.

With a pang of fear, Caitlin suddenly realize that all of the money she had on her would be useless.

“Garbage,” he said, shoving it back into her hand.

Caitlin looked over and saw with a pang of fear that they were undoing the ropes, that the boat was preparing to depart. She thought quick, reached again into her pockets, and pulled out some change. She looked down, found a quarter, and reached out and handed it to him.

He took it, more interested, and held it up to the light. Still, though, he wasn’t convinced.

He pushed it back into her palm.

“Come back with real money,” he said; he also looked at Rose, and added, “and no dogs.”

Caitlin’s mind turned to Caleb. Maybe he was there, just out of her reach, on the island of Venice, just a boat ride away. She felt furious that this man was keeping her from him. She *had*

the money – just not *his* money. Plus, the boat barely looked seaworthy, and it held hundreds of people. Did one more ticket really make such a big difference? It just wasn't fair.

As he stuck the money into Caitlin's palm, he suddenly clasped his big, sweaty hand over hers, and grabbed her wrist. He leered down and broke into a big, crooked smile, revealing several missing teeth. She could smell his bad breath.

"If you have no money, you pay me in other ways," he said, broadening his creepy smile, and as he did, he reached up with his other hand and touched her cheek.

Caitlin's reflexes kicked in, and she automatically reached up and swatted his hand away, hard, and extracted her wrist from his grasp. She was surprised by her own strength.

He looked back at her, apparently shocked that such a small girl would have such force, and his smile turned to an indignant scowl. He hocked up something from his throat, and then spit right at her feet. Caitlin looked down and saw it land on her shoes, and was revolted.

"You lucky I no cut you up," he grunted at her, then abruptly turned his back and went back to untying the ropes.

Caitlin felt her cheeks redden, as the rage overcame her. Were men the same everywhere? In every time and age? Was this a preview of what she could expect for the treatment of women in this time and place? She thought of all the other women out there, of everything that they must have had to put up with in this time, and she felt her anger grow. She felt like she needed

to stand up for all of them.

He was still bent over, untying the ropes, and she quickly leaned back and kicked the brute hard, right on his butt. The kick sent him flying over the peer, head first, right into the water, fifteen feet below. He landed with a loud splash.

Caitlin quickly ran up the rope ramp, Rose by her side, and pushed her way onto the huge sailing ship, packed with people.

It had happened so fast, no one, she hoped, had seen it. That seemed to be the case, as the crew pulled in the roped walkway, and the ship began to set sail.

Caitlin hurried to the edge and looked down: she could see him splashing in the water, bobbing his head up, as he raised a fist up at the boat.

“Stop boat! Stop boat!” the man screamed.

His cries were drowned out, though, as hundreds of excited passengers cheered at the boat’s finally setting sail.

One of the crew noticed him, though, and ran over to the side of the boat, following the man’s finger, as he pointed towards Caitlin.

Caitlin didn’t wait to see what happened. She quickly ducked into the thick of the crowd, Rose at her side, ducking and weaving this way and that, until she was deep in the center of the boat, in the thick of the masses. She pushed deeper, and kept moving. There were hundreds of people crammed together, and she hoped they wouldn’t spot her, or Rose.

Within minutes, the boat was gaining speed. After a while,

Caitlin finally breathed deep. She realized that no one was coming after her, or, as far as she could tell, even searching for her.

She began to cut her way through the crowd more calmly, Rose beside her, heading towards the far side of the boat. She finally made it, squeezed her way beside the crowded railing, and leaned over and looked.

In the distance, the brute was still bobbing in the water, pulling himself up onto the dock – but by now he was just a dot on the horizon. Caitlin smiled. Served him right.

She turned the other way and saw that Venice loomed straight ahead.

She smiled wider, leaning over and feeling the cool seawater pushing back her hair. It was a warm day in May, and the temperature was perfect, and the salt air refreshing. Rose jumped up beside her, pressing her paws on the edge of the railing, and looked out and smelled the air, too.

Caitlin had always loved boats. She had never visited an authentic, historic sailing ship – much less, sailed on one. She smiled and corrected herself: this was no longer a *historic* ship. It was a modern one. It was 1790 after all. She almost laughed aloud at the thought.

She looked up at the tall wooden masts, rising into the sky. She watched as the sailors all lined up and heaved on the thick ropes; as they did, yard and yards of heavy canvas were raised, and she could hear the flapping of the material. It looked heavy,

and the sailors sweated in the sun, yanking the ropes with all they had just to raise the canvas a few inches.

So this was how it was done. Caitlin was impressed by the efficiency of it all, by how seamlessly it worked. She couldn't believe how fast this huge, crowded boat was moving, especially without the benefit of modern engines. She wondered what the captain of the ship would do if she told him about 21st century engines, about how much faster he could go. He'd probably think she was crazy.

She looked down and saw, about twenty feet below, the water rushing by her, small waves lapping against the side of the boat. The water was so light, so blue, it was magical.

All around her, people squeezed in, all trying to make their way to the railing and look out. She looked around and realized how simply most of them were dressed, many in tunics and sandals, and some barefoot. Others, though, were dressed elegantly, and seemed to try to keep away from the masses. A few people wore elaborate masks, with a long, beaked nose. They laughed and jostled each other, and seemed drunk.

In fact, as she looked, she noticed that a good portion of the passengers were swigging from bottles of wine and seemed drunk, even in the early morning. The entire boat, now that she noticed it, had a festive, rowdy atmosphere, as if they were all on their way to a giant party.

Caitlin pushed her way along the railing, through the crowd, past parents holding up children, and slowly but surely made her

way to the front. Finally, she had the view she wanted. She leaned over the edge, and watched as the boat bore down directly on Venice.

The unimpeded site of the city took her breath away. She could see its outline, the beautiful, historic buildings, all lined up neatly next to each other, all built to face the water. Some of the facades were really grand, ornate, their white façades covered in all sorts of moldings and details. Many had arched walls and arched windows open to the water, and, amazingly, had their main entry doors right at water level. It was incredible. One could literally pull right up to one's front door by boat and step inside.

Amidst all the buildings, there were spires rising from churches, and occasional domes punctuating the horizon. This was a city of magnificent architecture, of a grand, ornate style, and it all seemed designed to face the water. It did not merely co-exist with the water – it embraced it.

And all along it, connecting one side of the city to the other, were small, arched footbridges, steps rising up each side and a wide plateau in the middle. These were crowded with people walking up and down or just sitting on the edge, watching all the ships as they passed by.

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