

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a person's face, focusing on the mouth. The person has pale skin and is wearing bright red lipstick. Their mouth is slightly open, revealing two sharp, white fangs. A thick, dark red liquid, presumably blood, is smeared across the lower lip and is dripping down the side of the face. The background is dark and out of focus.

obsessed

book #12 in the Vampire Journals

morgan rice

Morgan Rice

Obsessed

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OBSESSED (BOOK #12 IN THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS) by Morgan Rice:

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Аннотация

In *OBSESSED*, 16 year old Scarlet Paine races to save her true love, Sage, before he is killed at the hand of the Immortalists. Alienated from her friends and family—and with only one night left before Sage is wiped out—Scarlet is forced to choose whether to sacrifice it all for him.

Caitlin and Caleb race desperately to save their daughter, still determined to find a way to cure Scarlet and to end vampirism for all time. Their quest leads them to one shocking secret after the next as they seek to find the ancient, lost vampire city, hidden deep beneath the Sphinx in Egypt. What they find may just change the destiny of the vampire race for all time.

Yet it may still be too late. The Immoralist nation is intent on killing Scarlet and Sage, while Kyle, too, is on a murderous rampage, turning Vivian and the entire high school into his own vampire army, set on destroying the town.

In OBSESSED, the shocking finale of the 12 book series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, Scarlet and Caitlin will be left with a monumental choice—one that will change the world forever. Will Scarlet make the ultimate sacrifice to save Sage's life? Will Caitlin give up everything to save her daughter? Will they both risk everything for love?

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Rice Morgan OBSESSED (BOOK #12 IN THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS) by Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan's new epic fantasy series, OF CROWNS AND GLORY, will publish in April, 2016, beginning with book #1, SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN.

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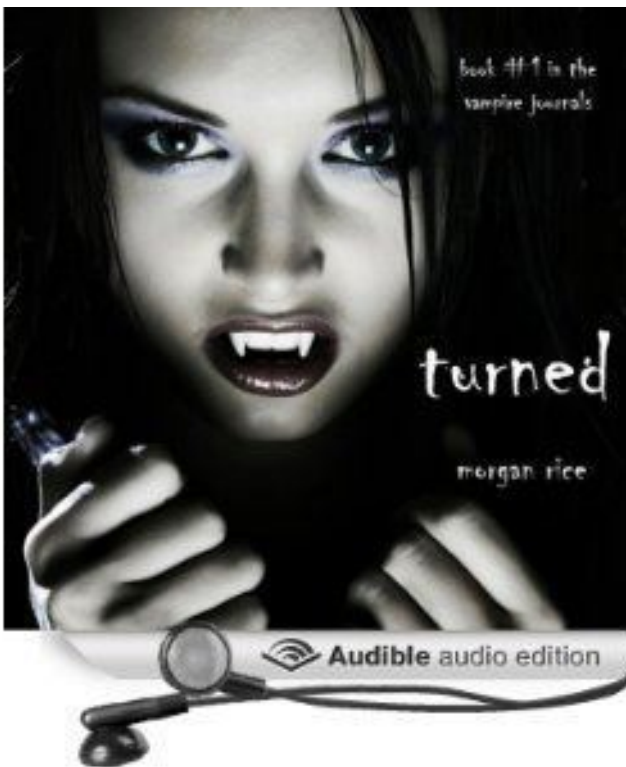


THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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“Thus, with a kiss, I die.”

– *William Shakespeare*
Romeo and Juliet

CHAPTER ONE

From the roof of the ancient Boldt Castle, Scarlet Paine could hear Sage's agonized screams. They echoed through the cold November night, each one feeling like a knife slicing into her heart. She could not bear the thought of it, of Sage being tortured to death by his own kind because he loved her, because he would not kill her in order to live two thousand more years. Scarlet had never dreamed she would be loved so fiercely by someone, so fiercely that they would actually die for her. And yet here she was, about to do the same for him.

Lore, Sage's cousin, had lured her to Boldt Castle. The Immortalists' two-thousand-year life span would be over once the moon waned, and Lore was desperate to take her life – the only way to save theirs. She, the last vampire on Earth, had to be sacrificed. Even though Scarlet knew it was a trap, she had to come. She knew her life would end here tonight, yet it would be worth it for a chance to save Sage.

Another one of Sage's screams pierced the night. Scarlet couldn't bear to listen to his agony any longer. She drew herself out standing and flapped her wings so that she was hovering an inch or two above the castle's old, sloping slate tiles. Then, heart pounding, she flew down through the window.

The room was at least a hundred feet high. Scarlet swooped through the shadows of the vaulted ceiling and perched on one

of the old wooden ceiling beams. She felt a wave of heat coming from below her and glanced down. The hall was filled with an agitated, angry crowd of Immortalists. There must have been at least a thousand of them in here. The crowd looked like a swarm of insects from this distance, some pacing back and forth whilst others were swooping a few yards above the ground. They were far enough below, at least, for them not to notice her hiding there.

Scarlet clung to her perch, feeling her palms grow slippery with anxious perspiration, waiting for her chance, psyching herself up to jump.

Down below, the Immortalists were fixated in one particular direction: a slightly raised platform that stood at one end of the room. There was an impossibly tall man on the stage, holding a long staff. He seemed to be jabbing the staff against a large cross.

Scarlet cocked her head in confusion as the cross appeared to move. It was then that she realized there was someone shackled to the cross, someone who writhed in pain every time the man's staff was jabbed into him.

Her heart lurched as she realized: Sage.

Anger rippled through every fiber of Scarlet's being. The man she loved was strung out by his arms and legs. His head was drooping forward onto his chest with exhaustion and his hair was slick with sweat. Blood had dripped down his torso and pooled at his feet. Scarlet wanted to scream out for him but knew she had to keep quiet or risk being spotted by the braying crowd. She felt sick to her stomach knowing that Sage's torture was on display,

that he was at the center of their hatred.

Scarlet watched in horror as the man in the long crimson cloak on the stage brandished the staff with a cross at its end before slamming it against the floor. The stone tiles made a loud noise that reverberated through the cavernous space.

“Will you relinquish?” the man screamed. “Will you give the girl up?”

He appeared to be the instigator of the torture and Scarlet concluded that he must be the Immortalists’ leader. She remembered Sage telling her about the man who commanded his race. His name was Octal and from what Sage had told her, he was a violent tyrant.

“Answer me!” Octal screamed.

The crowd joined in with a loud jeer.

Scarlet could not hear Sage’s answer from this distance but she knew that whatever he had said was not what Octal wanted to hear, because he leaned forward and pushed the metal staff into Sage’s chest. Sage let out a blood-curdling scream.

Scarlet could hold herself back no longer. She leapt from the beam she’d been crouched on and screamed at the top of her lungs.

“STOP!”

As she began soaring down toward the crowd, the Immortalists below turned their gazes up to her in one sharp, sudden movement. Scarlet faltered and her wings suddenly seized up with terror. She began plummeting through the air on a

collision course with the angry mob below.

From far away, Scarlet could hear Sage scream her name. It was the scream of a desperate man in love, a man whose heart was being torn from his body, a man whose pain at seeing his lover race toward death was far greater than the pain of the torture he'd just been enduring.

Scarlet flapped her wings frantically, but it was no use. The terror she felt had overwhelmed her powers. She was falling faster and faster toward the angry crowds. She knew that when she reached them they would rip her to pieces, for her death was the only way they could survive. Their jeers and shouts grew louder the closer she raced toward them.

As she fell, time seemed to slow down and the faces of her friends and family flashed through her mind's eye – her best friend, Maria, her mother, Caitlin, Ruth the dog. Even Vivian flashed into her mind even though Scarlet had hated her.

Then a beautiful face appeared before her eyes, one that made her gasp. It was Sage's face. In her odd slow-motion plummet, Scarlet managed to tip her head to the side and lock eyes with the real life Sage. Though he was covered in sweat and blood and grimacing with pain, he was no less beautiful to her than the perfect memory her brain had conjured up. As they made eye contact, Scarlet felt a surge of love race through her. Though she knew she was mere seconds from dying, she no longer feared it, because she knew she would die loved.

She closed her eyes and prepared for impact.

But before Scarlet hit the ground, Octal stepped forward and affixed his translucent eyes on her tumbling form. Effortlessly and without emotion he rose into the air and reached out for her. She felt his hands tighten around her arm. He pulled her into him as though plucking her from the air. All at once the rushing, racing sensation she'd been feeling was replaced by a gentle lull as they began floating in a controlled manner to the ground.

Scarlet opened her eyes, almost unable to believe that she was not in fact dead. But whilst the immediate fear of death drained from Scarlet's body, she knew the danger had not passed. Octal may have saved her from dashing her brains against the hard tiles of the church but she knew he hadn't saved her life out of compassion. He was a torturer. It dawned on Scarlet that he had saved her only in order to kill her in a more unpleasant manner.

She peered over Octal's shoulder at Sage.

"Scarlet!" Sage shouted.

Octal let Scarlet down. The crowd surged forward but Octal held his arms up as if to keep them back. The crowd obeyed. Scarlet didn't know why, but Octal was giving her and Sage one last chance to be together, one last chance to say goodbye.

With the eyes of a thousand seething Immortalists on her, Scarlet ran toward Sage. Her eyes blurred with tears as she flung her arms around him and buried her face into his neck. His skin was searing hot, as though fighting a fever. She held him as tight as she could, fearing it may be the last time she ever would.

"Scarlet," Sage murmured into her ear.

She drew back and held up his head. His eyes were puffy and bruised, and his bottom lip was split and swollen. Scarlet's heart ached to see him like that. She wanted to kiss him, to kiss away the pain and heal him, but she knew she had no time. Instead, she swiped a tendril of hair from his face and placed a delicate kiss on his forehead, the only part of him that did not look bruised or broken.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"Lore. He left me a note telling me you were here."

Fear flashed in Sage's eyes. "It's a trap. They will kill you."

"I know," Scarlet gasped. "But I had to see you. My life is in ruins anyway."

She thought of her parents and their constant arguing, of her mother's promise to eradicate her, of her house turned upside down by Lore, of Vivian who hated her guts and her friends who seemed to have turned on her.

"You're the only good thing left in my life," she added with sincerity. "Don't you remember me saying that if you died, I'd die with you?"

She tried to smile reassuringly but the look in Sage's eyes made a pit of pain open up inside her stomach.

He shook his head.

"I wanted you to live, Scarlet," he gasped, wincing from the pain of Octal's staff. "Don't you understand? The only thing that comforted me through my torture was the knowledge that you would get to live out your life once I was gone." He sighed. "But

now we will both die.”

Scarlet held Sage’s heavy head up in her hands. “And what about what I want?”

“You’re young,” Sage said with a grimace. “You don’t know what you want. I’ve lived two thousand years and the only thing that’s ever made sense to me is you. I don’t want you dying for me!”

“Was Juliet too young?” Scarlet replied sternly, remembering the magical night they had spent together watching Shakespeare’s tragedy.

At that moment, Scarlet felt the surging crowd on her back and knew that Octal was not prepared to hold them back any longer.

“Anyway,” she said, flashing Sage a bittersweet smile, “it’s too late now to change my mind.”

“It’s not,” Sage contested. “Please, Scarlet. Fly away. There’s still time.”

Scarlet responded by pressing a fierce kiss against his lips.

“I’m not scared of dying,” she said replied, firmly. Then she slipped her arm around his waist and turned to face the murderous crowd. “As long as we’re together.”

CHAPTER TWO

A vampire war.

The sea below Caitlin was as black as night. She listened to the sound of the thrumming engine as the small military plane soared through the clouds, the words repeating themselves over and over in Caitlin's mind. She could hardly comprehend how it had gotten to this, how her daughter had flown off into the night, leaving her and Caleb to chase desperately after her. The worry she felt for Scarlet was all consuming, making butterflies of panic take flight in her stomach.

Caitlin felt a strong, primal sensation stirring within her. Scarlet was somewhere nearby. Caitlin was certain. She sat bolt upright and gripped Caleb's arm.

"You can sense her?" he said, studying her expression.

Caitlin just nodded, gritting her teeth as a yearning need to be with her daughter swelled within her.

"She's in danger, Caleb," Caitlin said, holding back the tears that threatened to choke her.

Caleb looked back out the windshield and set his jaw. "We'll be with her soon. I promise you. Everything will be okay."

Caitlin desperately wanted to believe him but a part of her was skeptical. Scarlet had flown willingly to this place, to this castle filled with vicious Immortalists. As her mother, Caitlin had felt she had no choice but to follow. As a vampire, Scarlet

was certainly in more danger than your average teenager.

Another pang of longing struck Caitlin. But this time it was worse than before. It wasn't just the pain of separation from her daughter that Caitlin was feeling, it was something even worse.

Scarlet was in mortal danger.

"Caleb," Caitlin said hurriedly. "She's down there and she's in trouble. We have to land. Now." The urgency in her voice made her words come out in a hurried whisper.

Caleb nodded and leaned his view to the side. Below them, the black waves churned.

"There's nowhere to land," he said. "I don't want to attempt a water landing. It's far too dangerous."

Without missing a beat, Caitlin said, "Then we'll have to eject."

Caleb's eyes grew wide. "Caitlin, are you mad?"

But even as he spoke she was reaching for the parachute pack and strapping it on.

"Not mad," she said. "Just a mother whose daughter needs her."

No sooner had the words left her lips than the aching need for her daughter flooded through her again. She could just about make out a shape in the distance and thought that perhaps it was a building.

Raindrops had begun to fall, drawing lines down the glass and reflecting the bright moonlight, and Caleb's grip tightened on the tiller.

“You want me to ditch the plane,” he said, calmly, more as a statement than a question.

Caitlin clicked her parachute pack into place. “Yes.”

She held out another pack to Caleb. He just looked at it, the expression on his face one of incredulity.

“There’s nowhere to set the plane down,” Caitlin added firmly. “You said so yourself.”

“And if we drown?” Caleb said. “If the waves are too strong? The water too cold? How can we help Scarlet if we’re dead?”

“You need to trust me,” Caitlin said.

Caleb took a deep breath. “How sure are you that Scarlet’s near?”

Caitlin leveled her gaze with Caleb as another pang of longing rushed through her. “I’m sure.”

Caleb sucked air between his teeth then shook his head.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he said.

Then he quickly slipped off his shoulder straps and slipped the parachute pack on. Once he was ready, he looked over at Caitlin.

“This won’t be fun,” he said. “And it might not end well.”

She reached out and squeezed his hand. “I know.”

Caleb nodded but Caitlin could see the fear on his face and the worry in his eyes.

And then he slammed his palm onto the eject button.

All at once a rush of air swirled around them. Caitlin felt her hair tangle in the ice cold wind and felt herself propelled upwards at a rate so fast her stomach seemed to drop as though left behind.

And then they were falling.

CHAPTER THREE

Vivian woke with a start to find herself lying on a chaise lounge in her back yard. The sun was long gone, and moonlight glittered off the surface of the swimming pool. From the windows of her family's mansion, a warm orange glow spilled across the perfectly manicured lawn.

___ Vivian sat up and was hit by a wave of pain. It seemed to radiate from her very pores, as though every single one of her nerve endings was on fire. Her throat was dry, her head pounded, and there was a pulsing sensation like daggers behind her eyes.

Vivian gripped the sides of the chaise lounge to steady herself as nausea rippled through her.

What's happening to me?

Memories began floating to the surface of her mind, of teeth bearing down on her, of an excruciating pain in her neck, of the sound of someone's grotesque breathing in her ear, the smell of blood filling her nostrils.

Vivian gripped the sides even harder as horrifying memories flashed through her mind. Her heart beat hard and her stomach plummeted as she remembered all at once the moment Joe___ had turned her into a vampire. In her grasp, the chaise lounge cracked.

Vivian leapt up, alarmed by her strength. As she did, the pain she'd been feeling immediately dissipated. She felt different,

almost as though she were inhabiting a new body. A power that had not existed before surged through her veins. As a cheerleader she had been strong and athletic – yet what she felt now was something more than just peak physical fitness. It was beyond strong. She felt invincible.

It wasn't just power. There was something else building up inside of her. Anger. Rage. The desire to cause pain. The desire for revenge.

She wanted to make Joe suffer for what he had done to her. She wanted to make him hurt as much as he had hurt her.

She'd just begun walking toward the mansion, determined to pick up the pieces, to find him, when the patio doors flew open. She stopped in her tracks as her mother, dressed in her pink fluffy pom-pom slippers, silky dressing gown, and Prada sunglasses, peered out. Typical that her mother would wear sunglasses even when it was dark. Her hair was in rollers, a sign she was preparing to go out, probably to one of her stupid society functions.

At the sight of her mother, Vivian's newfound rage began bubbling to the brim. She clenched her hands into fists.

"What are you doing out here?" her mother cried, using the high-pitched critical voice that set Vivian's nerves on edge. "You're meant to be getting ready for the Sandersons' party!" She paused as Vivian took a step into the light. "Dear God, you look like death! Come inside quickly so I can sort out your hair."

Vivian's long, blond hair had once been her pride and joy – the

source of envy amongst her school peers and a powerful magnet for hot boys – but right now, Vivian couldn't care less about how it looked. All she could think about were the new sensations ricocheting through her body, the gnawing hunger in the pit of her stomach, and the desire to kill that pulsed through her veins.

“Come on!” her mother snapped, making the rollers on her head quiver. “What are you just standing there for?”

Vivian felt a smile tug up the corner of her mouth. She took another slow step toward her mother. When she spoke, her voice was cold and emotionless.

“I'm not going to the Sandersons' party.”

Her mother glared back, her glance filled with hatred.

“Not coming?” she cried. “That is not an option, young lady. This is one of the most important events on the calendar this year. If you don't come all kinds of rumors will start flying. Now hurry, we only have an hour before the car arrives. And look at your nails! You look like you've been crawling through dirt!”

She wore a look of incredulity, mixed with disbelief and shame.

Vivian's anger only deepened. She thought of the way her mother had treated her her entire life, always placing her prized society functions first, only caring about Vivian inasmuch as she fit into the perfect image she wanted to project to the world. She hated this woman, more than she could say.

“I'm not going to the Sandersons' party,” Vivian growled, as she stepped ever closer.

She realized then that there was a word for what she was doing: stalking. It was what pack animals did in the wild as they approached their prey. A thrill of anticipation ran through her as she watched her mother's expression change from frustrated to fearful.

"I'm not going to the Sandersons' party," Vivian said again, "or the Johnsons', or the Gilbertons', or the Smythes'. I'm not going to another party ever again."

The look in her mother's eye was something Vivian never wanted to forget.

"What's gotten into you?" she said, this time a nervous tremble in her voice.

Vivian stepped closer. She licked her lips and cracked her neck.

Her mother stepped back, horrified.

"Vivian..." she began.

But she did not get a chance to finish.

Vivian pounced, teeth bared, hands outstretched. She grabbed her mother, wrenched her head back, and sank her teeth into her neck. Her Prada sunglasses flew to the ground and she trampled them beneath her feet.

Vivian's heart beat faster as the sharp metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. And as her mother fell limp in her arms, Vivian felt an overwhelming sense of triumph.

She let go and her mother's lifeless body crumpled to the ground, nothing but a heap of twisted limbs and designer clothes.

Her dead eyes stared directly at Vivian, unseeing. Vivian stared back down and licked the blood from her lips.

“Goodbye, Mother,” she said.

She turned and ran across the shadowy garden, running faster and faster, and the next thing she knew she was flying, up into the night air, over their immaculate estate, and into the cold, cold night. She would find the man who did this to her – and she would tear him limb from limb.

CHAPTER FOUR

A full moon was glowing above Kyle, making the trees that lined Vivian's suburban street look like skeleton silhouettes. He licked the dried blood off his lips, savoring his delicious kill, recalling Vivian's expression of fear and terror. It sustained him. She would, he resolved, be the first of many, the first victim in the vampire army he was about to build.

The high school. That would be next. He had a burning desire to find the girl who'd turned him – Scarlet. Perhaps she would be there – or someone would who knew where she was.

If not, it was just as well – there would be an endless supply of young kids to turn. Ever since feasting on Vivian, he'd gotten quite the taste for teenagers, and he liked the idea of an obedient little army following him around. More than that, he liked the idea of wreaking havoc on this town – and on the world.

Kyle began jogging along the sidewalk, then he stopped short and laughed to himself. He remembered he was a vampire now, with the strength and skill beyond anything a human could dream of – and most importantly, the ability to fly. It was the one thing he hadn't fully tried yet. And now he wanted to feel it all, and to feel it fully. He wanted to soar into the sky and look down at those insignificant ants going about their dull little lives beneath him. He wanted to swoop at them and hunt them down like an eagle picking off its prey.

He grinned to himself as he took two big steps and took to the air.

It was exhilarating. Wind rushed past him, tousling his hair as he flew higher and higher into the sky. Beneath him, he could see the small town lights twinkling. He thought of all the people in their homes, ignorant to the hell he was about to unleash. He laughed to himself, picturing the chaos he would soon create. Nothing would give him more joy than to ruin each and every one of their lives.

Soon Kyle saw the high school in the distance, far below. The police had set up a blockade around a large area of the neighborhood, including every road that led to the school. Each route was lined with police cars.

Idiots, Kyle thought as he flew straight over them unnoticed.

They were being willfully ignorant. Clearly, the idea of a vampire killer on the loose was too much for their little brains to handle, so they'd downgraded him in their minds to just a run-of-the-mill killer. They had no idea.

As Kyle neared the entrance to the school, he could see bits of police tape flapping in the wind from where those two men had tried to gun him down. He could see his own blood on the concrete. He clenched his fists and thought about how no one could stop him. He was immortal now. Cars, bullets, nothing could stop him.

He decided then to take the back entrance. He swooped over the athletics field, where football practice was taking place under

the glare of the floodlights, and set himself down in the shadows. Using his super keen eyesight, he honed in on the two police cars parked just slightly around the corner, thinking themselves out of sight. Perhaps, Kyle thought with a smile, they were out of sight for a human. But not a vampire.

The place was in disarray. Smashed glass and litter were all over the pavement. He wondered how on earth they'd managed to convince any of the kids to stay at school. It was that willful ignorance again, he decided.

He paced toward the closed gym doors, considering it to be his best route into the school. Here, he noted, there was also extra security. Kyle could see they'd stationed a big burly guy by the doors, bigger even than he was. He was the sort of security guard who'd be better placed at a rough downtown nightclub than a high school. Kyle just smiled to himself, relishing the challenge of taking the man on.

He sauntered up to the security guard confidently, noting the way the man's hand slid down to his waist. Kyle guessed he would be reaching either for a gun or a walkie-talkie to radio for backup. Neither fazed Kyle. Guns couldn't kill him and even a hundred police officers would do no more than slow him down.

"You've got some nerve coming back here," the security man said as Kyle strolled up to him. "You're a wanted man. Every cop and security personnel in the city has got your picture. The whole city is on the lookout for you."

Kyle smirked and spread his arms wide.

“And yet, here I am,” he replied.

The security man tried not to let his worry show on his face, but Kyle could see straight through it.

“What do you want?” he asked, his voice tremulous.

Kyle nodded his head toward the gym doors. He could hear the pounding beat of music coming from inside and could imagine all the cheerleaders inside in mid-practice. He wanted to turn each and every one of them.

Kyle walked up to the security guard and grabbed him round the neck, lifting him clean off the ground. Even though he was bigger and taller than Kyle, Kyle’s strength was greater. The man felt barely heavier than a child.

“I want to make an army,” Kyle whispered in the man’s ear.

The man let out a strangled wail and kicked. Kyle bent his head low and bit the security guard’s neck. The man tried to cry but Kyle’s grip around his neck was too tight. He could make no sound as his blood drained from him.

Kyle dropped the man to his feet, knowing that he had created his second vampire. When he woke, reborn, he’d be in his army.
Soldier number two.

Kyle threw open the gym doors and loud pop music burst out along with the smell of sweat and the cheers of the girls in practice.

“Hey!” a girl shouted from the bleachers. “You can’t be in here.”

She was wearing the same cheerleader outfit as the rest of

the girls. She stormed over to Kyle and stopped in front of him, peering up with a frown.

“Get out of here!” she demanded.

Kyle ignored her demands.

“Do you know Scarlet Paine?” he said.

She grimaced. “That freak? I know *of* her.”

Behind the girl, the other cheerleaders turned to watch what was going on.

“Where is she?” Kyle asked.

The girl shrugged.

“How should I know?” she said.

Kyle lunged forward and grabbed her, hauling her above his head. The other girls began to scream.

“If any of you know where Scarlet Paine is,” Kyle shouted at them, “you sure as hell better speak up now.”

The cheerleaders cowered. The girl Kyle was holding above his head squirmed. Only one of the watching girls was brave enough to say anything.

“I don’t know where she is,” she said, trembling. “But her friends Becca and Jasmine are in the school choir. They’re practicing down the hall.”

Kyle narrowed his eyes at the girl. “Are you telling the truth?” She pressed her lips together and nodded.

Finally, Kyle put down the struggling girl in his arms. She ran over to the rest of the girls and they pulled her into a huddle, keeping her safely behind them, some of them crying.

Kyle went over to the wall and wrenched a climbing ladder down. He snapped off one of the long pieces of wood and used it to secure the gym doors by slipping it through the handles.

“No one moves,” he instructed the terrified girls.

He still wanted to turn them, but he had to follow up on the lead first.

He could hear the muffled weeping behind him as he left the gym and went into the school corridors. Despite the earlier altercations and gunfire, the place was still packed with kids. Kyle laughed to himself as he realized they must have thought that surrounding the school with police cars would be enough to keep him out. They were trying to keep everything normal so as not to scare any of the kids or parents in the community.

“How dumb do these people get?” Kyle thought to himself as he smirked.

Kyle walked up to a group of alternative-looking kids hanging by the lockers. They looked like the sort of kids he’d hung around with when he was at school, the type that would drop out without diplomas and be destined to work in bars for the rest of their lives.

“Dude,” one of the boys said, nudging the friend standing next to him. “Check out the bum.”

Kyle walked right up to the group and slammed his fist into the lockers beside them, making a dent. The group jumped with shock.

“What’s your problem, man?” the boy said.

“Choir practice,” Kyle grunted. “Where is it?”

One of the girls in the group, a goth with long black hair, stepped forward. “Like hell we would tell you.”

Before any of the group could blink, Kyle had grabbed the girl and pulled her into him. He sunk his teeth into her neck and sucked. In a matter of seconds she turned limp in his arms. The rest of the group screamed.

Kyle dropped the girl to the floor and wiped the blood from his lips with the back of his hand.

“Choir practice,” he repeated. “Where is it?”

The boy who’d first spoken pointed a trembling finger down the hall. Beside him, two of his female friends were crying and hugging, their frightened stares locked on the body of the dead girl.

Kyle made to leave but had only gotten two paces when he turned back and grabbed the two crying girls. He bit one first, then the other, draining the blood from their necks in turn as their pained cries turned finally to silence. He dropped them at his feet, stepped over them, and headed down the hall, leaving the rest of the group gaping.

Kyle followed the sounds of singing until he reached the room where the choir was practicing. He slammed open the doors.

The group could tell the instant he entered that they were in danger. Their singing ceased immediately.

“Jasmine. Becca,” he demanded.

The two trembling girls came forward. He grabbed them both

by the necks, hauling them off the floor.

“Scarlet Paine. Tell me where she is.”

The girls kicked and writhed in his grip. Neither could speak as Kyle’s grip was too tight on their necks.

“I know,” someone said.

Everyone turned, surprised. Kyle dropped Becca and Jasmine and looked at the girl.

“Who are you?” Kyle said.

“Jojo,” the girl replied. She twirled some hair in her fingers and smiled. She was wearing a Ralph Lauren top. Clearly one of Vivian’s friends.

“Well?” Kyle said.

“I...” the girl began but stopped. “We were at a party together the other night.”

“And?” Kyle demanded.

“I saw her. With this guy. Really hot guy actually.”

Becca and Jasmine exchanged a look. Jojo coughed and carried on talking.

“They were talking about how they couldn’t be together forever because he was, like, dying or something.”

Kyle’s patience ran dry. He flew across the floor to the girl and hauled her into the air.

“Skip to the end!” he cried.

The girl clawed at his hand round her neck. “Church.”

Kyle studied her for a moment then put her down. “Church?”

The girl nodded, her eyes wide with terror. She rubbed her

neck.

“Church. Or castle. Or cathedral. Something like that. They... flew off together.”

Had the girl said such a thing earlier, her classmates would have ridiculed her. But moments after witnessing Kyle fly across the room at her, the idea of Scarlet Paine and some handsome boy flying into the moonlight together suddenly seemed less far-fetched.

From her heap on the floor, Becca flashed angry eyes at the girl.

“Why would you tell him that, Jojo?” she cried. “He clearly wants to hurt her!”

“Vivian loyalty,” Jasmine replied scathingly.

Kyle’s ears pricked up. He thought of Vivian’s sweet blood. He turned to Jojo.

“You’re one of Vivian’s friends?” he asked.

The girl nodded.

Kyle grabbed her hand.

“You’re coming with me.”

The choir watched in horror as Jojo was dragged from the room and into the hallway. Kyle dragged her along the corridors with him. The whole place was a scene of chaos. The kids he’d turned had begun feasting on one another. Those who had yet to be turned were running and screaming, trying to get out. Kyle nodded to the goth girl and her friend as he passed them, watching them sucking the blood of their school mates. Beside

him, he felt Jojo quiver.

He reached the gym and hauled open the doors to find the cheerleader girls had attempted to form a human pyramid to get out through one of the top windows. The pyramid tumbled as soon as they realized their capture had returned and foiled their plot.

“Clever,” Kyle said with a laugh. “You’ll all make excellent additions to my family.”

“Jojo!” someone cried as Vivian’s friend was thrown into the gym.

Kyle looked around and licked his lips.

“Let the fun begin,” he said to himself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Police officer Sadie Marlow peered through the small glass window into the room. In the otherwise bare room, she saw that there was a bed against one wall. Sitting upon it was the girl she'd been sent here to speak to.

The psychologist standing on one side of her pulled a swipe card from his pocket. But just before he swiped it against the door lock to allow the officers entry, he paused and turned to face them both.

"You know we haven't been able to get an intelligible word out of her yet," the psychologist said. "All she says is 'Scarlet. Scarlet. I have to find Scarlet.'"

It was police officer Brent Waywood's turn to speak up.

"That's why we're here, sir," he said, pointing to his open notebook. "Scarlet Paine. That name keeps cropping up in our investigation."

The psychologist pursed his lips.

"I understand why you're here," he replied. "I just don't take kindly to the police interrogating my patients."

Brent flipped his notebook shut abruptly, making a smacking noise. He glared at the psychologist.

"We have dead cops," he said in a clipped tone. "Good men and women who won't be going home to their families tonight because of some psycho who will kill anyone and everyone in

his path. What does he want? Scarlet Paine. That's all we have to go on. So you can see why questioning your patient is a priority for us."

Officer Marlow shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, frustrated by the way her partner seemed to find conflict in every situation. She couldn't help think that her job would be much simpler if she could do these interviews by herself. Unlike Brent, she had a calm demeanor__ and a way with witnesses, particularly the mentally vulnerable ones like the girl they were here to see. That's why the police chief had sent her to the secure the mental facility in the first place. She just wished he'd picked a better officer to accompany her. She realized then, with a sinking feeling in her stomach, that the police chief hadn't exactly had many cops to choose from. Other than the ones guarding the high school, the rest in the precinct were dead or injured.

She stepped forward.

"We understand the witness is in a fragile state," she said, diplomatically. "We'll keep our tone civil. No demanding questions. No raised voices. Trust me, sir, I've got years of experience talking to kids like her."

They all glanced back through the window at the girl. She was rocking back and forth, her knees pulled up to her chest.

The psychologist finally seemed satisfied to allow the officers entry. He swiped the card against the door lock. A green light flicked on, accompanied by a bleep.

He led the two officers into the room toward the hunched girl.

It was then that Officer Marlow noticed the cuffs on her ankles and hands. Restraints. The hospital didn't issue restraints unless the patient was a harm to themselves or others. Whatever this girl had gone through, it had been horrific. How else would a sixteen-year-old high school kid without so much as a blemish on her permanent record be suddenly deemed dangerous?

The psychologist spoke first.

"There are some officers here to see you," he said, calmly to the girl. "It's about Scarlet."

The girl's head darted up. Her eyes were wild and roved across the faces of the three people before her. Officer Marlow could see the anguish in her expression and the desperation.

"Scarlet," the girl cried, pulling on her restraints. "I need to find Scarlet."

The psychologist looked at the two officers as he left the room.

*

Maria looked up at the officers. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the sane part of her was still working, still lucid and awake. But the part that Lore had messed with was in control, and it felt like a dark storm cloud fogging up her mind. She had to get out of this place and she had to find Scarlet. Scarlet would be with Sage, and Sage, she was certain, would be able to help her. He'd be able to undo what his cousin had done to her.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't explain to

anyone that she wasn't crazy, that she didn't belong here, shackled like a convict. Even when her friends came to see her, even when her mother held her hand and cried, Maria couldn't get the words out. Whatever Lore had put inside of her brain was impenetrable. And it was getting stronger. With every passing moment, she felt her strength seeping away. Her ability to fight Lore's mind control was diminishing and the sane part of her was becoming weaker and weaker. Maria was certain that if she didn't get help it would eventually disappear altogether, leaving her an empty shell.

The male officer stood with his gaze tipped down to Maria. The female officer perched on the side of her bed.

"Maria, we need to ask you some questions," she said, softly.

Maria tried to nod but nothing happened. Her body felt heavy. She was exhausted. Fighting whatever Lore had done to her brain was tiring work.

"Your friend, Scarlet," the woman continued in the same gentle way. "Do you know where she is?"

"Scarlet," Maria said.

She wanted to say more but the words just wouldn't come out. She watched in frustration as the male officer rolled his eyes.

"This is useless," he said to his partner.

"Officer Waywood, you need to be patient," the woman snapped at him.

"Patient?" Officer Waywood cried. "My friends are dead! Our colleagues are in danger! We have no time to be patient!"

Trapped inside her own mind, Maria felt her own frustration grow. She understood Officer Waywood's concern. She wanted to help, she really did. But thanks to Lore, she could hardly utter a word. Getting the words out of her mouth felt like running on a treadmill – all that effort and she never got anywhere.

The female officer ignored Officer Waywood's outburst and turned back to Maria.

"The man looking for your friend, his name is Kyle. Have you ever seen him before? Heard her mention his name at all?"

Maria tried to shake her head but couldn't. The female officer chewed her lip and fiddled with the notebook in her hands. Maria could tell by her gestures that she was weighing something in her mind, trying to decide whether to tell her more.

Finally, the female officer reached out and squeezed Maria's hand. She looked deep into her eyes.

"Kyle... he's a vampire, isn't he?"

From his standing position, Officer Waywood threw his arms in the air and scoffed. "Sadie, you've gone crazy! That vampire stuff is just crap!"

The female officer stood quickly, bringing her face up to the man's.

"Don't you dare say that," she said. "I'm a police officer. It's my duty to question this witness. How can I question her properly without telling her what we know?" Before Officer Waywood had a chance to respond, Sadie added, "And it's Officer Marlow, thank you very much."

Officer Waywood gave her a displeased look.

“Officer Marlow,” he said, enunciating it through his teeth, “in my professional opinion, introducing the idea of vampires to a mentally unstable witness is a bad idea.”

From her place on the bed, Maria began to rock. She could feel the sane part of her, buried so deeply beneath whatever Lore had done to her, starting to surface. Somehow, the fact that Officer Marlow believed in vampires was helping the trapped parts of her mind break free. She tried to speak and at last a noise came from her throat.

“War.”

The two officers stopped arguing and looked back at Maria.

“What did she say?” said Officer Waywood, a frown across his face.

Officer Marlow rushed to the bed and sat beside her.

“Maria?” she said. “Say that again.”

“W...” Maria tried. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Her lucidity was returning to her. Her mind was becoming her own again. Finally she got the word out. “War.”

Officer Marlow looked up at her colleague. “I think she’s saying ‘war.’”

He nodded, a worried expression on his face.

Maria took another deep breath, willing the lucid part of her to take control, to tell them what she so desperately needed to.

“Vampire,” she said through her gritted teeth. “Vampire. War.”

Officer Marlow's face paled.

"Go on," she urged Maria.

Maria licked her lips. It took every ounce of effort she had to stay present.

"Kyle," she said through a grimace. "Leader."

Officer Marlow squeezed Maria's hand. "Kyle will lead a vampire war?"

Maria squeezed back and nodded.

"Scarlet," she added. "Only. Hope."

Officer Marlow exhaled and sat up straighter. "Do you know where Scarlet is?"

Maria gritted her teeth and spoke as carefully as she could. "With Sage...the castle."

Suddenly, a deep pain started inside Maria's brain. She screamed out and clutched her head, pulling her hair into her tight fists. Instantly she knew that the sane part of her was being overpowered once again by whatever damage Lore had done to her. She was slipping away.

"Help me!" she screamed.

She began pulling against her shackles and thrashing wildly.

Panicking, Officer Marlow stood. She looked over her shoulder at her partner.

"Call it in," she commanded him.

She tried to calm Maria but the girl had lost it. She was screaming over and over. The door bleeped and the psychologist rushed in.

“What happened?” he cried.

“Nothing,” Officer Marlow said, backing away. “She just flipped.”

She paced away as the psychologist tried to calm Maria and stood beside her partner.

“Did you call it in?” she said, panting from anguish.

“No,” he replied tersely.

Officer Marlow frowned at him and reached for her walkie-talkie. But Officer Waywood leaned forward and grabbed it from her hands.

“Don’t,” he snapped. “The Chief doesn’t want to hear this crap. He’s got his whole squad to look out for and you want to bother him because some crazy kid thinks there’s a vampire war!”

Over the sound of Maria’s screams, Sadie Marlow spoke in a hurried, insistent voice.

“The Chief sent us here for a reason. Why would he want to question a so-called ‘crazy kid’ if he didn’t think she could help? Kyle wants Scarlet Paine. That girl,” she pointed at Maria, “is the closest we’re going to get to finding her and maybe ending this thing. If she knows something then I’m pretty sure the Chief will want to know.”

Officer Waywood shook his head.

“Fine,” he said, shoving the walkie-talkie back at her. “It’s your career on the line, not mine. Let the Chief think you’re a lunatic.”

Officer Marlow snatched the device from her partner and clicked the button.

“Chief? It’s Marlow. I’m down at the institute with the witness.”

The walkie-talkie crackled.

Officer Marlow paused, weighing her words. “She says there’s going to be a vampire war. Led by Kyle. And the only person who can stop it is Scarlet Paine.”

She looked up at her partner’s raised eyebrows, feeling like a fool. Then the walkie-talkie buzzed again and the police chief’s voice rang out.

“I’m coming.”

CHAPTER SIX

Scarlet coughed and wiped dust from her eyes. Her mind swirled as she tried to make sense of what was happening around her. One moment the Immortalists had been advancing on her and Sage, the next moment there'd been a tremendous explosion that rocked the castle. Then the ceiling had caved in, bringing with it brick, wood, and heavy slate tiles.

Scarlet looked around and found that she was in a cocoon of rubble. It was so dark she could hardly see. Thick dust clogged her lungs, make it difficult to breathe.

"Sage?" Scarlet cried into the darkness.

Something stirred beside her.

"Scarlet?" came Sage's voice. "Is that you?"

Scarlet's heart leapt as she realized her beloved was still alive. She scrambled over boulders and debris toward the hunched shape of Sage. Once she reached him, she pressed her lips against his.

"I've got you," she whispered.

"Scarlet, it's too late," he countered.

But Scarlet wasn't listening. She slipped her arms around his naked torso and pulled him to sitting. He slumped, weak, barely able to hold his body up.

"What happened?" he said, surveying the damage, his voice little more than a croak.

"I have no idea," Scarlet replied.

She looked around again and this time started to notice the tangle of Immortalists sprawled across the floor, or trapped beneath ceiling beams and clumps of brick and stone. Flames rose from several different areas like strange orange shrubbery.

Octal lay motionless on the floor. His staff lay beside him, snapped clean in half, and the cross on the tip that had been used to pierce Sage was aflame. Scarlet couldn't tell whether Octal was dead or not but he certainly looked like he wasn't going to be doing any harm for the time being.

Then Scarlet recognized the twisted metal fuselage of a military plane amongst the rubble. She gasped.

"It was a plane," she said. "A military plane crashed into the castle."

Sage shook his head, confusion across his brow.

"There'd be no reason for a plane to be here," he replied. "The castle is in the middle of nowhere."

"Unless they were looking for it," Scarlet finished for him, as it dawned on her. "Unless they were looking for *me*."

Just then, a mound of brick shifted and Sage winced as it slammed into his leg.

"We have to move," Scarlet replied.

It wasn't just danger from the damaged building she was worried about – it was the Immortalists. They had to escape before anyone came to their senses.

She turned to Sage.

“Can you run?”

He looked up at her with weary eyes. “Scarlet. It’s too late. I’m dying.”

She gritted her teeth. “It’s not too late.”

He grabbed her hands in his and stared deeply into her eyes. “Listen to me. I love you. But you have to let me die. It’s over.”

Scarlet turned her face away from him and wiped away the single tear that fell from her eye. When she turned back she reached out and hauled Sage’s arm across her shoulder, wrenching him to a standing position. He cried out in pain and sunk into her. As she began to lead him across the rubble and through the plumes of acrid smoke, she said:

“It’s not over until I say it is.”

*

The castle was in disarray. Though the plane that had crashed into it had been small, the damage to the ancient building had been colossal____.

Scarlet weaved through the corridors as the walls crumbled around her. She held Sage tightly to her side and he slumped into her, groaning with pain. He was so weak and feeble it made Scarlet’s heart ache. All she wanted was to get him to safety.

Just then, she heard shouting coming from behind.

“They’re getting away!”

Scarlet realized with a sinking sensation that they were coming

back to their senses, that despite their castle being destroyed and many of their brethren lying hurt and dying around them, their desire for vengeance was going to drive them on.

“Sage,” Scarlet said, “they’re coming for us. We need to go faster.”

Sage gulped and grimaced.

“I’m going as fast as I can.”

Scarlet tried to hasten her pace but Sage’s weakness was slowing them down. He had to stop running. She had to find somewhere safe to hide him so that they could at the very least say their goodbyes.

She looked over her shoulder to see several Immortalists advancing. There, at the back, half concealed by shadows, she saw Octal. So he wasn’t dead.

As the group gained on them, Scarlet saw that half of Octal’s face was badly burned. He must have been in significant pain and yet he still wanted to harm her and Sage. It made Scarlet so sad to think that the love between her and Sage outraged the Immortalists so much.

Suddenly, an almighty crash made Scarlet leap, and a sudden spray of icy water soaked her. She looked over her left shoulder to find that the whole side of the castle had crumbled into the sea, causing a mighty wave to crash over them.

She heard screaming and looked back to see the Immortalists tumbling into the sea. They fell so quickly they didn’t even have time to fly to safety, and as soon as they hit the waves, the angry

ocean swallowed them up.

As the tiles began to give way beneath her feet, Scarlet slammed her back against the wall of the corridor and pushed Sage back with her arm. The black water churned several feet below them. Scarlet suddenly felt as though she were balancing precariously on the ledge of a mountain.

The only person left standing, on the other side of a wide chasm, was Octal. Scarlet knew that it would take him no more than a few seconds to fly across the gap between them. But instead, he decided to watch.

He thinks it's hopeless. He thinks we're going to die.

"Quick," she said to Sage. "Before we fall into the sea."

Cold ocean spray hit her face as she led him across the ledge. With every step, more of the flooring broke off and tumbled into the ocean. Scarlet's heart raced with anguish. She prayed that they would make it out of the castle and to safety.

"There," she said to Sage. "Just a few more steps."

But no sooner had the words left her lips than the tiles beneath Sage's feet cracked. He just had time to look up into her eyes before the floor gave way and he plummeted down into the blackness.

"Sage!" Scarlet screamed, her hand outstretched, reaching for him.

But he was gone.

Scarlet glanced up at the other side of the chasm and saw a smile spread across Octal's horrifically disfigured face.

Without a second of hesitation, Scarlet leapt off the ledge like a diver from a diving board, and soared downward toward Sage's falling figure. Seconds before he hit the ocean she swept him up into her arms.

"I've got you," she whispered, holding him to her chest.

Sage was heavy. Scarlet was only able to hover. They were barely inches above the treacherous water. She knew she couldn't fly up because that would reveal to Octal that they had survived and he would launch an attack on them right away.

It was then that she saw caves to her right. They were naturally made, eroded into the solid rock by the ocean over centuries. The castle must have been built on top of them.

Scarlet wasted no time. She flew into the cave, Sage in her arms, and set him down on the floor. He flopped back and groaned.

"We're okay," Scarlet said to him. "We made it."

But she was soaking wet and shivering. Her teeth chattered as she spoke. When she held Sage's hand, she realized he was trembling too.

"We didn't make it," he finally said. "I've been telling you all along, I am going to die. Tonight."

Scarlet shook her head, making her tears fly from her cheeks.

"No," she said.

But she realized then it was no use. Sage was dying. It was really true.

She held him in her arms and let the tears fall freely. They

rolled down her cheeks and onto her neck. She didn't bother to wipe them away.

Scarlet was about to utter her goodbyes when she noticed a strange glow coming from beneath her T-shirt, just where her heart was. She shook her head, thinking at first she must be hallucinating. But the glow got stronger.

She looked down and realized it was her necklace that was aglow, white light spilling through the hinges. She reached inside her top and pulled it out. She had never before been able to open the necklace but something told her this time would be different. As she slid a fingernail into the latch, she realized that her tears had been dripping onto it. Perhaps they had somehow unlocked the pendant.

The two halves folded open and white light burst into the cave, illuminating Scarlet's and Sage's figures. In the middle of the glowing light was an image. Scarlet studied it. It was a castle in the middle of the sea, but not Boldt Castle. This one was taller and thinner, more like an elaborate tower than an actual castle.

Scarlet shook Sage by the shoulder.

"Look," she instructed him.

Sage managed to half open a weary eye.

Scarlet heard him take a sharp intake of breath.

"You know where it is?" she asked.

Sage nodded. "I do."

Then he slumped his head back into her lap, exhausted.

Something inside Scarlet told her that wherever this place was,

it was important. And if Sage knew of it, then it was significant to the Immortalists. Why would her necklace show her such a place? And why would it only open when her tears fell on it? Surely it was a clue.

Scarlet snapped the necklace shut and the white glow disappeared, taking with it the image of a crooked castle in the middle of a raging ocean. Somehow she knew deep inside of her that if she got Sage to this castle, he would live. But she was running out of time.

She heaved the unconscious Sage onto her back. He was heavy, but this time Scarlet was more determined than ever, and more certain that there was hope. She took to the sky.

She would save him. No matter what it took.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Caitlin struggled to catch her breath as she fell though the night sky. One moment Caleb had hit the eject button, and the next, the plane was suddenly no longer around her. She was in the black air, falling toward the raging ocean.

She glanced right, looking for Caleb. He wasn't there. Feeling anguished, she looked about her – and finally, she spotted Caleb above her, his parachute deployed. He was pointing to his parachute cord. She couldn't hear him over the sound of the roaring air.

Then she realized: he was trying to tell her to pull her cord. She did and all at once the plummeting stopped as her body snapped. All was suddenly peaceful. She was hovering, floating, the white parachute spread open above her like angel's wings.

Caitlin took some deep breaths to calm her racing heart. She looked back up at Caleb and saw him giving her two thumbs up. Caleb, who had far more experience with this sort of thing, managed to maneuver himself so that they were almost level.

"It's going to be cold!" he shouted to her.

Caitlin looked down. The water was looming, and before she had a chance to think about the frozen waves hitting her, an enormous explosion made the whole world shudder.

Panicking, Caitlin looked to her right to see that the plane had crashed into something. She realized with a sinking sensation

that it was the building she'd seen on the horizon, the one her senses had told her was where Scarlet was to be found.

"No!" she screamed.

Flames and bits of burning fuselage tumbled into the sea as a huge plume of black smoke billowed into the air.

Then Caitlin hit the ocean.

Caitlin gasped as she hit the freezing water. It was so cold, it felt as though her bones had turned to ice.

But the sharp sting caused by the frigid ocean paled in comparison to the anguish in her heart. Just ahead, the building Caitlin was certain her daughter was in was ablaze. She watched, as though in a daze, as the ceiling caved in. A moment later, the whole sea-facing wall crumbled into the ocean, leaving a deep wound in the exterior.

"Caitlin!" Caleb's voice came from a little distance away.

Caitlin shook her head and found her way back to her senses. Caleb was swimming toward her, his parachute already detached and floating away, snatched by the strong current.

"Get your pack off!" Caleb instructed the second he was beside her.

Caitlin shrugged the heavy thing off, feeling instantly more buoyant. But her body was still weary, and her water-logged clothes were weighing her down.

"We have to get to land," Caleb said.

He scooped his arm around his wife. She could feel that he was trembling violently. He was trying to be strong for her but

really his situation was just as perilous.

“Do you think you can swim that far?” he added, nodding to the crumbling Boldt Castle.

Caitlin gritted her chattering teeth.

“What if the plane hit her?” she managed to say.

Caleb shook his head. “Don’t think like that.”

“I can’t help it. She’s our daughter. What if – ”

But Caleb didn’t let her finish. He pressed his hand over Caitlin’s heart.

“If she was dead, you’d know,” he said. “Wouldn’t you? If you can sense our daughter, track her to this place, then you’d know in your heart. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Caitlin bit her lip.

“Yes,” she said, finally. “You’re right. I would know if she was dead. I would feel it.”

But even as she said the words, and even though she believed them, she couldn’t help but feel that same sense of dread. Even if Scarlet was alive, she was most certainly still in danger.

Caitlin felt her arms begin to fatigue from treading water for so long.

“What are we going to do?” she cried to Caleb. “The only land is that way.”

She pointed at Boldt Castle, at the gaping hole in its side. Caleb followed her outstretched finger.

“I know,” he said with trepidation.

Caitlin nodded. Wet tendrils of hair stuck to her face. She

swiped them away and began to swim toward the castle.

Just then, a noise caught Caitlin's attention. It sounded like a distant whining noise, mechanical in nature. Familiar. Getting louder.

Caitlin glanced over her shoulder at Caleb.

"A helicopter," she said.

Caleb paused mid-stroke and stared up at the sky as the noise grew louder and louder.

"The police?" he said. "They can't still be on our tails, can they? Unless they were tracking the plane."

Caleb suddenly thumped his open palms against the water, making a huge splash. But the noise was almost completely drowned out by the whirring blades of a helicopter approaching fast.

His features dropped into resignation.

"Get ready," he said. "This is about to get a lot more dangerous."

*

It took several minutes to swim to Boldt Castle. The side closest to Caitlin and Caleb was completely destroyed where the plane had struck. Stone and rubble had tumbled into the ocean, creating a sort of slope that they could now climb up. It was precarious going but they made it, finally, into Boldt Castle.

The smell of airplane fuel was strong in the air, mixed with the

smells of dust, smoke, and sea salt. Caitlin heard a clamoring of noise in the distance, of people shouting, arguing, and crying out in pain. She knew at once that the building had been full before the plane hit, and that thanks to her, many people had been hurt. She shivered, her frozen body racked with guilt.

Caitlin was in a state, her hair a mess, the jump from the airplane and force of the waves having turned it into soggy dreadlocks. Her clothes were torn in places. Caleb looked just as bedraggled.

“Well?” he said. “Can you sense her?”

Caitlin put a finger to her lips to quiet him. She tried to get a feel for her daughter, to let her instincts tell her where she was, but she was struggling to catch hold of anything tangible. The sound of the roaring helicopter circling above them, the heat coming from the fire, the cries coming from the injured, all were crowding her mind and messing with her abilities.

“I can’t feel her,” Caitlin whispered, feeling defeated.

Caleb rubbed his chin. Caitlin could tell he was at his wits’ end. She wished she could do more to help but her mind was too frantic to hone in on Scarlet.

“Is she in the castle somewhere?” Caleb asked.

Despite his best attempts to hide it, Caitlin could hear the exasperation in his voice. She’d led him to this place, forced him to jump from a plane, and now she couldn’t even tell him whether she’d been right or not.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to calm her mind.

"I think she is," she said finally. "I think she's here somewhere."

"Then we search," Caleb replied.

He turned to leave but Caitlin grabbed his arm.

"I'm scared," she said.

"Of what we might find?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said, "of seeing the damage I've caused."

Caleb reached out and squeezed her hand.

They stepped further into the castle. They walked carefully as the ground underfoot seemed unstable. When Caleb suddenly stopped short, blocking Caitlin's path with an extended arm, she assumed there was some kind of obstacle ahead. But when she craned her head to look over his shoulder, her mouth dropped open with astonishment. A little way ahead of them were hundreds upon hundreds of men and women. Some of them were flying, others hovering, and all were facing a man who stood taller than any human Caitlin had ever seen. He was at least double the size of a normal man. Half of his face was burned red raw.

"What is he?" Caitlin whispered to her husband.

Caleb just shook his head.

Caitlin shivered. Finding her daughter seemed more imperative now than ever before. These strange people were disconcerting her, especially the giant man with his disfigured face.

"This way," Caleb said in a hushed tone to her.

They crept away, keeping as silent as possible, sticking to the shadows where the crowd would not see them. Then Caitlin placed her hand on Caleb's arm to stop him. He looked back.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Scarlet," Caitlin said. "I can't feel her anymore."

"You mean she's not here?" Caleb challenged her.

Caitlin shrunk back from the fury in his voice.

"I think she's gone somewhere else," she said quietly, feeling defeated and desperate. "I could feel her before, right by the place where we came in, but the further into the castle we go, the weaker it becomes. I think she left before we got here. She got out the way we got in."

Caleb ran his hands through his hair in exasperation.

"I don't believe this," he muttered under his breath.

Just then, a strong light beamed into the castle from the helicopter above. It was lowering itself through the collapsed ceiling.

"It's attempting to land!" Caleb cried incredulously.

The crowd in the great hall began to disperse, with people running and flying all over the place.

"We have to leave," Caitlin said to her husband.

"I know," he replied. "But how?"

"This way," Caitlin said, tugging on his arm.

She led him across the great hall. Thanks to the descending helicopter, none of the strange people in the hall seemed to

realize that the two figures racing across the room were strangers. The helicopter blades were creating a mini tornado in the room, whipping up plumes of smoke that added even more to the chaos.

Caitlin and Caleb burst out of the hall and into a gloomy corridor. The smoke was thick here and the light dim. Together, Caitlin and Caleb ran the length of the corridor until they reached a door. Caleb shoved it with his shoulder and it opened at once, revealing to them the outside world.

“Over there!” Caitlin cried, surveying their surroundings.

Caleb looked to where she was pointing.

Just ahead, down some stone steps leading from the castle, was a small parking lot with enough space for four or five vehicles. Amongst them was a motorcycle.

They ran for the bike. It hadn't been locked up or secured in any way.

It took several attempts before he was able to kick the motor into life, but all at once the engine roared and spewed out fumes. By then, people from inside the crumbling church had begun filing out.

“Quick,” Caitlin cried, jumping on the back behind Caleb. “They're coming.”

But before Caleb had a chance to accelerate away, the sound of police sirens began wailing out from nearby.

He took off, swerving to avoid the people darting from the castle. Streaming out of Boldt Castle after them came the police who had arrived by helicopter. Hurtling down the dark,

winding pathway toward them came several police cars, their lights flashing furiously.

“Now what?” Caitlin cried.

Caleb looked over at her. He revved the motorcycle’s engine.

“Now you hold tight,” he said.

Caitlin just had time to loop her arms around his waist before the bike sped away.

*

The bike bumped along the road. Caitlin was exhausted. She rested her head against Caleb’s back, comforted by the steady thumping of his heartbeat, and gazed up at the black night. But she knew she couldn’t rest. Scarlet needed her help and there was no way she could pause for even a moment while she was in danger.

“Any ideas?” Caleb cried over his shoulder, battling to get his voice heard above the wind and the police sirens that tailed them. “Directions?”

Caitlin could tell he was trying his hardest to stay calm and composed but he was just as drained as she was.

“I can’t sense her,” Caitlin shouted back. “Not right now.”

Caleb said nothing, but Caitlin saw his hands tensed against the handlebars hard enough to make his knuckles turn white.

The bike flew onwards, gradually increasing the distance between them and the police cars.

The road was a narrow country lane. It began to wind up a hill. Soon there was a steep drop on one side and a cliff face on the other. Feeling queasy, Caitlin ducked down behind Caleb's back for protection. The wind danced through her hair.

Just then, she felt something vibrating in her pocket. Surely it couldn't be her cell phone. But when Caitlin reached inside her pocket she discovered that her cell phone had, indeed, survived the ocean plunge. She hadn't had reception before but now suddenly it had sprung to life, flashing up to her that she had a voicemail.

Caitlin dialed her voicemail and listened to Aidan's hurried voice on the other end.

"Caitlin," he said. "Where are you? You need to call me back now."

The message ended. That was it. She went to hit redial – but lost service.

"Damn!" she cried.

"What is it?" Caleb called over his shoulder.

"We need to pull over," Caitlin replied, realizing as she glanced down at her handset that the battery was on one percent.

"I can't pull over," Caleb replied. "The police are on our tail. We have to get far away from this place first."

Just then, Caitlin noticed a cave cut into the cliff side.

"In there!" she cried.

Caleb sprung to attention, twisting the bike's handlebars with expert precision so that it swerved and skidded into the cave,

kicking up dirt before drawing to a halt.

As soon as they'd stopped, Caleb turned to face his wife. "Can you sense Scarlet?"

"No," Caitlin replied. "My phone came back. I need to call Aidan."

Just then, the police cars that had been on their tail went screaming past the small cave where Caitlin and Caleb were hidden.

Caitlin grabbed her cell phone and punched in Aidan's number, praying that the battery would hold out. He answered on the third ring.

"You took your time," he said.

"I've been a bit busy," Caitlin replied, thinking of the plane ride and ocean plunge. "So what was it you needed to tell me?"

Caitlin listened to the sound of Aidan's voice on the other end of the phone as he shuffled around and rifled through books and papers. She felt her frustration grow.

"Can you please hurry up?" Caitlin barked. "I don't have much battery."

"Ah, yes," he said at last.

"What?" Caitlin demanded. "Tell me!"

"Tell me the chant again. Tell me the chant that is the cure."

Caitlin fumbled in her pocket and pulled out the notes she'd made when studying the book. But they were soggy and the ink had run. She closed her eyes and tried to visualize the page as she had read it. The words began to appear in her mind.

*"I am the sea, the sky and sand,
I am the pollen on the wind.
I am the horizon, the heath, the heather on the hill.
I am ice,
I am nothing,
I am extinct."*

_____Caitlin opened her eyes and the words disappeared from her mind. There was a long moment where Aidan was silent.

Caitlin wanted to scream at him to hurry up.

"Caitlin!" he said at last. "I've got it. I've got it!"

"Tell me," Caitlin replied hurriedly, feeling her heart race.

"We've been such fools! It's not a chant at all."

Caitlin frowned.

"What do you mean? How can it not be a chant? I don't understand."

"I mean that the chant isn't the cure," Aidan replied, fumbling over his words in his excitement. "The chant is *a clue* to the cure!"

Caitlin could feel her heart thumping with anticipation.

"So what's the clue then?" she asked.

"Caitlin! Think about it. It's a riddle. Directions. It's telling you to go somewhere."

Caitlin felt the blood drain from her face as she ran through the words in her mind.

"I am the sea, the sky and sand," she repeated under her breath. Then, suddenly, it came to her. "No. You don't mean –"

"Yes," Aidan replied. "S. P. H. I. N. X." _____

“The vampire city,” Caitlin whispered under her breath.

Of course. Before Scarlet had disappeared into harm’s way, Caitlin had been trying to find the cure, to find a way to turn her daughter back from a vampire into a human. She thought the words on the page needed to be read to Scarlet to cure her, that what she had found was the cure. But no. What she had found were instructions that would lead her to the cure. Caitlin had let her innate anguish as a mother override the sensible, logical scholar she needed to be right now, the one who would work out that the riddle was not a cure – but a map.

“Thank you, Aidan,” she said hurriedly.

Her phone went dead.

Caitlin looked up at Caleb’s expectant face.

“Well?” he said.

“I know where we’re going,” Caitlin replied, feeling a twinge of hope for the first time in a long time.

Caleb raised an eyebrow and looked over at his wife.

“Where?” he said.

Caitlin smiled.

“We’re going to Egypt.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lore stood on a mound of rubble amongst the ruins of Boldt Castle. The blades from the lowering helicopter made wind whip his torn clothes and ruffle his hair. He glanced around, surveying the damage the plane had caused. Hatred filled him to the brim.

He cried, shaking his fist at the gaping hole in the side of the ancient castle. Then he took a deep breath. There was no time to waste. His people would be dead, eradicated, by the end of the night. Their only hope was to find the girl who had stolen his cousin's heart. And that meant killing anyone who stood in their way.

But the Immortalists were panicking, startled by the presence of the helicopter. They began zooming around the great hall, some streaming out of the castle altogether, running off to their inevitable deaths.

"What are you thinking, son?" a voice beside Lore said, breaking him from his reverie.

He looked down to see his mother gazing up at him. Though Immortalists experienced parent-child relationships differently from humans, Lore still respected the woman who had fed him, clothed him, and seen him safely through infancy. The thought of her death at the end of the night made his heart clench even more than the thought of his own.

"I'm thinking of Sage," Lore replied. "We used him as bait

before and the girl came.”

His mother frowned.

“You think there’s still hope?” she asked, quietly.

Lore could see that weariness had crept into her eyes. She was ready to die. Or at least, ready to stop fighting.

But Lore wasn’t. And neither were hundreds of the Immortalists still clinging to life in Boldt Castle.

“I’m not going to give up,” Lore told her fiercely. “We cannot let our people die just because my cousin has fallen in love with a vampire. He’s going to die anyway. What’s the point?”

Lore’s mother shook her head. “You don’t understand love.”

“No,” Lore replied. “But perhaps if I lived two thousand years more I would.”

His mother smiled and squeezed his arm.

“I want that for you, son,” she said kindly, “But I can’t help but feel that fate is against us.” She tipped her head up to the sky and the bright full moon shining in through the collapsed ceiling. “The stars are aligned. The wheels of fate are in motion.” She looked back at him. “Tonight is the night the Immortalists die.”

Lore balled his hands into fists.

“No it’s not,” he said through his teeth. “I will lead an army if I have to. I will bring chaos to the earth. I will destroy the whole human race before I let my people die.”

As he spoke, the Immortalists around him began to look over, roused by his speech and passion. He turned his back on his mother and directed his words to them.

“Who will stand with me?” Lore cried, shaking his fists. “Who will fight for their right to live?”

The small crowd began to mumble their agreement, and the noise attracted still more toward Lore. They streamed past the smoldering airplane fuselage to get a better look. Soon, Lore’s words were met not with mumbled assent but with cheering and clapping.

“Who amongst you has heard enough of fate and prophecies and stars?” he said. “I am not prepared to let our proud people die today!”

The crowds roared their agreement.

Lore noticed that Octal had joined the crowd and was standing at the edges. Lore beckoned to his leader, to the man he respected above all others. But Octal shook his head, as if communicating silently that Lore should be the one to lead the Immortalists.

Lore couldn’t help but frown. Could he really lead an army?

But he didn’t have time to ponder it, because the helicopter was touching down.

“Kill them!” Lore screamed. “Kill the humans!”

The Immortalist crowd followed his command immediately. They rushed at the helicopter. Lore heard the sound of desperate shouting as the police began drawing their weapons. But it was futile. There was no way the police could stand up to the Immortalists.

As they fought, Lore noticed several police officers were escaping from the castle.

“Block the exit!” Lore ordered his troops.

With the exits blocked, the remaining police had no other option but to take to the skies again in their helicopter.

But that wasn’t enough for Lore. He did not just want them driven away, he wanted them dead. As the helicopter began to rise, Lore’s murderous intent grew only stronger.

“Don’t let them get away!” he commanded his followers.

He watched as a group of Immortalists sprung into the air. The police on board the rising helicopter looked on in disbelief as the hovering Immortalists began swarming the helicopter, dragging it down. It begun to stutter under their weight and started to fall. The police inside began to scream. As the helicopter plummeted to the ground, the Immortalists leaped out of harm’s way.

A fireball plumed into the air as the helicopter hit the ground and exploded.

The crowds cheered, exhilarated by the death and destruction their actions had caused. They zigzagged through the air before finally landing and calming down. It was then that Lore realized they were all looking to him again, awaiting his instructions.

“What now?” one of them cried.

“How do we save our people?” another added.

They had been bolstered by the victory against the helicopter and the humans. Lore had awoken a desire to fight and live in them all. The crowd erupted into a rabble of worried exclamations.

This time Octal moved through them toward Lore. He was

ready to command his people once again.

“The girl is in the caves,” he said, his voice booming out through the destroyed great hall. “She has Sage. They are together.”

Lore nodded and squeezed his hands into fists.

“To the cave!” he cried.

Together, the band of Immortalists followed Octal and Lore in the direction of the caves.

CHAPTER NINE

Vivian felt the air rush past her as she flew over the small town, her heart beating fiercely in her chest. She didn't know exactly where she was going; she just had a compulsion to fly, to let the shackles of her old life melt away. She felt exhilarated, and the world felt suddenly so full of possibilities she could hardly contain her excitement.

But the longer she flew, the more a new sensation began to swell within her. It was a sort of gnawing emptiness. The human part of her had died and had been replaced by this awesome, powerful new creature. The death of her mother – at her own hands, no less – was not the source of it. The feeling was more primal.

Vivian swooped past a flock of birds. As she flew, she tried to decipher the new feelings within her. Hunger was of course the most prominent. Anger came a close second. Then she realized with startling clarity that the other feeling overwhelming her was the need for a mate.

And that meant Blake.

At once, Vivian changed her course, heading in the direction of the high school. She licked her tongue across her sharp incisors. This time, there was no getting away. Blake would be hers forever. Once she turned him, they would be intrinsically linked, bound forever, in the same way she could feel the

disgusting man who sired her pumping through her bloodstream. And knowing that she could have Blake forever made Vivian's desire for him grow even stronger.

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