

THE IMMORTALS

The Crovirs and the Bastians: two races of immortals that have lived side by side with humans since the beginning of civilization and once ruled an empire that stretched across Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Each possessing the capacity to survive up to sixteen deaths, they have been engaged in a bloody and savage war from the very dawn of their existence. This unholy battle has, for the most part, remained a well-guarded secret from the eyes of ordinary humans, despite the fact that they have been used as pawns in some of the most epic chapters of the immortal conflict. It was not until the late fourteenth century that the two races were forced to forge an uneasy truce, following a deadly plague that wiped out more than half of their numbers and made the majority of survivors infertile.

Each immortal society is ruled by a hierarchy of councils made up of nobles. The First Council consists of the heads of seven Immortal Sections: the Order of the Hunters, the Counter-Terrorism Group, Human Relations, Commerce, Immortal Legislations and Conventions, Research and Development, and Immortal Culture and History. The Head of the Order of the Hunters is the most powerful member of the First Council. The Second Council, or the Assembly, comprises the

regional division directors under each Head of Section, while the Congress of the Council is made up of local authority chiefs.

Though they have been instrumental to the most significant events in world history, religion, and culture, the Immortals' existence is known to only a select few humans, among them the political leaders of the most powerful states on Earth and the Secretary General of the United Nations.

PROLOGUE

January 1599. Polar Urals. Western Russia.

The immortal bit back a curse as his boots sank in a snowdrift. He struggled out of the icy clutches of the land and carried on climbing, his eyes never leaving the dark shape moving between the trees above him. The figure suddenly stopped and turned. A flash bloomed in the gloom of the evergreen forest.

The immortal heard the crack of the pistol's discharge a moment before the lead ball thudded into the trunk of a birch, just inches from his head. He dropped to the ground, wood chips raining down around him and the sulfurous smell of burning gunpowder tainting the crisp, cold air. A further bang drowned out the agitated barks of the sled dogs in the outbuilding next to the log cabin at the bottom of the rise. The second shot smacked through the tightly-packed snow next to his hand. He swore and rolled behind a cluster of bushes. He rocked to a stop and peered around the edge of the snow-laden branches as the echo of the blast died down.

His prey was disappearing into the shadows beneath the canopy.

The immortal jumped to his feet and gave chase once more, his breath leaving his lips in white plumes. A bitter wind whistled down the flank of the mountain and stung his frost-crusted eyes and exposed skin. Down below, the sled dogs started to howl. The immortal clenched his jaw against the burning pain in his lungs and legs and willed his body forward.

Dazzling light greeted him at the summit of the rise. He staggered to a halt in calf-deep snow and squinted in the glare. His stomach lurched.

The forest ended abruptly on the edge of a rising ice field. Beyond it, a glacier rose to the summit of the peak, a white scar spread across miles of jagged, dark rocks. Sunlight reflected off towering cliffs and precipitous valleys, the shimmering brilliance masking the deadliness of the hostile landscape. Some hundred feet ahead, barely visible in the blinding radiance, the man he had been hunting for nearly two centuries scaled the treacherous incline.

The immortal removed the musket rifle strapped to his backpack, his gaze locked on the running figure. He shouldered the weapon, cocked the hammer, and carefully sighted down the barrel. Blood pounded in his ears as he held his breath and pulled the trigger.

Flint struck steel. Sparks flared as gunpowder ignited. The lead shot erupted from the muzzle of the gun and flashed through the air, its path straight and true.

The man he was chasing jerked and cried out. He stumbled down to one knee and clamped a hand to his right flank. He swayed for a moment, pushed himself up, and turned to fire his weapon once more. The shot whistled harmlessly into the treetops. He threw the pistol to the ground and started to climb again.

Rage darkened the immortal's vision. He had waded through thousands of miles of godforsaken wilderness before finally tracking down the man who had killed his lover and who posed the greatest threat the immortal societies had ever known. Having lost precious moments dispatching the bodyguards who stood watch over the remote hideout in the Urals, he had come within seconds of killing his enemy when the man escaped his grasp once more, rescued by the same uncanny luck that had been his savior for the last two hundred years.

The immortal shoved the rifle into its straps and headed over the ice.

Despite the wound, his prey accelerated and angled for a black outcrop rising out of the glacier to the far left.

Cold air seared the immortal's throat as he pursued the bleeding figure. He had just reached the crimson trail staining the

pristine snow when a distant boom reached his ears. He stopped and looked up.

Movement on the slope some six thousand feet above him caught his gaze. A wall of whiteness slowly detached itself from the face of the mountain.

The wounded man froze in his tracks. He stared at the approaching avalanche before moving once more, his legs pumping awkwardly through the snow as he raced for the shelter of the spur of rock.

The immortal followed, despair sending a fresh burst of energy through his body. *No, not now, not when I am this close!*

The deluge rushed inexorably closer, a tidal wave of death dancing gracefully down the incline.

The immortal staggered after his prey, his resolve unshaken, air leaving his body in harsh gasps. The land rocked violently beneath his feet. He floundered and lost his footing. A thunderous explosion tore the air as he fell to his knees. A large crack appeared in the glacier in front of him.

The immortal's eyes widened. A cold blast knocked him sideways and sent him tumbling along the incline. He rolled and slid to a stop on his stomach some twenty feet down the slope. The roar of the approaching maelstrom of snow and ice echoed against the looming

peaks and vales. The fissure lengthened. He blinked and saw a jagged line dart inches past his right hand before snaking toward the distant tree line behind him.

He scrambled backward as a dark crevasse opened in the ice sheet. The ground crumbled beneath him. His stomach dropped. He yanked his sword from the scabbard on his back and stabbed the blade frantically upward.

It sank into the edge of the ice just as he started to fall. He dangled from the hilt for a shocked moment before slowly looking down at the yawning darkness between his legs. His breath froze in his throat, the fear that gripped him almost paralyzing in its intensity. He gritted his teeth and reached up with his free hand, his flailing fingers searching desperately for purchase. They closed on the lip of the widening chasm.

The avalanche became a deafening howl that eclipsed the rapid drumbeat of his pulse. He looked over his shoulder.

His prey had reached the rocky outcrop and was crouched beneath it, his body braced for impact. Their eyes met through a thickening mist of fine snow. The wounded man smiled, his gaze full of dark triumph.

The immortal closed his eyes. Despair formed a tightening band around his heart as he steeled himself for what was to come.

The white torrent washed over the crevasse, pounding him with a cold, deadly weight that knocked the air out of his lungs. A rock smashed into his fingers, breaking skin and bone. He choked back a cry and swallowed a mouthful of snow.

The sword shuddered in his grasp. He let go of the edge of the chasm and clung to the hilt with both hands. Blood made his grip slippery. Another crack reached his ears. He looked up through the gray haze and glimpsed the fracture tearing through the ice holding the blade. It collapsed a second later.

He fell into the abyss, sword in hand.

Wind whistled in his ears. White walls rushed past him. The light faded as the deluge followed him into the gulf.

Soaring cliffs of black rock replaced the walls of ice as he fell through the crevasse into the very bowels of the mountain itself. Then the rock disappeared.

He had a vague impression of a gaping, empty void before he struck the ground.

Pain exploded through his consciousness, blocking out sight and sound. He felt his bones shatter. The earth shifted beneath him once more. Icy liquid suddenly flooded his throat. He gasped and choked. As freezing numbness engulfed his body, dulling the agony

searing his senses, the immortal blinked and registered the clear waters surrounding him in dull incomprehension.

Darkness descended from above. The rest of the avalanche crashed down around him.

His fingers slowly loosened on the hilt of his sword. His final thought before darkness and silence locked him in the icy grave of the underground lake was that no one in the immortal societies knew of the danger that was still to come.

PART ONE: FROZEN

CHAPTER ONE

June 1969. San Andres Mountains. New Mexico.

Oh shit, not the face!

Ethan Storm steeled himself as the soldier's fist sailed through the air and smashed into his left cheek. He staggered back a step. The heels of his boots struck a rock wall. Chains jingled above him as iron cuffs bit into his wrists. He shook his head, spat out blood, and directed a crooked smile at the man who had hit him.

'Is that all you've got?'

An ugly grimace distorted the soldier's features. He snarled and pulled his arm back once more. His companion stepped in front of him.

'Enough!' barked the second soldier. 'Our orders were to capture the guy, not beat the living shit out of him! Besides, you know those scientists will complain if we make him bleed.'

The first soldier scowled and slowly lowered his hand.

'They probably won't notice anyway,' he said with a grunt. 'I don't know what the hell our government wants with all these bastards, but I've never seen people heal so damn fast. It's fucking unnatural is what it is!' He glanced around uneasily, his eyes alighting on the

shackled figure on the far side of the cell. 'That asshole was a mess when they finished with him the other day. Now look at him! I can't even see a scar where they cut into him!'

Ethan blinked. He was finding it difficult to concentrate on the soldier's words; the narcotic they had given him had still not worn off. From what he could gather of their conversation, it seemed there were other immortals locked up in this infernal dungeon with him. He raised his head and squinted at the prisoner on the other side of the room. All he could make out through the drug-induced haze clouding his senses was a man with a long, filthy, matted mane and matching beard.

The stranger sat on the floor with his head bowed and his back against the wall, arms resting loosely on his knees. His wrists and ankles were locked in stout manacles and fetters. A metal collar bound him to an iron ring in the floor. The stench of human waste filled the room from a hole in the ground.

Anger surged through Ethan. He was damned if he was going to end up like that guy. He flexed his fingers and focused on the cuffs holding him to the wall. Tendons bulged in his neck while he concentrated on the metal. Sweat broke out across his forehead. His vision flickered.

Ethan gasped and sagged, the chains tinkling above his head as his legs almost gave way. Alarm flared inside him. Did they know of his ability? Was that the reason they had sedated him?

The soldier who had struck him looked around dismissively at the jangling noise before crossing the floor to the silent figure on the opposite side of the cell. He stopped a couple of feet from the chained man.

‘Hey! What the hell *are* you?’ he demanded.

The prisoner remained silent.

The soldier stiffened. He drew his foot back and kicked the captive man viciously in the leg. ‘I asked you a question, asshole!’

‘For fuck’s sake, Eddie, stop it!’ hissed his companion. The man’s eyes grew round with horror. He took a step forward. ‘Eddie, no!’

The soldier called Eddie had taken his gun from his hip holster. He leveled it against the mute prisoner’s head and cocked the hammer.

‘Maybe I should blow your brains out. See if you survive that, you inhuman piece of shit!’

The bound man’s hands rose so fast Ethan almost missed the move. He snatched the pistol from the soldier’s grasp, removed the magazine, and dismantled the weapon in a blur of motion. The clatter

of the parts hitting the floor was the only sound that broke the frozen silence that followed.

The soldiers gaped. Ethan bit back a snort. The prisoner's head rose. Teeth gleamed above his matted beard.

Eddie lost it. It took a further two guards to drag him, cursing and struggling, from the chamber. By the time they left, the prisoner's face was a bloodied pulp.

He had not made a single sound while the enraged soldier punched and kicked him.

Ethan's fingers cramped from fisting them in the tight iron cuffs. Frustration gnawed at his insides as he considered the helplessness of their situation.

'Hey, you okay?' he called out weakly to the still shape on the floor.

Footsteps echoed somewhere outside the room. The prisoner slowly pushed himself up to his elbows and mumbled something through swollen, cracked lips. A key rattled in the lock.

'What was that?' said Ethan, his eyes shifting briefly to the cell door.

'I would worry about your own self, boy,' the prisoner repeated in a raspy voice. His piercing, blue-green gaze locked on Ethan's face.

The door swung open on thick hinges. A tall, distinguished-looking, middle-aged man in a white coat walked in. He stopped and stared at the bleeding figure on the floor.

‘And what have we here?’ he murmured, his tone unhurried.

The prisoner froze. Unbridled rage blazed in his aquamarine eyes. He jumped to his feet so quickly the movement startled Ethan and charged toward the man in the doorway. The chains stopped him short a second later.

A choked grunt escaped the prisoner’s throat as he strained against the metal collar digging into his windpipe. He clawed the air inches from the silent figure’s head, his face reddening while the metal links binding him jangled and shook around the iron ring in the floor.

The stranger in the coat turned his back on the enraged man, his expression unperturbed. His hooded eyes alighted on Ethan’s face.

‘Ah. You’re awake.’

The man reached inside his pocket and walked leisurely across the floor.

Ethan tensed when he saw the capped needle and syringe the man withdrew from his coat. He stared at the clear liquid inside the glass tube with rising panic and started to struggle against the chains holding him captive. Veins throbbed on his forehead as he focused his mind once more on the iron restraints around his wrists.

The cuffs trembled above him.

The man in the coat paused. 'Now, now, we can't have you doing that, Mr. Storm.' He uttered a disappointed tut-tut. 'Not after all the time and resources we spent finding you.' He took the cap off the needle.

Ethan clenched his jaw and concentrated on the shackles. A buzzing noise filled his ears. His knees suddenly collapsed beneath him.

Cursing the drug dulling his senses, he shook his head dazedly and pushed himself up just as the man reached him.

'No!' Ethan shouted. He stepped back until he hit the wall, shocked at how weak his voice sounded and the shudders of exhaustion racking his body. 'Get the hell away from me!'

He kicked out at the man in the coat. The stranger sidestepped smoothly.

Steely fingers closed around Ethan's throat. He found himself lifted off the floor and choked on the tightening band across his windpipe, legs thrashing feebly midair.

The man in the coat held him aloft and studied him coldly. 'Things will go better for you if you cooperate, son of Jared.'

Before Ethan could make sense of the stranger's cryptic words, he felt a sharp prick in his neck. The man depressed the plunger on the syringe. Cool oblivion washed over the immortal.

It was dark inside the cell when Ethan came to. He opened his eyes and blinked.

He was lying on his side on the cold stone floor. A rock wall swam into focus a couple of feet in front of him. He stared at it for a moment.

Hope welled inside his chest when he realized they had unchained him from the wall. He pushed up on his elbows. Metal clinked in the gloom. He looked down.

His heart sank when he saw the cuffs around his wrists. He raised a hand to the heavy collar around his neck and followed the iron links leading from it to the ring on the floor.

‘Shit,’ he muttered.

There was movement to his right. He turned and met an intense blue-green stare a couple of inches from his face.

‘What the —?’

Ethan scrambled backward awkwardly.

‘You’re awake,’ said the bearded prisoner.

Ethan clutched his chest. ‘Jesus, man! You almost gave me a heart attack!’

Chains jingled as the prisoner sat back on his heels.

'Somehow, I suspect you will survive such an attack of the heart,' he professed calmly.

Ethan studied the man with a frown. 'I take it you're also an immortal?'

The man cocked his head and eyed him shrewdly. 'And what makes you say that, pray tell?'

The prisoner had an old-fashioned, cultivated way of expressing himself that Ethan had not heard in some time.

He scowled. 'Well, apart from the obvious clues from those soldiers, your wounds are healing pretty damn fast.'

The prisoner raised his fingers to the scabs on his face. 'Ah. Yes. I suppose there is no hiding that fact.'

A wave of dizziness suddenly struck Ethan. He shifted on the floor, pressed his back to the wall, and dropped his head between his raised knees. He concentrated on his breathing until the sickening feeling passed; he was evidently still under the influence of the latest injection.

He clamped down on the panic threatening to overwhelm him and raised his eyes to the bearded prisoner. 'So, what the hell gives?'

The man looked at him blankly. 'I am afraid I have no knowledge of such an expression.'

Ethan bit back a curse. *Seriously, what is wrong with this guy?*

‘What’s going on?’ he rephrased with as much patience as he could muster. He indicated the interior of the cell with a weak wave.

‘Why are we here? What do these people want with us?’

The immortal watched him for a beat. ‘If I may ask, how exactly did they apprehend you?’

Heat flooded Ethan’s cheeks. The subject of his capture was a source of great embarrassment to him.

‘They put something in my drink when I was in the company of a...lady.’

He still felt chagrined for having fallen for the oldest trick in the book. A day after he had finished his latest assignment in Los Angeles, he had travelled to Vegas to enjoy the hard-earned cash that had been wired to one of his accounts. His suspicions should have been aroused when an attractive brunette bumped into him in the lobby of his hotel, spilled coffee down his shirt, and invited him for a drink in the bar as an apology. Had he not already consumed a fair amount of alcohol before the flight that brought him over from LA, he would have been in a better state of mind to smell the obvious trap.

The woman had been exactly his type, with dark hair and eyes, and all her curves in the right places. Ethan would have pondered his uncanny luck if he had been in full possession of his faculties. And

he would have noticed the men watching them from various discreet places around the bar while he and his companion drank and flirted with each other.

It wasn't until he took the woman up to his room that the penny dropped. Halfway through undressing her, the bed started to spin alarmingly beneath him, much more than could be explained by the alcohol he had imbibed. A moment later, four men burst through the door, pinned him to the mattress, and jabbed something in his arm. The next thing he remembered was being lifted off the back of a truck in a large, brightly-lit hangar and being dragged through what felt like half a mile of underground tunnels to the room where he now found himself chained.

All this he haltingly related to his cellmate.

The other immortal leaned toward him, eyes glittering intently in the gloom. 'This place you saw before they brought you here, can you describe it to me?'

Ethan hesitated. 'You're not gonna mention that I was an idiot for being so easily deceived?'

'Of course, you were a complete fool for falling prey to your baser animal instincts.' The prisoner shrugged. 'There is, however, no point weeping over shed milk. Now, about this place you spoke of.'

Ethan's jaw sagged. "Weeping over shed milk?" What are you, an old lady?'

The prisoner's eyes narrowed slightly. 'There is no need to be discourteous, boy.'

'I'm starting to find "boy" slightly insulting myself,' snapped Ethan.

There was a flash of teeth in the dark. 'That's because you are but a child in immortal years.'

'Oh yeah? And you're like what, four hundred or something?'

Ethan could feel strength flowing back into his limbs. Arguing with this irritating guy seemed to be doing him some good. He almost missed the pained expression that flashed across the other man's face.

The prisoner dropped his head back on the bare rock wall. 'What year is it?'

Ethan stared at him, nonplussed. 'Year?'

'Yes. Jonah and his men have taunted me with so many half-truths in the last decade, I don't know what to believe anymore.'

Ethan wondered at the undertone of bitter dread in the man's voice. 'It's 1969.'

The prisoner went deathly still. Muscles worked in his throat.

'Then I am seven hundred and thirty-nine years old, boy,' he finally whispered in a tortured voice.

Ethan startled. 'You don't look a day over four hundred and fifty!'

The prisoner's knuckles whitened where his hands rested in his lap.

'What the hell happened to you? Were you frozen in time or something?' said Ethan.

The older immortal stiffened. 'You are correct.'

Ethan blinked, perplexed. 'What?'

'You asked if I had been frozen in time. The answer to that question is yes.'

Ethan shivered at the expression in the older immortal's eyes. The latter looked like someone who had survived the very depths of hell itself.

He looked away from the intense gaze and studied the manacles around his wrists. Wondering if he had enough reserves left to get himself out of this mess, he tugged at the cuffs. The iron was old and thick. He took a deep breath and concentrated on the locking mechanism.

'Jonah referred to you as a son of Jared,' said his companion. 'Who is Jared? Is he a member of your special Crovir ancestry?'

CHAPTER TWO

Ethan's head snapped up, any notion of manipulating the metal fleeing his mind. He lunged toward the older man and groaned when the cell reeled around him. He collapsed on the floor and swallowed the bile rising in his throat. A shudder racked his body.

'What the hell do you know about that?' he spat out once he could lift his head off the ground.

The other immortal reached for something in the gloom. There was a clink and a faint slosh. He passed across a wooden ladle full of water.

Ethan grabbed the handle and swallowed a mouthful of the cold liquid. Some of it spilled over and dribbled down his chin.

'From what I witnessed earlier, and our captors' persistence in keeping you under the influence of some sort of mind-altering substance, I can only surmise that you are an Elemental,' said the man. His gaze dropped to the birthmark on the back of Ethan's left hand. 'I have only ever heard rumors of your kind. You are a rare breed indeed among the Crovirs.'

Dismay flooded Ethan at the man's words. With it came a familiar rush of anger and sadness. He flopped down, his cheek pressed against the chilly, wet stone.

‘You don’t know how rare.’

He felt the other man tense.

‘You are the last of your kind?’ his companion asked harshly.

Ethan closed his eyes and sagged on the bare rock under a fresh wave of exhaustion. ‘I believe so.’

When the other immortal spoke again, a trace of compassion tinged his tone. ‘It seems Jonah has been looking for you for some time. You did well to stay out of his reach for so long.’

Now that the drug was slowly clearing from his bloodstream, Ethan could no longer ignore the deep-seated fear that had plagued him ever since those men burst into his hotel room. More than a century after they had ripped his family apart, the invisible enemy who had been chasing him all over this godforsaken world had finally tracked him down.

In the wake of the terror that gripped him, Ethan was surprised to discover a reserve of rage. His nails bit into his palms. He sat up slowly, the face of the man in the white coat swimming in his mind.

‘Is Jonah the name of the guy who stabbed me in the neck?’

‘Yes. His true name is Jonah Krondike, although currently he appears to be using the alias Jonah Resner. He is a Crovir noble.’

‘What does he want with me?’

The older immortal drew his legs up and rested his arms on his knees. 'I believe he is intending to use your body for some sort of experiment.'

Ethan stiffened. 'Experiment? What kind of experiment?'

His companion hesitated. 'That I do not know the answer to, boy.'

Ethan narrowed his eyes. He could not help but feel that the older immortal had just lied to him. 'There seems to be some kinda history between this Jonah Krondike and you. How do you know him?'

'It is a long tale and one I am afraid I will not have time to relate.'

Ethan arched an eyebrow. 'Why? You going somewhere?'

The immortal nodded. 'Yes. We both are.'

Ethan gaped at his fellow prisoner. 'Huh?'

'We are about to escape from here,' explained his companion. 'It has been twelve hours since they gave you that medication. They will be back to administer another dose soon.'

Ethan felt blood drain from his face.

'So, how are you feeling, Elemental?'

There was a clink from the chains as the older immortal rummaged around in the dark.

'Like shit, now that you ask,' mumbled Ethan.

'I meant, how are your immortal powers?' his companion asked patiently. 'Do you think you can use them?'

Ethan took a deep breath and stared at the cuffs around his wrists. He concentrated on the metal. Blood thundered in his ears. A grunt left his lips.

There was a faint noise from the locks.

He gasped and bent over, alarmed at how much the act had taken from him.

'Not bad,' said the older immortal. 'Now, see if you can open them all the way.'

Ethan panted where he crouched on the floor. He turned his left hand over and slowly extended his middle finger at the other man.

'There is no need for that kind of gesture.' There was a dim noise outside the cell. 'I would hurry if I were you.'

Ethan detected a glint of metal in the shadows as his companion placed something on the ground. He swallowed the lump of panic clogging his throat. 'What's that?'

'It is a shot from that idiotic infantry man's gun.'

The immortal maneuvered the handle of the ladle into the base of the wall behind him and carefully extracted a piece of rock the size of an orange.

From the marks around it, Ethan suspected it had taken the man weeks, if not months, to carve out the lump of stone. Despair swamped him at that thought; he did not want to end up locked in this hellish dungeon for eternity.

A low mumble of voices reached him from the other side of the cell door.

‘It is the change of the guards,’ said the older immortal. His eyes shone in the gloom. ‘Are you getting anywhere with those fetters?’

‘No. At least, not fast enough for it to be of any use.’

Beads of sweat dotted Ethan’s brow and pooled at the base of his throat as he centered all his energy on the metal bands binding him. Had he been in full possession of his senses, he would have been out of them in seconds.

‘This might help,’ said the older immortal.

Ethan looked up. ‘What —?’

His companion slapped him forcefully across the face.

Ethan’s head snapped to the side. He turned and gaped at his cellmate. ‘*You bastard!* Why the hell did you do —?’

The immortal lunged toward him.

‘Use that anger! *Focus!*’ he hissed inches from Ethan’s face.

He struck him again.

Ethan's ears rang from the second blow. Numbness bloomed on his cheek. A wave of fury flooded his body.

The older immortal made a satisfied noise at the back of his throat and shuffled backward. He lifted the rock above his head and brought it down sharply on the rim of the bullet. Sparks flared in the gloom when stone met metal. He raised the rock and hit the base of the cartridge a second time.

There was a flash and a loud bang as the casing exploded.

An alarmed curse sounded outside their prison above the dying echoes of the detonation. A key jangled agitatedly in the lock. The door slammed open, spilling faint, yellow light across the floor.

A guard stormed inside the room, rifle in hand. He flicked the switch on the wall and blinked as brightness flooded the space.

'What the fuck was that?' he barked.

He raised the weapon stiffly to his shoulder, the barrel swinging between the two prisoners. A sudden clatter made him jump. His gaze moved to the iron shackles and collars lying open on the floor. His eyes grew round.

Ethan smiled savagely. The rage blazing through his veins had burned away the last vestiges of the narcotic in his system and allowed him to unlock the restraints holding him and the other immortal captive.

The guard swore. His finger moved on the trigger. Ethan zeroed in on the gun. With his mind clear, it took but a single breath for him to perceive the structure of the metal. He altered it.

The barrel of the rifle twisted sideways with a tortuous creak. The guard gaped at the buckled weapon. He cast it aside and reached for the army knife on his hip.

There was a blur by Ethan's side as the older immortal bolted to his feet and dashed across the room. He reached the soldier just as the latter raised his blade, ducked under the swinging arm, and drove his shoulder into the man's chest. Air whooshed out of the guard's mouth in a harsh grunt as the immortal tackled him to the ground; the knife fell from his hand and skittered across the floor as he landed heavily on his back.

The soldier lay stunned for a heartbeat before struggling against the man atop him. His eyes darted fearfully toward the half-open door and he opened his mouth to scream for help. Ethan tensed.

The soldier barely had time to utter the beginning of a cry before it became a choked gurgle; the immortal had straddled his body and was digging his thumbs into his windpipe. The man's face flushed to a deepening red as he punched and pulled at the prisoner's rock-steady arms, body bucking futilely beneath his attacker's weight and heels kicking at the ground.

The immortal remained silent, his face a study of fierce concentration and his knuckles white where they lay against the guard's neck.

It was a matter of seconds before the soldier stopped struggling.

Only when the man lay completely still, bloodshot eyes staring unseeingly at the ceiling and limbs relaxing in death, did the immortal finally move. He sat back on his heels and dropped his hands to his sides, his posture rigid.

Ethan released the breath he had been holding. Mixed with the growing admiration he felt for his companion's tenacity in the face of the odds stacked against them was a sliver of fear.

The older immortal had been a survivor for a lot longer than Ethan. And he was evidently not afraid to kill.

Hooded eyes turned to him. 'You did well.'

The immortal rose, stepped past the body of the soldier, closed the cell door, and removed the key from the lock.

Ethan climbed shakily to his feet, his heart hammering inside his chest. 'Now what?'

'We wait.' His companion glanced at him. 'What is your name, boy?'

Ethan hesitated. 'Ethan. Yours?'

‘Asgard. Asgard Go—’

The sound of footsteps rose from outside. Ethan stiffened. The footsteps grew closer and stopped on the other side of the door.

Asgard brought a finger to his lips, turned off the light, and melted into the shadows. Ethan slipped into a dark corner of the room just as a key turned in the lock. The door opened.

A woman in a white lab coat walked in with a metal tray in hand. She started to reach for the switch on the wall and froze when she spotted the body of the guard in the pale beam of light washing across the ground from outside. A gasp left her lips. She took a step back and reached inside her pocket.

Asgard came up behind her and kicked the door shut with his heel. Darkness fell inside the chamber once more.

‘Hello, Marilyn,’ he hissed as he clamped a hand over the woman’s mouth and locked his arm around her body, trapping her.

The tray fell from her grasp and clattered noisily on the floor. Ethan saw the woman’s eyes shrink into slits. She stamped on her captor’s foot with the heel of her pump and slipped something out of her coat. He made out the shape of a handgun as he moved toward the struggling pair.

A low noise escaped Asgard's throat when the woman bit down on his hand. The barrel of the gun moved erratically toward Ethan.

'I don't think so, lady.'

He raised a hand.

The weapon crumpled in the woman's grip. Her eyes rounded with horror and fluttered closed a second later when the man holding her captive struck the back of her neck sharply with the edge of his hand. Asgard lowered her limp body to the ground and moved to the dead soldier.

'We haven't got much time.' He started to strip the man of his clothes and boots. 'They will come looking for her.'

Ethan stared from the syringe that had fallen out of the tray to the woman's pale features. 'Who is she?'

Asgard grimaced. 'She works for Jonah.' He glanced at Ethan. 'Take her coat.'

They found the keys to the shackles on the dead guard and chained the unconscious woman in the metal restraints that had previously bound them. Minutes after the soldier had stormed their cell, they were standing outside their prison.

An empty corridor carved out of bare rock stretched out on either side of them. The bulbs dotting the ceiling shed a subdued light on the metal doors lining it.

‘Should we get the other prisoners out?’ Ethan whispered. The woman’s white coat stretched uncomfortably under his arms and across his back.

Asgard finished locking the door. ‘No. The few that remain are too diseased to travel far. They will only be a burden.’

Despite his time in captivity, the older immortal had retained his brawny build; the guard’s clothes barely fitted his broad-shouldered frame. He had tucked his unruly mane under the soldier’s military cap and tugged the shirt collar up to mask his beard.

Ethan frowned. ‘Diseased? How?’

Asgard’s face darkened. ‘The experiments Jonah and his associates have been carrying out on them have taken their toll on their bodies.’