

PURGATORY

PART I

I was exhausted; with the two of us uncertain of our way,
we halted on a plateau lonelier than desert paths.

Dante, *Purgatorio*



I COULDN'T SHUT OUT the screams. Darkness surrounded me. A terrible weight pressed into my chest, making me struggle for each breath as I lay drowning in my own blood. I sat up with a gasp, blinking into the shadows.

The screaming had stopped. The room became still, flooded with silence. I took a couple of painful swallows, trying to moisten my parched mouth. It took me a moment to realize that the screams had been my own, each cry clawing my throat until it was raw. I brought my hands up to my chest. My fingers moved along the surface of my shirt. The fabric was smooth, with no sign of rips or tears from the crossbow bolts. I couldn't see well in the dim light, but I could tell this shirt wasn't mine, or rather, wasn't Shay's borrowed sweater—the one I'd been wearing the night everything changed.

A blur of images rushed through my head. A blanket of snow. A dark forest. The pounding of drums. Howls calling me to the union.

The union. My blood grew cold. I'd run from my own destiny.

I'd run from Ren. The thought of the Bane alpha made my chest tighten, but when I dropped my face into my hands, another figure replaced him. A boy on his knees, blindfolded and bound, alone in the forest.

Shay.

I could hear his voice, feel the brush of his hands on my cheek as I'd slipped in and out of consciousness. What had happened? He'd left me alone in the dark for so long. . . . I was still alone. But where?

My eyes adjusted to the low light of the room. The cloudy skies filtered sunlight through tall leaded windows stretching the length of the opposite wall, tingeing pale shadows with a rose-hued gleam as I scanned the room for an exit, finding a tall oak door to the right of the bed. Ten, maybe fifteen feet from where I sat.

I managed to slow my breathing, but my heart was still pounding. Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I tentatively put weight on my feet. I had no trouble standing and felt each muscle spring back to life, coiled and taut, ready for anything.

I'd be able to fight, and kill, if I had to.

The sound of booted footsteps reached my ears. The knob turned and the door swung inward to reveal a man I'd only seen once before. He had thick hair, deep brown like the color of black coffee. The contours of his face were cut at strong, chiseled angles, slightly worn with lines and covered with the shadow of several days unshaven, salt-and-pepper stubble—neglected but still appealing.

I'd last seen his face seconds before he coldcocked me with the pommel of his sword. My canines sharpened as a growl rumbled deep in my chest.

He opened his mouth to speak, but I shifted into a wolf, crouching low, snarling at him. I kept my fangs in plain view, a steady growl rolling out of my throat. I had two options: tear him to pieces or bolt past him. I was guessing I only had a few seconds to pick one.

His hand went to his waist, pushing back his long leather duster to rest on the hilt of a long, curving saber.

A fight it is.

My muscles quivered as I hunched down, angling for his throat.

“Wait.” He moved his hand off the hilt, lifting his palms in an attempt to pacify me.

I froze, stunned by the gesture and a little irked at his presumption. I wouldn't be calmed that easily. After a quick snap of my fangs, I risked a glance toward the hall at his back.

"You don't want to do that," he said, stepping into my line of sight.

I answered with a growl.

And you don't want to find out what I'm capable of when I'm cornered.

"I understand the impulse," he continued, folding his arms over his chest, the sword in its scabbard. "You might get past me. Then you'll run into a security detail at the end of the hall. And if you get past them—which I think you probably could, given that you're an alpha—you'll hit a larger group of guards at any of the exits."

"Given that you're an alpha." How does he know who I am?

Still growling, I backed off, throwing a glance over my shoulder at the tall windows. I could easily smash through them. It would hurt, but as long as it wasn't too high a drop, I'd survive.

"Not an option," he said, glancing at the windows.

What is this guy? A mind reader?

"That's at least a fifty-foot drop onto solid marble." He took a step forward. I backed up again. "And no one here wants to see you get hurt."

The growl died in my throat.

His voice dropped low and he spoke slowly. "If you'd shift back into human form, we could talk."

I gnashed my teeth, frustrated, sidling along the floor. But we both knew I was feeling less sure of myself by the minute.

"If you try to run," he continued, "we'll be forced to kill you."

He'd said it so calmly that it took a moment for me to process the words.

I let out a sharp bark of protest that turned to dark laughter as I shifted into human form.

"I thought no one here wanted to hurt me."

One corner of his mouth crinkled. “We don’t. Calla, I’m Monroe.”

He took a step forward.

“Stay where you are,” I said, flashing my canines.

He didn’t come any closer.

“You haven’t tried to kill me yet,” I replied, still scanning the room for anything that would give me a tactical advantage. “But that doesn’t mean I can trust you. If I see that steel hanging from your belt move an inch, you lose an arm.”

He nodded.

Questions pounded in my skull, making my head ache. The sensation of breathlessness threatened to overwhelm me again. I couldn’t afford to panic. I also couldn’t afford to show any weakness.

Memories stirred deep within me, swirling beneath my skin and raising gooseflesh along my arms. Cries of pain echoed in my head. I shivered, seeing wraiths ooze around me like nebulous shadows while succubi screamed overhead. My blood went icy.

“Monroe! The boy is over here!”

“Where is Shay?”

I choked on his name, terror welling up my throat as I waited for Monroe’s response.

Snatches from the past flitted through my mind, a blur of images that wouldn’t stay in focus. I struggled with the memories, trying to catch them and hold them in place so that I could make sense of what had happened, how I’d gotten here. I remembered racing through narrow halls, realizing we’d been cornered, and finding our way into the library at Rowan Estate. Shay’s uncle, Bosque Mar, eroding my outrage with doubts about what was happening to us.

Shay’s fingers clutched my hand so tightly it hurt. “Tell me who you really are.”

“I’m your uncle,” Bosque said calmly, walking toward us. “Your own flesh and blood.”

“Who are the Keepers?” Shay asked.

“Others like me, who want only to protect you. To help you,” Bosque replied. “Shay, you are not like other children. You have untapped abilities that you cannot begin to imagine. I can show you who you truly are. Teach you to use the power you have.”

“If you’re so invested in helping Shay, why was he the sacrifice at my union?” I pushed Shay behind me, shielding him from Bosque.

Bosque shook his head. “Another tragic misunderstanding. A test, Calla, of your loyalty to our noble cause. I thought we offered you the best of educations, but perhaps you aren’t familiar with Abraham’s trial with his son Isaac? Isn’t the sacrifice of one you love the ultimate gauge of your faith? Do you really believe we wanted Shay to die at your hands? We’ve asked you to be his protector.”

I began to shake. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Bosque smiled, and it almost looked kind. “After all you’ve been through, have you no trust in your masters? You would never have been made to harm Shay—another kill would have been provided in his place at the last moment. I understand such a test may seem too terrible to be fair, too much to ask of you and Renier. Perhaps you are too young to have faced such a trial.”

I balled my hands into fists so Monroe wouldn’t see them shaking. I could hear the screams of succubi and incubi, hear the hissing chimeras and the shuffling gait of those horrible, desiccated creatures that had crawled out of the portraits lining Rowan Estate’s walls.

“Where is he?” I asked again, grinding my teeth. “I swear if you don’t tell me—”

“He’s in our care,” Monroe said calmly.

There was that half smirk again. I couldn’t puzzle out this man’s reserved but confident demeanor.

I wasn’t sure what “care” meant in this case. Keeping my fangs bared, I edged across the room, waiting for Monroe to make a move.

Even as I watched him, blurry images of the past wavered before my eyes like watercolors.

Cold metal encircling my arms. The click of locks and the sudden absence of weight from my wrists. The warmth of a gentle touch rubbing away the icy chill on my skin.

“Why isn’t she awake yet?” Shay asked. “You promised she wouldn’t be hurt.”

“She’ll be fine,” Monroe said. “The enchantment from the bolts acts like a heavy sedative; it will take some time to wear off.”

I tried to speak, to move, but my eyelids were so heavy, the darkness of slumber pulling me beneath its surface again.

“If we can reach an agreement, I’ll take you to him,” Monroe continued.

“An agreement?” I was right about not wanting to show weakness. If I was making any sort of deal with a Searcher, it had to be on my terms.

“Yes,” he said, risking a step toward me. When I didn’t protest, he began to smile. He wasn’t being deceptive—I didn’t catch the scent of fear—but his smile was chased away by something else. Pain?

“We need you, Calla.”

My confusion buzzed more loudly, forcing me to shake it off like a pesky swarm of flies. I had to appear confident, not distracted by his strange behavior.

“Who exactly is ‘we’? And what do you need me for?”

My anger had dissolved, but I concentrated on keeping my canines razor sharp. I didn’t want Monroe to forget for one minute who he was dealing with. I was still an alpha—I needed to remember that as much as he needed to see it. That strength was the only thing I had going for me right now.

“My people,” he said, vaguely gesturing behind him toward whatever lay beyond the door. “The Searchers.”

“You’re their leader?” I frowned.

He looked strong but grizzled—like someone who never got as much sleep as he really needed.

“I’m a leader,” he said. “I head up the Haldis team; we run operations out of the Denver outpost.”

“Let’s talk about your friends in Denver.”

Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, Lumine, my mistress, smiled and a Searcher screamed.

I crossed my arms over my chest so I wouldn’t shudder. “Okay.”

“But it’s not just my team that needs your help,” he continued, turning suddenly to pace in front of the door. “We all do. Everything has changed; we don’t have any time to waste.”

He ran his hands through his dark hair as he spoke. I considered bolting—he was clearly distracted—but something about his manner mesmerized me, enough so that I didn’t know if escape was what I really wanted anymore.

“You might be our only chance. I don’t think the Scion can do this alone. You might be the final part of the equation. The tipping point.”

“The tipping point of what?”

“This war. You can end it.”

War. The word set my blood boiling. I was glad for it; the heat coursing through my veins made me feel stronger. This war was the one I’d been raised to fight.

“We need you to join us, Calla.”

I could barely hear him. I was trapped in a red fog—thoughts of the violence that consumed so much of my life filled my being.

The Witches’ War.

I’d served the Keepers in their battles against the Searchers since I could cut flesh with my teeth. I’d hunted for them. I’d killed for them.

My eyes focused on Monroe. I’d killed *his* people. How could he possibly want me to join them?

As if sensing my wariness, he froze in place. He didn't speak but clasped his hands behind his back, watching me, waiting for me to speak.

I swallowed, forcing steadiness into my voice. "You want me to fight for you."

"Not just you," he said. I could tell he was fighting to control his words as well. He seemed desperate to flood the air between us with his thoughts. "But you're the key. You're an alpha, a leader. That's what we need. It's what we've always needed."

"I don't understand."

His eyes were so bright as he spoke I didn't know whether to be afraid or fascinated. "The Guardians, Calla. Your pack. We need you to bring them over to us. To fight with us."

It felt like the floor had dropped out beneath me and I was falling. I wanted to believe what he was saying, because wasn't this the very thing I'd hoped for?

A way to free my pack.

Yes. Yes, it was. Even now my heart was racing with the thought of returning to Vail, of finding my packmates. Of getting back to Ren. I could take them all away from the Keepers. To something else. Something better.

But the Searchers were my enemies . . . I could only tread carefully if I made a pact with them. I decided to play up my reluctance.

"I don't know if that's possible. . . ."

"But it is!" Monroe lurched forward as if to grab my hands, a mad glint in his eyes.

I leapt back, shifting into wolf form, and snapped at his fingers.

"I'm sorry." He shook his head. "There's so much you don't know."

I shifted back. His face was etched with deep lines. Haunted, full of secrets.

“No sudden moves, Monroe.” I took slow steps toward him, extending my hand, warding off another approach. “I’m interested, but I’m not convinced that you know what you’re asking of me.”

“I do.” He looked away, almost flinching at his own words. “I’m asking you to risk everything.”

“And why would I do that?” I asked.

I already knew the answer. I’d risked everything to save Shay. And I’d do it again in a heartbeat if it meant I could get back to my packmates. If I could save them.

He stepped back and extended his arm, clearing my path to the open door.

“Freedom.”