



KEEPERS OF THE CHALICE 5

VAMPIRE UNITED

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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VAMPIRE UNITED

KEEPERS OF THE CHALICE

BOOK FIVE

TAMAR SLOAN

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CHAPTER I

MADELEINE



Maddy stares at the carnage around her, examining piles of rubble, cracked walls, and the specks of blood that dot the entire hallway. To her newly acquired vampire hearing, the members of the Order still fighting all across the Merrick headquarters are like a symphony of chaos in her ears, the sound of not-so-distant explosions leaving her ears ringing.

She stands rooted to the spot, hands loosely covering her ears, trying to digest it all.

“Caleb is human now?” Maddy says, dumbfounded. It had felt like a punch to the stomach when she realized that Vera had turned her into a vampire, but at least in that moment she’d been comforted by the thought that she and Caleb would finally be on the same side.

Now it feels like fate is laughing in her face.

“It was always Kenna’s plan to turn Caleb back into a human,” Cora explains. “He was forced to turn into a vampire because of his connection to her, against his will. I think she felt guilty about that.”

Maddy shakes her head, refusing to believe the words slipping into her overly sensitive ears. Then she frowns. “How do you know all this?”

Cora’s lashes flutter. “Stacy found me not long after I was turned. I’ve been working alongside her.”

Maddy draws back. “You knew,” she gasps. “You knew Kenna was alive

and that she intended for Caleb to be turned into a human!”

Cora has the grace to look uncomfortable as her gaze slides away. “Caleb never wanted to be a vampire.” She flashes a glance. “Plus, now the sire bond is gone. I can’t feel him.”

Maddy shakes her head as if to try and clear it. They don’t have time for this. “What about Orion?” she asks. “He needs Caleb to be human in order to resurrect. Aren’t we giving him exactly what he wants?”

Cora tries to approach Maddy, hands raised in a placating gesture, but Maddy avoids her, moving to stand beside a freshly formed hole in the wall.

“Orion’s too powerful in Purgatory,” Cora says, abandoning her plan to try and comfort Maddy. “If we leave him there, he’ll find a way to cause chaos. But in the mortal realm, we have a chance. We can finally destroy him once and for all.”

“But what if he destroys us instead?” Maddy counters, her eyes drawn to the scene playing out beyond the hole in the wall, the numerous dead bodies laid out on the lawn below. Many of them are the shifters and Merrick guards, but an uncomfortably large proportion of them are members of the Order.

How many did they lose in this senseless attack?

“Kenna has a plan to defeat him. If we trust her, then we will succeed. But we need to actually trust her this time and do exactly what she tells us,” Cora says.

“Trust her?” Maddy shouts back, pain and disbelief masked by the anger in her voice. “She let Caleb be captured by Malcolm, let her people die because she couldn’t trust them, let the most evil sorcerer ever to exist come back to the mortal plane. And you want me to trust her?”

Maddy’s heart hammers in her chest, the blood coursing through her veins pulsing in time with the banging in her head. The anger that she feels is so intense, it’s almost like she’s never been truly angry before. She feels like she could tear Cora apart limb from limb for agreeing to put Caleb in danger.

Cora looks on with wide eyes, hands raised like a gun is pointed at her chest. “Maddy, I need you to calm down,” she says in a soothing tone.

Maddy doesn’t listen. “You’re gambling with the world at stake. How much collateral damage are you willing to allow? How many lives will be lost in the name of finally defeating Orion?” Maddy continues to rant, the memory of Olivia dead in her arms like a hot poker in her chest, fueling her rage. It takes her a moment before she realizes she’s baring her fangs at Cora, closing her mouth with a start and covering it with a hand.

“I’m sorry,” Maddy says.

“It’s okay. Your emotions are going to be pretty intense for a while. I need you to try and calm down as much as you can before you do something you regret,” Cora says.

Maddy nods slowly, fighting the urge to destroy anything and everything. She bangs a fist against the wall, unable to quiet the raging tempest within her. A large crack forms and she stares at it in awe.

“I need to learn to control this power,” she says. “Everything is so intense, it feels like every nerve in my body is on edge.” Maddy runs her hands through her hair, rubbing the sides of her temples to soothe the headache banging within. “But the worst part is the hunger. How can you stand it? I’ve never felt so hungry in my life.”

Cora smiles, glad for the opportunity to help. “The hunger is worse when you’ve just turned,” she explains. “Don’t worry, it gets less intense with time. And if you want, I can teach you how to control your new powers,” she offers.

Maddy gives her a scorching look in return. Cora just revealed that she knew this was a trap all along, and never warned them. Maddy doesn’t even know if she can trust her anymore. When did her best friend turn into a complete stranger?

“Caleb can teach you if you prefer,” Cora corrects herself, the slight droop in her shoulders betraying her disappointment.

“No,” Maddy says. “I can’t be around Caleb when I’m like this. Not while he’s human again. I can’t risk hurting him.”

She hides her face by looking away, fighting back tears threatening to stream down her face. She’s a danger to the one person she trusts the most, the one person she wants to be with in the midst of all this madness.

“Can you still feel him at all?” Maddy asks. As long as Caleb is safe, Maddy can figure out this vampire thing on her own. Her warlock powers never came with an instruction manual either, and she did just fine.

“Not as well as I could before he turned,” Cora answers. “Soon I won’t be able to feel him at all, thank god.”

If a look could kill, Cora would be laid out on the floor, dead as a doornail. Maddy had been jealous when she learned that Cora was connected to Caleb, wishing it was her instead, but now it is clear just how much Cora took that connection for granted.

“I thought you would be happy that we’re no longer bonded?” Cora asks with an eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, sure,” Maddy answers, her forehead divided by lines of wrinkles as she tries to wrap her head around what exactly she feels. Her emotions are so raw, so unfiltered that she has a hard time making sense of them. At the forefront, loud as a church bell, is hunger and aggression. She never realized how hard it is to stay calm and collected when all you want to do is rip into people’s necks and suck them dry.

“How do you plan on defeating Orion?” Maddy deflects.

“Kenna has a plan,” Cora answers, avoiding Maddy’s piercing gaze.

“And do you know what this plan is?”

Cora wrings her hands, eyebrows pinching against each other as she formulates her answer. “The fewer people who know, the more likely the plan is to work,” she finally replies.

Maddy scoffs. “Orion is the physical embodiment of evil. He won’t stop until he changes the world and remakes it in the image of the Eldritch. He

cannot be allowed to succeed.”

“We won’t let him succeed,” Cora assures her.

Maddy begins to retort, but her words are cut short when the room is suddenly filled with red light, reflecting the sky outside. Maddy and Cora rush to the window, looking up at the crimson landscape before them.

The entirety has been tinged with the color of blood.

“You’re all deluding yourselves thinking you can stop Orion,” Maddy spits. “Kenna might think she’s pulling all the strings, but he’s the one who won. He’s already got what he wanted.”

Maddy zips away before Cora can stop her. She has no idea where she’s going or what she’s going to, but it doesn’t matter.

She’s lost Caleb.

And the world will be next.

CHAPTER 2

CALEB



Caleb stares down at his phone, the black screen reflecting his sullen face. A face that he hardly recognizes. It feels like an eternity since he last saw his reflection, the blood shot eyes staring back at him more like an alien's, just as much as the deep frown twisting its lips.

He tears his eyes away from the image of his haunted face to inspect the safe house that he's sitting in. The details of the world around him aren't as sharp as he's grown accustomed to. The red carpet spread across every inch of the floor looks dull, and even the sunlight streaming into the room to illuminate the sofa that he's sitting on seems less bright than it should be.

Is this what it always felt like to be human?

Caleb brings the phone back to life, dialing Mason for the third time that morning. He listens as the phone rings, praying his friend will finally answer. Maybe he didn't make it out of the Merrick compound. But maybe he already knows what happened to Caleb. He knows he's no longer one of them.

Caleb spares a glance to the dining room table, where Kenna is having a discussion in hushed tones with Rachel. If he was still a vampire, he'd be able to hear every word they're saying, down to the minutest inflection in their tone of voice. Caleb balls his hand into a fist, then lets it go. Even after turning his world upside down by making him human again, his aunt still doesn't trust him with her plans.

“I’m not a pawn to be used as you see fit,” Caleb says loudly, drawing Kenna and Rachel’s attention.

“Pardon?” Kenna asks, a confused look on her face.

“I said I’m not your pawn, and I’m not a child. You can’t make decisions about my life without asking me first.”

“I did what was best for you, and I would do it again in a heartbeat,” Kenna responds as she walks toward him.

Rachel follows, even though she looks like she’d rather have the world swallow her up than be in the middle of this conversation.

“I didn’t ask to be human,” Caleb snaps, anger mingling with the despair that’s been eating at him. “What gives you the right to decide what’s best for me?”

Kenna stops a few feet away, her posture calm and controlled. “I saved you from being used by Malcolm and his cult, I thought you’d be a little more grateful.”

“Saved me? You’re the one who led me right into Malcolm’s trap,” Caleb retorts, fighting the urge to scream.

It doesn’t make sense that his senses are dulled now that he’s human, but his emotions are like a storm, but he doesn’t have a chance to analyze this right now. Not to mention no one’s ever been turned from a vampire back to a human, so there’s not exactly a road map for this.

“I told you not to try to save me,” Kenna replies in that calm, controlled tone.

Caleb looks at her in disbelief, a sharp pain in his chest causing him to clench his jaw. “Next time I won’t,” he says with an air of finality.

He leaves the comfort of the sofa, desperate to be as far away from his aunt as possible, even though the one-bedroom apartment has little to offer in terms of escape. Caleb wanders into the kitchen, where he examines the refrigerator for food.

The only thing that he actually missed about being human.

Blood is great and it tastes marvelous, but after a while, the flavor gets monotonous. There might be subtle differences from person to person, but not enough to make a real impact on the palate. He hadn't realized how much he missed the wide spectrum of taste normal food offers. He'll finally be able to taste some of Maddy's cooking.

The thought of her brings a frown to his lips. It's bad enough that Mason isn't picking his calls, but Maddy ignoring him feels like he's been stabbed right in the middle of his chest. After poking and prodding him so many times about taking the cure, he thought she would have been elated that he was back to human. But apparently, she's not.

Caleb stabs the sandwich he's making, his appetite lost in light of his helpless predicament. What can he do without the vamp speed and strength that he had come to rely on? How is he supposed to help in the fight against Orion when he's so weak and powerless?

"How are you holding up in here?"

Caleb turns in alarm to see Rachel leaning on the doorway. It's been a while since anyone's snuck up on him. He'd taken for granted the fact that he could hear a heartbeat from half a mile away.

"I'm okay," Caleb lies, positioning himself in front of his ruined sandwich so that Rachel doesn't see.

"I know things are a bit rough right now, but they'll get better," she offers.

He takes a deep breath, forcing himself not to react. Orion is out of purgatory, Malcolm got what he wanted and Caleb just lost his powers, his girlfriend and his friend. Rachel is right though, things will get better. They have to. There's not much else that can go wrong.

"What do you know about the Van Helsing's?" Rachel asks.

"They're the greatest vampire hunters who ever lived," Caleb says. Kenna had taught him about the family back when he was training to be part of the Order. According to the historical record, Van Helsing alone killed

more than a hundred vampires, Dracula included.

“And how do you think they accomplished that?” Rachel asks.

Caleb scratches his head. The how of it had never really occurred to him. “Special weapons?” he guesses.

“Close, but not quite,” Rachel says. “The Van Helsing themselves were the special weapon. They became strong because they had to be. Count Dracula was at the height of his power when the first Van Helsing was alive, spreading terror across the land. He was a warlock before he turned into a vampire, making him very difficult to kill. So, the witches experimented on a few of the Order members trying to make them stronger. The exact spells they used have been lost to history, but they introduced some powers within the Van Helsing bloodline.”

“Is that why Kenna is so good at kicking my ass?” Caleb asks.

Rachel smiles. “No. She’s just good at kicking ass. Unfortunately while descendants of Van Helsing could use their powers freely and easily in the past, no-one in your bloodline has been able to activate their powers for the last hundred years.”

He nods, biting his tongue so that he doesn’t blurt out how useless this information is to him. He might finally be able to understand why Malcolm had wanted his blood, but what good does that do him?

“I want to see Maddy,” Caleb says, catching Rachel off guard. Once again, he’s struck that while the quality of his sensations have reduced after turning back into a human, the intensity of his emotions have increased. The whirlwind of despair and loneliness makes him want to tear the hair right off his skull.

“We’ll find her,” Rachel assures. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

“I want Maddy now,” Caleb insists. He can feel the anger and helplessness swirling within him like a tornado of unbridled emotion. Maddy’s the only one who can calm him down, make him see the beauty in the world once again. If she’s hurt, or dead, there’s no point in him being

around either. He was already technically dead as a vampire.

“Just calm down,” Rachel says in a soothing tone, placing a hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “We’ll get her as soon as we can.”

He shrugs off her touch, moving to the other side of the kitchen. “No,” he insists. “If you want me to calm down, then I need to see Maddy. If you want me to stay here, fine. But you need to find her. I don’t want a history lesson on how amazing my ancestors were. I just want Maddy.”

He steadily raises his voice as he speaks, the emotions boiling out with his words, so it is no surprise when Kenna walks into the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

Caleb gives her a hard look, fighting the urge to scream and tear out his hair. His aunt should have asked him what he wanted before she turned him back into a human. He’d been on the path to forging peace between vampires and the Order, ending centuries of conflict. Now, all of his efforts have gone to waste.

“I’m leaving,” Caleb declares, making his way towards the door. If Kenna and Rachel don’t see the urgency in finding Maddy, then he’ll do it himself.

Kenna stands in his way. “I can’t let you do that.”

“You’re not safe out there,” Rachel adds, keeping her voice soft as if she can lessen the blow.

Caleb can feel the tornado inside him raging even more than before, filling him to the brim with the desire to destroy everything. He clenches and unclenches his fists, the pressure of his emotions building up in his gut. He wants to explode into a million pieces and disappear. He’s suddenly worried what will happen if he does.

Just when he feels like he can’t hold on any longer, the doorbell rings.

Caleb rushes to the door, leaving Kenna and Rachel to follow in his wake. Maybe it’s Maddy! Maybe all this freak out is for nothing.

When he opens the door, Cora is standing outside, alone, a dejected look

on her face. “Maddy’s gone,” she sighs.

Caleb loses the tight grip he had on his emotions. A wave of energy bursts through him, tossing Cora back into the hallway. She hits the wall with a loud thud, but lands on her feet, her face a mask of shock.

Kenna and Rachel, who are standing behind him, don’t have vampiric strength to protect them. They’re thrown against the far wall of the apartment, cracking the plaster, then crashing onto the bureau below. It fractures and splinters, the sound like a sonic boom in Caleb’s head as their still bodies sprawl on the floor, glass and shattered wood decorating their surroundings.

“No,” he mouths, shocked at what he’s done.

He takes a step toward his aunt and friend but his knees give out. Blackness engulfs him before he hits the floor.

CHAPTER 3

MADELEINE



Maddy flees beneath bloody skies, fighting against the barrage of sensations pouring through her mind. The highway will take her away from here, and she follows the white lines along the edge. She slows to a jog as she reaches an intersection, pausing before she darts between two cars and up onto the sidewalk in front of a shopping center. Moms with children loiter in front of the shop windows as they stare at the crimson sky while Maddy's teeth beg for blood.

The air fills with the hint of iron, and it's the only thing in her head. The heat of each person burns through her mind. So much blood, delicious blood, all around. How many would it take to fill her? Consuming a community would put her face on the front-page news.

She shakes her head, hoping to clear her thoughts. It doesn't work, so she launches into a sprint once more. A car horn blares, but she doesn't stop. Instead, she leaps over the vehicle without slowing.

She's so much faster, so much stronger than she was before, and her strides eat away the space, covering more distance than she imagined possible. The wind rushes over her skin, the scents fill her brain, every light seems brighter, almost glaring. But none of it matters.

Her phone buzzes, and she knows without looking. *He's* trying to call her. Giving in isn't an option.

She needs Caleb, needs to see him, check on him, be with him, but she cannot risk him—no matter how much she wants to run to his side. What if she consumed him the way she polished off that lab worker? Losing him like that would shatter her into a million pieces.

No. He's better off without her. She's a messed-up muck of vampire-warlock now. They can't be together anymore. Each footstep becomes the word *can't-can't-can't*. Even as the words echo through her mind, a wail works up from her middle and threatens to spill over.

But it's no match for her bloodthirst. Humans are all around her, walking blood factories, begging to be devoured. For all this time, she had no idea what it was like being a vampire. Now, now, she's beginning to grasp an inkling of what it means to have bloodthirst as the hollowness spreads from her stomach out toward her arms.

Her control is waning, and the only way to get it back is to feed.

What did the others do? Blood banks. Where's a blood bank?

Maddy's phone buzzes again, and she slows to a stop at the corner of two streets in a part of the city she doesn't recognize. She should be winded, worn out, something. But she isn't at all. At least she's at the edge of the city. Wide open spaces surround the metro, and maybe humans will be safer from her now. She grabs her phone to search for the closest blood bank.

She checks the screen. *Eight missed calls.* Eight! He keeps trying, but she doesn't answer. How can she? It hurts too much. Instead, she tucks the phone in her back pocket. When will he take the hint? He's better off without Maddy now that she's a vampire-warlock hybrid. Her heart clenches, but she can't give in to the rush of emotions.

Caleb... God. Caleb. Her stomach clenches, and her heart twists. Her emotional pain wars with the physical pain of her hunger until Maddy doesn't know what to do. None of it matters without Caleb.

She types in *blood bank*. Maddy wants to keep others safe, so this is her next best option. There are multiple locations around the city.

There's one a few miles away, in a less populated side of town—not far from her current location if her map is to be believed.

Another hunger pang makes her gasp, and she presses her hand to her middle. It's getting worse, so much worse. Her knees buckle, and she drops to the ground. She must feed before she loses all control and attacks the first walking blood bag.

Blood bag? When did she start thinking of humans like that? She climbs to her feet. Less than two hours ago, she'd been mortal like them, and blissfully unaware of bloodthirst.

She glances around but nothing looks familiar. Walking directions put the blood bank only a mile from where she is. She takes one stride and a dozen more, and she makes it to the door of the blood bank faster than she could have as a human mortal. The door chimes as she strolls inside.

“Can I help you?” a man calls from behind the counter.

“I need to donate.”

He nods and heads back toward the back, calling back over his shoulder. “Let me get the forms. We still do things the old-fashioned way around here. Paper and ink.”

Maddy jumps over the counter, lands lightly on the other side, and sniffs at the air. The blood's a different direction than the attendant went, so she darts to the next corridor, peering down it. Two white-coated women chatter over something on a screen, and she bolts through a thick door and into a chilled room. It's filled with blood, categorized by type.

Does type matter? No, she doesn't think so. Maddy swipes three bags from the shelves and slips out of the room again, practically bumping into the guy from the front desk.

His gaze narrows. “What are you doing?”

Maddy glares at him. “Don't make me hurt you.”

He grins and winks. “Ah, total newb. Don't worry. Secret's safe with me.”

“I don’t need your help,” she snaps over her shoulder, already on her way toward the exit.

“Hey. They’re on the house.”

Before she strides out, she stops to look at him. “What?”

He flashes his own fangs and then waves her away. “Newbs always eat free. We can’t have you running around town, scaring people, now, can we? Keep the place safe for the rest of us.”

She bursts out of the blood bank and scans the surroundings for someplace to devour her meal. An abandoned barn leans to the side, but it would provide the best privacy. Ducking into the next alley over, she unlatches the slat door and pushes against complaining hinges. The long squeak cuts through the quiet air. Once she’s inside, she takes in the deteriorated interior. It’s enough to hide her, although maybe the door is the only thing holding up the whole barn.

She stops in the center of the room and sinks her fangs into the bag. The blood drips over her chin, but most of it drains down her throat. She’s never had anything so good. It should be acrid, revolting. Yet it’s not. It’s incredible, the life force flows into her, making her stronger than she’d been only a moment ago. It fills her with a euphoria, a high she would chase—no, *had to* chase—to make her whole in a way nothing else could.

Within seconds, the plastic bag empties, and she tosses it aside before tearing into the next one. Three bags put a dent in her hunger, but more importantly, it makes her feel like she’s more in control than she’s been since she became a vampire. It’s strange to taste blood and not be worried about having bit her tongue or her cheek or be repulsed by the feel of the tangy liquid in her mouth. She isn’t who the same Maddy she was yesterday. It’s unsettling.

Her next deep breath brings the scent of the rats in the corners, and the birds resting in the rafters. When she looks up, she can see them all, despite the murky, dusty barn interior. Her phone buzzes again, and she grimaces.

She already knows Caleb won't give up on her, so she must get as far away from him as she can. Back on the highway, she heads away from the city, away from Caleb, and toward the sea. Maybe he'll be safer with an ocean between them.

In minutes, she's sprinting along the beach, hunting for a way across. Large boats wait inside the harbor, but the sailors stand on the decks, peering at the sky overhead, probably trying to figure out how it fits into the red sky saying. If they only knew how bad it is or what the red sky actually means to everyone in their world.

She doesn't slow for an inlet and nearly trips on her feet when she doesn't sink to the bottom of the water. Did she just...can she...

The ocean stands between her and keeping Caleb safe. How much better would it be if she can cross it without needing a boat? She jumps to the right and out onto the water, bracing to sink into the salty water. But she doesn't. Her feet keep moving, and she keeps running over the surface.

She lets out an excited squeal. Running on water! She's running on water. Caleb! She should tell Caleb. Maybe he has pointers about... Her phone buzzes.

Sorrow dashes her elation, and she knows this is the time, this is her chance. Seeing Caleb isn't an option anymore. Staying away from him is the best for him. He's mortal, and she isn't.

Their relationship is doomed.

They're too different. Maybe they've always been too different.

But Caleb won't stop looking for her, and he has witches who can track her down. She can't let him find her. It must not happen, they can't be together anymore.

Maddy takes one last look at Mercy City and wishes it goodbye before turning out toward open water, allowing the salty breeze to mix with her tears.

So, she runs, and she keeps running until she sees a landmass appear on

the horizon. Trees point at the sky, and she continues until she's on the beach. Mercy City is out of sight, but not out of mind. Her next phone check shows no service, at least here on the edge of wherever she is. Every sensation is different, and she's hyper aware of everything, like the way each leaf on each of the trees at the edge of the beach flicker in her mind. It's an onslaught from her senses, overwhelming, if she's honest. This isn't a change she can outrun.

Dropping to the ground, she tries to focus on accessing her warlock powers. Just because she's a vampire, it doesn't make her not-a-warlock, at least according to everyone else. A cloak will keep her hidden from Caleb's witches, and she needs to cast the spell to keep him safe.

She tries to mask herself against being found. However, the conjuring doesn't come as quickly as it should, and it doesn't stick to her the first...or even the fifth time. Her magical powers have gone since every bit of her focus has been on becoming a vampire, but she needs to hide.

Her abilities seem almost out of reach, less, somehow, than they were before. Fighting against the dullness of her powers, she mentally scratches and claws at the magic until the cloak spell wraps around her. When it finally settles, her heart breaks anew.

She'll never see Caleb again.

It's the only way to keep them all safe.

CHAPTER 4

CALEB



“**B**ring me Galina,” Caleb rasps.

He’s saying the words before he’s even woken up completely after passing out. His eyeballs feel like someone popped them out while he was unconscious, rolled them in sand, and shoved them back into his eye sockets. His eyes flutter, but they don’t focus immediately. Maddy’s gone, but Galina can find her.

“Bring me Galina,” he growls and sits up on the sofa. He should be stronger than he is, more confident than he is. Was that all really just because he was a vampire? Why hadn’t Kenna asked him before turning him back into a human?

She should have asked.

Someone gasps. He thinks it’s Kenna by the tone. “What are you talking about?”

“You heard me. Bring me Galina. I want Maddy, and Galina can find her.”

He doesn’t care if Maddy doesn’t want to be found, he must find her. Another nearly overwhelming wave of sorrow threatens to drown him beneath a tsunami of feelings. The tornado inside him is going to turn into a hurricane. He needs her...and for these crazy human emotions to go elsewhere.

Kenna rushes to his side and puts her hand on his shoulder, the pressure gentle but firm enough to make it clear she doesn't want him to get up. "Take it easy. You're safe and back in Veritas now."

"We have to find Maddy."

"We don't know what you did back there. Let's focus on that."

"I had a burst of latent power and threw everyone back." He grabs his phone and dials Maddy again, but she doesn't answer. How many calls does that make? Eight? Ten?

"Yes, but we don't want it to happen again."

"Did I hurt anyone?"

"They're all fine."

"Then, apparently, something's activated." He throws his legs over the edge of the couch. "If I'm descended from Van Helsing, does that mean I can track people, not just knock them down?"

"We can't be sure," Rachel soothes as though she knows where his next words are going, and she doesn't want him to leave. "We have no idea why it worked for you or why your powers are activated now."

Cora hovers nearby, too, wringing her hands as though she expects to get yelled at.

"I want Maddy. That seems to be where it comes from." The petulant tone to his own voice annoys him, but it doesn't matter. Caleb meets her eyes and barely resists glaring. "Do you know where she went?"

She straightens her clothes, drops her hands, and makes fists on either side of her. "I couldn't tell."

"Did she feed before she took off?"

"On somebody in the lab."

"That's not enough."

Cora's expression tightens. "I know."

After he stands, a wave of dizziness nearly knocks him back to the cushions, but he grits his teeth and catches himself on the padded arm of the

couch.

Galina strides into the living room with a pleasant look on her young-seeming face. She doesn't say where she's been or what she was doing. "Someone said you needed me."

"I want you to find Maddy so we can go get her. She's out there in the middle of bloodlust with nobody. Nobody to coach her or help her figure it out." Starving is the hardest part of the change.

"Maddy's smart, and I'm sure she'll be fine," Galina says.

Caleb frowns and turns to Cora. "Did she seem like herself when she took off?"

"Not really, no." Cora purses her lips and moves to a table along the wall to pour herself a glass of blood. She holds one of the empty glasses up to Caleb. "Water? Humans need water. Have you had any since you've been turned?"

Caleb shakes his head. Water won't fix his problem. Kenna advances like she wants to interrupt his attempts, but he glares at her, so she takes a step back. He gestures to Galina. "Go ahead."

"Do you have something that belongs to her?"

Cora steps forward with a hair tie. "She dropped this back in the lab."

Galina puts her hand through the hair tie so it circles her wrist. Then she begins her conjuring in the center of the room. Her lips move as she draws magic into herself, her hands clasp, moving faster than Caleb's brain tracks. That's new.

If anything he knows Maddy, and she's going to be as happy about her own change as he is about his own. They're two pawns in the middle of a chessboard, being moved without any thought to their wishes. Kenna practically handed him to Malcolm by turning Caleb human, and now as a human, he's more than limited in the ways he can protect Maddy. He punches the padded arm of the sofa and nearly knocks himself to the ground. He'd grown more to depend on his vampire senses than he'd realized.

“Anything?” He’s in a hurry, and his worry makes his stomach churn.

Galina’s lips compress, and she’s got bad news she doesn’t want to give him. It’s all over her face.

“Well?”

She raises her hands as though she’s soothing a spooked horse. Slowly, she shakes her head. “There’s something blocking my spell. She’s—”

“Blocking your spell?”

“She’s out there, and I’m able to get a trace of where she was, but not where she is.” Her shoulders droop slightly. “She must have a masking spell around her, and I can’t break through it.”

“Masking spell?” Why would she do something like that? Why would she make herself impossible to find? *Maddy*...

“At least we know she’s able to access her powers. That keeps her from being completely helpless.”

Caleb turns to Cora. “Can you track her?”

Cora freezes with her glass of blood on her lips. Cautiously, she lowers it, licking an errant drop from the corner of her mouth. “If I could have tracked her, I would have.” Her brows furrow as she thinks for a moment. “Before you turned human again, I was able to find you using the bond between us—the sire bond. Vera is the one who turned Maddy, maybe she can help.”

Caleb’s knees shake, and he takes a seat on the sofa to hide the trembling. “Then where’s Vera?”

Cora places her glass on the table and continues speaking as though she doesn’t hear him at all. “Now that I think about it, maybe Vera turned Maddy for a reason. I mean, with everyone in the lab at the time, why would Vera turn Maddy? There has to be a reason. Why would she need a vampire-warlock hybrid?”

Kenna nods. “Vera’s the only one who can answer that question, and she’s probably the only one who can find Maddy.”

Galina nods. “At least as long as Maddy has herself wrapped up in a

cloaking spell.”

Caleb scrubs his hand over his face and then through his hair. Maddy’s location isn’t going to be easy to find, but Vera seems to be his only chance. “Where’s Vera?”

No one speaks.

Caleb bites back a frustrated sigh. “Can we use the locator spells on her?”

They all stare at him, but none of them move.

“So we don’t have anything that belongs to her? Of course not.” He mutters the last bit to himself. It’s obvious none of them have anything of Vera’s. “Then we’ll do this the old-fashioned way. We’ll use a monetary reward to get someone to talk. It’s unlikely Vera’s disappeared from this world, so we’ll get someone to turn her in.”

“Good idea,” Cora says, but she seems to be the only one interested primarily in what Caleb wants right now.

Kenna and Rachel whisper to one another, and he can’t hear any of it, thanks to his new human ears. Galina joins them.

He drags his phone from his pocket and starts typing in his instructions. He may not be a vampire anymore, but he’s still in charge. Finally, he drops his phone to the sofa cushion beside him. “There. Reward issued for anyone who comes up with a valid location for Vera. Now all we do is wait and hope we’re the first to reach her.”

He relaxes his head against the back of the couch, already despising the delay. Patience isn’t his strong suit.

Hang on, Maddy. I’m coming.

CHAPTER 5

MADELEINE



The next morning, Maddy scans her surroundings, eyeing the thunderstorms building on the horizon where the water meets the sky. Lightning flashes overhead, jumping from cloud to cloud, and a deep rumble vibrates across the ocean and the earth beneath her feet.

She may be a vampire with all the interesting enhancements now, but sleeping out in the open on the sand of the beach isn't going to help her survive in the elements. Plus, making herself a target for anyone who can spot her isn't conducive to survival, vampire or not. She has to at least get the basics covered. Her teeth chatter, but not because she feels cold. It's probably because she's hungry again with no blood bank in sight.

Her stomach hollows. The blood bags she'd stolen—*was gifted?*—are long gone, and she has to find another way to eat. No inhabitants are apparent in this place, so consuming fresh blood also doesn't seem like an option, unless she wants to try some kind of animal. Which animal would she be okay consuming? She wrinkles her nose.

Maybe a mile down the beach, the top ridge of a roof peeks out of the foliage, and she thinks it's the best chance at finding shelter. In a burst, she launches herself into a run, and her feet move at a speed she hasn't ever achieved before in her life. Gnats and mosquitos slam into her cheeks, and she squints against the impact, surprised she hasn't noticed them before. They

haven't bothered her the whole time she's been on the beach—probably another side effect of being turned into a vampire.

She reaches the ramshackle building sooner than she expects. How long will it take to get used to the increased speed, the overload from her heightened senses, and the hunger which never seems to disappear for long?

Making a wide circle around the building, she studies the holes in the wall slatting, the broken glass in the windows, and the listing door which has nearly come off its hinges. It's definitely not a Hilton, but it's better than nothing. She can't see much of the beach, but the surface of the ocean is now broken up by the growing waves.

More lightning zags across the sky, closer this time, and the thunder follows immediately after. The storm rolls in, and Maddy hurries up the steps into the shack. A gust of wind moves through the cabin, and rain scents the air. A drop splatters against the jagged edge of the broken window. A neon bolt slams down into the water, and Maddy presses her hand to her stomach, feeling hungry and alone.

The skies darken, and it's as though the whole beachfront takes a deep breath, waiting for the impending deluge. All the noise Maddy was hearing—the birds, the frogs, the bugs, all of it—pauses, and the silence presses in all around her.

Caleb. Caleb should be there with her, but he's not. She's never going to see him again, and the pain from his absence isn't something she's ready to grapple with.

Then the skies open, and the clouds empty themselves on the roof of the building Maddy's in. Within moments, water dribbles in across the whole of the building. It's not water-tight in the slightest. Maddy moves from spot to spot, trying to find a place which doesn't drip on her.

No luck. She chews her bottom lip but gasps when her new teeth poke the tender skin. Each flash of lightning overwhelms her vision, as though her brain can't keep up with the sensation dump. She blinks to clear her sight and

cringes as the thunder crashes over the building, rattling the broken glass in the windowpanes and the thin floor beneath her feet. She isn't sure what would happen if a vampire is struck by lightning, but she doesn't want to find out, so she moves to the middle of the cabin.

No matter how she twists, she can't escape the leaks, so she sinks to the floor. Rain drips on her shoulder, but she pulls her heels toward her bottom and rests her forehead on her knees. She's miserable here on this beach, but she's not going to risk the people in her life. She won't risk Caleb. Cold, wet, and hungry...

A clatter on the porch makes Maddy launch to her feet, and she presses herself to the wall, inclining her head to listen. Another noise, almost like a stomp, sounds on the porch. She moves to the door and sticks her head out to get a better look.

There's a shimmer in the air, and the rain moves around...*something*... making its way up onto the porch. Maddy's seen enough in the last few months that she expects bad news and scrambles back inside. If it's Caleb... God, don't be Caleb. She checks her cloaking spell, glad to find it's still completely in place.

"Who's out there?" she yells with more courage than she feels.

When nothing happens, she takes a jagged, pointed piece of wood from the floor and clutches it like a sword. Then she creeps outside.

The moment the sole of her foot hits the decking, a large figure steps out of thin air.

She leaps at him. In a blink, she has the makeshift weapon pressed at the hollow of his throat. Her teeth catch her bottom lip. Her heart should be pounding, but it isn't. "Who are you?"

Rain drips over his long-ish hair and skin, but it doesn't look like he feels any of it. His clothes are neatly arranged, and his mouth pinches as he raises his hands. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"Then why are you here?" Her gaze narrows, and she glares. "And I'll

warn you that I'm not the weakling you probably imagine me to be."

The man shakes his head, and that's when Maddy notices the ear points. "I'm from the Fae."

Maddy gasps. "Alec?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not Alec. Though, I know of him. My name is Sylvan, and I need your help."

"Need my help? With what?" She's not ready to trust whoever he is, and she's not ready to lower her weapon. "How did you find me?"

"You weren't so hard to find, and I won't be the last one."

Her stomach twists, and every sound outside the beach shack takes on a new, more sinister meaning. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Order put a bounty on any information which leads them to Vera."

"Vera?" Maddy echoes. Vera was the vampire who turned Maddy. Why would they— "They're trying to use my maker to find me. Vera turned me." The words burst out of her, pushed by the intensity of the revelation.

Fury burns through Maddy and the point of the wooden pike presses into Sylvan's neck. He swallows several times before Maddy realizes she's almost shoved the sharp end into the Fae's neck.

She backs off slightly, and her shoulders droop. "They're going to use the sire bond to find me."

"It would seem so," Sylvan agrees.

"Don't they get it? I'm trying to keep them safe!" A string of curses escapes Maddy's mouth, but she doesn't lower her hands. "Is that why *you're* here?"

Sylvan shakes his head. "No, I don't want to take you back to the Order. I need your help instead."

"My help?" She lowers the weapon. "Don't make me change my mind and cut off your head."

Sylvan grimaces. "Don't worry. You're too valuable to kill."

"Naturally." Maddy sighs, and her stomach drops to her toes.

When did she get to be just Maddy again? Maddy + Caleb. Her heart twists. She's stuck out in the middle of nowhere being miserable because Vera turned her into a vampire. She had to give up Caleb, and nobody bothered to ask how Maddy felt about any of it.

"Do you know why Vera changed you?"

"I didn't ask her," she snaps. Her upper lip curls, and images of attacking Vera play in her mind. Vicious doesn't even begin to describe it. "What's her reason?"

"Vera took your blood and delivered it to Quinn, and he used it to open up a portal to the Faerie kingdom. We need your help defeating Orion now that he's back in this world."

Maddy's ears prick, and excitement bubbles through her misery. To save the mortal world, they have to defeat Orion.

"What do you need from me?"

"Long ago, before the Fae were banished from the earth, my ancestors hid a weapon which would kill Orion and his spirit as well. We need your help to end his threat once and for all. It's in everyone's best interests to do away with Orion and his worship of the Eldritch."

Maddy nods. "So, how did you find me?"

His smirk sets Maddy's teeth on edge. "You can thank Vera for pointing me in the right direction. After that, it wasn't hard to find a new vampire, trying to keep herself from everyone. Are you hungry?"

Maddy presses her hand to her stomach once more. She feigns nonchalance, but the thought of consuming blood nearly brings her to her knees. "I could eat."

"Come with me. After you're fed, we'll be able to find the only weapon that's strong enough to defeat Orion. We need your magic to make it happen."

Maddy crosses her arms, suspicious of the Faerie standing there. "What happens when we defeat Orion?"

Sylvan studies Maddy. “What do you mean?”

“What happens to the Faeries after Orion’s defeated?”

“We’ll all return to our kingdom in the Fae realm once Orion has been dealt with. We have no desire to live in the mortal realm or play conquerors here.”

Maddy’s gaze narrows, and she studies the stranger. In the last few months, she’d met so many two-faced individuals with ulterior motives. “How can I believe you?”

“We’re not sure you have a choice.” Then he smirks again.

Maddy doesn’t like the words as soon as they leave the Fae’s mouth, but she isn’t sure she can argue with him. She moves to the edge of the porch, watching the rain as it pours from the sky. Her stomach feels as though it’s trying to consume itself, and she’s not sure where she’s going to get her next meal. If Sylvan, Alec, and the other Fae are the only option to get an army with the potential to beat Orion, then she doesn’t have a choice. None of them have a choice.

She turns back to face Sylvan. “I’ll go with you.”

He opens a portal, bows, and waves her through ahead of him.

Here goes nothing.

CHAPTER 6

CALEB



A knock brings Caleb's head up from the ancient parchments he's been studying, trying to find another way to track a vampire who has magical skills, too. It'd taken some work to sort out which documents might have any information at all. The knock sounds again.

"Yes?" Caleb calls.

The door pops open, and Cora stops on the threshold. "May I come in?"

"Sure." He drops the paper on the top of the stack in front of him. "What is it?"

"We had a reliable tip and we've found Vera."

Caleb leaps to his feet. "Where is she?"

Cora gestures to someone else in the corridor and then steps into the small room where Caleb has taken refuge. She selects a spot near the far wall, and Caleb doesn't miss the way she peers at him as though he's a stranger now.

At one time, before Kenna took it upon herself to turn him human again, Cora could find Caleb and vice versa, thanks to the sire bond. Regret twinges his thoughts. He'd lost so much he'd grown accustomed to...most of all, he'd lost Maddy.

He misses her more than he knew he could, more than he thought possible. She's a part of him, a vital, living, breathing part of him. He needs her.

Galina soon appears on the threshold as well. “We have a tip.”

He clutches his hands to keep his arms from flapping. “A location?”

Galina strides into the room like she owns the place, with all the assurance a witch can have. She shows him a scarf he’s never seen before. “It’s enough for me to find a location.” She conjures the location spell, and faster than he could have hoped, she grins. “I have her.”

“Send our people to get her.”

Cora steps forward, her expression more relaxed than it’s been since she delivered the news Maddy had gone. “Are you going with us?”

Caleb freezes. “Not yet. I’m not ready to lead anyone.” His feelings are all over the place, and his confidence isn’t back yet. “I’ll go when we have a location for Maddy... Until then...”

Cora nods as though she understands everything Caleb can’t say.

“Galina, go with them. They’ll need you.”

The witch beams at them all. “Vera can run, but she can’t hide.”



CALEB CIRCLES the room for the hundredth time when the door bursts open. Vera marches into the room, uncowed by Caleb’s retrieval party. Her chin practically points at the ceiling. Cora and Galina are on either side of her, and he’s glad Kenna isn’t here. Though, she could show up any moment...

“Vera,” Caleb says. He’d been practicing what to say the whole time, but it all flew out of his mind the minute the vampire strolled in. “You turned Maddy. Is that correct?”

Vera nods. “I did.”

“Where is she? You turned her, so you’ll know and can lead me to her. Tell me where she is.”

Vera quirks an eyebrow. “What makes you think I’ll tell you? You’re

vulnerable now.”

Caleb scoffs at her. “Is that so? You seem to forget that I’ve been trained by the Order, and Maddy is my mate. It is my right to know, and I’m not as weak as you believe I am. I could kill you for what you did to her.”

“Perhaps.”

He glares, his fury growing by the moment. “You have a great deal to explain.”

Galina takes a step back and her fingers twitch as though she’s working some kind of spell. Compulsion, maybe? He leaves the witch to it, glad for any help she can give him.

Caleb continues. “Why did you turn her? What does Malcom want with her?”

Vera shakes her head and takes a deep breath. “What makes you believe Malcolm wants her?”

“If not Malcolm, then who?”

Vera considers him for a long moment, and Caleb curses his lack of extra perception. He can’t sense anything about her intentions or her feelings. It’s as though he’s half-blind now.

“I need Maddy, and you’re the key to finding her.” A swell of energy builds inside him, and his hands turn to fists. “I don’t have time to mince words, Vera. Don’t tempt me to violence. Self-control isn’t currently my strong suit.”

He fights to keep a tight rein on the surging energy, clenching his hands until his nails dig into his palms. He won’t lose control again.

Suddenly, Vera jerks back. Her hair lifts into the air as though she’d grabbed a hold of a live electric wire. Her jaw goes slack as she stares at Caleb.

Loose pages fly off the desk and burst into flame. Vera turns ashen. Behind her, Cora’s eyes bulge, and her hair lifts in the same staticky way. Galina’s hands fall to her sides and she gapes at Caleb.

Caleb whirls on her. “What did you do?”

Her mouth moves, but no sound comes out. Finally, she rasps. “That wasn’t me.”

“Then who—” Caleb takes a step backward. If it wasn’t Galina, then it was him, and he understands the shock on all the faces in the room. “That was me.”

Vera’s eyes widen, and she chews her bottom lip. “It was you. Do you know what you did?”

He squares his shoulders and straightens his spine. “I’m a Van Helsing.”

“But do you know how you did what you did?” Vera shifts from side to side, and a gleam lights her eyes as though she has more to say.

“I have powers,” he begins, but he’s not sure what else to add.

She rubs her hand together in front of her, and Caleb doesn’t miss how they’re shaking. “Yes, you do.”

He considers the tremble in her voice, her ashen expression, and the way she’s leaning away without trying to be obvious. “And it frightens you.”

“You’re powerful,” Vera agrees. “But it doesn’t frighten me.”

“You’re lying. Start from there.”

Vera takes a deep breath before speaking. “You have more than powers, Caleb. You come from a long line of Van Helsing. A long time ago, witches performed experiments on your ancestors and made them stronger than you know, and the powers varied greatly from Van Helsing to Van Helsing. But the powers haven’t been seen in ages.” She crosses her arms, stroking her chin. “We must find out what your powers are. We need all the help we can get, and you’re the first Van Helsing descendant to have found his powers in a long time.”

“Why would I help you?”

“Because *I* can help you.”

“You mean you need *me* to help you,” Caleb counters. “But I won’t have that conversation until after I have Maddy, and you’re the key to finding her.”

He approaches Vera, relishing the step she takes back. “And you’re going to take me to her.”

“And what do I get for doing that?”

“You get the chance to make your case for my help.”

Indecision crosses her face.

“Tell me where Madeleine is.”

She points vaguely to the northwest. “She’s that way.”

“Take me to her.”

Vera agrees, but she points to Cora and Galina. “But they have to stay here.”

“Done,” he barks, ignoring Cora’s gasp and Galina’s muttering.



TWO HOURS LATER, Caleb and Vera speed along the highway in a large SUV, racing toward the place where Maddy has gone. Just as she asked, they’re the only two in the vehicle.

“How far is it?” Caleb asks.

Cora and Galina kept asking to “have a word with him” and “speak with him alone.” But he ignored their obvious worry, loaded into the driver’s seat of a vehicle with Vera, and took off toward Maddy.

“How far is it?” Caleb repeats.

But Vera doesn’t answer. Instead, a light snore comes from the passenger seat, and Caleb swallows back an irritated groan. Odd how this vampire sleeps with her eyes open, at least in the car, so he nudges her. How Vera can sleep while Maddy is in a strange place with strangers...

He nudges the sleeping vampire again, continuing until she snorts and wakes.

Caleb taps the steering wheel repetitively and changes lanes on the

northbound highway to pass a slower driver. The drive isn't going quickly enough, and he should have demanded Vera make a portal of some kind. "Are we still headed in the right direction?"

She tucks her hair behind her ear, peers out the window, and then glances back to Caleb. "You'll head west toward the next town over in about five exits."

"Where are we going? To Malcolm's?"

"No." She avoids answering Caleb's most important question, and he smashes the accelerator.

"Are you working for Malcolm?" he demands.

She shakes her head. "No, I don't work for Malcolm. We want to stop him."

"Then who are you helping?"

The silence in the vehicle turns oppressive, and he waits for the answer. Finally, Vera's shoulders droop. "I'm helping the Faeries. They needed the blood of a vampire-warlock hybrid to free themselves. That's why I turned Maddy and why I needed her blood."

"So, where's Maddy?"

"She's with the Faeries, and they're hunting for a weapon that could destroy Orion once and for all. That's why we need your help." She reads a sign as it passes overhead. "Next left."

"Got it." Caleb hits the blinker and eases off the highway to the left. "So, we're headed to the Faerie lair?"

"Something like that," Vera answers. "It's not far now. When we get there, Sylvan will have more knowledge about your powers."

Caleb wants to demand more information—about the portal, about Maddy, about the weapon, about the plan. He has a thousand questions he doesn't feel he can ask, but none of it matters. All the answers make no difference to his life. He needs Maddy, and that's the whole reason he's in this vehicle, on this highway, with this vampire.

He needs Maddy.

But as his brain churns through none-stop overthinking, he must admit he's deeply worried. He's certain Maddy's being used and manipulated by the Faeries.

And Caleb can't quite shake the feeling that he's being manipulated, too.

CHAPTER 7

MADELEINE



Maddy sinks her fangs into another blood bag one of the Fae had brought for her after she arrived with Sylvan. She draws on the metallic liquid, simultaneously loving it and hating it. It nourishes her in a way she never would have volunteered for. But it fills in the hollow ache in her middle and centers her mind. She tosses the empty into what she hopes is a wastebasket beneath the circular table in the center of the grand foyer and grabs another from the pile. Thankfully, she had five of them when she started. She peers down the long hallway without slowing her consumption, listening for footfalls.

After she polishes off the last two, she paces in the two-story entrance of the Fae safehouse, smoothing her hands over the dark mahogany paneling and the built-in cabinetry. When a drop of blood smears, she curses and tries to wipe it off. She feels like a two-year-old making a mess with her dinner. She considers the last bag on the small table, trying to decide whether or not to eat it, too. Finally, she scoops it up and drains it. Five pints...maybe half a grown person's worth. How long will it tide her over? She has so many questions about being a vampire and no one to reliably answer them.

She makes another lap around the room. The marble floor's been polished so much that Maddy can practically see her own face in the surface when she bends over. Sylvan's off having a final meeting with the leaders of the Fae

who are hiding out in the mortal realm, and Maddy's unwelcome in the inner sanctum or whatever they call the meeting place where the leaders meet.

For the hundredth time since she ran away, Maddy's thinking about Caleb, wondering what he's doing, and (foolishly) anxious to know if he misses her. If he misses her half as much as she misses him, he's miserable, too. Her heart cracks, and she sniffs back a rush of tears. Nothing in their lives is turning out like she imagined it would, but at least she can help defeat Orion. That's the best way to make Caleb safe, and she's prepared to do whatever it takes to keep him and the people she loves safe. No matter how much it hurts her.

Sylvan finally appears at the end of the hallway and marches toward the foyer, his footsteps echoing in the large space. He's wearing a belt with weapons in it, though Maddy isn't sure what the weapons are exactly.

Passing by her, he stops at the front door. "You ready?"

Maddy purses her lips, tilts her head, and puts her hands on her hips. "Maybe." She gestures toward the small table. "Do you have more of that to take along? It might make me easier to deal with."

The corner of his mouth pinches, and he smells of amusement. "How much do we need to carry-on?"

"Two or three human's worth," she guesses, trying to sort out how she knows the warm, only slightly spicy smell from him is amusement.

"It's being prepped with our supplies."

"So, do you actually know where the weapon is, or are we just heading out without a destination?"

Sylvan shakes his head but doesn't answer because an alarm interrupts whatever he'd been about to say.

"What's that?"

"Intruders..." He rushes past her and looks through the transom to the blurry window to the left of the door.

"Intruders? Is it Malcolm?"

“Not intruders,” he says, his lips tightening. “They’re visitors.”

Maddy hurries to the window on the right side, but Sylvan shoves her away from the glass and back toward the center of the foyer with more strength than she anticipated. She bumps into the table in the center, knocking it over along with the trash can beneath it. A few drops of blood dribble out onto the marble floor. Maddy drops to her knees swiping at the crimson traces as Sylvan throws the door open, letting in a burst of sunlight.

A moment later, Vera steps inside, and rage immediately burns through Maddy. She forgets the mess of table and blood and launches herself at the vampire who turned her into one against her will. She sails through the air, and Sylvan lunges at her to pull her away. He bellows Maddy’s name but misses snagging her ankle.

Vera barely reacts to Maddy’s attack, only putting up her hands long enough to slow Maddy’s assault so she can step to the side. That’s when Maddy sees...she sees...*him*.

The whole world slows, yet everything is turning and spinning. Caleb lifts his chin, and his pupils dilate when he focuses on her. Warmth fills Maddy and surrounds them both. Love and relief scent the air, and he opens his arms to take her in them.

He’s so close. So...here.

She can’t stop, doesn’t want to stop her descent into his arms. “Caleb!” His name escapes her before she can retrieve it, pull it back, and the sound is filled with every miserable moment on the beach. “Caleb!”

“Maddy,” he whispers, and he’s different...less...sure of himself, less strong, and it breaks Maddy’s heart, but she can’t bring herself to pull away from him. His arms close around her, as tight as a vice and as strong as forever. He’s warmer now, more... *pink*. More mortal, but every part of him is still him. His blood pulses in him, surging with each heartbeat, and her mouth waters. But he’s here. He’s stroking her hair and whispering her name over and over as though he hadn’t been sure she was real. “You’re here.

You're here."

"You shouldn't be here," she rasps. "It has to be over between us. Don't you get that? You're human, and I'm...I'm...*this*. I can't keep you safe like this... I don't know how. We have to end it. We can't be *us* anymore."

He places his hand on the back of her neck and presses his forehead to hers. "You never gave up on me, Maddy, and I'm not going to give up on you. We can learn how to control your vampiric nature...together. Always together."

Oh, how she wants to lose herself in his eyes and happily submerge herself in the unending love there. Like this, in his arms, she's ready to believe they can make it work. They can figure this out. All of it. How can Orion defeat their love?

God. How long has it been? For a moment, it doesn't matter, and all the hurt falls away. She gasps as Caleb brings his lips to hers, and then they're lost in their reunion. His lips smooth against hers, and she's hungry for him, devouring every inch of his mouth. His tongue hesitates over the new, sharper points of her teeth, but then it's the way it's always been, the way it always was.

Fire builds between them, and hunger churns through her. It's more, so much more now. His desire fills her mind, fueling her own. Every sensation is deeper, stronger, and every sensory part of her is overwhelmed. She wraps her arms around him and pulls him closer, yet close will never be close enough. *Caleb, Caleb, Caleb*. His name pounds in her head in time with his heartbeat. Nothing will stand in the wake of their love. *No one*.

She draws him closer, unable to remember why they'd ever been apart.

Vera clears her throat, and slowly, Maddy becomes aware of someone else saying her name, a stranger's voice she doesn't immediately recognize. *Oh. Sylvan*.

"We don't really have time for you two to get a room," he says.

Slowly, regrettably, Caleb slows their kiss, but he doesn't stop, not right

away. When they finally break apart, their chests heave, and his cheeks are flushed. His heart beats wildly, and he's still the only thing in her mind. He wipes her cheeks, and she's surprised they're wet from tears she didn't know she'd been crying. She's glad for the five pints which doused the bloodlust for a moment.

"Caleb, what are you doing here?" She keeps her voice low, to make it clear it's not a conversation for everyone.

"How can you ask me that? You know I had to find you."

"That's why I cloaked myself. I didn't want to be found."

He winks at her then, as though he didn't risk his life. "That's why I found Vera."

"Still putting yourself in danger, I see," Maddy says louder, stronger. Then she sniffs and tries to take a step away, tries to add distance so she can reassemble her composure, but Caleb doesn't lose his hold on her. So, she doubles down on the accusation. "How could you?"

"How could I what?" Frustratingly, he's unbothered by her ire.

"Risk yourself like that," she snaps, but her anger is losing whatever heat it had. "What if Malcolm had found you on your way here?"

Caleb laughs, a dark and humorless sound. "He'd have had a hard time stopping me."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because I need you, and we need to be together. It's the only way we can beat any of this."

It's the only answer he gives, but it's enough. It's the truest thing in him at this moment, and cloak spell or not, he would have moved heaven and earth to get to her. He'd have done anything to reach her, and Maddy can't find any more angry words in her at all.

"I'm glad you're here," she breathes. They'll just have to figure out the consequences together.

Sylvan clears his throat once more, and Vera leans against the wall,

studying her fingernails.

Caleb keeps one of his arms around her but turns so they're side by side. "Vera was the only way to find you, and she agreed to bring me here."

A long sigh seeps from Maddy. She doesn't think Caleb's right to do what he did, but at least he's here for as long as she can keep her teeth from his neck. She jerks her head toward Caleb. "He's the only reason you're not dead on the doorstep, Vera."

Vera shakes her head. "Big words for a new vampire."

Maddy takes a step toward her, but Caleb pulls her back. "Let it go," he whispers so low, it's more like he's mouthed the words at her. "You have a lot to learn about the sire bond."

"Fine." She's not about to fight all of them—not now, not feeling as relieved as she does to see Caleb.

"So, you have some questions to answer, too," he says. "Why are you here?"

"The Fae have a weapon which can defeat Orion once and for all. At least that's what they say. They need my help to find it. So they say." She glares at Sylvan. "I don't know much more than that."

"Those are pretty thin reasons to follow a stranger into a strange place." Caleb squeezes her to him. "Flimsy reasons to risk yourself."

"We don't have a choice. We have to defeat Orion."

"And I don't think you have room to talk about flimsy reasons, Caleb," Vera interjects. "But we're all here now."

At that, Caleb's eyes take on a sheen Maddy doesn't recognize. The irises darken, and a buzz hums in the air. A pulse shoots out from him and slams Vera into the wooden paneling.

"Oof," she gasps, trembling from head to toe. She points at him, then shies away with a whimper.

The small table rolls toward the back of the room, and Caleb grits his teeth as his face pales. He shakes from some kind of strain.

Maddy turns to Caleb, stroking his arms until his exertion lessens. Then she looks from Caleb to Vera and back again. “What’s going on?”

“He can do that now,” Vera murmurs.

Sylvan’s eyes go wide, and he shakes. “Is that what I think it is?”

Vera shrugs but nods. “I believe so.”

“I have powers, and Vera thinks they’ll help fight Orion. That’s why I’m here.” He points at Vera. “She said you know more about what’s going on.”

Sylvan crosses his arms and strokes his chin. “I recognize it, and I know more than Vera does.”

“Spill it,” Caleb demands.

“The witches made the descendants of Van Helsing stronger by using a kind of Faerie magic, and your powers have clearly woken.”

Caleb straightens. “Why now?”

“Probably because of the obsidian and the time it spent inside you. At least that’s my guess, based on the way the magic works. The obsidian probably unlocked your powers, but those powers weren’t accessible to you while you were a vampire. Now that you’re not a vampire anymore, you have access.” Sylvan’s grin isn’t reassuring. “A side benefit of becoming human once more.”

“Why don’t I find that reassuring?”

Maddy’s arms slip around Caleb’s waist, and she pulls him close.

“You should be reassured,” Sylvan counters. “You’ll be quite instrumental against Orion. We’ll need someone powerful enough to stall him until we can get the weapon ready.”

“Once we find it,” Maddy snaps. “We still haven’t found it yet. How are we going to do that?”

Vera lifts her chin, obviously interested in Sylvan’s answer.

“My people hid it deep in the earth.”

“Where?” Vera asks.

“No records remain of the location.”

Maddy snorts. “Then how are we going to find it?”

Sylvan shakes his head. “While no records remain with the Fae, there’s a great library in this realm, vast amounts of information are contained within it. It’s only available to supernaturals, and it’s filled with magical histories, maps, and information not contained anywhere else. That’s why we had to come here to prepare for war with Orion. This is why we required your blood to make a portal. We must find the library, so we can find the book.”

Maddy frowns and then stares at Sylvan. Finally, she turns to Caleb. “I think he means Veritas.”

Caleb looks to Sylvan. “Sounds like we’re headed to Mercy City.”

CHAPTER 8

CALEB



Mercy City isn't the place Caleb expected to be headed after reuniting with Maddy, but at least Maddy's beside him on the way to it. Sylvan's driving them, and he has the coordinates of Veritas Library. Caleb and Maddy are seated in the rear of the SUV, speeding toward Nim and Veritas. Love swells inside him, and he captures Maddy's hand and laces his finger through hers.

"I love you," he mouths, knowing she'll hear it as a whisper in her ear.

She turns away from her study of the passing scenery, all of it tinted red by the ominous scarlet sky. "I love you, too, but I don't think we can be together anymore. I'm a vampire-warlock hybrid, and you're a human. How can we make that work?"

He tugs on her arm. "When you told me you loved me, I knew you meant it then, and you mean it now. You mean it as much as I mean it, too. If it's the vampirism that's the problem, we'll find a solution for it."

Her gaze rests on him for a long moment, and she uses her free hand to stroke his cheek. "You're different somehow."

Sylvan has an earbud in one of his ears, but his eyes dart to the couple in the backseat. He's probably listening to everything they say while pretending he isn't.

Caleb gives Maddy a sheepish grin as they pass through the city limits of Mercy City. "I'm not a vampire anymore, so there's a lot more feeling and a

lot less confidence.”

She laughs then and squeezes his hand. “Is that why I feel like a raging witch most of the time now?”

“Being hangry 24/7 doesn’t help, but we’ll get that figured out. I’ll help you learn to control it. I learned how, that must count for something.”

“How are you going to help me with all that blood thrumming in your veins?” Her eyes widen, and her mouth stretches into a tight smile, exposing the way her teeth points press into her bottom lip. “I can smell it. It’s like walking into a restaurant when I haven’t eaten all day.”

He lifts her hand to his lips and presses a kiss to the back of her hand. “Who better than a former vampire to teach you how to be a vampire in a world of people?”

“I don’t want to accidentally devour you.” She half-heartedly pulls her hand away from him, but he doesn’t let her fingers slip away.

“You know, it’d be a heck of a way to go. In your arms with your mouth on my skin.”

“Don’t talk like that.” She leans toward him as they go around a tight corner and into the warehouse neighborhood of Mercy City. Her dark look made it clear she didn’t like his joke.

“Well, you haven’t drained me yet. That’s a good sign.”

She rolls her eyes. “I had five pints before you marched through the front door of the safehouse. That’s not going to last long.” She turns back toward the window as though she can already feel the emptiness creeping back into her middle.

Caleb taps Sylvan on the shoulder. “Can you stop by a blood bank before we go to Veritas?”

The Fae takes the earbud from his ear and drops it in the cupholder. “We already have a dozen blood bags in the cooler in the back, and a warmer we can plug into the USB in here.”

“You hungry?”

“I could eat,” she says, already half-way over the backseat and to the cooler. She brings two blood bags into the rear seat, and she consumes two more cold bags before they pull to a stop in front of Veritas.

No matter how many times they visit Veritas, Caleb can’t get over how the biggest library in the world for supernaturals is hidden inside a nondescript, unmarked warehouse, tucked between a shop and a barber. Dry, faded timber surrounds the old warehouse doors.

Sylvan climbs out and waits near the front of the vehicle.

Maddy leans toward Caleb. “He’s not impressed with the building.”

Caleb grins as he climbs out of the backseat. “Were you impressed the first time you walked into the library?”

“No, not at all.” Maddy follows him out the door he opened.

He tugs her close, unwilling to let her go farther away from him than the SUV seat beside him. “We both need to learn control now, control together. I still love you as much as I ever did, Maddy, more even.”

Maddy licks her lips and carefully presses her mouth to his, slipping her arms around him. Maybe she’s starting to believe they can make their relationship work, maybe she’s not, but her behavior inspires Caleb to hope she won’t run away the next chance she gets.

He relishes the closeness of his mate, not the vampire, not the warlock, but the woman he loves. The tangy taste of blood lingers on her tongue, and the need for it doesn’t drive Caleb anymore. As a vampire, the merest hint of blood could whip him into a frenzy like blood in the water for sharks. Not anymore.

After they break apart, he drops a kiss on the bridge of her nose. “Ready to head in?”

“Sure. Let’s see what we can figure out about this weapon.” She turns to Sylvan. “Are you ready to see what’s inside?”

Sylvan nods. “I’m ready. Will they allow me inside?”

“Supernaturals are allowed in, so you should be fine. When I was only a

hunter, they let me in, too.”

“But you had magic,” Caleb says. “Don’t sell yourself short, Maddy.”

His words bring her up short. “Will they let you in, Caleb? You’re just a human now.”

Sylvan shakes his head. “A human Van Helsing with powers now.”

The trio enters the warehouse, and Maddy turns sideways the way she did the first time Caleb brought her to Veritas, avoiding the roughed-up wood on either side of the door.

Nim, a powerful seer, meets them almost the moment they enter. Her eyes roam over them with a knowing glint. “You’ve had some interesting developments between you two,” she says, frowning at Caleb. “You’re human...but not.”

He shrugs. “I still have magic, some kind of powers.”

Slowly, she nods as her scowl smooths. “I see that. Now how can I help you today?”

Caleb gestures to the Fae beside them. “This is Sylvan, and we’re looking for a title about unknown Fae weapons, the hidden ones.”

Nim tips her head to the side, her hands tightening on the wheels of her wheelchair. “The title you’re seeking is only available to Archivists and the Grail Keepers.”

“The book contains information we need...” Caleb gestures over his shoulder. “I’m sure you’ve seen the sky.”

“We’re aware of the recent developments, and I’ve been recording it in the supernatural histories.”

Sylvan straightens. “The book we need contains the information that could lead to killing Orion once and for all.”

Nim presses her lips into a tight line. “Nevertheless, the book cannot be taken out of the restricted section. Nor can I allow you to read the volume you seek.”

“Why not?” Maddy says, reigning in her irritation. “We need it to stop

Orion.”

“Because the book is a dangerous title. It’s in the top five books on the restricted list. We cannot allow the magic therein to escape. We wouldn’t be responsible Archivists if we knowingly allowed it.”

Maddy places her hand on Nim’s shoulder. “What’s worrying you about this? It’s just a book, isn’t it?”

Nim shakes her head. “It’s not a normal book. It was written by Faeries and has been imbued with their magic. According to my research about this volume, this book is also a portal.”

“We won’t trigger any portals,” Caleb offers. “Will you let us see it if we promise we won’t trigger any portals?”

“It’s not that simple,” Nim counters. “Members have disappeared while reading the book.”

Sylvan steps toward them. “Then what do we do? We have to stop Orion.”

Nim considers them for a long moment, probably working her magic as a seer. “Do you trust him?”

The muscles work in Maddy’s cheek, and she turns to Sylvan. “I don’t think we have a choice. It’s the only chance we know to end Orion. The Fae are strong, and they’re gifted with a great magic. They don’t want Orion free either. Everything else...” She swallows, her throat working with the first hint of nerves. “We don’t have a choice.’

Nim tucks her chin in. “Then I’ll check out the book.”

Caleb begins shaking his head as a strong foreboding crashes over him. Maddy is with him now, and it makes him feel more balanced, but Nim can’t possibly be willing to risk the mortal world on an obscure rule meant to keep ne’er-do-wells from having access to powerful books. They aren’t trying to end the world, they’re trying to fix what’s already been broken.

Maddy scowls, her hand falling away from Nim’s shoulder. “How does that help us?”

“Since I’m an Archivist, I’m allowed to take the title from the shelf, and I’ll make the call. If I feel it’s safe to allow you all to read it, I’ll give you permission.”

Her words fill the silence, the weight of each one heavy on their shoulders. They don’t have a choice. What else can they do?

“Wait here,” she says. She rolls out of the main room and down a long corridor, taking their hopes with her.

“This had better work,” Caleb mutters. If this really is the only way to beat Orion, he’s not sure they can accept a rejection from Nim. She must let them read the volume.

Sylvan says nothing, only standing silently nearby.

Maddy paces around them, and her eyes remind Caleb of thunderstorms building on the horizon.

He catches her hand when she walks by and gives it a squeeze. “It’ll be okay.”

She yanks her hand away. “Have you seen the sky lately? How can you say that?”

“Because this is the path forward—”

A rumble rattles the building and a whoosh follows. A rumble shakes the building, making thousands of books shudder on the shelves. Caleb rushes to Maddy even as a gust of wind blasts over them, knocking him back a step. He grabs her, adrenaline pumping, to find the world has gone still again. Sylvan tugs his carefully arranged clothes, the only sign that something just ripped through Veritas.

Something powerful.

Maddy’s gaze jumps to Caleb’s. “That can’t be good.”

“Come on,” Caleb commands, sprinting down the hall the way Nim had gone. “We have to find her.”

None of the open reading rooms have Nim in them, but they keep searching. Through each room, front, back, sides, checking for hidden...

anything. Finally, in the last room at the end of the hall, Caleb senses a pulse of some kind, like the echo of a magic that was.

“It’s got to be in here.”

“Why?”

Sylvan waves his hand in front of him. “I concur.”

They check the walls carefully. When they reach the bookshelf at the rear, there are two books not quite in alignment with the others on the shelf. Maddy runs her hand over the two volumes.

Caleb reaches for her, every sad moment of being apart swelling in his thoughts. “Maddy, don’t—”

She doesn’t listen. Instead, she yanks on the two volumes. Behind the wall, mechanics creak and turn, a soft click pops the bookshelf open, revealing a door which is now ajar. A table rests inside with a volume open in the middle of the rough-hewn surface. Sylvan approaches the book, slowly, cautiously, and he glances at the pages.

“It’s the book,” he says. “The one we need.”

But Nim is nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER 9

MADELEINE



Nim's gone. *Gone!*

Maddy tugs on the collar of her shirt, grasping at anything other than being portaled to some place far away from where they are. "Maybe someone broke in and kidnapped her."

Sylvan takes a step toward the table, and Maddy rushes at him, hissing.

"We let you come here with us, but it doesn't mean we trust you, Sylvan." Rage pours through her, like all the fury and madness since she'd been turned by Vera has been multiplied. She launches herself at the Fae stranger. What would *his* lifeblood be like?

But Caleb catches her waist in his arms. "No, don't. It's the bloodlust, Maddy. It makes your feelings bigger, stronger."

She pulls away from Caleb.

Sylvan says nothing. He peers at the book on the table, glaring at the pages as though he has some kind of long history with it.

"Something wrong?" Maddy asks the Fae.

"No, nothing." He eyes them both, but he doesn't add any additional commentary, and he's not helpful in any other way.

Maddy begins to circle the room, running her hands over the walls. Caleb's expression pinches, but he begins examining the walls and the shelves. There aren't any windows in the square room, no physical way into

the space apart from the secret door they stepped through. The floor stones are thick, heavy, and clearly not easily moved. They continue circling the room. Soon, even Maddy has to admit that there's no evidence of anyone coming in from outside. A vice squeezes in her chest, but she ignores the dawning dread and makes another lap around the room.

"I'm not sure this is..." Caleb's voice trails away as he comes to a stop.

"But we have to check. What if we led someone to Veritas, and they broke in?"

"Wouldn't they have taken the book with them? Not just Nim?" Caleb has a point, and Maddy doesn't have any signs of any other options.

"Now what?" She moves to the table. "Maybe we should read the book to find out where she might have gone."

"No."

She reaches for the corner of the volume. "Then we'll close it."

Caleb lunges for her elbow and stops her. "No, there's powerful Faerie magic imbuing it. It's a portal book, and we don't have any idea how it all works."

"So, we just stand here and do nothing?" Maddy rasps.

Her ears prick. Footsteps sound in the corridor outside the room, announcing the arrival of two others.

"Someone's coming."

Sylvan moves to the entrance, but he doesn't step out. Instead, he waits at the edge of the doorway as though he plans to attack whoever comes in.

Caleb stops to listen. "I don't hear anything." A fraction of a second later, he nods. "I hear them now."

Blaise and Sierra enter the room, sweeping in. Blaise, a witch and Nim's partner, wears a beautiful blue dress, covered in nebula designs which looked like they'd been printed directly from a telescope, orbiting the earth. Her midnight hair had slashes of magenta in it. Sierra isn't as flashy as Blaise today, but they're both Archivists. Sierra gives Sylvan a long look, as if

daring him to attack them.

Maddy rushes toward them. “What are you doing here?”

“Nim called us to assist her.” Blaise glances around the room with a scowl on her face. “Where is she? Did she let you in here?”

“She didn’t let us in here, but she disappeared. The best we can tell, this is where she was.”

“Where did she go?” Blaise asks again, her concern obvious in the way her eyebrows pinch together. “This isn’t a room she would have let you be in.”

“We don’t know where she went,” Maddy says.

“There was a rumble and a burst of wind, and now we’re not sure what happened to her,” Caleb adds. “That’s why we’re in this room. She was here with that book and then not, but we didn’t see what happened.”

While Maddy continues circling the room, Caleb tells them what happens since they’ve arrived at Veritas. Their eyes grow wider and wider with the telling, and Sierra’s gaze darts to Sylvan over and over. They’re suspicious of him, and Maddy is, too.

When Caleb finishes, Blaise curses aloud. “The book should never have been opened so recklessly. Nim knows better. We don’t read these kinds of books alone. It’s why we never take these out of Veritas, it’s why we don’t allow it. Nim knows all of the rules and the reasons behind them.” She takes a deep breath. “How do we figure out where she’s gone?”

Maddy jerks her thumb toward Sylvan. “Maybe he can help.”

“Can we trust him?” Blaise asks.

“He was with us when Nim disappeared, so I hope so.”

Blaise turns toward the Fae. “Can you help decipher the pages?”

He points to Maddy. “Will she allow it?”

Maddy takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I won’t stop you this time, but you must promise to listen to Blaise and Sierra. When they say stop, you stop.”

Sylvan blinks. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He approaches the table and leans over the book on the table, and Maddy trails after him, loitering behind. “It’s as suspected. These pages can act as a portal.”

Maddy joins Sylvan at the table and leans over the book. The edges glitter as though they’re gilded, but they aren’t. It must be some kind of magic on the pages. She can’t read any of the words in it. “How can you tell the pages hold a portal? What’s it say?”

Sylvan gestures to the margins, not touching the parchment surface, but nearly. “The spell isn’t obvious, but it’s there. It’s made for Fae eyes, and it’s a warning about not being portaled somewhere else, but it also says the reader can choose where to port. I cannot read the exact words without enacting the spell, and I’m not interested in beginning our fight against Orion from somewhere else.”

“Can you tell where she might have been sent?”

Sylvan studies the page. “Because this book disappeared, we have no information about what the portal pages do or where they lead, but I suspect Nim chose the location. There’s nothing on the page which notates anything or any fixed location. So, I can conjecture that the portal location has something to do with the choice of the reader.”

Caleb scowls and crosses his arms. “No way to tell?”

“If I read the spell, I will be ported to the location in my thoughts. It is unlikely that this would be the location Nim has gone.”

“No, not my Nim,” Blaise moans, the powerful witch looking scared and vulnerable, something Maddy’s never seen.

“There has to be a way to know where the book sent her,” Maddy murmurs. She settles on the corner of the table, her mind churning through what she knows. She has some magic. With the strength of the vampire blood in her, maybe, just maybe it would help... “If I focus on Nim, maybe the portal could take me to where she is. She’s a seer, and I’m a warlock, right?”

Caleb’s already shaking his head. “No, no, we’re not risking you like

that.”

“Somebody has to do it, Caleb. Nim’s gone, and it’s our fault. We can’t lose our best chance of beating Orion. There must be a way to know where the book sent her.”

Sylvan studies the pages and then studies Maddy, Caleb, and the others. “It is the only way to know where she went.”

“Then I’ll go,” Caleb states flatly.

Maddy gasps. “You? That’s the dumbest thing I’ve heard today. It’s a worse idea than me going after her. You’re human now.” The pitch of her voice increases with each word, and she clears her throat when her voice cracks. “If it’s not a good idea for me to go, then I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go.”

“He should go,” Sylvan says, his voice a low rumble in the room. “Caleb is the only one who can.”

Maddy gasps. “He’s defenseless.”

Caleb shakes his head. “No, not defenseless. I have powers now.”

“That you can’t control. I won’t allow it. Together or not at all.”

Sylvan sighs and places his hand on Maddy’s shoulder. “He must go alone.”

“Why?” Maddy doesn’t want her voice to sound like a wail, but it does, and she bites back a whimper. “Why does he have to go alone?”

“You have vampire blood in you. Faerie magic will attack anything vampiric, so he must go alone.” Sylvan is certain, confident in his knowledge.

“He’s right, Maddy,” Blaise adds.

Maddy really does whimper then, and her heart twists. No matter how much she complained about being together again, she couldn’t fathom the thought of being apart, of sending Caleb into an unknown situation. *Alone.*

He drapes his arm around her shoulders and pulls her close. “I’ll be fine, Maddy. This is something I can do, so let me go.”

Maddy doesn't speak. She doesn't believe him, but she doesn't argue. No matter what her feelings are about what they have to do, the truth is clear.

They don't have a choice.

CHAPTER 10

CALEB



Caleb smooths his sweaty palms over his jeans and swallows to wet his dry throat. He'll be fine, surely. That's what he'd told Maddy, but did he actually believe it? Now he's not so sure. Maddy can't go because she's a vampire and a Fae portal would attack her. So, it's up to him to find Nim.

And he must find her. No matter how much he doesn't want to go.

Maddy's speaking in low tones to Sylvan, Blaise, and Sierra, probably trying to get some kind of "he'll be okay" promise out of those two and the mysterious Fae. But Caleb doesn't think any of them know one way or the other whether he'll be able to stay safe. His stomach churns, and he doubts his abilities. He has random bursts, sure, but how does that help him protect himself or anyone else?

Now he's an ex-vampire, mostly human, with some kind of Fae magic stirring up powers in his blood. Bonus: he doesn't know how to control any of it. But at least he's not a vampire anymore and can attempt to portal to wherever Nim's gone. He wipes his hands again. His safety doesn't matter anymore. All he cares about is keeping Maddy safe, and he knows her. If he doesn't go through the portal to find Nim, she'll try, and Caleb isn't willing to risk her safety.

How long has it been since he's had nerves like this? He misses vampire confidence—the belief he'll figure it out no matter what. Now it's like he has

a bunch of questions crashing over him almost all the time. Does he know what to do? Will it work? What if he's wrong?

Yeah, being human couldn't have come at a worse time. He glances at Maddy. If she can figure out the bloodlust, maybe she can pick up what he's lost in confidence. She leaves Sylvan and approaches him.

She lays her hand on his chest and presses a kiss to his cheek. Her hand lingers over his heart as though wanting to feel his heartbeat, but is it Maddy the girlfriend or Maddy the vampire who's interested in his heart?

Caleb grins and decides it doesn't matter, so he takes her hand in his. "I'll be fine."

She takes a deep breath, and a tremble moves through her. "I know you will. You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," he says, and Maddy's hand falls away. He moves toward the volume, still open on the table in the center of the room. He stands in front of the book and focuses all his mental energy on Nim.

He lays his hand on the open page, unsure how this works even as he keeps his mind on Nim. For the first time, he wonders where she would choose to go—

Bright light bursts from the book, swallowing him, blinding him. It yanks at Caleb, making his stomach swoop to the floor.

He blinks, then blinks again. Gone is the room in Veritas with its stone walls and floors. Instead, he's standing in a strange forest. Tall trees surround him, their shadows blending into each other, creating a brooding, oppressive atmosphere.

"Nim!" He spins in a slow circle, scanning the spaces between the large, dark trunks. "Nim! Are you here?"

There's no answer, and Caleb isn't sure where he is or where to go next. No clear trail shows on the forest floor to guide his next action. Is he even in the right place?

A piercing scream shatters the silence.

Caleb freezes, trying to figure out what direction the shriek had come from. He turns quickly in another circle and then takes off toward the sound before it fades completely. His legs eat away the distance between where he is and where he needs to be. He nearly trips on knobbly, gnarly roots twice but comes to a stop in a clearing when a small figure whimpers at the edge. A little girl huddles in the glade.

Cautiously, he steps toward her, and her head lifts. The tops of her ears end in points, and her hair is matted. Her chin quivers as she peers at Caleb. “Can you help me?”

“Help you with what?”

“My friend fell into a pit.”

Caleb studies the girl, trying to decide whether or not it’s a trick or what might be hiding in the forest beyond the clearing or who might be watching them. He crouches down next to the girl. “What’s your name?”

She sniffs, and her eyes are red rimmed. “Flea.”

He blinks down at the girl. “Flea? Your name is Flea?”

The girl sticks out her lower lip and her chin juts toward him. “Yeah, that’s what I said. Now are you going to help me help my friend?”

“Tell me what happened.” There’s something about the girl, something Caleb can’t quite put his finger on. “What happened to your friend?”

Flea jumps to her feet. “My friend, Spider, fell into a pit and a woman tried to help him—a woman I didn’t know. Then I heard a scream, maybe it was her. Now I don’t know what happened to either of them.”

Caleb peers into the surrounding darkness between the tree trunks and the overgrowth on the forest floor reaches his knees. A woman the girl didn’t know...that might be Nim. If it’s Nim, then Caleb needs to find her, and this might be a clue to her location. “Where are they?”

Flea gestures in the direction opposite of where Caleb came from. “Over there. I came when I heard the scream, and you were the first person I found who might be able to help us.” She tips her head to the side. “But your ears

are rounded and not pointed. I don't know your kind."

"Take me to the pit, and I'll see if I can get both our friends out."

She jumps to her feet and sprints in the direction she pointed earlier. She runs as quickly as she can without slowing. "Come on!"

Caleb takes off after her, concerned he's about to lose the only clue he has, but he's barely able to keep up with the girl. Her clothes snag on the underbrush, but neither of them slow down. Flea crashes through the forest, and Caleb follows her, and when they come to a stop, they're at the edge of a pit.

A woman lays in the bottom, her head propped on a dirt-covered stone. Caleb's insides twist, and his throat dries. It might be Nim down there, and he's not sure what's happened to her. But one thing he notices is that there's no friend, no one other than the woman on the ground.

Caleb turns to the pointy-eared girl. "Where's Spider?"

She scowls and peers down into the pit. "Spider must have gotten out. I'm going to find him." She sprints away, leaving Caleb alone at the edge of the pit. She shrieks into the forest almost immediately. "Spider! Where are you?"

Caleb lets her go without stopping her. Instead, he cups his hands around his mouth. Her lack of response to their arrival turns his stomach more than he expects. "Nim! Is that you?"

The woman doesn't answer, and she doesn't stir, but the longer he stares at her, the surer he is that it's Nim. "Nim! Can you hear me?"

Nim doesn't stir at all, and he can't even tell if her chest rises and falls. He doesn't have a choice. He has to get down into the pit with her. No obvious handholds exist on the edge or the walls of the earthen cavity.

With no easy way down to the bottom of the pit, Caleb jumps down from the edge, leaping out, sailing through the air, and bracing for the impact on the uneven ground. But it doesn't hurt his non-vampire body as much as he expected, and he drops to his knees beside Nim immediately. Dirt rains down on them as Caleb checks her breathing.

The knot of worry loosens slightly as he learns he won't be taking a dead body back to Maddy. At least Nim is breathing and still alive. Carefully, he checks over her. Nim has no exterior wounds, and there's nothing obvious to explain her unconsciousness. He can't sense any magic, and he can't scent any wounds either—not that he could with a mortal nose.

“Nim,” he whispers. He pushes on her side. “Wake up.”

When she doesn't budge, he grasps her shoulders and tries to rouse her by shaking her. Nothing happens. She still doesn't wake, and Caleb's at a loss for what to do next. He sits back on his heels.

A noise overhead brings him to his feet, but a large wave of mud slams into his chest and knocks him back to the ground with another bunch of mud inbound. He scrambles to his feet and tries to cover Nim, to protect her from the onslaught. Mud slide! How does that happen?

But he's not wandering for long. After the next wave of mud crashes over them, Caleb catches a glimpse of Flea's happy face, beaming down at him.

“Flea! Get us out of here,” he bellows, unable to pull himself out from the weight of earth.

But Flea does nothing. Her mouth twists into a sickly smile, and she throws back her head to laugh, exposing sharpened teeth.

Caleb digs at the dirt on top of him, but more fills in. He grunts as the weight presses against his chest. “Spider was never trapped down here, was he?”

“No, but you are.” She waves at Caleb, shakes her head, and giggles. “Orion sends you his regards, foolish Caleb and silly Nim.” Then she gestures to the edge, sending even more dirt cascading over them. They're trapped under a magic mudslide, and they can't do anything.

His groans already sound strangled, and he gasps between each breath. The next moment, he gets a mouthful of dirt, and it cuts off everything he had wanted to yell.

“Flea! Don't leave us here,” he rasps.

But Flea doesn't listen, and the ground piles on relentlessly. Being crushed to death, being buried alive is an awful way to go. He sucks at the air, fighting the weight of the filled-in pit.

Caleb's thoughts stray to Nim, and he hopes her end comes swiftly. They're both going to die here, and it's all his fault. Light isn't visible anymore, and Caleb imagines he can feel Flea dancing on their grave. Darkness circles his vision, and he knows he's not getting enough oxygen.

Without success, he tries to summon his powers, but nothing happens. Nothing at all. He can't save Nim, and he can't save himself. What good is a lousy set of powers he can't control?

He coughs and chokes on dirt as he inhales and it lodges in the back of his throat.

I'm sorry, Nim.

I'm sorry, Maddy.

He blinks rapidly, fighting the desire to pass out.

But it isn't long and he's finally giving in and letting his eyes close.

Just then, the soil over his face shifts, and a little light breaks through the dark. It's as though hope shines on Caleb's face.

"Hey! Help us!" he yells, as loudly, as strongly as he can.

More dirt is shoveled quickly away, as if by magic. He doesn't know who it is, but he shouts as much encouragement as he can. "We're down here! Save us!"

Nim better be alive. They'd come so close.

The last weight of dirt lifts away from his body, a face appears over the narrow trench he's now lying in.

He peers up at...

Quinn! How can it be Quinn? How did she find them? So many questions tumble through his brain, bumping together until nothing makes sense.

It's Quinn. Quinn has saved them both.

"Is Nim still alive?" Caleb calls.

“She is.”

Relief makes him sag against the ground. “Oh, thank god.”

Caleb’s overjoyed to be saved, but he doesn’t know whether he should be happy or sad to see Quinn here. He shakes his head. Of all the people...

It’s freaking *Quinn*!

CHAPTER II

MADELEINE



Maddy paces the little room, her footsteps seeming loud against the large stones of the old floor. Caleb's gone...somewhere. They don't know where and what's happening.

No one speaks, and everyone's on edge. The tension in the room pulls at her. It's too quiet, and it's taking too long. She wrings her hands, and she can't stop thinking about Caleb and wherever he's gone.

Blaise and Sierra lean against the far wall, next to Sylvan, each of them looking as grim as the other. So many questions swim in their eyes.

Maddy's stomach crunches in her middle and her knees begin to buckle, but she doesn't stop pacing. She's hungry, and it's not going to get better. However, stopping isn't an option. How can she? Caleb's somewhere else, without protection, trying to save Nim.

None of them know where either of them actually are right now. When Caleb gets back, Maddy can eat. Until then... She licks her upper lip, surprised by the teeth points as her tongue smooths over her vampire fangs. Eating needs to be a priority, but the blood bags from the cooler don't sound appetizing for some reason.

She turns to Sylvan. "Do you know where they would go?"

Sylvan presses his lips into a tight line and crosses his arms. "It's probably a portal to someplace Fae, but I cannot be certain. It's as much to do

with the reader of the page as it is anything else. I cannot be sure of what was in Nim's mind."

"And how are we sure Caleb went where Nim went?"

At first, he doesn't answer, and Blaise throws out a long series of curses, each one landing like a grenade in the middle of the room.

"So, we don't know. We can only hope."

That knowledge makes everything in Maddy angry, infuriates her in a way she's never felt before. Red fills her vision, and she grits her teeth to keep from screaming. Caleb shouldn't be there alone, vulnerable and unprotected. He should have gone there, grabbed Nim, and been back already.

Her thoughts careen to a halt.

It hits her, and she freezes. How is he getting back? They hadn't discussed that detail at all. She groans and pinches the bridge of her nose. *How?* How had they not at least discussed that at all? He has no planned way back. He'd gone, just assuming he would find the way while he was over there. He never should have used the book and portal. She drops her hand and gives Sylvan a dark look.

Maddy marches toward the book, everything still covered by the red haze of her anger. "I'm going to find him."

Blaise rushes toward her and wraps her arms around Maddy, yanking her back into the room. "I don't think so."

Maddy pulls Blaise's arms away from her and takes another step toward the book on the table, but Nim's partner doesn't let go. Then Sylvan joins Blaise's attempts to keep her from following Caleb.

"Let go." Maddy jerks out of their grasps, but they latch on once more. Neither release her.

Blaise's hands tighten almost painfully. "You can't go, Maddy."

"Fae magic will hurt you because you're a vampire," Sylvan adds.

Sierra waves her hands. "Shh! Shh! Somebody's coming."

The scuffle stops, and the trio turns to look at the entrance to the library's private reading room.

Kenna strides in with her eyebrow arched high. "What's going on?"

Maddy glares at Caleb's aunt. "We're cleaning up the mess you made."

Kenna blinks and draws back in surprise. "What mess?"

The red in Maddy's vision grows stronger, and she puts her hands on her hips. She's so *hungry*, and it's like a creeping madness. But she pushes it aside.

Instead, she says, "Caleb portaled himself somewhere else so he could find Nim and bring her back. But he hasn't returned, and now he's in a dangerous place, vulnerable and unprotected. Because *you* decided to turn him into a human again, Kenna."

Kenna places her hand on Maddy's forearm. "We did what we had to. It was necessary."

"How can you say that? Orion's been freed."

Kenna's eyes flash. "We'll kill Orion now that he's out."

"Do you even know where he is?" Maddy demands, not backing down. Kenna may be the leader of the Order, but Maddy's now a vampire. One who's terrified she's lost her mate.

"As far as I know, he's laying low at one of the properties owned by Merrick Group of Industries."

"But do you know which one?"

Kenna doesn't answer, and Maddy's hands turn to fists. Her stomach clenches again, but she pushes against the hungry sensation. Caleb's gone, and she's more than famished. The red grows stronger. She whirls and marches around the room, trying to fight the need to feed.

Caleb had helped her, and she could distract herself when he was close. But he's not here, and it's her fault. The emotions are turning into a tsunami. She places her hands against the wall and leans toward them, her chest heaving.

She must eat. She must feed. Not on the bagged, stale cold blood in the cooler, not this time. She needs something fresh, something alive, and she needs out of the building. The room's too close, too constricting. She straightens, marches toward the exit, and strides through the others before they even know what's happened.

When she steps out of the room, she takes a sharp right down the corridor. In a blink, she's at the entrance to Veritas and outside the door. A gust of wind blows across the parking lot, pushing trash and grass clippings from one side to the other. She stops in front of the door and takes a deep breath, but it doesn't help. The red of the sky matches the red in her gaze. Another blink, and she's out of the warehouse parking lot, driven by her hunger alone. If she eats, she'll be able to think clearly and find Caleb. It's the only truth she knows.

In a blur, she's out of the parking lot and cruising down the sidewalk. She doesn't know how far she's gone, but she's already in a part of Mercy City she doesn't recognize. On, she goes. She could consume anyone, she could be the last face someone sees, but she doesn't want just anyone. She needs to feed and to *help*... So...if she can find...

A pain-filled shriek catches her attention, and she stops at the next corner to the south. Across the street, two guys have a girl cornered at the end of an alley, and they're touching her, pulling on her clothes while she yells at them to stop.

"Come on, show us something," the taller of the two demands.

When she says no, the shorter one laughs. "Do you think you can get rid of us?"

The corners of Maddy's mouth twitch and tip upward. Those two are perfect. She charges across the street and stops behind a large dumpster. Two men won't be a problem. Not now, not as a vampire. Her emotions surge, and the hunger compels her.

Maddy rushes the two attackers, relishing their horror as they realize what

she is. She lifts one of the men away from the wide-eyed young woman and tosses him behind her. He slams into the cinderblock wall of the convenience store next door and groans as he slides to the ground. She leaps on him and stomps him into the ground. Each impact forces a rush of air and a grunt out of him. Then she lunges at the other one, dragging her mouth over his neck, pleased when one of her teeth nicks his skin and a bit of blood seasons her tongue.

“Oh, crap!” he yells, swatting at her and pushing her away. “She’s got teeth.”

“Teeth? What are you talking about?” the one on the ground rasps.

“Vampire! She’s a vampire!”

“Holy shit!” He tries to get to his feet, but he can’t get up from the ground.

“I’m your worst nightmare,” Maddy growls and lands a right hook on the shorter man’s chin.

But a whimper pulls her attention away from the two men to the young woman. She’s frozen in place, her hand resting over her gaping mouth. Guilt floods Maddy. What is she doing? Playing with her food before she was going to eat? Who is she? But even as the questions bump into one another in her brain, she knows she isn’t letting these two get away. She has to eat, has to feed, and they are her prey.

“Run.” Maddy releases the shorter man and waves to the young woman. “Get out of here. Go. You don’t need to be here for this.”

The girl doesn’t wait to be told twice, and she bolts out of the alley without a look back. Maddy grins at her retreating back and then turns back to the two attackers as one of the men rams into her. Maddy catches him in her arms and crushes him until he cries out.

She has so much strength now. She feels powerful, strong, and every jump, every move makes the blood pound in the veins of the two men, whetting her appetite like the smells of a feast simmering before serving.

They're both on the ground beside one another: a blood buffet.

Maddy drops on the one with the wound on his throat and licks away the remainder of the blood on his neck. They both whimper but neither tries to get away. Some kind of vampire hypnotism or were they both just that afraid of her?

Then she presses her teeth into his neck, and the man calls out as the sharp points puncture his skin. Whatever doubt she has disappears as the metallic taste nearly overwhelms her. So much delicious warm blood and consuming it would solve everything wrong inside her, wouldn't it?

"Maddy, don't! You don't want to do this!" someone yells from the end of the alley.

Maddy almost recognizes the voice. Who is it? But the blood inside the man... She needs the blood to fill her stomach.

The woman comes closer. "You don't want to have to tell Caleb you did this."

Caleb... Oh, man, oh, man... What would Caleb say if she had to tell him about *this*? Maddy raises her head, and she stares at the woman for long moments, trying to place her, trying to recognize her. Except the men's heartbeats thunder in her head, their blood rushes in her mind.

"Who are you? How do you know Caleb?" Maddy can't think straight, not with the blood pulsing beneath her.

The woman drops to the ground beside Maddy and places her hands over Maddy's. "It's Cora."

"Cora?" Maddy scowls. "I didn't recognize you. How did you find me?"

"Vampires can find vampires," she says. "And the fleeing young woman was a good clue."

Cora's hands tighten on Maddy's. "It's been too long since you've eaten, Maddy. Let them go. You don't want to do this. It's not something you want to tell Caleb."

That banks the fire in Maddy's bloodlust. "I'm so hungry." It breaks out

of her like a long wail. “I don’t know how.”

Cora helps her release the men, and she sends them away. Before they leave, she adds, “Don’t forget we can find you wherever you are. Don’t harass anyone again.”

They duck their heads. “Yes, ma’am, yes, ma’am.” Then the men scramble away.

Cora pulls two blood bags from her pockets and hands them to Maddy. “Go ahead. They’re not fresh, but they’re warm.”

In the alley, Maddy devours the two blood bags, and takes the third one Cora has in her pocket. Finally, Maddy wipes her chin, then slumps against the wall of the convenience store. “What’s happening to me?”

Cora pats her shoulder. “You’re figuring out how to be a vampire in a mortal world. It’s not easy, but it can be amazing, if you allow it.”

Maddy covers her face, glad the hunger has eased. But she doesn’t know who she is anymore, and she needs Caleb more than ever.

Where is he?

CHAPTER 12

CALEB



Quinn offers her hand to Caleb, and he takes it without hesitation. She drags him out of the earth as though he's being pulled free of his own premature grave, then makes sure he has his balance before releasing him. Being free does nothing to lessen the fear wrapping his stomach. Instead, when a crash sounds in the forest, he ducks as though dodging a volley of stray bullets.

"It was a branch," Quinn comments.

Panting, he scans the forest, half-expecting Flea—or whatever her name is—to come flying out from between the tree trunks. His pulse pounds and frantic takes on a new meaning. He hates it, and his emotions are as huge as they've been since he became a human again. But this is what he's got to deal with. Kenna deserves an earful next time he sees her.

His hands shake as he smooths them through his hair. He's already been gone too long, and Maddy must be frantic by now. How long have they been away? And how's he going to get back? He'd been counting on Nim to know how to make the portal work to get back.

Oh, crap. *Nim!*

That's when he sees her and rushes to her side. He tries again to wake her up, shaking her shoulders and calling her name over and over again. But she doesn't move. Caleb tries again and fights the worry that she's been without

oxygen for too long. He hasn't been injured by the lack, so she should be fine. *Right?* More worry, more concern. He isn't good at the human stuff anymore.

Quinn crouches beside Caleb and catches his hands. "She won't wake up. Not here. Not now."

"How do you know that? Is she hurt?" Nim's chest rises and falls with another breath. "Internal bleeding, maybe? Do you have doctors here?"

Quinn shakes her head. "No, no, it's nothing like that. Her body isn't hurt, so a doctor won't be able to help her now."

"Why not?"

"It's nothing medical. Orion doesn't want her to wake up, so she's not waking up."

"Why does he care?" Caleb can't keep from glancing at the shadows and the murky fog in the distance.

"Nim is the one who ensured the spirits of Purgatory didn't fall prey to his control. She kept them from giving in completely to Orion." She waves her hands over Nim's supine body. "This is his revenge. Nim's soul is trapped in a dimension he made for her. No doubt, it feels like a prison to her."

Except Orion's made his way into the mortal world. How does he know they're here? Oh, Flea. Of course. She's working for him, and she probably has a direct line of communication. Orion must have more than her eyes everywhere. Caleb shudders, glad he's here instead of Maddy, even though he didn't want to come here at all. His decision isn't about him. It's about Maddy. *Anything to keep Maddy safe.* The thought repeats in his head.

He brushes dirt off of Nim's forehead and cheeks. "So, how do we free her?"

Quinn looks defeated, as if her soul itself is ready to drip into the ground and drain away. "Orion must die. It's the only way to break the magic which holds her."

Caleb sorts through what he knows about Purgatory, Orion, and everything else. This—whatever’s going on with Nim—is something different, and he doesn’t have any knowledge of his own to help break her free. “Do you think she’s in pain?”

Quinn doesn’t answer, but her shoulders lower ever so slightly. She droops as though the truth is disheartening. “There’s no way to know.”

Except Quinn says everything Caleb needed to know with her body language. Of course, somebody like Orion wouldn’t trap a soul or a mind without all the pain he could conjure. “You don’t have to try to protect me from the truth,” Caleb says, rising to his feet. “I’d rather know the reality of it than something not-quite honest.”

Quinn says nothing.

Caleb decides not to press her. “How did you find us?”

Quinn shrugs, but her mouth tightens. Finally, she says, “The scream was a giveaway, and other noise. Flea is always up to no good, and a lot of cruel things go on here.”

Caleb studies their surroundings again and tries to make a plan. He’ll have to carry Nim out of here...wherever here is, come to think of it. “Where are we?”

“We’re in the Faerie kingdom, in the place that vanished after the fall of Atlantis.”

“But how did you get here?”

“I came here because I had a small portion of Madeleine’s blood, and I was able to channel enough power to come here. I still have a little of her blood left, so we can use it to leave.”

Caleb grins. That’s the first piece of good news he’s heard in a while. “You mean we could leave right now?”

“If you’re ready.”

He hefts Nim into his arms, the tension in his chest is less but not gone. In ten minutes more, it might be gone entirely. “Let’s get the heck out of here.”

Quinn circles her hands, turning them over and over, using her magic, dark as it is since it has its roots in obsidian. After a long moment, a pinprick winks, a portal opens, and grows wide enough to step through. Veritas and safety beckon on the other side.

She jerks her head toward the opening. “You go first.”

Caleb holds her gaze. “You sure?”

“Easier to keep it open from this side. I don’t want it to close until we’re both through.”

He shifts Nim in his arms and steps through sideways. Her head lolls against his shoulder, but she’s still breathing. Hopefully, the Archivists have more knowledge about this sort of spell. When he gets to the other side, he’s in the foyer of Veritas. The whisper of voices down the long corridor tells him the others are probably still in the reading room.

“Come on, Quinn,” Caleb calls. “Get out of there.”

But before Quinn can step through, Flea slams into her and knocks her to the ground, and the portal shrinks. Caleb searches for some place to deposit the still-unconscious Nim, but Quinn shakes her head back and forth, tossing Flea aside. Branches and twigs snap, and a screech comes from the shadows. A stampede of footsteps charges toward them, and Flea laughs maniacally as she throws herself at Quinn. Another rhino-like creature gallops toward the portal, obviously intending to launch through.

“Quinn!”

“No, I’ll take care of Orion’s creatures!”

The portal snaps closed, slicing the end of the creature’s horn from its nose. The horn drops to the ground of the Veritas foyer and rolls in a circle at Caleb’s feet.

Quinn! She sacrificed herself to keep him and Nim safe. Caleb groans as he turns toward Blaise, Sierra, and Sylvan as they rush down the corridor. Sierra gasps, and Sylvan barely reacts at all.

Blaise reaches Caleb first and smooths her hands over Nim’s face, gently

calling her partner's name. Her eyebrows pinch, and she goes pale with worry.

"She's breathing, and there's nothing physically wrong with her." Caleb keeps his voice low and soft. "Where should I lay her down?"

"This way, this way." Blaise tugs his arm toward another wing of Veritas. "There's guest accommodation this way."

The group hurries toward the spare apartment. Blaise leads the way with Caleb close behind while Sierra and Sylvan trail after. When they enter the living space, Blaise leads her to their bedroom, and Caleb settles the unconscious woman on their bed.

Blaise fusses over Nim, smoothing her clothes, her hair, whispering things in her ears. But Nim still doesn't stir. A moment later, Sierra and Sylvan troop into the room as well.

Caleb moves out of the way so Blaise can care for her partner, and he turns to Sierra. "Where's Maddy?"

Sierra and Sylvan share a long look but neither of them speaks.

"Where's Maddy?"

"She is not here," Sylvan intones.

"Then where..."

Sierra waves for Caleb to follow her. "We can talk about it back in the reading room."

"Sure." Caleb draws out the word, suspicious and fighting a burst of temper over the lack of answers. Silently, they leave the guest quarters. Maddy's nowhere around.

Neither says anything, but Caleb follows them back to the reading room with the Faerie book on the table. Maddy isn't in the reading room either.

"Enough." Caleb brings his fist down on the corner of the rough-hewn table, and he immediately regrets it as pain shoots up his forearm. "Where's Maddy?"

Sierra offers a weak smile. "Now, Caleb... She... Well, she ran out of

here, and—”

“Caleb!” Maddy bursts into the reading room. “You made it back!”

Cora enters behind her. He nods to her before he opens his arms to Maddy, and she rushes into them. He presses a kiss to her cheek, and she squeezes him in her arms, stronger than Caleb’s used to, but he grins despite the pain of the crushing hug. It’s not so bad, if he’s honest.

Then she brings her mouth to his, and they share a long kiss. Caleb loses himself in the sweet magic that is Maddy, in the very reason he takes every risk he does. Her pointed teeth drag over the flat of his tongue, making him swallow back a groan. He almost forgets there are other people in the room except a loud gasp has them drawing apart.

A cloud of white smoke has filled the room. It grows quickly, rising past their knees in a blink.

Caleb scowls, pulling Maddy closer. “What’s going on?”

Maddy waves her hand in front of her face, fighting against the thickness. “Whatever it is. It’s not good.”

Sylvan frowns. “This is vampire magic.”

As quickly as it appears, the white smoke disappears.

“Oh, no,” Maddy gasps, and she points at the table. “No!”

Caleb spins the direction Maddy’s looking, and his stomach drops to his toes even as he thinks his last meal is going to make an appearance.

Sierra coughs, and Sylvan curses darkly.

The table is empty, and the magical Fae book is gone.

“It’s the handiwork of vampires,” Maddy snarls. “And now we’ve lost the map to the *only* chance we had at beating Orion!”

CHAPTER 13

MADELEINE



How could they dare to come *here*? Attacking Veritas is an outrageous move. Veritas is a safe haven, a neutral location as a library for all supernaturals. While she rages on, Caleb tells the story of his trip through the portal.

At the end, Maddy stomps her foot, fighting the urge to launch into a dozen laps around the room. Or maybe running through the streets, searching for those criminals she didn't devour. "How could they?"

Caleb scowls. "How could they...what?"

She waves her hands wildly. "How could they attack Veritas? In broad daylight? How?"

Sylvan stands near the table, and he smooths his hand over the surface where the Faerie magic book had been before the cloud. He closes his eyes as though he's listening to a tune from far away.

Cora and Sierra stand at the edge of the room, shifting from side to side.

Maddy meets Cora's gaze. "Veritas isn't even safe from attack by the vampires. What do we do now?"

Cora presses her mouth into a tight line, and her incisors catch the glimmer of the dim light in the room, but she doesn't answer.

And neither does Sierra.

"The book should not be in the wrong hands. It's dangerous." Sylvan

pronounces it as though it's the solution to everything, and he straightens. "Since that was vampire magic, perhaps the vampires have started working for Orion."

Caleb crosses his arms and glares while Maddy gapes at the Fae. "Well, aren't you captain obvious?"

Cora barks a laugh and clamps her mouth closed mid-burst.

"The only chance we have to beat Orion is gone. What are we going to do?" Maddy scrubs her hand over her face and shakes her head. She's hungry again, and her middle is hollowing out, clenching with all the fury building in her.

"The vampires probably want the book now that the Faeries are back in the mortal dimension. Faerie magic is another thing, apart from the Cure, that can make vampires go extinct."

Maddy frowns, but she's glad for the distraction from her already growing hunger. "What do you mean?"

Cora and Sierra stand nearby, listening without speaking. Sylvan clenches his jaw as though he couldn't be persuaded to speak no matter what.

"It's the same reason you couldn't use the Fae magic and the portal book," Caleb says. "The magic inside it would have attacked you just because you're a vampire. That's not unique to that book, it's always true of Faerie magic and vampire blood."

Maddy thinks for a long moment. "So, maybe the book has something they need."

Caleb nods. "There must be something in the book that will allow the vampires to harm the Faeries."

"Maybe it's related to the reason Orion trapped Nim in her coma."

"Quinn said it was Orion's retribution," Caleb says.

"But maybe that's not all it is."

Caleb strokes his chin, and his expression turns thoughtful. "The book also contains the location of the weapon we need to use to kill Orion."

“But if the vampires want to use the weapon against all Fae, not just Orion, then maybe they’re hoping to find the weapon and use it themselves.”

Maddy and Caleb fall silent, each one lost in their own thoughts.

“So, what should we do?” Sierra ventures carefully.

Caleb grunts, then sighs. He smells of iron but like iron from a stone, not like blood. It makes him seem determined as he’s faced with the inevitability of whatever it is.

Maddy’s eyes widen as she understands what Caleb means to do.

“I don’t think we have a choice. We have to go after the book.”

“You can’t be serious,” Maddy hisses, her upper lip curling. The surge of feeling makes her returning hunger rear its ugly head again, shaking her focus for a moment.

Sierra glances from one to the other. “What are you two going on about?”

It’s Cora’s turn to gasp.

Caleb ignores her, giving Sierra a hard look. “We’re going to confront the vampires.”



THE ORDER of the Knightly Rose isn’t a group to be trifled with, but Maddy and Caleb don’t have much choice. The group of hunters are the only ones who will stand up to the vampires if the vampires decide to attack them. Maddy’s been a hunter for a long time, and now she’s basically a walking ball of H-A-N-G-R-Y. Even so, for the first time, nervousness and doubt rear their ugly heads.

Sierra, Cora, and Sylvan all stayed behind in Veritas with Nim and Blaise. Maddy doesn’t want them to come along, anyway. This will be the first meeting since Maddy’s change. Going to a secret order of vampire hunters as a vampire, well, it’s likely to be one heck of a reunion.

Nevertheless, Maddy's throat feels dry, and she has her first attack of nerves since Vera turned her into a vampire—a vampiric vampire hunter. She rolls her eyes. Of course this is her life.

An hour later, they're in the great hall, surrounded by members eyeing them with suspicion, and in front of the current leader of the Order: Marlowe. Maddy clasps her hands together in front of her, hoping none of the other hunters can see her hands shake. Caleb hasn't spoken at all since being led into the great hall.

"You may speak," someone says.

But the quiet in the room weighs down on Maddy, and she doesn't quite know how to begin. The silence stretches. When Caleb elbows her, she nearly chokes on her own spit. Embarrassing doesn't begin to describe the half of it.

She clears her throat, cursing the nerves. "Greetings to the most revered Order of the Knightly Rose and assembled hunter-leaders." She winces at how butt-kissy that sounds, but she presses forward. "I am here to ask for assistance in our mission against the vampires."

Marlowe arches an eyebrow. "Go on."

"They've stolen a book from Veritas. It's a Fae book, filled with magical spells and portals. More importantly, the volume also contains directions on how to find a weapon which can kill Orion once and for all."

Marlowe leans forward in his seat. "A weapon to best Orion? How did you hear of this?"

"It's a Fae weapon which has been lost to time, and we were guided to the book by a Fae who is only interested in stopping Orion."

"Why do they care?"

"If Orion isn't stopped, all dimensions will be at risk."

Marlowe peers at them both. "You have news," he says, as though expecting Maddy to announce all her secrets. "You both have news."

Maddy sighs. "I have been turned into a vampire."

The collected crowd gasps, but none of them seem surprised.

“And I’m not anymore.” Caleb speaks for the first time since they’ve arrived at the Order, and his voice rings clear. “But neither development diminishes our need to find this book or the help we require to do it.”

Marlowe laughs like an execution bell ringing the time of demise. “Do you think the Order will follow you into battle? You are vampiric.”

A chuckle moves through the hunters.

“We will not take orders from you,” a hateful male voice calls out, and other voices join in agreement, and the murmur of voices becomes a roar. All of them are speaking, yelling at the same time.

Caleb steps forward. “I am a son of Van Helsing, the greatest hunter of them all.”

Marlowe shakes his head. “The Order will not follow former vampires either. Your noble bloodlines make no difference.”

The large doors to the right click, clank, and creak open. The noise cuts through the growing cacophony, and the room immediately falls quiet once more.

Footsteps echo through the hall as a lone figure marches out of the shadows and into the room. “I am Kenna, and I am the leader of the Order of the Knightly Rose.”

Fury burns through Maddy. Caleb’s aunt is one of the most conniving people in their lives to date, pulling the strings and never asking permission. She whirls to face Caleb. “Did you know about this?”

Yet Caleb’s eyes widen with each step toward them Kenna takes, and he doesn’t have to say anything. He smells of sharp shock. He didn’t know about Kenna’s sudden appearance. He whispers, “This isn’t going to go well.”

Marlowe points at Kenna. “And just who do you think you are?”

“I am the leader of the Order, and I demand you step down willingly.” She encompasses the entire room in her glare. “I am still your leader.”

“We believed you were dead,” Marlowe spits. “You no longer have any

rights of leadership here.”

“The Order has but one leader,” the hateful man yells. “Marlowe!”

“This is how you repay me, Marlowe?” Kenna demands. “You were always loyal to me!”

Except no one hears her. A cheer spreads through the group. “Marlowe! Marlowe! Marlowe!” More and more voices join in the chant. The clang of metal weapons soon accompanies the voices. “Marlowe.”

The ground vibrates with the energy, and Maddy’s nostrils flare. So much blood in the building, and it’s not just blood. It’s excited, angry, hot blood. Caleb catches Maddy’s hand and squeezes it, grounding her before she breaks into a feeding frenzy.

She offers him a wobbly smile. “How did you know?”

He leans close. “Big emotions and loads of feelings. They can practically overwhelm a new vampire’s senses. All the heat of the mob accentuates the differences in tastes. It’s basically a giant buffet with loads of flavor options.”

Maddy takes a deep breath and clutches Caleb’s hand like the lifeline it is.

Kenna continues bellowing her demands to the crowd, but the chant only grows louder. They’re working themselves into a frenzy.

Marlowe raises his hands. “I am the leader of the Order of the Knightly Rose, am I not?”

A cheer answers.

“And we refuse to follow you or your two vampire sympathizers.”

Another cheer. Bladed weapons are being drawn all around the great hall.

“You will leave,” Marlowe commands.

Kenna puts her hands on her hips. “We will not.”

The situation is devolving quickly, and Maddy scans the perimeter for a quick way out. Kenna is looking shocked and for the first time, at a loss. Her Order has turned against her.

A stench draws Maddy’s attention to one of the hunters closest to her.

She scowls as the scent turns familiar, and she uses her warlock ability to delve into the closest hunter and the one next to him and the next.

After a moment, she gasps. “They’re possessed.”

Caleb turns to her. “What?” His eyes widen.

She gestures to the room. “They’re all possessed! It must be by spirits under Orion’s control. None of them are really...*them*.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me.”

Marlowe points to the trio in the center of the great hall. “Remove them!”

Hunters from all over the room charge toward Kenna, Maddy, and Caleb, brandishing swords and Orion’s hatred. At least guns don’t seem to be the weapon of choice.

Caleb lands a right hook in the temple of the first hunter who reaches them, knocking him out cold. Maddy launches herself at two more, besting them within moments by breaking one leg and one arm, respectively. Kenna leaps at yet another and spins around, dropping her opponent to the ground in a choke hold. Another attacker falls and still another, but they’re being overrun.

They’re no match for the endless supply of hunters. In the space of a breath, they’re losing.

“Maddy!” Caleb yells.

“Get out of here!” Maddy answers, dragging her fingernails over the face of her next attacker, barely resisting the urge to drain him of every drop of lifeforce.

“No!” Caleb shouts.

Suddenly, he stretches out his arms as if to surrender, but instead, he floats into the air over the crowd. A thrumming, pulsing sound builds around him. His eyes turn luminescent, and his hair sticks out from his head. A swirl of smoke works around him and builds to a cloud.

Maddy takes a step back and catches Kenna’s arm. Kenna whirls to attack her, but frowns when she realizes it’s Maddy. Maddy juts her chin toward

Caleb.

“Oh, no,” Kenna murmurs. “What’s he doing?”

Maddy shrugs.

The smoke explodes out from Caleb, rushing over the marauding hunters. All of them are swept back to their butts in the great hall. The closest dozen knocked unconscious, and many others knocked senseless. Pain-filled groans take the place of the sounds of battle.

Maddy and Kenna stand, shell-shocked. Caleb just felled the entire Order in one fell swoop.

Slowly, clusters of hunters climb to their feet and stagger toward the exits. Within minutes, the hall has been emptied, and Kenna sputters into disjointed expletives as Caleb sinks slowly to the floor once more.

Yet one lone figure remains in the great hall.

It's Else, glaring at Maddy.

“Well, well, fancy finding you here,” Maddy snarls.

Else shrieks and rushes at Maddy with a dagger held over her head. “This ends today!”

Before Maddy can reach her, a fiery burst shoots out of Caleb.

It streaks across the room, bright and hot. It finds its target unerringly. Unapologetically.

It slams into Else, pushing her away from Maddy and knocking her over.

Else drops to the ground with a round hole smoldering in the center of her chest and her eyes locked wide in surprise. The ends of her hair flame and then go out. Tendrils of smoke curl up toward the ceiling.

Maddy gasps and covers her mouth.

Oh my god. What has he done?

CHAPTER 14

CALEB



Caleb grits his teeth and clenches his fists, trying to figure out what he's done without panicking over the hugeness of it. Else is dead, and *he* killed her.

He focuses on the sensation of the ground beneath the soles of his shoes, and the bloom of love for Maddy in his chest. He's Caleb as he was before, as a human, but he's not old Caleb at all. There's so much more to him now, so much more he doesn't understand.

When had his heartbeat gotten so loud? Was it always that way before? The stench of burned flesh and singed hair disturbs him and his stomach churns, clenching with each pound of his pulse.

Else still smolders on the ground in front of them. What had just happened? He isn't sure he can say at all. It hadn't happened with any more thought than protecting Maddy, and the sequence of doing isn't something he can repeat. *Protect Maddy*. That's the only goal he has in his head. It's the only reason Else is dead on the floor of the great hall.

Regret over her death isn't in him, but confusion is. How had he done it without thinking? When Else brought the dagger down, all Caleb could imagine was Maddy, dropping to her knees with a stake in her heart. The magic surged and burst out of him with no reason or thought.

"Why?" Maddy rasps at him, clutching at her own throat. She sprints to

his side and tugs on his arm. “Why did you have to kill her?”

Caleb tries to pull her close, but she’s slow to move toward him. She leans away as though she’s afraid of him. *Her*. The one he loves, the one he needs. He would never do anything to hurt her. “I had no other choice.”

“But you always have a choice.”

His gaze narrows. “Do you have a choice when you consume a mortal in the middle of bloodlust? Did you have a choice with the lab tech? Or did it happen by instinct?”

Her mouth stretches into a twisted grimace, and her eyes turn glassy from moisture. “I don’t think that’s fair.”

The unshed tears in her eyes break through the hard barrier around his heart, and he fights a rush of regret over his comment about the lab tech. Instead of apologizing, he merely whispers, “Maddy, I had no choice. I had to keep you safe.”

“Even when you were a vampire, you didn’t kill anyone outright unless it was necessary. You didn’t even talk to her first or try to negotiate with her.” She shudders. “You just burned a hole through her.” Her hands tremble as she gestures, so she puts her hands on her hips. “Maybe you shouldn’t use Faerie magic, Caleb. It’s so dark.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think whatever it is you do, whatever powers you have... They come from Faerie magic, and Faerie magic is dark, isn’t it?”

“We already know it comes from my forebears getting mixed up with Faerie magic and witches and who knows what else,” he agrees.

“Well... Maybe it...” She pauses long enough to swallow. “Maybe it leaves a little dark in you each time you use it.”

Caleb doesn’t like what she’s implying, but she probably has a point. They know so little about his powers. “So, you’re saying I shouldn’t use it?”

She shrugs. “If you don’t have to, no.”

“Maybe you’re right, but we’re going to need my powers if we’re going

to have any hope of defeating Orion.” He doesn’t tell her he can’t command it, that it comes out of him without his controlling it. “I don’t know that I have a choice about that either.”

She doesn’t say anything for a long time. “If the Order isn’t going to help us, we have to try something else. We must get that book back.”

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Caleb puts his arm around her, and they make their way out of the great hall and the Order. The halls are empty, and no more hunters come from their hiding places. They’re all probably too afraid of Caleb to try now. Their footsteps echo in the silence of the empty spaces.

“Do you think Nim’s awake yet?” Maddy presses a hand to her middle, and Caleb recognizes the motion as the beginning of her hunger. But she doesn’t say anything about being hungry. Instead, she asks, “Why did Quinn say she’s unconscious?”

“Quinn said the coma is Orion’s fault.” But even as Caleb says it, he’s not sure that’s the end of it.

“Do you think there’s more?”

“I think it’s more than just Orion’s revenge. I think the Faeries placed Nim under a spell so that she couldn’t control the spirits. If she’d come with us, she would have been able to break the hunters free from Orion’s control.”

Maddy shakes her head. “Then we have to free her. It’s the only way to keep others from being possessed by the spirits controlled by Orion.”

“To free her, we have to find a way to break the spell, or we have to kill Orion. There’s no other way.”

When they step outside, she grimaces. “Let’s go see the Council. Maybe we can talk them into returning the book to Veritas.”



WHEN THEY ARRIVE, Caleb has to admit the Council isn't any less scary than visiting the Order, but Maddy's a vampire and even as a human, Caleb is still the vampire king. Maybe it'll be enough to get them in through the door.

They stop in front of another nondescript building in a mundane location in Mercy City. The Council moves locations as often as they feel threatened. With the arrival of Orion in the mortal dimension, they've probably moved daily.

Caleb stops at the front door, more than surprised it doesn't open automatically for the vampire king. The Council should be anxious to meet with him. He pounds on the upper panel, expecting a response and getting none.

Maddy scowls. "What's going on?"

A few minutes later, the front door pops open, and a familiar face peeks out. "Oh, Caleb! There you are."

Caleb draws back from the door. "Mason, good to see you. You going to let us in?"

Mason tips his head to the side. "Mm, no, I'll come out." The door closes and the sound of talking then shuffling comes from the other side. Yet it doesn't open.

Caleb's jaw goes slack. What's Mason playing at?

"He's going to come out, but he's not going to let the king of the vampires in?" Maddy murmurs. "That doesn't sound right."

Mason steps out of the latest Council safehouse and closes the door behind him. He puts one arm around each of them and escorts them down the steps to the sidewalk in front of the building, effectively leading them away. "Madeleine, Caleb, it's so great to see you both. I hear you both have some news of interest."

Maddy wrinkles her nose as though she smells an awful stench.

Caleb shoves Mason's arm off his shoulders. "What are you talking about?"

Maddy shrugs out from Mason's other arm, and something red flashes red in her eyes. Her hunger is growing, and Caleb won't be able to ignore her needs for long. She'll take off after the next human she can.

"Let me in to see the Council, Mason," Caleb snaps. "We don't have much time. I'm the king of the vampires, and it's within my rights to call a council meeting anytime I wish."

"Well," Mason draws out the word. "With the Faeries back in the picture, the Council is very busy. The threat of extinction is very real. I'm sure you understand."

Mason turns to Maddy. "As for you, we've heard how Vera turned you into a vampire, but that doesn't mean we trust you, descendant of Dracula or not. None of that has anything to do with anything."

Caleb grasps Mason's shoulder and stops him short in the middle of the sidewalk. "Did the Council have a hand in stealing the book from Veritas?"

Mason sniffs. "Of course, we did. It was my first act as the new king of the vampires."

Caleb's eyebrows hit his hairline, and he staggers back as though he's been punched in the gut. "Your what?"

Mason winks at Maddy. "The Council made me the new vampire king the moment they heard your boyfriend became a human again. Doesn't make any sense for the king of the vampires to be a human, now does it?"

Caleb hears everything Mason's saying, but he's in too much shock to process any of it.

Maddy releases a long string of expletive mutters under her breath, and she moves away three paces, as though she needs space between her and Mason.

Caleb grins at Maddy. "Don't rip the arms off the new vampire king just yet, Maddy."

This makes her laugh.

Mason's expression hardens. "We have the book, and we'll use it to

destroy the Faeries.”

Caleb pinches the bridge of his nose, shakes his head, and moves to the edge of the curb. “Stop, Mason. Just stop.”

“What are you talking about?” Mason joins the two of them on the curb edge. “Stop, what?”

Caleb grimaces and draws a deep breath in through his teeth. He has to make Mason understand what’s really going on here. “Orion is a much bigger threat than the Faeries. Don’t you get that? You have to make the Council understand. The Faeries don’t matter. Orion intends to take over the mortal dimension. This realm is at risk.”

“Orion is one threat when the Faeries can destroy us with their magic.” Mason steps out of Caleb’s grip, narrowly avoiding a pile of animal excrement. “I will make the vampires stronger than you ever did, Caleb. I’ll do everything you should have done when you were in charge.” He jerks his thumb toward Maddy, and his upper lip curls. “But you were too in love with her the whole time you had the chance to be the vampire king.”

Maddy kicks at the ground and almost seems to blush. But the muscles work in her cheeks, and she’s shaking from head to toe.

Maybe Mason’s words should make Caleb furious, but they don’t. They’re true—each and every word, and he’s at a loss for how to respond. The silence swells.

“I will do everything in my power to ensure that the remaining vampires are standing tall at the end of all this,” Mason adds, glancing at the red-tinged sky. “Good talk. Be sure to stop by next time you’re in the neighborhood.”

Then he pats them both on the shoulders and hurries back into the Council house without another word. The heavy door slams and locks behind him.

Caleb can only stare after his former friend-turned-betrayer.

Maddy rubs her hands over her face, throws her head back, and screeches at the sky, a soul-splitting sound. When her wail fades, she meets Caleb’s

gaze.

Her weariness shines through in her eyes, and it echoes his own. They've been pinned in the corner once again. How much more will they have to carry before they can rest? They have to war on two fronts now—friend and foe, and they're outnumbered on every side.

He stares at the building behind them. "We have to take care of this Council once and for all, especially now that Mason's been brainwashed."

"I must be hungry. Ripping Mason limb from limb and raiding their blood vault sounds like the best idea I've heard in two lifetimes." Maddy sighs. "Who needs enemies with friends like these?"

Caleb's mind spins. The saying has never been more accurate than now.

No matter which way he works the problem, he doesn't know how they're going to find a way out.

CHAPTER 15

MADELEINE



Maddy's shaking in the passenger seat while Caleb sits silently in the driver's seat. They're both back in the SUV they drove to the Council building, sitting in the parking area near it. The engine's running, and some random R&B station plays on low.

Maddy curses under her breath. "What a bunch of selfish cowards. Can you believe they said no?"

Caleb frowns, staring out the bugged-up windshield. "Yeah, I can, especially with Mason in charge now. There were enough vampires who weren't crazy about our relationship, Maddy. The rest... Well, everyone knows how things should be done when they're not the ones doing it."

Maddy falls silent, drumming her fingers on the inside of the door. "It's not right."

"No, it's not," Caleb agrees. "But we can't make them join us or help us. Them or the hunters, either one."

"What if we could, though? What if we could find a way to make them join us?" She presses a hand to her middle as the emptying sensation seeps out from her stomach, throughout her torso, and into the rest of her body.

His scowl deepens. "How would we do that?"

She shrugs, already frustrated by his questioning. Can't he just pretend with her for a nanosecond, for a minute? What if they could? What if they got

their happily ever after and everything wasn't miserably difficult from start to finish...*for once?*

"I don't know," she finally answers dully.

"Well, we can't."

His answer seems so final in the quiet of the car.

She's still trembling, and her un-beating heart seems to split in two while her empty stomach crawls out from between the pieces and rears its ugly head. The two sides of her war as her thoughts tumble end over end without stopping. She wants to charge the building, rip the front doors off their hinges, and attack everyone inside. *Consume. Consume. Consume.* It's her new dead heartbeat, never far from her mind.

But it's Mason's punishment swimming in her thoughts most of all. He'd been surly and disrespectful and quick to rush in where others had not. Surely, he understands what an unprecedented situation they're all in...

The vampire king becomes a human, and his hunter girlfriend becomes a vampire nearly at the same moment. Now Caleb has creepy Fae magic powers he can't control, and Maddy doesn't know how to control her bloodlust when she needs to feed. They're both bigger messes than they've ever been, but they don't get time off from saving the human realm.

None of that is important in the face of Orion's arrival. None of it. She glances at the red-tinged sky, fighting the urge to shake her fists at fate and circumstance. What do they do now?

At this moment, they're alone—on their own in a world of hurt. Maddy and Caleb against everyone. How do they draw the rest of the realm into the battle meant to save it from an evil ruler? What rallying cry could they use? Who do they have on their side now?

No one. No one. It echoes in her head with hunger's heartbeat. Her skin chills, or maybe she only imagines it. Everything's a muddle, but one thing is for sure...

How could they all turn their back on her...on Caleb...on the whole

world?

In the driver's seat, Caleb still stares at some place far away, the way he does when he's working through a problem, trying to see through to the end of it.

He takes a sharp intake of breath, and his gaze cuts to her. "Are you okay?"

Her chin quivers. "No, I'm not. I'm hungry, and I'm angry, and it's like two sides of me are fighting for control."

"Neither of those is a very balanced side of you."

Her laughter sounds tortured, strangled—even to her. "No, not very."

The vehicle beeps as Caleb presses the start button, and the engine turns over. "We should probably find you something to eat."

"Where are we going to do that?"

Caleb's fingers drum on the steering wheel as he thinks about the growing dilemma.

Maddy's thoughts continue their chaotic spin. "Big feelings are hard to outsmart," she comments, scrubbing a hand over her face. "I'm not used to it."

"Especially when you're hungry." Caleb studies her, and the warmth in his gaze shocks Maddy. How can he look at her like that? She's basically tried to warn him that she's about to lose control, and he still looks like he's going to love her to the end of the time—which might not be too long from now if they can't figure out how to beat Orion.

Her eyes flood with moisture. "What are we going to do?" she asks, fighting the desire to wail at the top of her lungs. "We're all alone. We have to beat Orion, but the Council is out of your control, the hunters won't help us, and I'm about to go mad with hunger."

Caleb chuckles, probably to keep from wailing himself. "Well, the hungry part is definitely the most concerning of all of that."

Maddy playfully rolls her eyes at him, but a dark shadow enters her

periphery as it crosses near them in an arch as though it's circling their SUV. Vampire-fast, the lone figure disappears between two buildings, but Maddy sees the movement in a sort of fast slow-mo. Maybe it's a benefit of vampire sense. She can't tell who it is, but she launches herself out of the passenger seat, anyway.

"Someone's out there," she yells at Caleb. It could be anyone, and she doesn't want him hurt. "Wait inside."

"The f—"

The slamming of the passenger door behind her cuts off the rest of his argument. Maddy scans for movement. She feels like she should recognize who it is, almost like she can almost say who it is. Before she can sort through all the sensations in her brain, Cora comes to a stop in front of her.

"Cora!" Maddy exclaims. "You nearly got yourself murdered."

Cora's mouth twitches as though she's heard a joke she can't laugh at. "I know you too well, Maddy, and murder isn't something you do. Besides, I also know that you're not nearly as good with your vampire skills as you will be."

Caleb climbs out of the driver's seat of the running vehicle and jogs around to join the two of them.

Maddy glares at Cora through narrowed eyelids. The half-flattery should irritate her more than it does, but Cora isn't wrong. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to help."

"Too late," Caleb quips. "They've already said no."

Cora shrugs. "Maybe so, but I can go and get the book since I'm a vampire."

Maddy's eyes go wide, and Caleb's eyebrows hit his hairline.

She grins. "I can see how you both expected me to show up and save the day."

"You're just going to waltz in there and get the book?"

“I *am* a vampire with lots of vampire abilities.”

“But how do you know it’ll be in there?” Maddy demands.

But both Cora and Caleb give her a long look.

“It’ll be in there. Vampires always take things they want to keep back to their lair,” Caleb says. “We know it was vampire magic that took it, and they wouldn’t take it anywhere else. They don’t have to admit it’s in there for us to know it’s in there.”

“Then you’re sure,” Maddy says.

Cora raises her eyebrows. “Pretty sure.”

Maddy doesn’t understand why she’s stalling. They need the book, and Cora’s volunteered to go get it. None of this situation should bother her, so she’s not quite sure why she’s hesitant. And then it hits her: even with all the craziness lately, she’s worried about her bestie. “What if you get hurt, Cora?”

Cora’s tight expression softens. “I won’t. I know lots of little places to hide in there. When Caleb was a vampire, I learned a lot about the inner workings of the building.”

“That’s a good point,” Caleb agrees. “Benefit of being the one with sire bond with the vampire king.”

Maddy crosses her arms and shakes her head. “It’s not good enough. Once you go in there, we can’t help you. The whole Council could attack you since you have been hanging out with us. Don’t you get that?”

Cora’s face pinches. “No, they won’t. They all understand the bond Caleb and I had from before. It’ll be easy enough to explain as me checking on him because of the sire bond, and I’ll call you when it’s all done.”

Maddy doesn’t answer at first, fighting large swells of fury at how Cora’s arguing with her. Doesn’t she know Maddy’s only trying to keep her safe?

Cora lays her hand on Maddy’s arm. “I’ll be fine.”

“Well, I’m allowed to *not* like it,” Maddy counters. “Even if I understand why it must be done.”

Silently, Cora considers Maddy.

“Now or never?” Caleb urges.

Cora nods. “I’ll be back. Expect my call.” Then their vampire friend makes her way into the building, using the front entrance, and disappears inside as though she owns the place.

Maddy grunts as though she’s gotten a fist to her gut. “What is she doing? Doesn’t she know better?”

Caleb stares after Cora for a long time and then he shrugs. “She knows what she’s doing. Not all the vampires agree with the Council, and I’m willing to bet she knows who the dissenters are.”

Maddy glances over her shoulder at the idling vehicle. “What do we do now?”

“We need to find you something to eat,” Caleb says. “There’s probably a blood bank around here. At the very least, we can do that.”

Maddy studies her boyfriend, appreciating his wide shoulders, confident posture, and the way his hair falls over his forehead. Yeah, he doesn’t swagger as much as he used to, but Caleb’s still the guy who makes her heart skip a beat or three or ten—undead heart or not. She reaches for his hand, and he grasps hers, lacing his fingers between hers.

He lifts his chin, peering into a distant place. “You know, as bad as everything is, Maddy, I can’t help but believe that our love will be what makes the difference in the war against evil. Why else would we be right here, right now?”

“I hope so, Caleb. It all seems so insurmountable now,” she whispers, fighting the desire to sink her teeth into the closest mortal neck (Caleb’s). “But I really need to get some food in me.”

He nods with a creeping, rogue smile. “Let’s find a blood bank right away, or I hate to be one of the pedestrians around here. You can be pretty persuasive when you have half-a-mind, Maddy.”

That, at least, makes her laugh, even as she presses her hand to her stomach, trying to forget the sharpness of her hunger. “Let’s find me a neck,

Caleb.”

CHAPTER 16

CALEB



Caleb stands at the counter and makes eye contact with the friendly-looking man behind it. “I know it’s a little unusual, but can I get a blood bag?”

“Wholesale or retail?”

“What?”

“Wholesale or retail?”

Caleb frowns, running over the times he had to get blood when he used to be in charge of the vampires. He hadn’t ever had to buy blood. He could have waltzed into the council building or any vampire safehouse to grab some. “I don’t think I’ve ever been asked that before.”

The guy grins. “Then you’re retail.”

“Do you have a lot of wholesale buyers?”

“There’s a vampire place not far from here. They buy sometimes, and we have a few other places which like to stock up.”

“Oh.”

He reaches under the counter, opens a small fridge, and deposits two quart-sized bags on the counter. “They’re AB Negative.”

“The rarest? You sure you want to give me these?”

The cash register quietly beeps as he types in the information. “It expires tomorrow, so it’s fine. Besides, I’m not gifting them to you. Who are they for?”

Caleb glances over his shoulder at a fidgeting Maddy in the passenger seat of the SUV. She's chewing her bottom lip while she stares at the building, but he doesn't think she can see in. "My girlfriend. She's waiting in the car, and she's famished."

"Oh, I saw her when you pulled up. It happened to my sister. It was hard on her, especially at the beginning."

"Which part?"

"The whole thing. She's the reason I started selling quarts outright. She needs to have places to eat out, too." The guy punches one more button. "It'll be \$106.76."

"Thanks." Caleb hands over his debit card then he enters the pin-number on the handheld number pad. "I'm surprised more blood banks don't sell it like this."

He doesn't say much else before Caleb makes it back out to the SUV. When he climbs into the driver's seat, he presses the start button and hands the quarts over. "Rarest vintage."

Maddy says nothing, sinking her teeth into another quart bag of blood.

Caleb's cell rings, and it routes through the Bluetooth radio and speakers. When Cora's name shows up on the screen, he taps the green answer button. "Hello?"

"Caleb?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"I have the book, but—"

"Did they catch you?" Maddy interjects, looking up from her blood bag with a dribble of red slipping over her chin.

"No, no, nothing like that," Cora assures them. "I'm in the private library behind the council hall. You remember where all the important stuff is kept?"

"The stuff they don't want everyone knowing about." Caleb gives Maddy a look as she returns to consuming her meal.

"Yeah, that one," Cora agrees. "But there's something going on in the

council hall now. I'm not sure what it is, but I've got to make it through there to get out. The vampires are in a crazy frenzy, and there's at least twice as many in the council hall now. They're all screaming and yelling about something."

Caleb holds his breath to listen, barely able to make out the tumult in the council hall beyond the secret library. "Listen. We're coming to get you." Caleb puts the SUV into reverse and peels out of the parking lot. "Don't try to leave. Maybe we can create a distraction or something."

"One more thing," Cora says. "Bring a bag we can hide the book in."

"Got it. Stay until we get there." Caleb taps the red phone on the screen and speeds back toward the council building.

Maddy lowers the now-empty bag. "How are we going to get in?"

Caleb slows for a red light, glad when it turns green before they come to a complete stop. "Based on the noise of the hall, there's got to be some meeting or something, so I bet there's a lot of vampires on their way in. Maybe we can slip in with the next group."

Maddy scrunches her nose.

"Or you can run us in there with your vampire speed."

Her expression pinches even more. "Are you serious? How is that going to work? You have to know of a way to get in there that's more reliable than waltzing in and hope they don't notice us."

"I might have a better idea," he says. "It's a long shot, but we'll see."

Maddy doesn't answer. Instead, she breaks into her other blood bag, so Caleb doesn't push it anymore. She'll be easier to talk to when she's no longer hungry, anyway.

When they get to the building, groups of vampires are hurrying into the council building, but instead of pulling into the main parking area, Caleb continues around to the rear. Maybe there's enough uproar nobody will notice the extra tint on the windows or the human and the vampire in it.

He vaguely recalls a window at the rear of the building which hadn't been

screwed closed. They'd left it alone so it could be used as a fire escape from the basement. Not many vampires know about it. If it's still there, they can climb into the basement of the building and take the rear staircase to get into the hidden library.

Maddy finishes the second bag, and she presses a hand to her middle again while using the other to wipe her face. She's already much calmer, and her fidgeting has quieted.

Caleb grabs a napkin from the center console. "Feel better?"

"Yeah," she whispers, using the paper to clean her face.

"Glad one of us does," Caleb mutters. His stomach death rolls, churning and threatening to make him lose his last meal.

"I'm not sure I'll ever get used to seeing blood all over my own face."

"Give it time," he offers, even as he's conscious she never wanted to be a vampire and now she is one—in the middle of the biggest fight of their life. He wishes there was time to say more, to maybe take her in his arms, but Cora has the book, and she's trapped in the back room with a growing crowd of vampires in the council hall. He pats Maddy's hand. "Come on."

She steps out, and Caleb does, too. But he lopes to the back of the SUV, and he opens the rear to rummage in the back. There's not much in the way of disguises, but he finds two hats and a small reusable shopping bag. That's what there is, so that's what they'll use. He hands one to Maddy, and she mashes it down on her head while simultaneously tucking her hair up into it. Then he does the same.

She gives him a rueful look. "It's not much."

"Yeah," he agrees. "It's not, but maybe they're all too busy with whatever they're doing to notice."

With that, they jog to the rear of the building and run along the back edge of the perimeter, stopping between two large bushes in the middle of the long wall. Caleb ducks down, looking for the low window. When they reach it, he lets out a low whistle. "That's narrower than I remember."

The window is about two feet wide and maybe about eighteen inches tall. It's been there long enough that the earth has encroached on the window itself, and he takes a moment to dig the grass and soil out and pull it away from the window.

"This is the way we're getting in?" Maddy asks. "Without being seen?"

Caleb drops to his belly and peers into the dark room. His heart pounds in his ears, and he's so nervous he's trembling. Will he ever get used to being human again? He grabs the edge of the window and pulls, but the panes don't budge. He tries again, bracing himself against the brick wall of the building, but it doesn't move at all.

Behind him, Maddy glances over her shoulder and dances in place. "What's taking so long?"

"I can't get the window open," he grunts.

"On the count of three. One, two..." She crouches beside him, grabs the window edge close to where Caleb's holding on, and her hands graze his. "Three."

Together, they yank.

With a pop, the window slides open, the pane cracking and the frame crunching. Bits of glass fall out of the now broken window, but at least it's open.

When Maddy lets go, she loses her balance and falls back into the large bush. "Oof."

Caleb scrambles to his feet and helps her back to his side. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

He winks at her. "Vampire strength."

"Apparently."

He tosses the shopping bag into the basement. Then he drops to his belly again and shimmies inside, ignoring the shards scraping his abdomen. He drops to the ground on the other side, curling around to manage the fall a little better. Maddy works her way in after him.

A stinging sensation has Caleb lifting his ripped shirt, and he discovers three lines of red scratches seeping blood. Carefully, he touches the wounds, and he hisses as a burst of pain surprises him. His body had become so fragile now.

Maddy drops to the ground beside him and is quickly on her feet. When she sees his blood, her eyes widen and her pupils dilate. She nods to the injuries without moving closer. “You okay?”

Caleb drops his shirt, smoothing the fabric over the scratches. “I’m fine.”

“K.” She doesn’t say anything else; she doesn’t have to.

Caleb knows from experience that she can smell his blood. She’s still so new as a vampire, it’s probably all that she can think of right now. And they’re in the middle of a council building, and he’s got bleeding wounds. It’s as bad as swimming in a pool with sharks and leaking blood.

“Let’s get the book,” he says. “Maybe we can find a rag or something so I can get cleaned up.”

She nods, but her eyes stray to his abdomen. Her long, pointed teeth glint in the dim light of the basement.

Together, they run to the rickety unused stairs at the far back corner of the unfinished lower level. They lead up to the first floor where the coal chute and cellar used to be back at the turn of the last century.

The stairs creak and complain as they creep upward. Caleb steps up just far enough to see down the short hallway out into the first level. There’s a tumult in the council hall beyond, but no one’s back here. He steps into the corridor and darts to the door on the left. The handle gives easily, and he opens the door.

Inside, Cora shrieks, but she clamps down on it as quickly as possible. Caleb steps inside, whirls toward Maddy, and waves her in.

In a blink, Maddy’s in the corridor and into the room, but her eyes widen with surprise. “I won’t get used to that.”

“What?” Cora asks. “Vampire speed?”

Maddy nods, but her gaze moves to Caleb's abdomen again. "Yeah. That."

Cora takes a deep breath, and her eyebrows pinch. "Are you hurt?"

Caleb lifts his shirt. "Yeah. It's nothing."

Cora grimaces. "Except it's blood, and we're in a house of vampires." She waves to Maddy. "With a newbie in tow."

"It'll be fine," Caleb growls.

"You should have been more careful," Cora snaps.

"Well, it's not like we can do much about it now."

Maddy glares at Cora. "I just ate. I'm fine. Two quarts."

"Well, at least there's that." Cora puts her hands on her hips. "Now, how are we going to get out of here?"

"We're going to go out the way we came in."

Caleb hands her the shopping bag, so Cora tucks the book inside the bag and hands it back to him. The trio stand on the threshold, dart back to the rickety staircase, and make their way back down.

Caleb's heart thuds in his chest, and he can't believe they haven't been caught yet. Is it going to be this easy? He hooks the shopping bag with the book over his arm. They make it to the basement without being spotted, but the minute he places his foot on the first stair, a loud splintering sound shatters the quiet.

Caleb freezes as the sound ricochets up his legs, through his torso, then slams through his mind. He draws in a sharp breath as he jerks back, but it's too late.

The narrow staircase crumbles beneath him.

Twisting frantically, he scrambles to get back to the solid floor, but his fingers merely brush the solidness that could save him. He drops, falling through the air, splintering and shattering wood the soundtrack of his doom. He squeezes his eyes closed, unable to summon any kind of magic at all.

Unable to save himself from the unforgiving cement he's shooting

toward.

“Caleb!” Maddy screams behind him.

Hands wrap around his wrists, yanking back onto the first floor.

Maddy's sweet smile fills his vision. “You’re not dying today,” she says, the words light with humor, yet firm with promise.

Caleb’s chest heaves as he sucks at the air. “Thanks.”

Cora arches an eyebrow. “Now how are we going to get out? Is there another way into the basement?”

Caleb grimaces as he gets to his feet, his pulse still out of control. “There’s another staircase...” Hopefully it’s sturdier.

“Where is it?” Maddy asks, her gaze flickering to the one that’s now little more than firewood a story below.

“At the front of the building,” Caleb says heavily, knowing what he’s suggesting is taking impossible to the next level. “Near the entrance.”

Cora curses. “So, it’s jumping down into the dark basement or out the front of the building?” She considers Caleb. “I don’t think I can jump down while I’m hanging on to you.” She gestures toward Maddy. “And I know she can’t. What’s that leave?”

“It leaves strolling out the front door,” Caleb says.

Maddy shakes her head. “There’s no way.”

“Well, look what I found,” a familiar voice echoes down the corridor. “I thought we made it clear you’re unwelcome here.”

The three of them whirl to face Mason who stands at the end of the short hallway. A group of vampires stand behind him, glaring. Curling his lip, Mason turns and marches back into the council hall as the other vampires enter the corridor and surround them.

With grim faces, they shuffle the three of them into the main hall.

All the council members are in the great hall, lining the perimeter. A handful of bodyguards are also inside. Each vampire wears a ferocious expression with eyes glittering with malice as their footsteps echo down the

hall.

Maddy lifts her chin and refuses to be cowed by their situation. She throws her shoulders back and shows no sign of weakness despite being caught.

But Caleb shivers as the hate of the council washes over him, imagining the scents of negative feelings he can no longer sense. The place must be full of it. They all stop in the middle of the council hall in what feels like a set up.

Mason faces them with his arms crossed. He tsks as though they're the biggest fools he's ever met. "You've never been interested in making vampires as strong as you can, have you, Caleb?" He gestures to the great hall. "We've all seen the evidence of it. You've sided with the Faeries not the vampires, and you've repetitively weakened our position."

"You're wrong, all of you," Cora snaps. "Caleb never—" She bites back the rest of whatever she wants to say.

Slowly, Mason turns to her. "My, my, Cora, you love to pretend you're a real vampire, don't you?"

"What the heck are you talking about, Mason?" Cora snaps.

"You've never valued your vampiric gift. Not since the day you turned."

Cora's face twists. "Because I have different ideas on what it means to be a good vampire?"

"Nevertheless," Mason continues, waving a dismissive hand. "I'm not going to let any of you leave with the book."

Caleb tightens his hands on the plastic bag. Now that they have the book, there's no way he's letting it get back in the hands of vampires.

Especially with Mason at the helm. He was always loyal to the Council, but never this blind.

Mason drops his chin, his cold glare settling on Caleb. "I should have known you would do this. You're no longer the leader of the vampires, and I will not allow the Faeries to be brought into the mortal plane."

"This is bigger than that, Mason," Caleb growls, his body tightening.

Every muscle is locked. Every fiber is flooding with fury.

Mason shakes his head. “It was Faerie magic that made the Van Helsings powerful enough to bring the vampires—our people—close to extinction. That must not happen again. I won’t allow any of you to do this.”

So be it.

Caleb rushes his former friend and slams into him, using surprise to get the better of him. He swings the bag and slams the book into the side of Mason’s face. “You’ve been brainwashed by the Council, Mason. Don’t you get that?”

Mason’s eyes widen and he stumbles backward, a sneer curling his lip. His fangs flash as he leaps forward, grappling with Caleb for several long seconds before easily shoving him away.

“What are you doing? You’re a weakling now,” Mason snarls.

Maddy tries to join in, but Cora catches Maddy’s arm. “Not now,” Cora says. “Let them do this.”

Caleb plants his feet into the ground, hating how weak he feels as a mortal. His heart pounds in his ears again—*did it always happen this way?*—and his blood pulses through him. With a snarl of his own, he rushes at Mason again.

Except Mason pushes him to the side, throwing him into a row of chairs for a non-existent audience, knocking them to the side where Caleb trips over them. The clatter echoes in the hall.

“Don’t you get it?” Mason demands.

“Don’t get what, Mason? What?” Caleb bellows as he climbs to his feet. “That you’re not a leader at all? That you’re only a puppet for the puppeteers?”

“No, that you can’t win, Caleb. You’re a mortal. Nothing more.”

Roaring with rage, Caleb runs at Mason again. He feints right as Mason whips out a furious strike, then quickly ducks under his outstretched arm. Everything feels so much slower. So much weaker. But he doesn’t let that

stop him. His head plows into Mason's chest, eliciting a satisfying grunt from his old friend.

"Fool," Mason spits, catching Caleb in his arms.

They twist and struggle, but Mason's body feels like steel and Caleb is practically putty in his hands. Mason catches Caleb, his arms clamping around from behind and instantly tightening. The vice-like grip closes around his ribs, trapping him, but Caleb slams his head backward into Mason's face.

Mason grunts, but doesn't release Caleb. In fact, his arms jerk and tighten, as if the jolt of pain is fueling them. Caleb squirms and tries to drag in a breath, to fill his lungs with oxygen. It's not working. Instead, Mason's grip grows tighter.

All the air is squeezed out of Caleb's chest. His ribs crack. It's impossible to move.

"I warned you," Mason sneers close to Caleb's ear. "Now they'll have to watch you die."

A buzz grows in Caleb's ears, bigger and louder until it spreads through him. A warmth blooms in his chest. It bursts into a flaming inferno. His arms shake, his legs give out. The bag drops from his numb fingers, the book landing with a thud.

But Mason holds tight.

Assuming he can contain what he's unleashed.

"Caleb, no!" Maddy shrieks. She must understand what's happening inside of Caleb. Once more, she tries to rush toward him.

"Hold her back, Cora!" Caleb yells as the power in him reaches a chaotic frequency, as though every cell inside his body vibrates with the energy inside him.

Cora drags Maddy back from the fight.

Everything goes crimson, and Caleb can't see anything but red. In the distance, he feels Maddy, but there's nothing else. He must win. He must save...

Suddenly, the energy bursts out of Caleb, and Mason's grip disappears. Caleb turns around to see Mason crumble in a pile of charred remains. One of the nearest council members rush at him, and Caleb meets the hulking man.
Destroy them all!

Within moments, Caleb pulls the man's arms from his body and snaps his neck. Another council member charges at him. Then two more attack. But each of them falls to the ground in the great hall.

One more. One more. The words beat in Caleb's mind. It's a drum beat which doesn't stop.

Elias stands against Caleb, now one of the few remaining.

Maddy screams, holding her hand out to Caleb. "No! Caleb! This isn't you! Caleb!" She launches herself out of Cora's hold and comes to a stop near him. "Come back to me!"

He halts as a soft sensation washes over him. It's as though he can feel Maddy's love filling his own heart. This brings him to a stop and the drumming in his brain ebbs. The surge fades.

He blinks.

He blinks again.

And then reality hits him.

Bodies surround him. A council of vampires are dead around his feet. And it's his fault.

His eyes widen at the gruesome scene. How? How?

Caleb drops to his knees and wails, terrified of what he's becoming.

What am I? What have I done?

CHAPTER 17

MADELEINE



It's deathly quiet. Too quiet. Quiet as the grave. No sounds of the dying.

No injured calls for help. Nothing. So much destruction... Did Caleb kill them all?

Maddy drops to her knees as Caleb wails and drops to his own. The forlorn sound weakens her, and his sorrow reverberates deep within her. What had he done? She wants to yell at him, ask him over and over, but his face crumples as he realizes what's happened, and she knows that it wasn't him. The bodies all around, the devastation, none of this is Caleb.

He didn't mean it, and it's not who he is or who he wants to be.

The gravity of what he's done sinks into Caleb's consciousness, his heart's breaking, and hers is, too. All around them, life happens, dragging them one way and then the other. Everyone wants their piece of them, treating them like pawns in a game where no one told them the rules.

And their lives, their wants have become the perpetual casualties, sacrificed over and over.

Cora hovers nearby with the bag still slung over her arm, and the clear rectangular outline confirms that she still has the book inside it. Such a mess for a few pages. She starts checking the bodies.

No. Maddy shakes her head. Not for a few pages...to save the whole world.

Caleb's in the middle of the carnage, rocking back and forth with his face in his hands. Will his magic destroy him? Maybe it'll destroy all of them... before it's over. None of this makes any sense. Why would fate decide to grant him powers he cannot control? Their lives are such a twisted, entwined mess now.

Trembling, Maddy climbs to her feet and takes a step toward Caleb. "Caleb," she calls softly, trying to avoid being destroyed by a surge of whatever his magic is. "Caleb."

But he doesn't react, doesn't flinch, merely continues rocking back and forth. He's weeping, gut-wrenching sobs. He's no longer the self-assured, never second-guesses-himself Caleb. Instead, he feels the severity of what he's done. These were his people.

Maddy knows it's because his vampire arrogance has all but gone, and in its place, a broken human, filled with something he doesn't understand. Hell, none of them do.

When she lays her hand on his shoulder, he flinches as though she's struck him. "Get away from me," he rasps. "I won't accidentally kill you, too, Maddy. I can't. It'd kill me."

"Oh, Caleb," she whispers, unable to believe her heart is breaking even more. She crouches down beside him and tucks her arm under his. "Come on. Let's get you home."

"I have no home." He pulls his arm out of her grasp. "No home should have me."

"That isn't true." She tucks her arm back under his and grasps his elbow. "I'm not letting you go, Caleb. Not now, not ever." She tugs him to his feet as though he weighs nothing, and her vampire strength surprises her once again. "I am your home."

Maybe it's cliched, too much, over the top...Maddy doesn't know. But it's how she feels. Their home is wherever they are, together, and she doesn't intend to let that go. She's not driven mad by blood-hunger, so for now, she

can be strong for him. She wants to be strong for him.

She pulls him into her arms and hugs him, willing everything in her heart to wash him clean of his own hurt. “Let’s get you back to Veritas.”

His shoulders droop, but he doesn’t argue. Instead, he takes a deep, shuddering breath.

Cora inches closer, and she meets Maddy’s gaze as if to ask if it’s safe now. Clearly, Cora’s figuring out that unintended casualties are still casualties in the chaotic messes of their lives.

Maddy nods. “He’s okay now.”

Caleb’s eyes cut to her, and he glares. “Am I?” He gestures to their surroundings. “Do you see what I’ve done?” He’s yelling now, his eyes wild with pain. “These used to be my people. I was one of them...and now look at what I’ve done.” His voice trails away. “Look at what I’ve done.”

Maddy turns to him, facing him without turning away, without shying from him. “You’re as okay as you’re going to be right now. What happened is awful, but...” She presses her hand to Caleb’s chest. “We’re going to figure this out, but we can’t do that if you run off. No matter how bad it is, we don’t separate. You hear me, Caleb? We’re together until the end.”

The corner of Caleb’s mouth twitches, and he stares down at her hand. “Tell that to one blood-lusty newbie vampire I know. I’m pretty sure she runs off every few minutes.”

His joke is half-hearted, but it’s something, and Maddy turns until she’s beside him. Then she drapes her arm around his shoulders as nonchalantly as though they’re strolling through a garden. Or maybe a graveyard. She fights a shudder and works to keep her tone even, as jovial as she can make it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sometimes faking okayness is the bravest thing to do.

They start toward the front door. No one is in sight, so Cora brings up the rear, following after them. None of them speak. What could they say in the aftermath of what’s happened?

Maddy puts her hand on the front doorknob, ready to open it.

Something clatters behind them.

Caleb freezes and lifts his chin, a wild expression in his eyes. “What did I do, Maddy?”

“I don’t know.” *I don’t know at all.* There are so many things she should say, but she can’t think of anything beyond “I don’t know.” So, she reaches for Caleb’s hand and tugs him closer to her. “But we’re going back to Veritas, and we’re going to try to work this out.”

Caleb glances at Maddy. “You going to drive us over?”

Maddy blinks. “I guess so.”

He gives her a weak smile and leans on Maddy. “It’s probably a good idea. I’m not feeling so hot.”

Cora stops beside them. When Maddy quirks an eyebrow, she shakes her head. *No Survivors*, she mouths, and it’s like a punch in the stomach, a shock she’s not about to let Caleb know.

It doesn’t matter.

Stopping Orion’s plans is the most important thing now.



BY THE TIME they reach Veritas, Caleb shivers in the passenger seat as though he’s in the frigid arctic. Maddy chews her bottom lip, worrying about her mate. He’s so much paler than he was when they got in.

Maybe it’s a side effect of the surge of obsidian magic and his magical blow up. She doesn’t remember it happening last time, but this surge had been so much more intense, so much more devastating. It’s as if he’s started running a low-grade fever during the drive over. Has the dark magic triggered an infection or something?

She shuts off the car, and she grimaces as she jogs around the SUV. She

helps Caleb out of the front passenger seat, and Cora climbs from the rear seat, still clutching the book bag.

Kenna comes out of Veritas to meet them, but as soon as she's near, Caleb lurches at her, but missteps and throws himself off balance. Kenna barely reacts, and Maddy and Cora easily restrain him.

“What are you doing?” Maddy whispers close to Caleb's ear.

“This is all her fault,” Caleb mutters. “I could rip her limb from limb.”

“You couldn't rip anybody from limb to limb right now.” Maddy puts her hand to Caleb's forehead. “You're clammy and pale.”

Kenna nods toward Caleb. “What's wrong with him?”

Maddy frowns. “He had another surge of power, and then he got like this. This time was so much stronger than the last one. Maybe his magic is poisoning him somehow or overwhelming his immune system or I don't know what.” It's all a guess.

“Let's get him inside.” Kenna gives Caleb a long look. “I think Sierra found something which might help.” She strides toward the door and enters.

Carefully, Maddy and Cora help Caleb into Veritas, half-walking him, half-carrying him toward the cushy seats. They lower him and when his butt hits the soft cushions, his whole body relaxes and a sigh seeps from him. Without another word, Kenna's gone deeper into Veritas, probably to get whatever Sierra found.

Cora moves away, but Maddy kneels in front of Caleb. She squeezes his knees. “Are you starting to feel any better? It's been a heck of a day.”

He peers into her eyes. “I think whatever this is might be fading. I'm still weak, but it's not as bad as it was when we got here.”

Maddy touches his forehead again. “You're still pale, but you're not as clammy as you were earlier.”

Kenna reappears in the main lobby area with Sierra in tow. Sierra has something in her hand, but Maddy can't tell what it is.

Caleb drums his fingers on the arms of the upholstered chair and glares.

“What do you think Kenna’s going to try to do to me now?”

“Maybe she’s going to try to help you.”

He sighs, the tension with his aunt no doubt taking its toll, too.

Sierra comes to a stop in front of Caleb and opens her hand, palm-side up. Inside it, there’s a large oval rock with multiple carved runes all over the surface. The top has a hole drilled through, and it hangs from a long leather cord.

Caleb eyes it. “What is it?”

“While you were gone, we looked for an artifact to help you with your particular...issue.” Sierra offers an uncomfortable smile as though she doesn’t quite know what to call Caleb’s power. “The runes are runes of power. They’ll help you focus your abilities and control them.”

His expression turns dubious. “How do you know?”

“It was mentioned in the texts, and it’s been stored in the vault since the death of the last Van Helsing who used it. We have reason to believe he used it to help funnel and direct his powers. Logically, this will help you as well.” She studies the stone pendant and the deep marks in the rock. “Though, the runes imply it would help anyone control their magic.”

Kenna and Cora hover behind Sierra. Carefully, Caleb takes the rock from Sierra’s hand, and Maddy helps him fasten it around his neck. As soon as the pendant touches Caleb’s skin, he gasps and color returns to his cheeks almost immediately.

Sierra beams at Caleb and nods at him, pleased with herself. “The Archivists spent all morning hunting for this item. We knew it would work.”

Caleb sniffs. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Maddy crouches beside his chair. “Did it help?”

“I already don’t feel as weak or sickly.”

He reaches to slip the pendant off, but Maddy captures his hands. “No, don’t do that.”

“I’m not sure I trust them.”

“But there’s color in your cheeks now,” she agrees and stands. “I think it might be just what you needed. Maybe they had a good idea.”

Caleb glances up at her. “You were worried.”

Maddy’s chin quivers. “A little.”

Caleb catches her hand and pulls her down to his level once more. “More than a little.” He scoots to the front edge of his cushioned seat. He grasps her chin in his hand, and she shivers as a wave of emotions rolls through her. “I’m fine.”

Her eyes flood with tears. “No, you’re not fine.”

“I’m fine, Maddy.”

“Don’t be silly. Neither of us are fine.”

At this, he gives Maddy a half-smile. “Well, I can agree with that.”

“Do you want to get out of here?” Caleb asks.

Maddy’s eyes widen. “What?”

His gaze turns warm, and passion dances in his eyes. “We should go someplace.”

One of the women behind them snickers, but Maddy doesn’t care. It’s been so long since she’s seen *that* glow in his eyes, and warmth spreads through her. It’s a lightning strike, and now she doesn’t want anything more than spending a night with Caleb, but there’s nowhere they can go. Veritas is the safest place for them. She takes a breath as desire snakes through her, tickling and tripping as it burns through her undead veins.

“You really are feeling better.” Maddy chews her bottom lip, contemplating what she thinks he means.

He chuckles, the sound low and growly. “Maybe the ‘power’ rune has some side effects of its own.”

The sound of his laughter does something to Maddy’s feelings, and moisture obscures her vision. She blinks rapidly to clear them, finally squeezing her eyes closed, forcing the hot tears to slip over her cheeks. When she opens them again, Caleb’s staring up at her.

He reaches for her cheek and uses his thumb to brush away the drops. “It’s been hard on you.”

“Not just me,” she says, and her chin quivers as she swallows a sob. “All of us.”

Caleb nods, climbs to his feet, and pulls her close. He drapes his arms over her shoulders, and she tucks herself against him. The rune necklace seems to be glowing slightly, as though the magic inside it is working overtime to make Caleb better.

He turns to her. “It has, but we have to focus on the small successes. If we don’t, then we’ll get so overwhelmed we won’t do anything.”

Cora steps forward with the book bag held up. “He’s right. We have the book, and that’s something. It gives us a chance to beat Orion, and we’ll keep it safe so you can get some rest.”

Sierra glances from Maddy to Caleb and back to Maddy. “I’m sure you two are tired. And we’ll need some time to translate the book to find the location of the weapon to kill Orion.”

Cora arches an eyebrow and jerks her thumb toward the corridor. “We have guest accommodations here.”

Caleb takes a step toward the hallway and tries to pull Maddy along with him. “That sounds lovely.”

Maddy frowns and tugs Caleb back toward her. “Isn’t Nim in there?”

Cora whirls to face Sierra, and Sierra grins. “No, we’ve converted another room and moved her to that location for the time being.” She pauses and leans closer. “Blaise wanted her closer to her, so you two can spend the night in the guest accommodations. You should be comfortable.”

At that moment, Caleb’s stomach growls, and he presses a hand to his middle. “I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Cora says. “We’ll bring some food by...for both of you in a couple of hours. Do you remember where the room is?”

“I think so,” Caleb says.

Maddy ducks her head, and her cheeks heat...or they would be heating if she had blood rushing around her body, but her embarrassment doesn't stop her from hurrying after Caleb. They haven't had any time alone in ages.

Once they're inside, Maddy studies the bed. Then she turns to Caleb with a bright smile. "I already feel better. Less..."

"Overwhelmed?" he asks, moving close enough to smooth his hand down her arm. He laces his fingers through hers.

She nods, glad he understands without her having to explain everything and every word, and she squeezes his hand. Then she presses her forehead to his, basking in the closeness of him.

"Caleb," she breathes, trembling in the tsunami of anticipation crashing over her. "Kiss me."

Tonight, at least for a little while, they're able to forget the world around them.

CHAPTER 18

CALEB



The next morning, Caleb slips out of the bed before Maddy does, re-situating the stone necklace over his chest. Instead of leaving the guest room, he makes his way back to where she sleeps. He strokes her cheek, loving the way the light illuminates her skin. She's the most gorgeous woman he's ever met, and being a vampire hasn't changed how he feels about her. She takes a deep breath, sighs, and rolls over so the light sparkles in her eyelashes.

Caleb makes his way into the bathroom adjacent to the guest bedroom as images from the previous night flood his thoughts, and his mouth stretches in a smile. Last night was a welcome respite in the middle of the hell of the last few weeks.

Maddy's chest rises and falls beneath the cover they were both tangled in, and his emotions swell in his chest. She means everything to him and protecting their plane of existence isn't about everyone else. It's about her. Keeping Maddy safe amplifies the strength of his power somehow. He isn't sure how, but he's certain it's true.

An ocean of energy surges inside him, and he's shocked it's not seeping out of him the way it did in the council hall. It seems his energy reacts to the size of his emotions. Reconnecting with her meant everything to him.

The Archivists had even brought a platter of food and two large bags of blood for Maddy. One of these days, Maddy will need to learn how to drink

from a willing human, but she isn't yet mentally ready for something like that, and he doesn't plan on pushing her to be anything other than she is. Caleb doesn't know if she'll ever be ready, not after dealing with blood lust and becoming a threat.

He grabs a water bottle from the small fridge and sits down to watch his girlfriend sleep. He doesn't know how much time passes, but he's in no hurry to interrupt her.

Finally, her eyes flutter open, and her gaze lands on Caleb. The corners of her eyes crinkle, and her lips curl in a smile.

His love swells, sending a rush of power surging through him. It's under control, probably thanks to the runes he wears.

"Hey, there," she says, her voice raspy from overnight disuse. She reaches for him, opening and closing her hand. "Come back to bed."

Caleb grabs a bag of blood and crosses the room. When she lifts the bed cover, he slips beneath, but he hands her breakfast. After Maddy finishes it, she scoots closer, and he wraps his arms around her. He kisses her bare shoulder and rests his head against her.

"I'm glad we had some time last night," he says. "The world is so broken that we haven't had time for us. I feel less..." He frowns and glances to the side, trying to figure out how to word what he wants to say.

"Chaotic?"

"Yes. That's part of it."

"Tumultuous on the inside?"

"That, too." Peering into her eyes is almost like seeing into her soul, and he could lose himself there. It would be easy to hide away somewhere and forget everything Orion might be planning. "It's like being anchored before the tide rushes out and tries to take me with it. Between the change I didn't ask for and the power I didn't ask for either, sometimes, it feels like I'm losing myself."

Her mouth pinches, and she studies his face as though she's searching for

something she can't find. She presses her lips to the top of his head. "I won't ever let it sweep you away, Caleb. I won't let it happen."

It's easier to forget with her in his arms, and he wants to stay there forever.

"But we can't," he murmurs.

She boops his chin and grins as though the weight of everything isn't weighing on her either. "Can't what?"

He hesitates a moment, knowing it'll kill the tender moment between them. "We can't stay here forever."

"No, we can't," she agrees. "But sticking together is the key. Throughout everything, we've managed to keep each other from losing it in all the ways we might have."

"So, that's our secret sauce?"

"I think so."

He squeezes her in a quick hug. "You ready to go out there?"

"Can't put it off forever." She pauses. "I guess."



BACK IN THE main room of Veritas Caleb and Maddy loiter close together, waiting for the others to make an appearance.

Cora's the first to arrive, and she frowns at them both. She has a paper bag filled with food he can smell. It makes his stomach growl. "Did Maddy get something to eat?"

"She did." *I took care of her.* In more ways than one.

Cora quirks her eyebrow and jerks her head toward the hallway. "Come on. They're in the reading room."

Caleb frowns, and he starts after Cora. "They've been here the whole time?"

Maddy glares at the back of Cora's head. "Why didn't they tell us?"

"I'm sure they thought you were busy." Cora doesn't glance back at them, but she hurries down the corridor. "They're trying to decipher what's in the Faerie book."

Maddy grumbles under her breath. When her mouth opens, Caleb squeezes her hand, and she doesn't say whatever she's got on her mind.

Caleb leans closer. "Let it go. I'm glad they left us alone. Aren't you?"

She shrugs without agreeing or disagreeing, even as her lips tip up at the edge of her mouth.

When they enter the room, Kenna stands with Sierra who leans over the table, and Cora joins them. She places the paper bag on the table beside the open book, and she starts unloading it, placing the food on the table. There are bagels, loxs, veggies, and way too much food for the number of mortals in the room, making Caleb's stomach grumble again even as he knows it'll have to wait.

Cora nods toward the book. "Anything new?"

"Not yet," Sierra murmurs. "But we're checking it out."

Caleb scans the room, turning slowly in place. The Faeries seem to be nowhere to be seen. "Where's Sylvan? I haven't seen him in a little while."

Maddy gestures to their surroundings. "Maybe Sylvan went underground after the vampires stole the book. They're probably worried about getting caught unawares."

Caleb picks a spot between the breakfast food and the book before snagging a bagel. His stomach still churns from the power coursing through him, so he foregoes any cream cheese or anything else. "Where are we at?"

Maddy crosses her arm and stands slightly behind him. She doesn't touch any of the human food Cora brought. "How far have you gotten through the book?"

"Not very." Sierra doesn't look up. Instead, she carefully turns another page and begins studying the images and markings on the page without

reading anything aloud.

He swallows, and it still feels weird to have something other than blood go down his esophagus. “What’s on that page?”

“A portal for some place in a watery world. I’m not really sure. It’s been the same sort of jump spells for the last dozen pages.”

“Jump spells?”

“Jump-from-place-to-place spells.”

“What’s that page say?” Caleb asks around the last bite of dry bagel, and he winces as his stomach flips around.

“I can’t really read it to you.”

“Fair enough.” He’s getting sick of being along for the ride in nearly every way now. He’s not driving anything forward, and his words don’t mean much anymore. “I’m going to find coffee.”

Maddy hooks his elbow and tugs on him. “You okay?”

“Fine.” He stalks out of the room without another word.

But Sierra’s excited “Oh!” brings him back.

“What is it?” Kenna asks.

Caleb knocks on the table’s edge, fidgety and impatient to get everything settled. He wants more time with Maddy. He gestures to the book. “What did you find?”

“It’s a missing page.” She swipes a magnifying glass from the table and peers at the book, her eye weirdly huge in the center of the glass. She studies one side and then the other.

“What?” Caleb’s hands stray to his pendant. “What’s on the missing page?”

Maddy leans forward expectantly, but she says nothing. The stress must be getting to her, too.

“Neither side has any residual markings from the ripped-out page.” Sierra frowns at the parchment surfaces and lifts the bottom edge of the book so the light falls across it, highlighting any change in the surface. She looks again

through the magnifying glass. This time, the tool glows. “Ah.”

“Ah?” Caleb echoes. “Ah, what?”

“It looks like it’s a spell. I’m not sure exactly what kind.” The enchanted magnifying glass stops glowing, and Sierra places it on the table beside her. “I can find out?”

Maddy releases a frustrated sigh.

Caleb grits his teeth and takes a moment before answering. “We don’t have time for that.”

“He’s right,” Kenna agrees. “Orion’s here, and we don’t have time to work out some kind of spell. We need the location of the weapon.”

Caleb glances at his aunt. “Come to think of it. Do we even know what this weapon is?”

Nobody answers.

“I see. So, we need to figure out what the weapon *is*, and we need to find it. Time’s ticking.”

Sierra turns another page and then another. Sometimes, she picks up the magnifying glass and sometimes she doesn’t.

Caleb exits to get coffee, and Maddy trails after him. Neither of them speaks. Time ticks by and Sierra keeps studying the pages. Finally, she tsks.

“I believe I’ve found three marks which correspond with one another.”

Caleb practically launches himself at the table. “Three marks?”

Sierra points at a corner of the page. “There’s a rune here,” she turns several pages, “here,” more pages, “and here.” She sits back in her chair. “I believe these are location points which should lead us to the weapon...” She pauses as though there’s something else she needs to say.

“But...?” Maddy demands.

Sierra taps the page. “There are three words under each rune. When I put them together, they imply that the only way to get to the weapon is with Fae magic?”

Maddy groans. “Of course.”

“Fae magic?” Caleb puts his arm around Maddy’s shoulders. “Where’s Sylvan when you need him?”

They all share a long and frustrated look.

“So, what do we do now?” Kenna presses her lips into a tight line.

Maddy gasps and points to the middle of the reading room.

A small glowing swirl spins in the air near the rear wall. Sierra freezes, and Cora charges at the magic. Nothing else happens with the swirling. But Kenna curses and exclaims, “Behind us!”

Everyone whirls as a hairy leg pokes through the door and then another follows. Everyone freezes as a dark, multi-legged figure gallops into the reading room.

“How did he get in here?” Kenna yells. “There should have been an alarm.”

Sierra gasps and shoves herself back from the table. Cora grabs the Fae book and spins away, clutching it against her torso like a football. Her gaze ping-pongs around the room as she searches for a way out.

Kenna and Caleb jump toward the eight-legged intruder with Maddy between them.

“It’s Spider,” Caleb roars.

Kenna releases a steady stream of curses. She pulls a dagger from somewhere and slashes at Spider, drawing blood along the hairy abdomen. Caleb suppresses a shudder. So many eyes on that thing.

Maddy leaps at Spider, kicking one of his legs out from beneath him. “Who?”

“I told you about Flea and Spider, back in the alternate realm!” He kicks another one of the hairy legs out from under Spider, and Spider grunts as he lurches to the side, falling against the door frame.

Spider tries to shove his way into the room, but Kenna’s slashing keeps him at bay.

Maddy’s face scrunches as she leaps up onto the hairy back of the beast,

kicking and stomping. “What are you talking about?”

Spider lifts four legs and spins around, throwing Maddy off of his back into the room. She slams into the closest wall with a grunt, but jumps to her feet.

“Give us the book!” Spider growls, his fangs working like fingers on either side of his mouth.

“Us?” Maddy demands. “Who’s us?”

“They work for Orion!” Caleb yells. He tries to grab a leg, but Spider shakes him off easily. “And he must have found a way into our plane of existence to follow us here. They’ve got to be after the book.”

“Why?” Maddy shakes her head and grabs one of the legs, so Kenna cuts it off at the knee.

Spider shrieks in pain.

“They’re Fae. They can use it.” Caleb tries for another leg, but he still isn’t strong enough to hold onto it. “Don’t let them get it.”

“I know,” Cora barks. “Keep him out of here.”

“Enough! Give me that book!” Spider bellows. He raises his front two legs, his mouth working over and over. When he brings his legs down, a concussive pulse bursts out from beneath him, throwing them all back into the walls of the reading room. Webs shoot out over the whole room.

The wall impact knocks all the wind from Caleb’s body, and he slides down. His brain isn’t working, and he can’t hear anything around him. His ears ring. White strings crisscross the reading room. He blinks rapidly, rolling to his side and pushing himself upright. The room spins, and he blinks, trying to focus.

But there are two Spiders, two Maddys on the ground, two Coras on the ground, and... He can’t be sure. Spider rushes toward Cora and rips the book from her arms. He holds it close against his body, laughing wildly.

“Maddy,” Caleb rasps. “Maddy.”

But she isn’t moving, she doesn’t answer. Had she been closer to the

explosion than he was? There's no way she should have sustained more damage than he did. She's a vampire and he's...nothing. His heart twists and hesitates to beat. When it finally does, it thumps against his ribcage. *No, Maddy, no.*

They've come all this way; they've made it this far together. She can't be gone now.

Sierra is on the ground between them, and Cora's still down at the rear of the room.

Caleb throws himself to his belly, and he army crawls, elbow over elbow, toward Maddy, but beneath the webs. The room spins around him dangerously, making him nauseous. They won't survive against Orion if she isn't okay. Why isn't his magic ripping the Spider into eight pieces. "Maddy, are you okay?"

When he reaches her, she reaches for him. "I'm fine."

"You didn't answer me."

"I did, but you couldn't hear me."

Caleb turns toward the door where Spider still stands. Why is he still there?

"The book is ours," Spider gloats. "Ours. You won't stop Orion now." Then he marches out the door of the reading room.

Caleb grasps his pendant, and he tries to draw on the magic which shouldn't be so hard to use right now. Spider nearly murdered Maddy, so why weren't his powers working how they had before? It had to be something to do with the concussion burst. Maybe it had a magic block in it, too.

"I can't do anything," Maddy says, reaching above her. She grasps a web strand and gasps as though it hurts. "Not anything."

Sierra suddenly coughs and drags a deep breath in before she rolls to her side, dry-heaving and completely incapacitated.

Cora's face points toward the ceiling. She's not blinking, but it's probably

the web magic.

Caleb grits his teeth and climbs to his feet the moment he's in the doorway. He fights to break through the spell, and his whole body clenches as he wrestles his powers through the block.

Spider is still in Veritas. He's grown arrogant, and he's rummaging through shelves for artifacts, or Caleb doesn't know what. Spider's ego will be his downfall. A burst ripples out from Caleb, burning through the webs, and the sieve on his powers loosens. He swipes the dagger from Kenna's prone body.

Then he sprints after Spider. Before the Fae knows he's there, Caleb slams into his leg, slicing it in two with a roar. "Give me the book!"

A leg slams into Caleb and bats him into the upholstered chair. He tries to stand but slips, sprawling on the ground instead. Spider bares his fangs and runs at him. A yellowish saliva drips from the creature's mouth, bubbling against the floor.

Caleb scrambles to get up, but Spider's on him before he can. *Oof*. Caleb locks his hands on either side of the mouth, ducking each time Spider lunges. He hooks his knee over one of the spider legs and tries to spin around, but he loses his grip on Spider's mouth.

The drooling, gnashing opening spears straight for Caleb's neck.

"Aah!" Maddy's hellish scream cuts through the air, and she lands on Spider's back with another dagger in her hand. She plunges it into Spider's back.

Spider shrieks and squats, spraying something caustic on the ground beside him, then he shoves the end of one of his legs into the puddle. With a lightning-fast movement, he flings the sharp tip back at Maddy.

It lodges in her chest. Maddy's back arches as her eyes fly open.

Spider laughs. "Itsy-bitsy, itsy-bitsy death," he hums.

Then he shakes her off. Her body crumples to the ground, lifeless.

Caleb shimmies out from beneath the Fae beast and runs to Maddy, his

heart pummeling his ribs. Maddy!

“Nooo!” When he reaches her, he drops to the ground beside her, but her eyes are completely white. The irises are cloudy, and it’s as though the whites have taken over her whole eyeball. He shakes her, but she doesn’t respond. There’s nothing.

“Itsy-bitsy, itsy-bitsy,” Spider sing-songs.

Gently, Caleb lowers Maddy to the floor, fury coursing through him. Images of the council hall dance in his mind and he welcomes the rush of heat through his veins. Before he can do anything, something slams into the back of his head, knocking him forward. His vision dims, and he can’t tell who’s there. The power he had lessens, as if the spell is falling back into place.

There’s a scuffle at the far end of the Veritas lobby, and Caleb can’t tell who’s out there. It’s too dark, too hard to see. Did Spider’s venom get him, too?

But the scuffle continues, and Spider is beaten back.

Caleb’s eyelids flutter, and before he drifts into the black, he recognizes...

Alec.

CHAPTER 19

MADELEINE



Spider webs slide across Maddy's face, and she shivers as she finds she's lying in the middle of a darkened space. Her surroundings are made of the silken strands. She's drowning in webbing, and she can't get it off. It grabs at her, choking her, squeezing her. The weight of it pushes against her chest and makes the atmosphere heavier than it should be in Veritas.

She swats at the threads without breaking them. Who let all the spiders into Veritas?

No matter how many times she blinks her eyes, she doesn't feel like she can really wake up or sit up. Her vision is still clouded. What's going on? She swipes at her face, trying to wipe webs away. It's like being the first one to jog through the park beneath the short trees. How many times had she done that? But she hadn't been running in years.

No... Now she's a vampire, and there's something else going on here. Isn't she still in Veritas? Something isn't right about what's going on. What happened before she opened her eyes? They'd been attacked by an intruder, and Caleb had launched himself at it. A dark shadow creeps through her mind, and her skin prickles.

Spider!

The revelation chills her, and she spins in place, trying to find something to grasp other than spider webs. But there's nothing. Had he...

It's her. It's Spider's venom. She saved Caleb from certain death, but she was stabbed herself. The point of his leg pierced her skin like a sharp toenail, and the poison burned through her, knocking her into wherever she is. Perhaps she's withdrawn into her mind or been transported somewhere else.

Now she's here with pain spreading through her, outward from her chest.

The darkness of the venom tinges the air, the poison making the atmosphere heavy. It's spreading through her and the web strands sting her skin. She tries once more to bat at the webbing, but now her limbs won't move. The paralysis doesn't slow, and she sinks into the ground in the spider web room. It must be Fae magic.

None of her magic overcomes anything. No magic swells. Instead, the pressure increases, and it's as though her cells are dying one by one. Caleb was alive before she woke up here. Concern pours through her, and worry twists her stomach. Is he still okay? Was he been able to avoid losing to Spider?

Maddy grits her teeth, at least her jaw still works, and she's able to breathe. It feels as though her whole body has fallen asleep from the loss of circulation, and she's being tied into a fear straitjacket. Her heart throbs, and her vision blurs. Caleb, where are you? He has to be okay.

Her shoulders droop, and Maddy doesn't know what to do. She's trapped in spider webs with no way out, and she's not sure how to help him at all.

Surely, he'll find the weapon. He must.

Surely, he'll beat Orion, too. If the weapon falls into Orion's hand, then he'll destroy the only thing which can kill him for good. Caleb can't let that happen.

Maddy's heart clenches, and she twists in place. Yet the numbness spreads, and she can't reach out. She squeezes her eyes closed and pushes against the fear. She imagines breaking through it and finding strength on the other side. Her hand moves slightly, and she flings her arm at the surrounding webs.

Her fingers hook the strands, and she scrapes a few aside. The gap encourages her, and another fling of her arm knocks more aside. She pushes up, and more webbing falls beneath the flail of her arm. Maybe her fingers are starting to work better. Her toes wiggle inside her shoes now, too.

Struggling to sit up, she heaves herself to her feet, scraping away at the sticky threads coating her skin. She takes several steps in a row across the spongy ground while she squints at her surroundings. Each step is a little easier than the last one. There aren't any trees, nothing outside of the webbing. She must be in an alternate realm made by Fae magic, and it doesn't agree with the vampiric parts of her. There must be a way out of here.

Maddy walks through the silken threads, ripping and shredding the webs, searching for some sign of how she can get the hell out of here. She trips on something on the ground, and turns back to see what it is.

It's...a...limb... Maddy crouches down. Not just a limb! It's a leg... connected to a body. Who's trapped in here with her? She breaks down the thick network, working up the figure on the ground until she reaches the head. Then she rips the lattice from the face of the other prisoner.

Maddy gasps and falls back onto the cushy ground. It can't be! She checks again, shocked by the representation of the person inside there with her. It's Nim!

Nim! She's trapped in here.

Maddy grasps her shoulders and tries to wake her. "Nim! Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

Nim doesn't answer, but she shifts in place, rolling from side to side. "Spiders everywhere...on me...sucking my blood." She whimpers and shifts some more, shaking her head back and forth. "Spiders... Spiders."

Maddy presses her palm to Nim's forehead, trying to force healing power into the seer. The vampire magic combats the Fae magic, making her frown at the resistance. Hunkering closer, Maddy imagines freeing Nim from the spider webs which surround them.

Nim whimpers again, and she gropes at the air as though she's waking from the magic she's been under.

Maddy wraps Nim's face, pressing one palm to each of her cheeks. "Please, Nim, wake up. It's me, Maddy."

Nim groans, but her eyes don't yet open.

"We have to find a way out of here. We have to get out of here. Come on, Nim."

Nim's eyelids flutter then slam back closed. "So many spiders," she whimpers, tears seeping from the corners of her eyes. "They're biting me. Over and over."

"Fight them back, Nim. I'll help you."

Nim's whole body jumps as though she's been struck, and Maddy tries to pour as much magic into her as she can. How long they stay like that, she doesn't know, but she keeps hold of Nim while she flinches and whimpers. Her eyes open and close again as though she's almost free then drawn back in. On it goes until finally, Nim screams, a blood-draining, heart-shattering wail.

"Nim," Maddy shouts into the unconscious Archivist's face. "Wake up!"

Nim's eyes slam open, and she jumps to her feet, panting and stammering. She bats at the webs all around them. "What-what-what... I don't know. Where am I? It's so dark. Why are there spider webs everywhere?"

Maddy climbs to her feet and places her hands on either side of Nim. "Calm down. We're together," Maddy looks around, "wherever here is. I think it's some kind of mind-prison made with Fae magic."

Nim scowls at Maddy. "How long have I been here?"

"A week maybe? I'm not sure how long I've been here. Time could be different."

Nim scrubs a hand over her face. "How did you wind up here with me?"

"Spider came to Veritas, and I think he stung me. He put his leg in his

venom and stabbed me with it.”

“Better than getting stung by his butt.” Nim gives me a sheepish smile. “That’s what happened to me and then I wound up here. Butt transport.”

The out of place comment forces a barking laugh out of Maddy. It shouldn't be funny, but it is, and it breaks through the tightness in her chest. “That shouldn’t be funny.”

Nim shrugs. “But it is.”

Maddy laughs again, and it’s nearly hysterical. After a moment, she collects her composure and gestures to the non-defined realm they’re in. “How did you get here in the first place?”

Nim frowns. “I portaled myself by mistake. I used the book, wound up in the Faerie world, and Flea and Spider were there.” She stares at some place far away. “I’d almost freed Flea from Orion’s control, and that’s when Spider stung me.”

“And that’s how you wound up here?”

She scrunches her face in thought. “I’m not sure, but there was another point it felt like I was moving after I moved from the Faerie world to here. The Faerie world was better than this one, though, but it’s all Fae-made. It’s all a prison.”

Maddy grins. “They moved your body in Veritas, too. Maybe that’s when all the moving happened in your head, too.”

“Maybe,” she says. “Do you know how to get out of here?”

“No. When I first got here, I spent several days hunting for a way to get out. Then I laid down to rest, and that’s when I couldn’t wake up. I just had nightmares over and over. Have you figured anything out since you got here?”

“Not yet.” Maddy raises a finger. “But I have to get back so I can help Caleb. Spider is still there, and we have to make sure everything is okay.”

“I’ve been all over this place, and the webs are all I’ve ever found.”

Maddy bites her lower lip, her new teeth poking the fleshy part. “I have to

get back. They were losing when the venom hit me. What if they aren't okay? What if Caleb isn't okay?"

Nim says nothing.

The panic swells in Maddy's chest. "I can't be here. I can't." Her breath catches. "I have to." She flaps her hands, trying to lessen the horror tearing through her. Her heart should be pounding, but there's nothing. "I have to get back. I have to. I have to."

"Calm down," Nim hisses. "I'm more worried about the spiders in this dimension. With all your shrieking, you're going to lead them right to us."

Maddy's eyes widen. "There are spiders here, too?"

"You haven't seen them?"

"I haven't been here long. Are they big?"

Nim swings her arm through more webbing, making the space around them a little larger, but she stops as though she's listening. "You're in luck."

"What?" Maddy wrings her hands in front of her, fighting the returning fright.

Nim's lips flatten to a thin line. "You get to see the spiders."

"What?"

"They're on their way. Listen."

Maddy tips her head toward the strands as the low thrum of vibration works through the webbing. "Is that them?"

Before Nim can answer, little spider bodies are moving along the network, scurrying toward them both. Maddy's eyes widen as they multiply until there are hundreds of them stampeding toward them. The vibrations grow louder, turning into a low rumble, like thunder in the distance. A moment later, the ground begins to shake, and a herd of spiders heads their way.

Maddy gestures toward the marauding arachnids. "What do we do?"

Nim can't answer. She swats two spiders climbing on her feet. She flicks the ones that leap onto her hands and scurry up her arms. She kicks another

three.

A dozen crawl up Maddy's legs, burying their fangs in her skin. She screams out as pain stabs through her, each time their serrated teeth pulling bits of her flesh from her body. Blood pours from the wounds, filling the air with its coppery scent. Maddy knocks them from her and kicks six more before they can land on her.

She scoops the next one from the ground and rips it in two, throwing the legs aside. She glimpses one feeding on her calf muscle, and she stomps her leg. Maddy's breath catches in her throat. Each bite feels as though it's pulling her farther and farther from the link between her and the warlocks.

What spell can she use? On her own, with her connection so weak now?

Another wave of spiders run at her, overwhelming her, and she screams as they rip into her skin again. Her magic is lessening as her link withers. Maybe this is Orion's plan. Maybe it's been his plan all along. The darkness presses in, obscuring the webbing.

The spiders are heavier than they should be, denser from the evil they carry. Maddy's knees buckle, and she doesn't know how she's going to win. The bites are like a thousand stabs from knives. So many gashes.

Shadows cloud her thoughts.

Beside her, Nim's barely holding her own, and she falls to the ground as the spiders overwhelm her, crawling all over her. It's terrifying—the stuff of nightmares.

“No!” Maddy screams. They're going to die here. This is it. She's not going to make it back to Caleb, and she's not going to be able to help him end Orion once and for all. She slips to the ground, and her chin quivers. Hundreds of spider bodies, thousands of spindly legs rush over her.

She chokes on a sob, pressing her lips into a tight line to keep the hairy legs out. It's the end. *I'm so sorry, Caleb.*

Then, as suddenly as they arrived, the wave of attacking spiders retreats, and Maddy feels something different in the air. Maybe the darkness is

ebbing. The vibration of the hundreds of bodies moving along the silken lines begins once more.

Maddy fights her way to her feet, and she hooks her arm in the crook of Nim's and drags her to her feet, too. They bat away a few of the stragglers, relieved they weren't completely overrun.

Nim gasps, sucking at the air. "I've never seen them that bad."

Maddy clenches her teeth as she tries to keep from crying out in the relief, and her shoulders droop with relief. The heaviness dwindles as the rumble of the spiders running over the network of webbing fades. "But they're gone."

Nim nods. "Yeah. I don't know why, though. Why are they retreating? It doesn't make any sense. They were going to win."

Maddy pushes her hair out of her face, and she squints at a bright light in the distance. She points. "Do you see that?"

Nim turns to look where Maddy's pointing. "I don't see it."

The webs around them begin to glow. But the light grows stronger and brighter, rushing toward them both. Finally, it breaks through the lacing, splitting the web. The light surrounds Maddy, but it doesn't wrap around Nim. The illumination starts dragging Maddy across the ground.

She reaches for Nim, groping the air as she tries to catch Nim's fingers. "Come on!"

But Nim's hand passes through Maddy's palm, and she cannot hold onto her as the light begins to drag Maddy away. Their fingers don't meet, and she tries to get out of the light, but she can't.

"I'll be back for you," Maddy promises. "I'll come back for you."

Nim stands completely still as the light speeds up and whisks Maddy out of Spider's realm.



MADDY GASPS AND BOLTS UPRIGHT, blinking wildly and groping the air around her as her vision clears. Slowly, the surroundings come into focus, and she squints at a nearby figure.

Cora's standing beside her, blood pouring over her chin and down her neck.

Maddy licks her own lips, wincing when her tongue hits her teeth points. Her stomach twists, reminding her she hasn't eaten for a while. She points to Cora's mouth. "Why is your mouth so bloody? What happened?"

Cora points to Caleb as he appears by her side. "It was his idea. Ask him."

CHAPTER 20

CALEB



Caleb stares at Alec as the confusion from Spider's attack clears. "What are you doing here?"

Alec raises an eyebrow as though it's a foolish question, and his upper lip curls. "You're all running around like fools. We cannot leave our chance at survival in the hands of clueless mortals."

Spider's body collapses into the ground, shuddering and twitching in a grotesque postmortem display. Carefully, Caleb remembers Maddy and how Spider attacked her, and... and... His blood chills in his veins, and he trembles. Surely, she's not...

He scrambles to his feet and rushes to Maddy's side. She's laying in a heap in the middle of the corridor. The others are slowly coming to as well. Yet Caleb only has eyes for Maddy. He strokes her cheek. "Maddy?"

She doesn't respond. For a long moment, he stares as horror creeps through him and twists his intestines around his heart. Finally, her chest rises and falls. His shoulders droop, and he sags from relief. Tears flood his eyes, but he doesn't have time to cry. Kenna did him no favors by turning him into a human right now.

Caleb leans close to Maddy, relieved she's still alive even as her breaths stutter as though it's growing harder and harder for her to take them. He leans close to her ear and whispers how much he loves her. On the next breath, the

strain to breathe seems a little less, and he squeezes her hand.

Carefully, Caleb turns to Alec. “What do you mean, we’re all running around here like fools?”

It’s as though Alec’s smelled something putrid. His bland expression screams his disdain. “Since Orion’s been freed, the Faeries have arrived from their kingdom.” He pauses. “We really don’t have much choice, did we?”

“So, all the Faeries here to help?”

Alec sniffs. “Don’t be silly. Not all Faeries are good.” He pauses as though he’s evaluating Caleb, and he sneers. “Including Sylvan. You should know that by now. Are all you mortals good?”

“Sylvan helped us before.”

“I doubt he did anything other than serve his own purposes, whatever they were.”

Caleb doesn’t agree or disagree, and he considers demanding Alec explain what his purpose for ‘helping’ the idiot mortals is.

Before Caleb can ask, Alec’s eyes narrow. “I’ll help you retrieve the weapon, and I’ll give it to you. Before that, I’ll also help you save Madeline.”

Caleb crosses his arms and considers the Fae, keeping a brave front while Maddy’s life hangs in the balance. Weakness won’t serve what he needs to get out of Alec. “Everyone has their own intentions. What’s in it for you?”

“I intend to live. Survival isn’t certain with Orion running around. He’s chaotic and prone to random actions. So, I intend to ensure that both Orion and Sylvan are dead at the end of all this.”

Caleb’s eyes widen as he studies Alec. “You’re going to *kill* Sylvan, too? And I’m supposed to let you?”

He gestures to Caleb. “You need me to work the magic in the Fae book, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Caleb draws the answer out, already growing suspicious of the ulterior motives. “That’s right.”

“Then it’s the cost for my help, and you will swear you won’t interfere.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.” Caleb can’t stand by and allow Alec to murder anyone.

“You don’t have a choice.”

Caleb wants to argue with him, but he’s right. They don’t have a choice. They need Fae magic to find the weapon, so they need Alec to help work the portal book without injuring anyone. “Fine. When it’s time, I won’t get in the way, but you’re going to help me save Maddy.”

Alec nods once. “But first we need to get the obsidian back from the Faerie kingdom. It means we must rescue Quinn.”

Caleb clenches his fists as he takes a step toward Alec. The power churning inside him makes the pendant warm against his skin. “I won’t help you rescue anyone until Maddy’s safe. She’s my top priority.”

Alec gives him a long look. “To save Quinn, we need to keep Maddy alive, and the only way to keep her alive is to remove Spider’s venom.”

“How do we do that?”

“You must remove it from her blood.”

Caleb crouches next to Maddy’s body. “So, how do we do that?”

“She has to be drained of her poisoned blood. I’m sure you have someone within your friend-group who is capable of doing that.”

Alec’s new level of condescension is beyond insufferable. Yet Caleb’s at least pleased with the ideas for helping Maddy. He doesn’t trust Alec, but their purposes are currently aligned. “Are you sure this will work?”

“Of course. I’m familiar with Fae magic, and I know how to combat Spider’s work especially well.” Alec looks bored as he stands near Spider. He studies his manicured nails and waits as though he’s being inconvenienced by having to deal with ‘foolish mortals.’

Caleb groans. If only he was still a vampire, he could sink his teeth into Maddy’s neck and handle it all without having to hurry anybody else along. As it is, he now needs Cora to make a quick recovery. They don’t have time for her to continue her slow wake-up on the other side of the room. He jumps

to his feet and crosses to Cora's side. He grasps her upper arms and shakes her gently.

Caleb glances back at Maddy before shaking Cora once more. "Cora. Come on. I need you to wake up."

Her eyes flutter, and she scowls almost immediately. "What happened? My head feels like somebody's trying to drive a tent stake through it."

"Spider attacked Veritas."

Her eyes widen, and she sits up, wobbling slightly as she comes fully upright. "Oh, maybe I shouldn't have moved so quickly."

"Well, I'm going to have to ask you to do one more thing. I need you to drain Maddy."

She stares at me as though she's struggling to process my words. "What?"

"I need you to drain Maddy. It's the only way to get Spider's venom out of her blood."

"Are you sure?"

"If we don't try, she'll die for sure."

Cora presses her lips into a tight line as she studies him. When she starts to try to climb to her feet, Caleb helps her. "Where is she?"

"Over here." He leads her to Maddy's side, and she sinks to her knees beside the love of his life. Maybe it's the wrong thing to do, but it makes sense. "Drain the venom out of her."

Cora's gaze darts to Alec, and her face pinches. But she says nothing.

"It's the only way," Caleb urges.

"I'm not swallowing," Cora says. "I don't know what Spider's venom would do to me. He's Fae, I'm vampire."

Caleb shrugs. "Whatever you have to do."

Cora presses her teeth to Maddy's neck, and the initial puncture makes Maddy jolt as though she's been struck by electricity. Blood seeps out, spilling onto the ground beneath her. More and more covers the ground, and Caleb's heart starts pounding. He shouldn't be letting it happen, but it's the

only way to save her.

Alec still wears a nonplussed look on his face, still studies his fingernails.

So much blood. It's so much. Cora sits back with a sickened look on her face. "It smells wrong, somehow. It turns my stomach."

"It's the venom," Alec snaps.

Caleb squeezes Cora's shoulder. "Keep going."

She lowers her mouth to Maddy's neck once more.

Caleb wants to wring his hands, pace, and freak out over the amount of Maddy's life on the ground. He wouldn't have thought it possible, but she grows even more pale.

Finally, Cora sits back. "That's it. That's all I can do without killing her."

"Now we wait." He turns to Alec. "How long until she wakes up?"

"Depends on how well your friend drained her."

Caleb wants to launch himself at Alec, but he keeps his rage from exploding out. He's trying to *save* Maddie, not accidentally murder her. He thinks the pendant on the necklace must be working the way it's supposed to.

Soon, Maddy's breathing becomes easier. Suddenly, she gasps and bolts upright, blinking before registering Cora.

She points to Cora's mouth. "Why is your mouth so bloody? What happened?"

Cora points to Caleb as he moves in. "It was his idea. Ask him."

"C-Caleb?" Maddy whimpers.

Caleb drops to his knees beside her. "I'm here."

She reaches for him, but her hands shake. "Caleb? I thought..."

"Hush. I'm here."

"No, Nim's back there."

He freezes. "She's back there?"

"We have to save her."

"I can't send you back."

She shakes her head and squeezes her eyes closed as fat tears roll from

the corners of her eyes. “We have to save her.”

“We will.” Caleb doesn’t know how, but he can’t have her worrying about Nim right now. “You have to heal the rest of the way, Maddy. We can worry about Nim when you’re stronger.”

Cora bumps Caleb’s side. “Hey.”

“What?”

“Alec’s gone.”

That brings Caleb to his feet, thinking he’s been double-crossed. “What? Where did he—” But where Alec had been standing, a large stake rests. “Is that it?”

“The weapon?” Cora asks.

Caleb nods. “Is that the thing we’ve been hunting this whole time?”

Cora crosses her arms and dons a stony expression. “It must be.”

He glances down at Maddy and then back at the weapon. The plain metal stake isn’t at all what he expected. It’s about twenty-four inches long and as plain as something a grandparent might use in their garden. This? This is the weapon they’d been hunting?

But there it is...

The weapon they needed to stop Orion from destroying everything Caleb loves.

Time to take this fight to the Faerie world.

CHAPTER 21

MADELEINE



Alec's standing in the hallway as they emerge from the reading room. "I've used the book and opened the portal in one of the other reading rooms, and you'll both be able to go through this time."

Maddy shakes her head, and the movement has her dizzy again, making her stomach roll. She squints at Alec. "That's not true. I couldn't go last time."

Alec raises an eyebrow. "Oh. Is that so?"

She puts her hand to her chest and shows her teeth. "Where have you been? I'm a vampire. Fae magic will attack me."

Alec's shrug infuriates Maddy, but she still doesn't feel great after the poison, and she's not sure how to respond.

He points to her. "If you go now, it'll hurt less, and you'll actually be able to get through."

Caleb studies the stake, the dark metal almost seeming to absorb the light. "She's going to get better before we go. She's not one-hundred-percent yet. There's no way."

Alec sniffs. "You don't have time to wait."

"Of course, there's time," Caleb counters. "An hour, two, maybe five. What's it to you?"

"If you go now, Spider's venom will leave a residual Fae magic inside

you. Since it was throughout your body, and you're not completely recovered from it, it'll hide your vampire cells from the Fae magic. It might pinch a little when you go through, but you'll be fine."

Maddy scowls, and she grasps the wall to keep from swaying. "How can you be so sure?"

Alec seems disinterested, as though none of it is his concern. "Spider was Fae. His magic and his venom are Fae. It filled every inch of your veins, and your veins haven't yet had time to refill with vampire blood, have they?"

"No," she says, drawing out the word, not making the connection.

"The residual will mask the vampire in you. Go now or don't go at all."

Caleb lowers the stake. "Are you serious? You want her to go now?"

"Up to you. I'm not the foolish mortal." Alec shrugs and marches out of Veritas without another word, disappearing as quickly as he showed up.

"Is he always like that?" Maddy mutters. "He's not nice at all."

Caleb lays his hand on her forearm. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"That's not true."

Maddy looks him over, pursing her lips, swallowing back a gag. "It doesn't matter, Caleb. I'm not about to let you go alone. You're my mate, and we're going through whatever portal the crazy Fae made. Together."



THEY'RE HOLDING hands as they step through the portal into the Faerie world.

Maddy draws herself to her full height and straightens her spine as the magic slides over her skin. She expects it to sting, and she's not disappointed. At least it's not stabbing pain, rather just stinging. And after being sucked into the magical prison with all the spiders, being completely conscious in her real body is better than being projected into another realm.

She's still so dizzy and not altogether together after all that venom.

The murky sky feels closer, and scents Maddy doesn't recognize waft through the air. Her ears prickle as though someone's staring at them from the shadows. Muted sounds careen through the darkened tree trunks. The ground isn't as cushiony as the floor of the spider lair, but it's still different from their own realm.

"It was like a cave," she murmurs with a full-body shiver. "A cave filled with spider webs."

Caleb turns toward her and studies her as though he's not quite sure what to make of her commentary. He squeezes her hand, ever the encouraging boyfriend. "Here, you mean?"

"No, no, back in the prison when you freed me. I think it must have been Spider's lair." She bites her bottom lip, relishing the sharpness of her teeth points in her lower lip, still struggling with what to do about Nim. They'd left her behind and come after Quinn instead.

"Are you feeling any better yet?"

"A little," Maddy lies. She tugs on Caleb's hand. "How are we going to find Quinn?"

"They were attacking Quinn when I left." Grunting, groaning, and the sound of fighting comes from a point in the distance, and Caleb glances toward the noise. Bats, or maybe they're birds, fly through the trees on the horizon. "We should check that out."

"How could Quinn still be fighting?"

"Time passes differently here," Caleb says. "Don't worry. We'll find Nim, too."

She peers at him. "Are you sure?"

"The minute we can, we'll save her, Maddy. First, we have to find Quinn because she has the obsidian. That's what we need." He stops to face Maddy, and he grabs her hands in his. "I need you to focus right now. It's dangerous here, and we have to be together on this."

Maddy lifts her chin, trying to pull her brave self together. Instead, their surroundings waver and threaten to spin. She shakes her head, but it doesn't make it any better.

Caleb frowns. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know." Maddy pinches the bridge of her nose. "The venom is still making something weird for me. Maybe it's the magic in my veins, disagreeing with my vampire blood. Or whatever the heck Alec was saying earlier."

He makes a face. "You sure you want to search with me?"

"Yeah, let's go. It's a residual reaction from the venom and the portaling, and I'm sure it'll clear as we go. The sooner we find her, the sooner we can get out of here."

They jog toward the loud noises, and Maddy blinks rapidly. The closer they get, the clearer her head becomes. They reach the edge of a clearing, finding Quinn's hunkered down in the center of the pile of broken sticks and trees. Bird-bat things fly overhead, cawing and screaming as if to warn Quinn as Maddy and Caleb venture into the center. As they draw closer, Maddy can see that all the broken sticks and trees aren't only sticks and trees...

They're legs and arms and broken appendages. Blood of all colors stain the ground. It's been more than a bloodbath here. It's been an ongoing massacre.

Quinn leaps out with a long, sharpened stick hefted over her shoulder and Caleb instinctively shoves Maddy behind him. Dark stains cover the end of her weapon. "Get out of here! Didn't you learn anything the last—" her voice cuts out. "Oh. You're not Orion's creatures."

"No." Caleb waves. "Hey."

Maddy gives her a weak smile. "We came to find you. It's time to get going."

"Going?" Quinn echoes, her stick dropping as she looks around as if leaving was no longer something she considered possible.

“We have a portal open, and we need to get you out of here,” Caleb says.

Maddy doesn't add anything. She doesn't know whether to tell Quinn everything about needing the obsidian or any of the other things that have happened. Do they have time to give the everything-report?

Quinn's eyebrows lower over her eyes, and she gestures toward Maddy. “*She* was able to come through the portal?”

“Yes, I was able to come through the portal. Something about Spider's venom and all that.”

“Ah.” Quinn stares into the distance. “They'll be back soon.”

“Who will?” Maddy turns around to peer the direction Quinn is. She's feeling some better which probably means the venom is wearing off even more, but it also means the venom is wearing off even more, and it might be harder to get back through the propped-open portal.

They're running out of time.

“Every creature I've killed comes back.”

“Comes back?” Maddy echoes, her stomach churning.

“Each one is resurrected, no matter how many times I kill it. I've tried beheading, dismembering, strangling. It doesn't matter how they die or how many times they die. They come back.”

Maddy scowls. “Are you saying Spider's going to resurrect, even though we killed him?”

Quinn's gaze strays to Maddy, and then she makes a slow circle as though an attack is imminent. “Why are they waiting?”

“Probably because we're here.”

Caleb circles the perimeter of the clearing, his body practically vibrating with tension.

Quinn grimaces and shrugs. “Maybe.”

“Is Spider going to resurrect?”

“Probably not?” Her answer ends like she's asking a question.

Maddy doesn't like it. “What do you mean ‘probably not’?”

“Well, I can’t be sure because he’s out there and he was in here and got out of some portal or maybe he’s inhabiting someone...”

“Explain.” Maddy’s head is still swimming, and she’s tired. They have to get out of here, but she’s not sure she can survive another encounter with Spider.

“I say ‘probably not’ because you killed him out there. Which means you probably ended his real body. But that’s not the way all this works in here. Time is different; life is different. And I can’t be sure which Spider you ended unless I can see the body.”

Caleb makes another lap. Maybe that’s what he’s doing with all the nervous energy floating around. It feels wrong here somehow.

Maddy gestures to Quinn. “Well, we need to get out of here before everything in this world gets into the moral plane anyway, and you can look over his body back in Veritas. I doubt they’ve cleaned it up yet. Can we get out of here now? It’s a miracle we haven’t been attacked yet.”

Quinn frowns. “Oh, the portal closing has nothing to do with how many of these creatures wind up on the mortal plane.”

Caleb comes to a stop between them. “What do you mean?”

Quinn rams her stick into the ground and leans on it as though they’re discussing the weather, not some invasion. “The living force of these creatures has been trapped inside the hosts of bodies back in the mortal plane. Until those hosts are destroyed or exorcized, those creatures will never truly die. They’re shadows or echoes of the originals.”

“So, even if we close this portal, we’re still going to have more show up in the moral plane?” Caleb crosses his arms and strokes his chin. “That’s not helpful for overcoming Orion.”

“No, not when it means Orion will have endless reinforcements,” Quinn agrees.

Maddy shares a look with Caleb. They need the obsidian, but maybe cutting down on how many enemies they’re fighting all at once isn’t a bad

idea. “Let the creatures come. We’ll find their bodies as they show up. They have to be collected somewhere.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s likely that Orion trapped groups together. Where do we know of a collection of members who aren’t acting quite right?”

Caleb’s eyes widen, and Maddy can tell he has the same thought she does.

“Maybe they’re inside the Order members?” Maddy ventures. “You know they weren’t acting the way they should have last time we were there. It’s why... why you...”

Caleb winces, but he doesn’t say anything more than, “Yeah.”

Quinn looks from one to the other and back again. “Should I ask?”

“I’m sure we’ll explain later.” Maddy shifts from side to side. “Now can we get out of here?”

As Quinn yanks her stick out of the ground, she grins. “As long as you know leaving here doesn’t mean we aren’t going to have a problem with random Fae attackers, then I’m game. Lead on.”

As the trio hustles back toward the portal, Maddy hides her discomfort with Quinn’s mercurial behavior. She has obsidian in her, and she’s comfortable with living in the middle of a pile of dismembered body parts. It’s dark...in a way Maddy’s worried Caleb might be turning.

It doesn’t matter. She loves him no matter what, but it’s something she can’t ignore and she can’t deny it may make a difference as they meet whatever future is barreling toward them.

When they reach the portal, they send Quinn through first.

Before they go through, Caleb catches her hand. “You okay?”

“Fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“Doesn’t matter, though, so I’m fine,” Maddy answers.

“It’s okay to not be fine.” He pauses. “And hungry. It’s been a while

since you've fed. When we get back, we should probably fill you up. If I'd thought of it, I'd have made you eat before we left."

Maddy shrugs. "If I had, I probably would have been attacked by the Fae magic more than a stinging prickle on my skin."

"Good point." He takes a step toward the portal. "You ready?"

She nods, and they move through. She jerks and whimpers as the stinging is now more like stabbing as the Fae magic washes over her. Good thing they didn't wait any longer than they already did. The moment they're through, Alec's portal closes with a snap behind them and instant relief washes over Maddy. She blinks, suddenly conscious that Caleb just tensed beside her.

When her vision clears, she sees they have a new visitor waiting on them in Veritas.

Quinn's already in conversation with Caroline Merrick.

Maddy's stomach clenches...from hunger, from shock, she doesn't know which. "What are you doing back in Mercy City?"

Caroline points to Quinn. "I came to see my sister."

Her sister... That's a stretch. Sort of.

But Maddy doesn't argue or correct her. Instead, she squeezes Caleb's hand.

Maybe Caroline's arrival shouldn't bother her as much as it does, but everything is still so...so...*off*. Caroline used to support Malcom, their father, and Maddy's seen enough double-crosses to be suspicious of everyone.

Just how is this latest arrival going to play out?

CHAPTER 22

CALEB



Caroline turns to Quinn, studying her face as though she's searching for something, and Quinn gives the woman a tight smile. Neither of them speaks, tension thickening the air. It's more than complicated between them.

They're all back in Veritas now. Alec's nowhere around, and Cora's in the corner of the reading room, pretending to read. Though Caleb doubts she's doing much reading. She's probably listening to everything going on. They wouldn't have let Caroline in here without a guard of sorts. Cora must have drawn the short straw.

Caleb glances at Maddy. After being drained, almost dying, and healing, his recently-vampired girlfriend should be more than famished. She had a big breakfast before Spider attacked Veritas, but a lot has happened between then and now.

Caroline clears her throat. "Is there anything of my sister left? Is Ileana still inside you?"

Maddy bites back a gasp.

Quinn jumps as though the question startles her, and her expression turns sad. "Maybe I should have expected that question."

"It's a reasonable one." Caroline crosses her arms, and her mouth pinches.

Caleb glances between the two sisters. There's so much history here.

Caroline's the daughter of Malcolm, and Ileana is Caroline's sister. Except once Ileana passed on, Quinn escaped purgatory and took over Ileana's body. Essentially, Quinn's running around with Caroline's dead sister's face.

Caleb should probably care more about the trauma in it, but he only cares about getting Maddy fed. Bloodlust is a bitch when it hits. And everybody's sporting their own trauma from the upending and subsequent invasion of the mortal plane.

He crosses his arms, realizing how heartless he's being. Maybe his new powers are impacting him more than he wants to admit.

"Well?" Caroline urges.

Quinn sags as though it's not something she likes to talk about. "There's not much left."

"Anything at all?" Caroline's voice cracks, and her face crumples.

Quinn tilts her head, and her expression turns thoughtful. After a long moment, she says, "There's a sliver of Ileana's spirit still inside me. I can tell she's there, deep inside. But I can't access it or her."

Caroline swipes at her cheeks. "Why not?"

"Ileana's spiritual energy is eclipsed by the obsidian." Quinn takes a step toward Caroline, and Cora looks up from her book, watching like a hawk. But Quinn places her hand on Caroline's forearm. "I know how much you miss her. Once the obsidian is removed, I'll do everything I can to ensure you two reunite."

Caroline throws her arms around Quinn, crying on her neck. Quinn awkwardly pats Caroline's back.

Maddy turns to Caleb and gives him a smile, one which reminds him of when they first figured out they liked each other, before all the recent drama, trauma, and everything else. It's the old Maddy, smiling at him, *his* Maddy, and it warms him. Someday, they'll have a life without Orion screwing it up.

Caroline steps out of Quinn's embrace. "Thanks for that. I don't think I knew how much I needed to hear that." She wipes her eyes. "I should have

believed Ileana when she told me the truth about Malcolm. I regret that so much.”

Cora stands, and it’s clear she’s making ready to escort Caroline out of Veritas.

But Caroline turns to Caleb. “Malcolm and Orion have joined forces.”

Maddy curses under her breath.

Cora sighs. “It’s not a surprise.”

“You’re right,” Caleb agrees, even as his gut tightens.

Maddy glares at him. So much for the sweet smiles.

He shrugs. “Well? Did you really expect it not to go that way?”

She relents. “But for once, it would be nice if something went our way without a fight.”

“We got out of the Fae world without a fight,” Caleb counters, knowing she won’t like him pointing it out on the heels of her frustration. “That’s a win.”

She says nothing.

Caleb turns back to Caroline. “What else do you know?”

“I know they have control over the Faeries,” she answers.

Maddy curses again. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Again, though, did you expect anything different?” Cora interjects.

“I didn’t ask you,” Maddy snaps.

Cora’s eyebrows hit her hairline. “Is somebody getting hangry?”

Caleb covers a smile, but he gestures to Caroline. “What else?”

“They’ve abducted a woman, and they’re holding her hostage to ensure the Faeries are loyal.” She pauses. “Including their leader, Sylvan.”

This time, Maddy gasps. “Sylvan is their *leader*?”

Caroline nods, and she begins pacing. “But there’s something else going on... Something more.”

Maddy glances at Caroline. “What do you mean?”

Caroline throws her hands up. “Maybe it’s a gut feeling, but I know

Merrick Industries has experimented on a lot of supernaturals. There's got to be something bigger going on. They're trying to do something...something huge."

"Do you have any idea what?" Caleb asks. They could be up to all kinds of awful things in Merrick's group of industries. They have an endless supply of research money and ethics aren't something Malcolm cares to keep.

Caroline stops short and shakes her head. "No, I have no idea, but it must be big. Why else would they have joined up with Orion?" She scrubs a hand over her face. "It's such a mess."

Caleb gestures to Cora. "Is Galina around?"

"Won't take long to get her here."

"Maybe it's time we figure out where Orion is. If he's at Merrick Industries, maybe Caroline can get us inside."

But her expression turns dubious. "It's possible my access codes and everything still work."

Cora jerks her thumb toward Caroline. "Will you keep an eye on her while I get Galina here?"

"You have a summoning spell or something?" Maddy asks.

Cora tugs her cell phone from her back pocket. "No, I'm going to call her." She grins. "I just don't have reception in here."

This makes them all laugh, half-hysterical sounds, but it still feels good even if it feels a little stolen in the middle of all the end-of-the-world-ness going on.

Caroline takes a seat in the cushioned chair Cora vacated. "I'll be good." She studies Quinn. "Maybe we could talk a little while we're waiting?"

Quinn shrugs. "Sure."

While Cora steps out of the reading room, Caleb makes his way to Maddy's side. "You hungry?" he asks quietly. "It might be time to get you something to eat."

She frowns at him. "Why do you ask?"

“Oh, *hangry* probably covers it.”

“Well, I don’t feel hungry, so I don’t know how I’m *hangry*.”

Caleb drops his arm around Maddy’s waist. “It’s been a while since you’ve had anything to eat, Maddy.”

She presses a hand to her middle. “My stomach is still pretty upset from the whole venom thing. I’d probably throw up whatever I tried to choke down right now. Blowing blood clots isn’t appealing.”

Caleb frowns. “Blowing blood clots?”

She gives him a dark look. “You know, like blowing chunks, but blood.”

That thought sort of turned Caleb’s stomach, too, but he finds himself grinning a little. “Still, I think we should get something to eat as soon as we can. As soon as Galina gets done, we should eat and rest.”

“Sure. If there’s time.”

Cora soon returns with Galina trailing behind her. “Look who I found.”

“That was quick,” Caleb says.

“I was in the neighborhood. Had a feeling you might need my witchy skills again.”

Caroline chuckles as she stands. “A bit psychic, are we?”

Galina pins Caroline with an intense, extremely serious look. “Of course. Aren’t you?” Then she turns to Caleb and Maddy, all sparkly eyes and smiles. “Who are we finding this time?”

“Orion,” Caleb answers.

Galina’s smile drops away. “Ah.”

“Can you do it?”

“Of course. It just might take a little time, depending on how many wards and magic I have to get through to locate him.” Galina begins a minor chord hum as she rolls up her sleeves. “If he’s smart, he’s hiding, but one thing about Orion, he’s ballsy.”

Quinn nods at that, her lips thinning.

Soon, Galina’s conjuring a location spell, searching the atmosphere for

traces of Orion's aura and his magic. She searches the mortal plane for hints of the Fae. Then she searches Mercy City, but Orion's not there.

Her search widens.

As a mortal, Caleb can't see Galina's magic well anymore, but he can tell she's casting. Maddy and Cora stare at a large space below Galina's hands, and he's seen it often enough before to be able to approximate what it looks like.

Caroline leans close to Caleb. "Can you tell what she's doing?"

"Yes," he says, but he doesn't add anything else, and Caroline moves back into her own space. Caleb isn't about to explain the mortal-to-vampire-to-mortal his life has been so far. Finally, Galina's eyes twinkle.

"Ah ha! I've found him. He's several hundred miles away." She frowns. "In a..." She focuses on Caroline. "Palace?"

Caroline steps forward, and her hands start moving even before she starts speaking. "Yes! I knew it! I knew there was something going on there." Her elation is obvious while the others are waiting for more information. "There's a family mansion there. It used to belong to one of the Merrick ancestors. It never showed up on the data for research and development, but I would find random large shipments sent there from the research labs. I knew there was something secretive going on there, but I could never find any real evidence to warrant digging into it more closely."

Galina beams at Carline. "Well, it seems your father's keeping Orion there."

"Or maybe they're both there," Caleb says. "And they're preparing for Orion's attempt to conquer this world."

Galina steepled her fingers. "Possibly."

Maddy shakes her head. "You mean *probably*."

"The question, is what do we do now?"

Caroline's eyes widen. "Oh, I know when it's going to happen." She swallows. "Tomorrow."

They all whirl to face her.

Maddy taps her foot. "How do you know it's going to be tomorrow?"

"It was a date that came up in some of the notes associated with whatever was in the crates." Caroline's completely still as she speaks. "I often found evidence of the shipment contents, but the shipping lists were often deleted. On the couple I found, the notes included tomorrow's date."

"Then they're going to do it at dawn," Cora says.

"Why?" Maddy demands.

"Because it's one of the times when the distance between planes reduces. It's easier to get from realm to realm at sunrise and sunset. Why do you think humans love to watch them so much?"

Maddy blinks. "Are you serious?"

Caleb grasps her hands. "She's serious, and she's not wrong."

Maddy trembles. "So, we only have a few hours to get ready?"

"We have time enough to eat and rest," Caleb says. He turns to Cora. "Are the guest quarters still available?"

Cora grins. "Should be."

"Then we're going to eat and sleep. We'll be up before dawn." Maddy starts to argue, but Caleb shakes his head at her. "I need to sleep, and I'm not sharing a room with you until you've eaten."

She closes her mouth so quickly her teeth snap together.

Galina hums to herself as she unrolls her sleeves. "While you two are doing that, I'm going to find the Archivists and give them an update. Maybe they have information." She turns to Caroline. "Come with me, dear. You probably have more information in that brain of yours, and we could use it."

"I'll get some food together and bring it by shortly." Cora follows them out the door without waiting for permission or agreement.

"Thanks," Caleb calls after her. "We'll be in the room."

"Thank you," Maddy adds hastily.

Caleb laces his fingers through hers, and they make their way to the guest

quarters without speaking. Maddy goes in first, and he closes the door behind them. Cora shows up a few minutes later with food for Caleb and blood for Maddy. Cora doesn't stick around, and they eat without comment, the weight of what's to come pressing in around them.

Pushing away her empty bag, Maddy points to the ticking clock on the counter. "It's almost dawn already," she says. "I'm not sure I can sleep."

"If we don't rest, we won't be any good when they need us." Caleb pulls her into his arms and presses a kiss to her forehead, breathing in her scent. "If we survive this, we can finally be together in all the ways we've been dreaming. It'll be like we're normal again."

The promise of an *after* hangs in the air, settling in Caleb's very soul. After is what they're fighting for.

After is what will be lost if Orion wins.

Maddy straightens in his arms in the way she does when she's trying to be brave. "We'll survive this."

He thinks he hears her whisper, "We have to," under her breath. She looks up at him, her eyes shifting with the same determination and anxiety he's feeling. "I'm going to hold you to your promise, Caleb."

"You better," he murmurs, pulling her even closer and pressing a kiss to her neck, below her earlobe.

Maddy melts into him with a sigh. "Kiss me for real," she whispers. "I need you."

Caleb grasps her chin and tips her mouth toward his, just as hungry for the feel of her mouth as she is. Their lips press, their mouths open, their breaths become one.

Let tomorrow come. They'll face the doom hand-in-hand.

The world with its promise of doom or everything they've ever wanted fades away as they comfort each other in the way only two lovers can as they face the end of the world.

CHAPTER 23

MADELEINE



I t's still dark out, and they're all awake, the sense of growing doom almost reaching suffocating level.

Maddy paces inside the entrance to the large library as she waits for Caleb to make an appearance. They fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, but she woke up as the digital clock rolled to 4:00 A.M., then crept out, wanting to let him get as much sleep as possible.

They're about to face the fight of their lives.

And humanity's.

Sleep isn't something Maddy needs—not exactly. However, shutting out the world and being with Caleb had lulled her long enough to rest. The peace from the night before slowly drains from her the closer the clock ticks to dawn. Veritas has been in lock-down since the night before. All the defenses have been activated—the few there are.

Although they're not all loitering in the foyer, Veritas overflows with Order members, Fae warriors, and many vampires. All unlikely, uncomfortable allies. The Archivists still work in their private rooms somewhere, searching for useful battle spells. Maddy hopes they find one they can toss at Orion to swallow him up. It'd be great if this is all wrapped up by lunch time.

She grimaces. No, it'll take all of them working together to beat Orion.

More than that, though...

She catches her bottom lip in her teeth. The sharp scent of nervousness assails her nose. The whole of Veritas reeks of it. Not fear, though, but nerves and unease. How many will be standing with them at the end of the day? How many will sacrifice themselves to save this realm?

She tries to push the thoughts away, only to find they're as sticky and toxic as the spider's webs in the Fae realm. The truth is, they're facing the end of the world.

There's no way to sugarcoat something like that.

Caleb strides into the foyer, looking more together, surer of himself than he has been since he became a human again, the pendant resting against his chest. "Morning."

Maddy rushes toward him and wraps her arms around him. "You're looking chipper."

"Amazing what a good night's sleep will do for a mortal body." He leans closer to her ear. "Did you eat?" he whispers.

"I did when I got up. Cora got me three bags."

"Good. I did, too. You ready for today?"

"No," she admits quietly.

He squeezes her tightly against him. "Good. Me neither."

This time, that makes her laugh quietly against his shoulder. Or maybe it's easier to laugh when she's in his arms. Either way, it lightens the weight on her shoulders. She turns to face Kenna, Cora, and the others. They all peer at the two of them expectantly. Many of the warriors are in other rooms, but the leaders are all here.

Caleb clears his throat. "Morning."

Responses ripple through the group.

"It's going to be a day of it."

More answers of agreement.

"We're probably going to be sorely outnumbered."

Kenna shrugs. “We usually are, but it’s not been an issue.”

Caleb nods, no doubt acknowledging the courage in that statement, along with the reality it’s most certainly going to be an issue in this battle.

Cora peers through the windows on either side of the entrance. “Somebody’s arrived.”

Maddy rushes to Cora’s side, stopping beside her in a blink. “Can you tell who it is?”

Cora squints and moves a little to see through the wavy glass. “Huh.” She pulls away from the window. “Looks like Alec.” She leaves the entrance without opening the door.

Caleb mutters under his breath. “Insufferable jerk.”

“He’s probably coming to help us since he thinks we’ll be bad at it.” Maddy punches the unlock code into the keypad next to the door. The lock mechanism clicks, and she tugs open the door as Alec reaches it.

He gives her a look. “I thought Veritas remains open to all, at all times.”

For the briefest moment, Maddy considers closing the door on Alec’s smug face. It’s more than tempting. Instead, she says, “We’re now operating under the Orion protocol. What’s the secret word?”

Alec scowls. “Secret word?”

Maddy’s gaze narrows, and her fury flares. “I’ll give you a hint. It starts with a ‘P.’ You say it when you want something...”

Caleb catches Maddy’s elbow and uses it to pull open the door the rest of the way. “She’s kidding.” He takes a step closer to Maddy. “I don’t think Alec knows the word ‘please.’”

“I was going to teach him,” Maddy mutters, stepping back from the door. “Come in.”

Alec sniffs as he crosses over the threshold. “I don’t appreciate the humor. It’s very human.” He strides into Veritas with his retinue of impressive Faerie warriors in tow. “We’ve arrived to assist.”

Caleb gestures magnanimously. “We’re glad you’re here.”

Kenna, Cora, and a handful of others join them at the entrance.

Alec's gaze sweeps over them. "Surely, we have more than these."

Cora jerks a thumb over her shoulder. "There's more in the building, but not as many as one might hope. Who'd you bring?"

Caleb crosses his arms, and Maddy does the same, trying to look at ease. A thousand pricks dance over her skin, almost like goose bumps, and it's coming from the Fae. She's realizing the difference between Fae and vampires isn't all in their head. After centuries of being at odds, it's reached a cellular level.

"The Faerie magic which made you a powerful Van Helsing was my own." Alec turns and gestures grandly to the warriors behind him. "And these Faerie warriors have long stayed hidden among the mortals, awaiting the death of Orion. They have come to finally see the end of him." He turns to Kenna. "And who did you bring?"

Kenna shakes her head. "I have some Order members here. It's hard to find the ones who haven't been possessed." She checks the large clock to the right. "There's more on their way. Not as many as we need, but more."

He turns to Cora. "And you?"

"Not that it's any of your Fae business, but I've brought all the vampires we have left." She sighs. "It took some work to convince them that Orion is a bigger threat to the world." She turns to Maddy. "I had to promise them we'd make sure every vial of the Cure in the world is destroyed."

Kenna gasps.

Cora shoots her a dark look. "It's the only way I could get them to agree."

Maddy nods. "We'll do it." She considers Caleb. "It's not like we're going to go around turning everyone back into a human against their will." She glares at Kenna, too. Caleb's only just now beginning to get used to all the feelings and everything else associated with being human again.

Caleb turns to his aunt, the great leader of the Knightly Rose vampire hunters. "If that's what we have to do to save the world, then that's what

we're going to do, Kenna."

She presses her lips into a tight line, but she doesn't argue. Instead, she whirls to face the few of the Order with her now. "Come on. Let's make ready."

Cora ushers the vampires off, too. "Time to earn our keep." She glances back at Alec. "And prove we're better warriors than the Fae."

Caleb chuckles under his breath.

Kenna strides away, pulls a stick from her belt, extends it, and knocks the end against one of the other Order members. "Come on. Let's warm up."



PINK LIGHT DANCES on the top edge of the horizon as they're nearly ready to leave Veritas. Maddy studies the collected warriors. It's not enough. They'll probably be outnumbered. Her stomach churns.

Even Caleb looks a little paler than when he marched out of the guest apartments.

Maddy's hands tighten into hot fists. It's what they have, so it's what they'll use. They won't let Orion have the mortal plane without a fight.

Alec opens the portal, and they step out into the mountains around the mansion where Orion hides, leaving Maddy blinking. She'll never get used to being one place and then stepping through to another.

Once their small, hastily assembled army is through, Alec allows the portal snaps closed behind them. They all drop to the ground to peer down at the mansion from their carefully chosen vantage point. For a moment, Maddy allows herself to believe that destiny is on their side. They had all the pieces they needed when they needed them. Even with his look of disdain, Alec still showed up to help them get to the mansion.

Maybe with fate on their side...

The mansion has more gothic spires on it than Maddy remembers, and the points stab at the low cloud, illuminated by the rising sun. Jagged peaks surround them, and there's only one road into the mansion. Her stomach clenches as she registers figures moving in the towers that have probably been turned into turrets. More figures move past the windows.

So many...

Caleb drops onto the ground beside her and takes her hand. He gives her an encouraging squeeze, and Maddy's glad he probably can't see everything she can. This is worse than she expected...and she knew it would be bad.

Fear and dread crowd around the flicker of hope bravely trying to stay alive inside her. "Do you think we'll win?" she whispers to Caleb, unwilling to hear anyone else's answer.

He's the only one who can feed the belief they'll not only win, but live to see it.

But before Caleb can answer, Alec marches toward them with an even more sour look on his face.

"Caleb!" he barks. "We have a problem. We're outnumbered."

Caleb climbs back to his feet, wiping his hands as he frowns. "We already knew that."

"It's worse than we anticipated."

His shoulders tense. "Okay. I'll bite. How bad is it?"

Alec's upper lip curls. "At least ten-to-one."

Maddy jumps to her feet and rushes Alec, stopping short right beside him. She may be terrified, facing hopelessness straight in the face, but she won't let anyone undermine Caleb's steady faith. He needs it.

And so does she.

"I don't care if it's fifty-to-one, so drop the attitude, you sorry piece of Fae," she snaps. "We're supposed to be here, and we're doing this."

Caleb's eyebrows hit his hairline, and his eyes twinkle. "I'm with her."

And for the moment, Maddy really believes everything has been pointing

to this moment.

Even if they fail.

Even if they die.

She makes a fist. “I don’t care what happens. We’re going to beat Orion or we’re going to die trying. The mortal plane is worth it, and I refuse to believe we’re all here for any other reason than to defeat Orion. We’re going to win.”

As the silence spreads through the group, Maddy hopes those won’t become her famous last words.

CHAPTER 24

CALEB



D*amn.*

Maddy's magnificent when she's furious. Her eyes flash, her lush red lips work a snarl he could kiss, and she puts Alec in his place. If he could portal back to Veritas and take Maddy back to bed, he would right then.

In the dim light of pre-dawn, Alec is clearly angry about being addressed that way by a vampire, but it doesn't matter. He can use his scowl on Orion.

He's the enemy.

Caleb studies the mansion in the valley below. Hundreds of figures circle the mansion, moving as menacing shadows. A cold burst of wind dances down his spine. It's colder here than it was back at Veritas. He shakes his head. Of all the things to notice right now... Instead, he turns his thoughts toward Maddy and the promises they'd made before they'd climbed from the bed to face the attack.

We'll survive.

And we'll live happily ever after.

Now, as he's staring down at the scene of what's sure to be their final battle, he's not so certain he'll be able to keep the first promise...which means he won't be able to keep either promise.

But Maddy will live. He'll die making that come true.

He pulls a semi-automatic pistol, loaded with a silver bullet magazine

from his waistband. It'll be nearly useless against what they face, but it won't keep him from trying. The fingertips of his freehand graze his pendant. It's humming with the power coursing through his body, but it's helping keep it at bay.

Maddy turns to face the collection of warriors around them. "Are we all ready?"

Kenna steps forward. "The Order is ready."

Alec's upper lip curls, and he glances at Maddy. "My people are ready."

Cora shrugs. "We're as ready as we're ever going to be." Her expression makes it clear she wants to say more, maybe even something about what a hopeless attack this is going to be, but she doesn't. "Outnumbered or not, the sun's coming up."

Caleb nods once, and Maddy jogs to his side. He leans closer to her and lowers his voice. "You ready?"

She grins, but it's more like a grimace. "As ready as we can be."

"Then let's go." He climbs up the ridge and is about to break into a run, no longer allowing himself time to think, only for Maddy's hand to pull him up.

She winks at him. "Let me handle this."

Caleb frowns. "What do you mean?"

Maddy wraps her arm around him and sprints toward the mansion. In a blink, they arrive at the edge of the porch. An alarm blares over the compound as Cora and the other vampires follow.

A horde of shadow-possessed Fae and other creatures pour out of the front of the mansion, a sea of blank or death-hungry eyes swarming around them.

Maddy charges at them and throws a kick into the middle of the closest possessed. Caleb can't see the hypnosis spell she works, but her attackers freeze, peering at her adoringly until she punches them in the temple and they fall to the ground. She charges another trio and zips from being to being,

moving so quickly Caleb can barely track her.

A twig snaps behind him, and Caleb whirls. He draws a burst of his magical energy and throws himself at a blank-eyed Fae who brandishes a short pitchfork-like weapon. He rips the fork out of the stranger's hands, leaps onto the attacker's back, hooks his arm around the man's throat, and squeezes long enough to incapacitate him. Pointed ears graze Caleb's forearm as the attacker slips to the ground.

He whirls and throws himself at the next pair. The pendant warms, and the heat spreads through his shirt and against his chest. A small burst of energy explodes from Caleb's chest and takes out the two. He clamps his teeth tightly closed and sweat forms on his upper lip, keeping a tight rein on the power surging through him.

Hundreds of possessed beings swarm through the clearing, and Alec roars his commands in Fae. One of the warriors takes a black arrow to the chest which dissolves as the point lodges between his ribs.

Kenna runs at the duo. "Follow me!"

Others of the Order rally to her position, and Caleb joins them. He swipes his hand over the neck of the archer who felled the Fae, leaving a mark of blackened flesh behind. The Fae's eyes bulge, and he chokes on something building in his throat.

Kenna gapes. "What did you do?"

Caleb doesn't answer because he doesn't know. Everything in him hates the killing, the ending of lives, but it comes naturally in the midst of battle. How can he explain he doesn't know the spells he casts, that the power moves through him without his understanding it.

"Can you do it again?" Kenna asks, and then her gaze switches to something over Caleb's shoulder. She cups her hand around her mouth. "Maddy, duck!"

Caleb whirls. The sun rises over the peaks around the mansion and a burst of wind moves over them. Another attacker levels his weapon at Maddy's

head, but she's fighting another hulking beast—some kind of half-man, half-Orc creature Caleb's never seen before.

His heart stops, and he sprints toward her without uttering a sound. He points at the beast behind her, and a stream of white-hot fire bursts from his fingertip and slams into the being's chest. It throws its head back and lets loose a blood-curdling scream.

Maddy beheads the foe in front of her, takes up the blade it drops, then spins toward the hulk, swinging the blueish knife through its neck. It tumbles to the side as Maddy meets Caleb's gaze with the tiniest of nods.

Another wave of reinforcements pours from the mansion. And then another.

A movement draws Caleb's attention toward a window on the second floor, and he glares at Malcolm as he stares down at the carnage in front of the mansion. The twisted bastard is smiling.

Caroline and Quinn launch themselves into the new battle lines. Metal meets metal, and magic pours through the opposing forces. Caleb can't see it, but he can nearly feel the rush of it all. It's a thrumming of energy all around, and it's almost as though he can reach out and touch it.

He grunts as he slams into the next round of warriors. His muscles burn, and the stench of blood practically overwhelms him.

It's too much. There are too many.

In a flash, he understands that there's no chance, that hope is lost. Without some overwhelming blow, they won't win. His throat dries, and his heart pounds, pulsing in his eardrums. The same three words throb in his mind over and over.

To the death...

To the death...

To the death...

And that's what it's going to be. A rush of moisture obscures his vision, but he blinks it away. Not for himself, but for her, for Maddy. He wanted the

after. How he craves forever with her. His Maddy.

Maddy...

Maddy!

Something's wrong. Caleb turns in place, searching the battlefield for his mate. At first, he can't find her. He runs one direction and then the other.

Finally, he spots her on the front steps of the mansion. A movement behind her catches Caleb's eye, and he strains to see who it is. He can't make out the shadowy figure, and he runs toward her, hoping he reaches her before they can take her from behind.

Maddy does nothing, and Caleb's certain she doesn't know the stranger is there. Alec is at her side. Yet Alec doesn't seem to realize the shadow stands behind them. It has to be a spell, a magic of some kind.

Maddy cuts the legs out from another attacker, and Alec darts to the far side of the mansion. Maddy moves as though she's going to go after him.

But a sinister, angular face comes into view, and Caleb's heart clenches in his chest.

God, no. No. No. No!

It's Sylvan.

But Caleb blinks, and Sylvan disappears. He reaches Maddy, and he catches her arm. "Did you see him?"

"Who? Malcolm?"

"No, Sylvan."

She doesn't answer.

Caleb turns to Alec. "Come on! We have to find Orion or Malcolm. It's the only way to stop this!"

Alec nods, and then the three of them—Caleb, Alec, and Maddy—move into the mansion. Some of the Fae warriors are already inside, fighting on the staircase and in the corridors.

"Come on! I saw him in the window on the second floor," Caleb yells and ascends the stairs, three at a time.

Maddy and Alec follow him without argument, a handful of good Fae also following them. Caleb doesn't have time to appreciate the nicest mansion he's ever seen. Splintered wood panels cover the walls, chairs lay on the floor, and a grandfather clock leans in the window.

"This way!" Caleb directs them. They enter a small study, and Caleb runs to the window where he spotted Malcolm. "He's not here!"

They start back toward the exit once more, but Sylvan appears on the threshold.

Alec sneers at the fellow Fae. Maddy screeches at him, and Caleb dashes toward him.

But Sylvan avoids Alec, leaping to Maddy's side.

"Look out!" Caleb yells.

Maddy jumps to the side, but Sylvan comes to a stop beside her, her eyes going wide.

"What do you think—" Her voice cuts out as she goes still.

Sylvan moves his palm over her face, and her body stiffens. She doesn't blink or move.

Alec charges Sylvan, but he knocks Alec to the side with a swipe of his fist. Alec lands in a heap on the ground, no longer wearing his signature sneer or snarl.

Caleb roars in fury, now running with everything he has. "Maddy! Get away! Get away!"

She doesn't react, she doesn't move. Doesn't do anything to free herself.

Sylvan catches an unresponsive Maddy in his arms and drags her out of the room. Caleb runs at them, but he slams into an invisible wall. His body ricochets back with a pained grunt as he realizes he can't even reach Alec, who's collapsed on the floor of the study.

Fear grips Caleb in its icy clutches, and a rush of adrenaline floods him. He punches the invisible shield, wincing as his knuckles crash against the shell he can't see. He can't break through the block Sylvan's left behind.

He's trapped.

Sylvan drags Maddy out of the room, around the corner, and out of view. He's laughing as though he's won, and it chills Caleb's blood.

"Maddy!" Caleb bellows. "Maddy!"

She doesn't move. She doesn't answer. Has Sylvan already ended her life?

Knowing he has no other choice, Caleb clutches the pendant on his chest and summons as much magic as he can. He focuses on the shield then punches with the other hand, relieved as the faint sound of cracking splinters the air. He does it again and again, feeling the growing hole each time. With a final shout, he bursts through it, reaching the doorway on the other side of the magic spell.

Not bothering to check on Alec, he breaks into a run, heading the way Sylvan dragged Maddy. Every second it took to break out of the invisible shield felt like a lifetime. He just has to hope he's not too late.

Caleb reaches a doorway at the end of the long corridor and tries the knob, but it's locked and warded. He takes three steps backward and throws himself onto the surface.

"Help me!" a voice calls.

Is it Maddy? He doesn't know, he can't be sure. He peers behind him, trying to decide whether to break in or go another way to find her. There's no one who can tell him where Sylvan's taken her.

A shuddering wail echoes on the other side of the door. "Oh, help me. Please."

Renewing his effort, Caleb batters the door. On his fourth try, the thick door splinters, and he crashes through into a small room with a thin mattress in the corner.

"Maddy!" Caleb stops at the edge of a mattress on the floor of the tiny room and drops to his knees. "Maddy?"

The woman rolls to her back, the chains which connect her wrists and her

ankles to the wall rattling each time she moves. Her matted and tangled hair falls away from her face, exposing the points of her ears.

Caleb's heart falls, and his stomach twists. It's not Maddy, which means Sylvan has her somewhere else. He's wasted more time. Seconds, minutes they don't have.

Yet he can't leave an innocent to fend for themselves in the middle of this mess. Whispering an apology to the girl who he promised to save, he summons more magic, forcing the spell into the metal of the chains. Carefully, he weakens the material until he can pull it apart with his bare hands. Finally, he helps the stranger to her feet.

"Thank you, thank you," she whispers.

"Who are you?" Caleb asks. "Where can I take you?"

"I'm Sylvan's wife..." Her voice catches in her throat. "Just take me away from here."

Caleb almost reels back, realizing he just saved the wife of the Fae who's kidnapped Maddy, not some innocent woman. Gritting his teeth as she leans against him, he escorts her out of the mansion, unwilling to think through the consequences of what he's done.

Right now, he *needs* to find Maddy.

The scene outside the mansion is even worse than it was before. He spies Sylvan at the edge of the battle, and his wife breaks away from Caleb with a cry, making her way toward her husband. Caleb doesn't bother to watch the reunion.

Not when his world is crumbling around him.

An army of evolved shifters overwhelms their forces. Malcolm's cult surrounds them all.

And Maddy is nowhere in sight.

CHAPTER 25

MADELEINE



Sylvan's magic wraps around Maddy, and his right arm hooks around her neck. He pins her in the crook of his arm, dragging her out of the private little study on the second floor of the remote mansion. He hasn't found the stake.

Alec's on the ground of the room, and Caleb... He slams into an invisible wall, and it prevents him from coming after them. Her last view of Caleb is him, clutching his pendant with panic in his eyes.

Inside her mind, Maddy kicks and screams and fights against Sylvan. She flails wildly...

In her head.

But her body doesn't move at all.

Instead, Sylvan controls her, seemingly without effort.

He yanks her through evolved shifters, possessed by shadow, and members of the Cult, feverish in their adoration. The farther Sylvan drags her, the more frenzied the beings seem.

They move through twisty corridors and down several flights into the basement of the mansion. Her stomach churns. What's Sylvan done to her? What kind of Fae magic is he using to suppress her own powers? She's a vampire and a warlock. He shouldn't be able to do it at all.

Her thoughts swim through fluff and fear squeezes her throat. Finally, they reach a large room in one of the lowest points of the mansion. Large

maps cover the walls. Pins mark points on each and every map. An expansive table takes up the center of the room, and multiple ancient volumes lie open over its service. It's as though she's strolled into history and every underground war room from every world war documentary she's ever seen.

Maybe it's fitting to be here since they stand on the cusp of the end of all things. If she could move, her teeth might be chattering, her body might be trembling.

But Maddy still can't move. A shadowy figure turns toward them, and Maddy recognizes him.

At the far end, Malcolm Merrick waits, a snake poised for a deadly attack. His eyebrows meet over the bridge of his nose, and dark hatred burns in his eyes.

Heavily armed cult warriors surround him, each one wearing a Malcolm-matching snarl.

She scrambles to try to put together an attack spell.

Balls of fire... Brimstone... Lightning... Anything...

But nothing happens, and Malcolm closes the distance between them.

Sylvan pulls Maddy into the middle of the war room and stands her there. He releases Maddy, and she remains there, unable to move, barely able to keep her balance. Sylvan takes a step to the side, and she tries to watch him through her peripheral vision.

Malcolm studies Sylvan. "I see keeping her bound has exacted a toll. Anything left of the amplifier?"

Sylvan holds up a crystal just as it dissolves to ash in his hand. Sweat glitters on his upper lip. "She fought the whole way, but it held enough to get her here. All of what...five minutes?" He shakes his head. "If she'd been any stronger...any more practiced, the amplification crystal wouldn't have been enough to hold the spell at all, and we don't have another." He grimaces. "She's your problem now."

Malcolm chuckles. "So she is. Release her to me."

Amplification crystal? Is it something like the pendant Caleb wears? Maddy works the information in her mind. Stones amplifying self-control and crystals amplifying magic. It makes sense, doesn't it? She glances from Sylvan to Malcolm and back again. They don't have another one.

The straitjacket of magic around her loosens as the crystal ash settles on the floor, and Maddy wiggles her fingers to test her ability to move. She grimaces as she reaches for her magic, and nearly laughs when she can feel it just out of reach.

Sylvan moves to a chair which rests against the perimeter wall, and he takes a seat, practically sagging. "I hope you've brought enough warriors."

Maddy wants to argue with Malcolm, warn him of her strength, but Sylvan had incapacitated her with the crystal.

Malcolm glances around him, his look encompassing all the warriors he has. "I don't require them."

Sylvan snickers. "Don't you plan to fight her?"

Malcolm arches an eyebrow. "Of course. I intend to put her in her place."

Sylvan frowns at him. "You're going to risk everything on your ego?"

A burst of foul air gusts through the war room, making the corners of the maps on the walls flap in the wind. It swirls in tighter circles until it dances as a whirlwind on the table, turning pages in the tomes.

A smile splits Malcolm's face as the display continues.

Abruptly, an alarm sounds through the mansion, and a beast appears on the threshold. "They've breached the mansion." The beady eyes cut to Maddy. "They're looking for her."

Malcolm turns to Sylvan. "Take my guards and target her mate. He's weak and human now. End him."

Maddy bites her bottom lip to keep from crying out. Sylvan doesn't do much more than give Malcolm a curt nod. He gestures to the guards surrounding Malcolm, and they all race out of the war room.

How could Malcolm be such a strategist? He sent all his support away,

and he's completely ignoring how dangerous Maddy could be. His foolishness will be his downfall.

Maddy doesn't move yet. She wants him to believe she's still fighting the spell.

He approaches her, slowly, carefully, warily. He draws a long blade from a sheath on his belt and lifts it as though he means to stab her. The metal glints in the light of the war room as he moves closer. But he doesn't bring the blade down. Instead, he holds the point up to her cheek, rocking the metal back and forth until it bites into her skin.

She wants to cry out, but she doesn't let her reaction show through.

"We would have made an impressive duo—the first of our kind." He says it as though he's musing aloud. "It's a shame it must end now."

Maddy doesn't flinch as he raises the knife high over her. She tests the weakening bonds holding her, hoping it's enough.

Malcolm brings the blade down hard and fast in a killing blow, victory glinting in his eyes.

But she darts to the side, her vampire speed making her little more than a blur.

He cries out when he slices through empty air.

Maddy grins, turns, and jumps behind him. She slams her fist into Malcolm's back, sending him tripping forward. "Not as helpless as you think. Am I, Malcolm?"

A string of curses burst from his mouth. He sprints toward her, slashing at the air, aiming for her but she's too fast. His blade slices nothing but air. Malcolm's grunts echo in the war room, and he glances to the exit.

"No help now," Maddy growls, shoving him backward. "They're all out there."

Malcolm whirls and charges at her once more.

She leaps out of his way. "What are you going to do? Call them back to help you like the coward you are?"

“I don’t need them,” he snaps. He presses his hands together and then widens his hands. “I have the supernatural power gifted to me by the Archangel Raphael. Why would I need them?”

A push slams into Maddy’s chest, and she raises her own hands to counter his magic. She slices through the attack, and Malcolm howls as his powers snap back into him. He stumbles backward.

She rushes him again, but he swings his fist and clips Maddy with a right hook. Without pausing, she throws an uppercut with the opposite hand, missing Malcolm’s chin as he anticipates and moves out of the way. He moves into her space then she brings her right hand against Malcom’s temple.

His eyes bulge as the impact forces a grunt from his body. He stumbles back, but the eyes that rise flash with a new surge of hatred. “Not today.”

A thousand stabbing sensations from invisible knives roll over Maddy, and she winces, trying to turn away from the hits.

Malcolm launches himself backward. “You’ll never reach Orion. Don’t you understand this?”

“You won’t win.” She leaps up into the air and brings her hands down.

He poofs into the corner of the room. “Orion will release the Eldritch, and he will bring order to this chaotic world.” He flicks his fingers and sends a handful of maps off the walls. “Humans don’t deserve to live.” His mocking laugh echoes in the cavernous room. “Caleb will die.”

Maddy's hands turn to fists and she chases him into the corner.

“Caleb will die, you foolish girl. In fire and terror. Orion will pull him apart limb by limb.” Malcolm laughs and laughs, deflecting each of her strikes. “As we hasten the Eldritch into our realm.”

The image of Caleb being torn apart ravages her mind, and she shakes her head from side to side. “Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.” Then she understands. “Get out of my head, you monster.”

He disappears, but his voice echoes in the space. “Ah, yes, monsters will rule this realm, consuming humanity, piece by piece.” Layers of cackling,

mocking sounds send a tumult in Maddy's heart. "It will be a paradise."

"A paradise of Orion's design is no paradise at all," Maddy yells, searching the shadows. "We'll never let it happen."

Malcolm appears at the end of the table, his eyes gleaming as he studies the books spread out before him. He raises his glowing hands over them. Webs of power burst out of his hands, zapping Maddy over and over.

She raises her arms to block him and draws a raging river of warlock power inside of her. With a shout, she brings them down and stomps her foot at the same time. A concussive blast explodes out of her, throwing Malcolm back into the wall behind him. His eyes widen as he slides down the wall.

This time, Maddy laughs. "Didn't expect that, did you?"

He snarls and jumps to his feet. "You'll pay for that!"

Maddy crouches, ready to launch herself at the evil man. "You'll be the one who pays!"

Footsteps echo in the corridor outside the war room. They both hesitate for a half-second as Quinn appears in the doorway.

She skids to a halt between Malcolm and Maddy. "It's my fight now!"

Maddy waves Quinn away. "Get out of here. Let me handle this!"

"No," Quinn shrieks. "I will take vengeance for Ileana. I'll have his head." She charges Malcolm but stops before she runs into him. She sweeps her leg over the ground, knocking Malcolm down where she pounces on him.

Quinn's hands disappear into a blur as she pounds Malcolm into the stone floor.

Maddy studies the duo, but somewhere, out there, she can hear Caleb calling her name. The image of him being torn into pieces flashes in her mind once more, and she flees the underground room.

They *must* find Orion.

No matter where he's hiding in this mansion.

They *must* stop him before he can do anything to put their world in danger.

She darts out, moving faster than she's ever gone before. She still has the stake. She just needs to find Orion to end him. Up the stairs, Maddy reaches the main floor.

But she stops the moment she enters the main room. Her heart plummets. Her chest constricts.

There's an army of evolved shifters, filling the hall....

And Caleb's on the other side, fighting them one by one.

Shit.

CHAPTER 26

CALEB



A burst of movement at the far end of the main hall of the mansion snags Caleb's attention away from the half-rhino shifter's fighting. He trips as he looks and narrowly misses being rammed by the giant horn on the hybrid beast's face.

Maddy!

His mate's alive, and she's well. Does she still have the stake?

A snort brings him back to the maniac of a rhino creature. The beast is half-shifted somehow, as though the magic within him hasn't quite taken hold all the way. He paws at the ground then charges Caleb, the floor quaking beneath them. The hardwood creaks, and the building shakes. Caleb leaps out of the way of the marauding creature, leaping over him.

"Not today, fellow," Caleb yells.

Cora appears at his side with a grin. "What he said!"

Caleb grasps his pendant and draws a burst of magic into himself. When he sends it out, he unravels the spell holding the rhino shifter, and the being drops to the ground, writhing.

Cora stops in the middle of the great hall beside him. "What's up with rhino-guy?"

Caleb scowls as he studies the shifter. "I think the spell is releasing him. Or maybe it's making it so he can't exactly shift."

The sound of running footsteps brings Caleb around toward the grand staircase. Three elk bound down the steps, trumpeting as they approach.

Cora leaps at them, landing on the back of the largest of the three. Her smile stretches from ear to ear as the leader peels off from the tiny mini-herd, careening into the parlor.

Caleb gives chase and follows the elk and Cora through the sitting room, the study, and the formal dining room. Fine dinnerware falls from the shelves lining the walls and crashes on the floor. He rubs his hands together and sends another burst of magic through the giant elk.

Cora leaps from the back. Almost immediately, the elk becomes a man.

“I’ve got to get to Maddy,” Caleb yells to Cora and sprints back toward the great hall. When he arrives, he finds Maddy amid a small horde, beating them back. A wolf, a bear, and something Caleb doesn’t recognize all go flying out from Maddy’s position.

Her warlock powers must be growing.

Battle by battle, little by little, Caleb and Maddy work their way toward each other. Cora reappears, and she stops in front of a shifter in mostly human form.

His long strands of hair down the back of his head seem to mark him as some kind of hyena shifter. His random raucous laughter doesn’t dispel Caleb’s guess.

“You got this?” he calls to Cora.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it,” she yells back.

But the beast jumps toward her, shifts mid-air, and knocks her to the ground, snarling and snapping in her face before she can throw him off.

Cora catches his muzzle in her hands, and Caleb streaks toward her.

“No, I’ve got this,” she sing-songs over her shoulder.

Caleb slows. Behind him, the fighting continues.

Cora throws the shifter aside and leaps back to her feet. She turns to face the creature, and they circle one another. She peers into its eyes, drawing the

hyena in with her vampire hypnosis. The line of hair on its back relaxes, and finally, she reaches for his ears. When she scratches behind the shifter's ears, their circling halts, and as he yawns, she puts him to sleep.

Cora glances up. "What now?"

"I don't—"

"How about that troll-tree-thing behind you?" Her voice gets louder at the end.

Caleb whirls and drives his palm into the center of the attacking monster's trunk, sensing it stumbling back. Cora positions herself beside him, and they charge toward Maddy, punching and kicking. When they reach Maddy, she's standing over two shifters, and her chest heaves.

"Do you still have it?"

Maddy's eyebrows pinch. "I have it." She lifts the edge of her shirt, and the stake rests in her waistband. "Where's Orion?"

Caleb looks around, hating that he doesn't have the answer.

"We can't keep doing this," Maddy pants.

"The battles have been hard all over," Cora answers. "One falls and two more show up."

Caleb curses and scans the battles all over the front lawn of the mansion. The sounds of more fighting come from inside the mansion. They aren't winning. Ending Orion is the only way to win this. His skin stings from the scratches all over him.

Maddy lays her hand on Caleb's forearm. "What is it?"

Caleb's powers pulse through him. "We can't hold them off much longer, and we can't pretend we're going to win." His fingers twitch, and he imagines himself sending a burst of energy through their enemies. "We have to find Orion and use the weapon."

"But we don't know where he is."

"Yet. We don't know *yet*," Cora interjects.

"He has to be hidden somewhere here," Maddy agrees.

At the crest of a hill to the east, a pack of wolves appear. Their howls reverberate through the valley. It's Isabelle, Kade, and Land! The Archivists must have let the werewolf clans know about the battle here. Between them and the flying warriors, maybe they could hold their own long enough to find Orion and drive the stake through his chest.

Caleb wants it so badly he can nearly taste it. He grits his teeth.

At the pinnacle of the low cliff, Isabelle lifts a sword. *Excalibur!* She's carrying the magical sword—the queen-maker. It glints in the sunrise light, and an orange glow surrounds them.

Cora grins. “Well, that’s a good sign.”

Maddy laughs and throws herself into another enemy.

The werewolves and the accompanying pack of wolves gallop toward the battlefield, slicing down enemies as they leap from rock to rock, making their way down into the valley.

Alec darts along the edge of the fighting line, and he waves toward the reinforcements as Caleb, Maddy, and Cora hurry to meet the canine warriors.

However, instead of joining up with Caleb, Maddy, and Cora, Isabelle starts toward the other side of the valley. She lifts her hands once more. “We’ll take care of the shifters! Find Orion!” She sends her blade through the center of another beast. “End this now!”

As the shifter tumbles to the ground in two pieces, Isabelle throws her head back and howls her triumph. The others join her, and the piercing wail echoes through Caleb’s bones, stirring another jolt of energy through him. He could level the valley, but it would kill them all—good and evil, alike.

That’s not an option.

“Where is he?” Maddy yells, touching the stake under her shirt.

Caleb doesn’t answer, and Cora hypnotizes another shifter into a long nap. All around them shifters drop, and dead Fae litter the lawn.

Nearby, one of the shifters glances toward a spot on a rocky outcropping. It snorts at the shifter beside it, and the shifter looks to the same place. They

jostle one another.

Is Orion up there?

How can they make it up there?

Caleb spots the edges of a miniskirt flapping in the wind overhead. Gabby! Colt isn't far behind her.

Caleb waves toward her as she flies overhead, and she circles back. "Gabby! I need to get up there!"

She spirals overhead, her head swiveling between the rock ledge and Caleb. She dips down and Colt follows. Caleb lifts his hands and Gabby scoops him up into her arms. Colt grabs Maddy, and they start toward the rocky outcropping.

They drop the two of them on the ground. Caleb's surprised to see the ledge is nearly as big as a three-bedroom house. It's completely empty, devoid of anyone. However, there's the front façade of a concrete bunker-like house, flush with the cliff. A metal door is to one side of the wall. It's thick, as though it's a bomb-proof door, a small window in the center.

"Going back for Cora," Gabby yells before diving toward their best vampire friend. "See you on the other side."

Colt nods to them both without speaking. When they reach the ground, he uses his wing and slams into a row of shifters, and Gabby scoops up Cora.

Caleb stops watching Gabby and Colt, and he turns to face the rock wall, unwilling to let his hopes up too high. It's unlikely Orion's in there by himself.

Maddy elbows him. "Do you think he's in there?"

"In the bunker?" Caleb asks.

"Yeah."

He coils his muscles. "Only one way to find out: let's go."

They slink toward the entrance. When they reach the window, Caleb rubs a clean spot into the pane of glass, and he studies the main room. It's completely empty inside, but lights flicker on the walls of the corridor at the

rear of the room. There's no way to get in outside of the metal hatch.

He gestures toward Maddy. "It's clear."

She glances over her shoulder as Gabby drops Cora on the rock ledge. Cora tucks her legs and rolls as she lands. When she pops up, she scrubs her hand over her face. "Not my favorite way to travel," she mutters. "What are you two waiting for?"

"For you," Maddy says. "Come on."

Caleb turns the wheel on the bomb door, cringing with each clang of internal mechanics. There isn't any way to sneak in. They have no choice.

We have no choice.

They have to find Orion, they have to use the stake, and they have to end this all. The hinges creek as the door swings outward. They creep into the large foyer. Noises come from a room beyond, but bodies litter the ground. Splotches of ash cover the floor, burned places speak of the horrendous things done inside the bunker.

Maddy shudders. "What is he doing in here?"

Cora gingerly taps a small pile of ash and scrunches her nose. "Nothing good."

Caleb says nothing, pressing toward the rear of the room. He has one mission, one way out. They can't wait any longer.

"Do you have the stake ready?" Caleb rasps. "We're only going to have one chance at this."

She lifts her shirt once more. "Yeah, I still have it. I know what's at stake." She cringes at the irony of the word. "I know what we have to do."

Cora slips past them and moves from the first room into the second. She gasps.

Caleb darts in and stops short as he takes in the contorted bodies. Many have been burned, partially incinerated. Two piles fill one corner: wings without bodies and bodies without wings.

Caleb presses a hand to his mouth and bites back a gag. The stench of

burned flesh sears his nose. “He’s a monster.”

Cora says nothing. Tears glitter on Maddy’s cheeks.

A scream echoes, emanating from the end of the corridor before them. A stuttering voice begs to be freed. Whimpering and crying meets their ears.

“He’s experimenting on supernaturals now,” Caleb rasps, horrified.

Maddy grimaces, and the muscles work in her cheeks. “He already worked his way through the shifters. You saw how contorted and messed up some of them were.”

Cora sighs. “Some of them were stronger than I’ve ever seen before.”

Caleb curses and darts toward the corridor. When he reaches the edge, he glances back. “You don’t have to come.”

Cora jerks her chin toward him. “Shut up.”

Maddy sadly shakes her head as she studies the bodies in the corner. “You know we do. I’m not letting you do this alone, Caleb.” She turns to him. “I love you too much to let you save the world on your own.”

Cora shrugs. “Ditto.”

Emotions swell in Caleb’s chest, but he doesn’t say anything else. He can’t. It’s now or never.

One step becomes ten, and he’s at the end of the corridor with Maddy and Cora close behind. Caleb sticks his head into the room where Orion’s bent over a supernatural strapped into a bed in the middle of a large testing area. The cot looks like something from a middle of the century sanitarium, the kind of thing used in shock therapy. Large metal monoliths surround the bed, and it reminds Caleb fleetingly of reading about human sacrifices in the middle of Stonehenge.

Sensors scream and display flash information all around. Malcolm set this up for him. He must have. Malcolm deserves everything he’s got coming to him, too.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Orion straightens, but he doesn’t turn around. “I expected you much sooner.”

The trio doesn't answer as the mutilated and unrecognizable creature on the bed whimpers.

"If you'd been here sooner, maybe all those winged creatures would still be alive." He turns slowly then and sneers at them. "I had to entertain myself somehow."

Caleb draws a rush of magic, and it fills his body, fueled by anger and vengeance. He points toward Orion, ready to send a stream of energy sailing toward the evil leader. His necklace warms against his chest.

He squeezes his eyes closed...

And nothing happens.

Again, Caleb tries. His pendant burns his skin.

Still nothing.

Maddy mutters something under her breath, and she leans toward him, too. "Nothing's happening."

Cora steps into the room, but she freezes and her eyes bulge. "Can't, can't."

Orion chuckles, the sound evil. "Do you really believe I would be here, testing magical creatures without some kind of protection in place?"

"Dampeners," Cora rasps. "He's. Using. Dampeners." She cries out as though she's being crushed. "Get out. Get out."

But Caleb can no longer move.

Maddy's face scrunches, tears roll down her cheeks, but she doesn't move either.

Orion shakes his head. "You imagine the bunker is to keep people out." He points to Maddy, and the edge of her shirt lifts. The stake slips out of her waistband and floats toward Orion. "Hmm. So nondescript. What a simple weapon for such a much-storied purpose." He extends his hand, and the weapon lands in his palm. "I will destroy it, and with it, every hope you had."

He closes his hand, but nothing happens to the stake.

Orion frowns and tilts his head to the side. The latches unlatch from

around the supernatural test subject, and Orion pushes the body from the cot. He hooks probes to it and throws a switch. The lights in the bunker dim.

Yet nothing happens to the stake. It remains intact.

Again, Orion attempts to destroy the weapon. Finally, he turns to Maddy. “Perhaps I cannot.” Finally, he looks to Maddy. “But you can.”

“I. Would. Never,” she grunts. “I. Won’t. Help. You.”

He points to her, and a scream breaks from her mouth like a raging river through a canyon.

Caleb winces as the sound nearly shatters his bones. His resolve to ruin Orion strengthens as his heart begins to break. It’s his fault. This is all his fault.

Caleb roars, pulling magic into him. Yet none of them can do anything.

They’re still frozen in place, and Maddy’s tortured screams echo through the bunker and over the mountain.

Orion has the upper hand.

And Caleb’s responsible.

None of them can use any of their powers.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He’d led them right into a trap.

Their failure is all his fault.

CHAPTER 27

MADELEINE



Maddy takes a deep breath as she recalls her training.

Pain is a flame, burning as a candle beside her, and she pours every sensation into the wax of the candle before closing it into a box. Pain is a feeling to be felt but should not be handed control over her.

Her screams lessen, as she distances herself from the feelings. Pain is something to be endured, it's a means to an end. Within three breaths, she's centered within a peace she never remembers having achieved before. She wills Caleb to understand.

None of them can speak, they're all still trapped by the dampeners and bound by Orion's magic. Even so, with Maddy's new vampire constitution, it's made it easier to distance herself from the suck.

Orion's magic rushes over her in waves, spreading through her, working to find a chink in her resolve. But the mental benefit of vampirism must not be something Orion's considered.

She takes another deep breath. She will not scream again. She will not give Orion the satisfaction of seeing her lose control once more. Better to endure than give the fiend what he wants.

Maddy knows she must get the weapon back, and once more, she considers how having vampire strength may yet work in her final favor. It may be the only way she'll have the strength to drive the stake through Orion.

So, she waits, patiently.

Now silently.

Caleb stands beside her, frozen in place, but his face wears a worry over a torture she no longer feels, and she wishes she could tell him: better her than him. Resolve would be so much harder if it was *his* torture she had to endure rather than her own. She turns her head ever so slightly.

Their gazes meet.

Orion barks a laugh. “Ah! I understand now.”

The magical attack on Maddy disappears.

Then he turns to Caleb and wiggles his fingers. “The way to extricate her compliance is through you.”

“No, no, no,” Maddy whispers. “Please. No.”

Caleb shoots her a warning glance. Inside, she feels as though she’s screaming, convulsing, and begging Orion to let him go. But Caleb’s whole body tenses, his hands become fists, fastened to his sides. He clamps his teeth shut with a snap, but a pain-filled groan works its way out of him.

Orion places the metal stake at the end of the cot, near where the tortured supernatural’s feet had been.

Caleb’s eyes widen, and his teeth chatter as Orion whispers a spell which lifts Caleb into the air, carrying him to the cot and holding him down on it. The fasteners latch around his body, and his grimace increases, his lips peeling back and exposing his teeth.

Caleb convulses, shaking the small bed from side to side, and he cries out as the torture increases. A long series of expletives escape between his clenched teeth.

If Maddy had been crying before, her tears are now gut-wrenching sobs. It’s positively agonizing to see Caleb in so much pain of his own.

“Please, let him go,” Maddy begs, moving her lips as much as she can.

“Don’t,” Caleb snaps. “Maddy!”

“Let him go, Orion,” she whispers through clenched teeth. “It’s me you

want.”

Orion smiles, a sickly, ugly expression. “The only way I’ll let him go is if you use your power to help me and destroy that weapon.” He takes a deep breath as though warming to his subject. “Once the weapon is destroyed, I’ll achieve my vision of monsters filling the paradise I imagine—monsters of my own creation.”

Maddy blinks away another rush of tears. “Like the beasts in the valley?” she asks, finding the hold on her has lessened.

“My magnificent creations,” he murmurs. Then he whirls toward Maddy. “And you will help me reshape the world’s destiny and remake it in the image of the glorious Eldritch.” He twists his hand in Caleb’s direction, and he arches on the cot as another scream seeps from him. “Once I succeed, no one will stop me, and you have the ability to join me in the creation. You could be my queen.”

“Impossible,” Maddy hisses.

Caleb moans, rocking back and forth as the bed creaks beneath him and the fastener straps pop. “Don’t help...him, Maddy.”

“Shame you cannot move at all,” Orion sneers, then turns, moving closer to Maddy. “Agree to help me, and I’ll let you go right now. Perhaps I’ll retrieve the entire obsidian and merge it with Eldritch once again. It will be whole again.”

Maddy glances at Caleb. He’s still writhing in pain, and she can’t do anything about it. She’s rooted to the spot, unable to move. Maddy leans to the side, trying to break free of the spells Orion keeps casting.

Orion turns toward the remaining maps on the walls. “Eldritch will spread through this realm...” he murmurs excitedly. “I’ll continue fashioning my creatures.”

The weapon rests beside Caleb’s leg. It’s not that far. If Maddy can break free of the magic, in a blink, she could reach the stake and drive it into Orion’s heart. As Orion gestures to one groupings of pins on the map,

Maddy's able to take a tiny half-step toward Caleb.

Caleb glances at her, blinks, then groans a little louder. The pendant around his neck turns bright red as though it's been heated in a fireplace. He must be trying to tap into his Van Helsing powers.

Orion turns toward Maddy, and he flicks his wrist again to send another rush of torture through Caleb. Caleb's legs and arms jerk against the straps. His teeth chatter.

Orion nods toward her mate. "When you're ready to help me, I'll release him. All you have to do is destroy the stake."

Maddy chews her bottom lip. "If I can't reach it, how am I supposed to destroy it? I don't know how to use my powers like that." More to the point, if she can reach the weapon, how will she be able to free either one of them without magic? Caleb can't use his, and she can't use hers.

Orion sniffs. "Don't be silly. You're a warlock with powers. You only need to send a burst of magic into the stake, expand it, and shatter it."

Maddy adopts a thoughtful look, trying to convince Orion she's considering his offer. "What if I help you? Will you contort me into something awful? Or kill me?"

"Not if you agree to help me." He gestures to the map, pointing to the mountain range where they are right now. "Eldritch will spread across from here, slowly taking over the realm."

Footsteps echo in the outer rooms of the bunker, and a woman with long, matted hair bursts in. "Orion! You will pay."

"Who is she?" Maddy rasps.

Caleb's eyes widen. "Sylvan's wife!"

Maddy whirls to stare as Sylvan's wife rushes at Orion. She presses her hands together and brings them apart. Orion falls back as though a series of spells slam into him. More follow.

"Cursed Fae wench," Orion bellows.

"You! You are the one who did this." She gestures to herself. "Malcolm

kidnapped me and tortured me.” She tumbles to the ground as she weaves another spell, throwing it at Orion. “And now my husband is dead. He died at my feet to bring your cursed world to ours.” She slips to her knees and then the ground. “Oh, Sylvan.”

The bunker shakes as the words escape through her lips. The whole room flickers and then the walls seem to melt as though the magic surrounding them all is failing.

A moment later, a burned and battered Sylvan bursts in. He spies his wife on the ground, and he turns fury-filled eyes toward Orion. “You!”

Orion scowls at Sylvan. “You’re just another Fae peon in a world moving on without you.”

“Sylvan!” his wife cries out. “Thank the gods.”

“You don’t have control over me anymore, Orion,” Sylvan bellows. “I’ll stop you.”

“Think again.” With a sharp wave of his hands, he turns his back toward Sylvan and studies the maps once more. “Your freedom makes no difference to my plans.”

Sylvan freezes, his muscles straining. Maddy returns to fighting her own bonds, realizing they’re not any closer to escaping.

She stills again as Sylvan’s lips pucker. His hands twitch. Then he charges at Orion’s back. “You’ll pay!” Orion whirls and takes a step forward as Sylvan’s mouth twists into a grim smile. “It takes all your strength to hold them in place, doesn’t it? You’re defenseless and losing control of those possessed.”

“Preposterous!” Orion yells as he scampers away. As he flees, he points to Sylvan, obviously trying to put his spell back on the marauding Fae.

Sylvan leaps toward Orion, barely missing his wife’s abuser. “We were never meant to be apart. She’s my mate, my queen, and you stole her so you could blackmail me.” He swings at the retreating Orion, clipping his chin.

The walls melt even more as the magic drips off them. Maddy shares a

look with Caleb and then Cora. The bunker quakes once more. Sylvan is keeping Orion distracted.

Orion tosses a spell at Sylvan, and the skin on Sylvan's cheeks bubble up as though he's been tossed into an oven. But he still chases Orion.

Maddy struggles against the dampeners and the magical spells. Maybe if she'd taken time to eat again or... or...

No, she's not giving in. There's hope yet. Pushing forward is the only option.

She's able to take two steps, one right after the other, and she's jubilant. Their bonds are weakening. Five more steps bring her almost closer enough to the cot. She reaches for the stake. The dark metal sears her palm, but she doesn't release it.

Sylvan leaps on Orion's back, wrapping his long fingers around the Fae's throat. But Orion spins and slams Sylvan into the map wall.

"Let me out, Maddy," Caleb rasps. "We can take him."

Maddy considers the stake and then Caleb, trying to decide which to do first. She pounces on the straps on Caleb's legs, releases them, and hurries to his arms, releasing those, too.

Caleb sits up, but he wobbles slightly before hopping from the cot. He nods toward her. "You ready?"

"Yeah," she whispers. "I'm ready."

Cora's managed one step toward them, but she's not as free as either Maddy or Caleb is. If they can attack Orion together, maybe the magic will weaken enough for Cora to gain her freedom, too.

But they can't wait.

It's now or never.

Now or never...

"On three?" Caleb says.

Maddy nods. With her free hand, she squeezes Caleb's. "On three."

"One..." Caleb begins the countdown, his pulse pounding in the base of

his neck.

Maddy hefts the stake to her shoulder.

“Two...”

Maddy rocks back and forth as her throat dries.

“Three!”

They rush toward Sylvan and Orion as Orion dumps the limp Sylvan to the ground in a heap. Maddy swings the stake at Orion’s head, striking it against his temple.

One by one, Orion’s spells fail.

The binds lessen and the magical dampening spells slip away, too. Caleb’s pendant turns bright red once more, and energy bolts out of him toward Orion. He stumbles backward.

He points toward the metal stake, and Maddy feels it begin to lift out of her hands.

“No, you don’t.” She yanks it back.

Orion tries again.

Again, they fight over the object.

But Maddy yanks it back, wrapping her fingers around it tightly. The vampire strength amplifies her warlock magic, and she maintains her hold on the weapon.

Behind her, Caleb urges her forward.

They’re so close. Maddy grits her teeth, sure that their victory is within reach.

“Now, Maddy. Now!” Caleb roars.

Maddy swings the stake like a bat, sending Orion reeling back into the wall of maps, tearing them from their places. Beside them, Sylvan groans and climbs to his feet. He rushes toward them and slams into Orion, knocking him back.

And then Cora’s beside them, too. Sylvan and Cora shove Orion against the wall, and Maddy hefts the stake high. She aims the point at the center of

Orion's chest, and with a cry, she drives it into his chest.

Bones crack beneath it as it punctures skin and ribs. Behind her, Caleb grabs the end of the stake and helps her drive it all the way through him into the wall behind.

It never would have worked if she hadn't been a vampire, and if they hadn't been together...

"More, Caleb. We have to be sure," Maddy pleads.

"Three, two, one," he answers.

Harder, they push.

The cork board behind Orion splits, and the crack shoots the top, splitting in two and falling to the floor. The cinder blocks behind the corkboard crunch and divide, sending fractures spider-webbing out from behind him.

Orion's eyes widen, and he grabs the enchanted stake in his chest. "Impossible."

Maddy tries to drive it in farther, but Caleb pulls her back from Orion.

"Maddy, come on," he whispers. "Let's get out of here."

Orion begins to shake, his legs stiffening and flailing, but he's not able to get free of the stake.

His eyes turn black, and his fingertips gray. His skin thins, and red veins raise all over his body. His lips turn to charcoal ash. His mouth opens and a burst of wind gusts out of him as he soundlessly squirms.

Sylvan and Cora release him and scurry away from their shared enemy. A clatter's going on behind them, but Maddy doesn't turn around; she can't move at all. Orion's dying, and she doesn't want to miss any of it.

Orion's body slowly disintegrates and then explodes into a thousand pieces, sending a concussive blast out from him, through the bunker and outward. Maddy leaps out of the way of the particles from Orion's body, but she still doesn't take her eyes from the barren stake in the wall. She lands nearly at the entrance to the room.

"Look out!" Caleb yells, nearly slamming into the large table in the

middle of the war room.

Maddy cries out as something punctures her skin and slides into her neck.
When she turns to face the traitor, she gasps.

It's Kenna...holding a long syringe.

Maddy's vision turns fuzzy, and her knees buckle.

As she slips to the floor, her thoughts tumble over each other.

Kenna has been against them this the whole time.

I'm so sorry, Caleb.

CHAPTER 28

CALEB



“Kenna!” Caleb growls. “What did you do?”

Kenna puts the lid back on the needle and tuck the syringe in the back pocket of her pants, like it’s the most common thing in the world. Maybe it is...for her. Constantly playing with people’s destinies. The remaining members of the Order collect behind her. There aren’t many left.

Two of them lift Maddy between them and take her out of the bunker. Caleb wants to run after her, but Kenna catches his arm, stopping him.

“Tell me,” Caleb turns to her. “What did you do to Maddy?” *My Maddy.*

She shrugs. “It took us forever to find you up here in this secret bunker.”

Caleb rounds on his aunt, pointing at her face. “Tell me what you’ve done, Kenna.”

She wraps her hands around Caleb’s finger and brings his hand downward. “You’ll understand soon enough, but I promise you, Maddy is well and safe.”

He curses under his breath and catches up to the two Order members who carry her. “She’s *my* mate. Let me carry her.”

They allow him to lift Maddy into his arms without a fight.

Caleb studies Maddy’s cheeks, her neck, and relishes the feel of her against him. It may not be completely over yet, but they’ve ended Orion... It’s as good as finished. He wishes she was awake to celebrate with him.

He studies the other Order members. “Where are we going?” he asks them.

“To the mansion. We’re all gathering there.”

Caleb takes a breath, afraid of the answer to the question he has to ask. “How many have we lost?”

“We don’t know yet.”

Neither of them speaks again as they lead him out the front of the bunker and to a transport vehicle. Carefully, Caleb places Maddy in the back and climbs in beside her. “I take it you plan to drive us back down into the valley?”

The taller of the two Order members nods. “Trust us. It’ll be okay.”

“Sure,” Caleb answers, glad to be near Maddy once more. Though he doesn’t trust them at all.

He thinks he hears Kenna’s voice outside the transport. He’s so weary, he’s not sure he cares anymore. Maybe his scheme-y aunt is going along, too. Caleb doesn’t care.

The two gently close the rear doors of the transport. A moment later, the engine rumbles to life, and Caleb rocks back and forth as the vehicle moves away from the bunker.

He strokes Maddy’s cheek, tracing the trail of her tears made through the dust on her skin, and she takes a deep breath and sighs. Even unconscious, she’s worried. It’s a sound he recognizes almost as easily in her as in himself now.

Now that the danger has passed, weariness pours through Caleb, and he’s not sure he’ll be able to carry Maddy into the now-conquered mansion. Still, he won’t let anyone do it. He takes her limp form into his arms as they arrive and carries her into the mansion.

The sun beats down overhead. It feels like it should be days after they portaled here, but by the position of the sun, it’s only been a few hours. A breeze blows through, pushing the earlier clouds aside. Even the spires on the

mansion don't look as menacing.

No one speaks, and the whole of the valley is silent. Order members gather the dead and move them into piles according to their associations. They may have won the battle, but it cost them all something. As Orion's control ebbs, so many more will begin to wake up and find the mess of their lives left behind.

Much like Sylvan and his wife. They'll all need more than a little help after they recover from their injuries. They all will.

Kenna joins him as Caleb walks into the mansion, carrying Maddy into the living room and carefully laying her on the couch. Caleb adjusts her positioning on the cushions and fusses with her clothes, but she doesn't move other than her chest rising and falling in deep, even breaths.

"How did the battle go down here?" Caleb asks Kenna after he takes a seat on an upholstered cushion next to the couch. "It looks like we lost a lot of our people."

Kenna grimaces. "The numbers are better than they could have been for as outnumbered as we were."

Caleb doesn't add anything else, but he already feels the deaths as wounds on his soul. Ones he's not sure will ever heal. Moreover, he's not sure they *should* ever heal. Those who made the ultimate sacrifice should be remembered forever.

Kenna takes a deep breath and sighs. "We were losing until Gabby and Colt arrived."

"Gabby was the one who flew us up to the rocky outcropping."

Gabby strolls into the living room with Colt trailing behind her, barely able to fit through the door frames with their wings.

"We made it to the other side," Gabby says. "Didn't we?"

Caleb nods, and he's not sure he can maintain his composure and answer her. She points to Maddy on the couch. "How is she?"

Caleb glances to Kenna, and she gives him a sideways grin.

“She’s fine,” she answers.

Marlowe and Rachel enter the living room from the kitchen. “We brought more of the Order members and that helped turn the tide,” Marlowe says. “Once Orion’s hold started loosening, it made it a lot easier to get others to join the fight.”

Caleb processes Marlowe’s words. “Is everything okay now?”

Marlowe nods. “Better than okay. I’m sorry everything was so wrong before.”

Isabelle, Kade, and Land troop in from outside as well. Isabelle limps slightly, and she shakes her head as she moves into the living room. “We’ve got some nasty shifters out there, but they’re all gathered on the front lawn.” She turns to Kenna. “We have a lot of work ahead of us.”

“Work?” Caleb asks, barely able to hang on to a coherent thought. Each passing minute makes it harder and harder. The long day is catching up to him. “What are you two working on?”

Kenna nods to Isabelle. “I’ve got a working fix. We’re going to start injecting the evolved shifters so they can turn back into what they were before Malcolm and Orion got ahold of them.”

Isabelle nods. “We’re going to help her get everything settled. It’s easier for a shifter to approach a shifter.”

Caleb scowls. “Where did the injection come from?”

Kenna shrugs. “It’s something they created with my help while Malcolm had me captured and made me work with Vera.”

Caleb scans the battle-weary faces. “Has anyone seen Quinn?”

“I’ll get her,” Isabelle says, and she jogs out. When she returns, Quinn marches into the room after her.

“Hey, Caleb,” Quinn says, and her shoulders droop. She’s clearly as exhausted as they all are. She tucks an errant strand of hair behind her ear. “What happened to Maddy?”

“She’s sleeping off our fight in the bunker.” He doesn’t want to tell

anyone that Kenna did something to her, and he doesn't yet know what.

"Did you get him?" Quinn asks.

"Orion?"

She nods slowly.

"We did," Caleb says. He strokes Maddy's cheek. "She drove the stake through his heart, and he broke into a million pieces."

Her chin quivers. "Forever?"

"Forever," Caleb says. It has to be the truth; he can't bear anything else. It's why they went out of the way to find the stake, and it was the only goal they had. It's what they accomplished together—him and Maddy. "He's gone."

The words fall heavy in the room. *He's gone.*

Every exhausted body and tired soul lifts as the weight of Orion's impending attack slips away a little more.

"What happened to Malcolm?" Caleb asks, keeping his gaze on Maddy.

"I killed him," Quinn says, her voice soft but hard.

"Good."

The silence falls again, and no one speaks for a long time. It's too much to consider. What does it mean to live a life without the threat of Orion in it? Caleb's heart swells, and he knows they couldn't have done it without all of these individuals, coming together to accomplish this gargantuan task.

"Couldn't have done this without any of you," he says, his voice rough with emotion. "It's hard to believe it's over."

"It's over," Kenna confirms. She's practically smug as she says it, though, and that grates on Caleb's nerves. She didn't have to do everything she did without getting permission or anything else, but he doesn't have the energy to take her to task again.

The silence spreads once more, and exhaustion floods through Caleb. He adjusts Maddy's legs and sits down on the cushion beneath her legs. He wants to be there when she wakes up.

She's the whole reason they made it to the end of this journey, and he wants to be there when she wakes up to realize what's happened.

Caleb dozes, on and off, and he's not sure how much time passes.

But finally...

Happily...

Maddy sits upright with a gasp, and he gets to tell her they won the way they always knew they would.

Together.

CHAPTER 29

MADELEINE



Maddy bolts upright with a gasp. *Caleb!*

What's happened? Her head swivels. Where is she? She doesn't recognize this place, this living room with ripped curtains, torn carpets, and dirtied couch. But Caleb's sitting at the end of the couch she's sitting on. Her legs are on his lap, and he's squished down in the cushions, snoring lightly. Have they won?

Nobody else is in the room for her to ask. She doesn't want to disturb Caleb, but she needs to know. Did they all die during the fight, and this is the next life? No, that one is unlikely.

So, did they win against Orion? Is it all over?

Wait. Orion. *Orion...*

Images of Orion's last moments flood her mind, and she buries her face in her hands. His hold on Sylvan lessened, and Sylvan distracted Orion so they were able to attack him. Then Orion exploded into a thousand shards while he'd been pinned to the wall beneath the enchanted stake.

That she'd driven into him.

That Caleb had helped her push even farther.

Is it true? Is it over? Moisture floods her eyes, and she blinks rapidly to clear it away before lifting her head before reaching for Caleb and tugging on his elbow.

He snorts and his head pops up. He squints into the light as he frowns at the room, probably trying to figure out what woke him up. When he turns his head, he startles slightly. “Hey, Maddy,” he murmurs. “How are you feeling?”

“You were sleeping.”

“Guess I was.” He grins. “It’s been a busy day.”

She extends her hands toward him, almost afraid to hope. “Is it all over?”

“It’s over.”

His words repeat in her mind. *It’s over. It’s over.*

“Are you sure?”

He squeezes her legs. “We’re sure. They’re all outside, doing cleanup stuff now.”

Cora laughs from the threshold to the right of the sofa before she strides into the room and plops down into an upholstered chair near the end of the couch. “Hard to believe, isn’t it?”

Maddy gestures to the fancy living room they’re in. “Where are we?”

“The mansion in the valley,” Cora answers. “No more fighting, though. Once Orion died, a lot of his minions just sat down where they stood, trying to figure out why they were there at all.”

Caleb shimmies out from beneath Maddy’s legs and moves to her side. He presses his palm to her cheek and smooths her thumb over his cheek. “We did it.”

Maddy throws her arms around him, laughing and crying and babbling. Abruptly, she pulls back from Caleb. “What happened to Sylvan?”

“He’s okay.”

“What about his wife?”

“They’re together.”

Kenna steps into the room this time. She’s got another syringe in her hand, and Maddy eyes it. ““They’re sleeping in one of the rooms upstairs. They’ll be fine.”

“You stay over there with that,” Maddy says.

Kenna glances down to her hand where Maddy’s staring. “Oh, this. It’s for the shifters out there. We’re helping them turn into what they were before. Not evolved. Not mutated. I’ve able to tweak the formula to suit our needs as they come up.”

“Speaking of that.” Maddy’s hand slips to the back of her neck and scowls at Caleb’s aunt. “What did you do to me?”

Kenna smiles. “Turned you back into ‘just a’ warlock again.”

“You did what?” Caleb demands. “Without asking? Again? Kenna. You can’t do that—”

Maddy places her hand on Caleb’s forearm. “Don’t.”

Caleb turns to her, and he brings his lips close to her ear. His breath dances over her neck. “Then you’re okay with what she did, Maddy? She should have asked first.”

“Maybe that’s true, but...” For the first time, Maddy takes stock of her body. She’s hungry, but the blood lust is gone. She rubs her forehead, surprised her mind is clearer than it’s been for days. Her feelings aren’t practically insurmountable with a rush of anger behind everything. In fact, she’s feeling normal again, not like she’s got to get busy before the crazy sets in again. “Maybe it’s the best thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

Kenna moves closer. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” Caleb snaps.

But Maddy grins up at her boyfriend’s aunt. “Everything’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” Caleb whispers for her ears alone.

Though she strains to hear him, it makes her grin.

Caleb quirks an eyebrow. “What?”

“I don’t think I have vampire hearing anymore.” She swallows back a rush of tears. “It’s nice.”

Isabelle appears behind Kenna. “Oh, hey, Maddy, you’re awake. Thanks for taking care of Orion.”

Maddy scrambles for something nice to say in return. “Oh, well, thanks for taking care of...of...everything else.”

Isabelle beams at her. “No problem.”

Within a few minutes, the word spreads that Maddy’s awake again, and they all gather in the large living room of the mansion once more.

Maddy swings her legs over the edge of the sofa. When she tries to stand, she sways, and Caleb jumps to his feet beside her.

He slips his arm around her waist. “You okay?”

“More than okay, but I want to say something.”

Caleb turns to the gathering of people. “She wants to say something.”

Maddy laughs. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Caleb pulls her closer. “Oh, I think I’ll be doing a lot of things I don’t have to do for the near future.”

She smooths her hands over his chest and stares up into her eyes. “Oh, yeah?”

“You better believe it.”

The intensity and intimacy of his gaze warms her, and her cheeks heat. “I hope so.”

Cora coughs. “Do you two need a room? I think there’s at least fifty in this house.”

That breaks the mood just enough, and Maddy turns to the collected group. She smiles at Kenna and points to her neck. “Thank you for that. I guess it’s okay that you didn’t ask for permission. I’m glad to have the vampire version of me gone.”

Then she turns to Gabby and Colt. “Thanks for flying us up to the bunker, and for being here. I know you didn’t have to.” Maddy spreads her arms wide. “None of you had to. We couldn’t force you, but we couldn’t have done any of this without all of you.”

Cora tsks. “Of course, they had to. We couldn’t let Orion take over.”

“We all lost so much, gave so much, sacrificed so much...” Maddy’s

voice breaks. “And we’re still here.”

Marlowe studies the ground and then Maddy. “We’re only sorry we didn’t join sooner.”

Rachel nods.

Maddy’s gaze roams over the warriors who stood with them, even when their win hadn’t been assured, hadn’t been promised.

She clears her throat. “None of you ran away. None of you left when we saw the numbers down here. Even outmatched, even overwhelmed, we all made our last stand together.”

Cora zips closer to Maddie and catches her in an embrace. “And we won.”

Maddy wipes the tears from her face and hugs her friend tightly.

“None of us could have won without you and Caleb,” Cora adds. “You did this. Without you, none of this would have gone the way it needed to. You and Caleb saved the world from Orion.”

The others agree, returning their thanks, and before long, all of them are dabbing at their eyes—even Kenna.

Scattered applause turns into a thunderous jubilation, so loud the mansion vibrates with the sound. When Maddy covers her face with her hands, she squeezes her eyes closed as she struggles not to weep. Caleb wraps around them both as they cry, washing the trials from their hearts the only way they can.

Finally, Gabby steps forward. “Well, I think we need to get back to our world. We’re going to have a lot of cleaning up back home.”

Quietly, Gabby and Colt hug Maddy and Caleb before they leave the mansion. Marlowe and Rachel follow. One by one, their allies exit the mansion, returning to their lives and their homes, until only Kenna and Cora are left.

Kenna turns to Cora. “I have to make checks on the shifters out there. Many of them have recovered enough to leave, but there were a few which

were more mutilated than the others.”

Cora nods once. “I’ll help you.”

Then Caleb and Maddy are left alone in the living room as she still stands with his arm around her waist.

“It’s over,” she says, wonder making her whisper.

“It’s all over.”

“What do you mean?” She turns to face him, and he loops his arms around her, clasping his hands behind her.

He smooths her hair back from her face and puts his cheek against hers.

“We’re both human again.”

It takes a moment for the gravity of this truth to sink in.

“No more blood lust?”

He straightens and shakes his head.

“No more super hearing?”

He shakes his head again.

“No more super speed, no more vampire anything?”

He grins. “No.”

“No more undead, huh?”

He chuckles. “We both have beating hearts again.”

“I think I like that most,” she whispers. She loves how he makes her heart pound in their more private moments together. “It’ll be an adjustment.”

“What will?”

“Getting used to being just human again.”

He presses his lips to her forehead before speaking. “Well, you’re still a warlock, and I’m still a hunter with Fae magicking through my veins, so there’s that.”

“True, but that’s going to be normal compared to what we’ve been living lately.”

“Agreed.”

Maddy angles her head up as Caleb leans down. Their lips meet, brush,

caress in a tender, aching touch. It's a touch of love. Of gratitude.

Of anticipation.

Caleb pulls back an inch, a smile hovering at the edges of his beautiful mouth. "You ready to go home?"

"I think so. We should get back to Mercy City and Veritas and then...and then..."

"And then?" he repeats.

Maddy smiles so deeply, it brushes her soul. "And then the rest of our life."

"Together," Caleb breathes, his gaze tender. "Always together."

Hands held tightly, they leave the mansion in the valley where the end of the world...*wasn't*.

EPILOGUE

CALEB



Caleb sips his coffee, grimaces, then puts the panda-shaped cup back down. Although he's appreciated most flavors since returning back to human, even relished them, coffee is still one he can't get behind.

He should've ordered a milkshake, but he wasn't sure his churning stomach could manage.

A hand falls on his shoulder. "I wonder if the original Van Helsing didn't like coffee either."

Caleb startles, his cup clattering on the table, before a grin climbs up his face. He reaches up to squeeze the warm palm as a thumb brushes his neck, sending a shiver skittering down his spine.

Maddy giggles as she slips in the chair across from him, their joined hands coming to rest on the table. "It takes a while to get used to human hearing, doesn't it?"

Caleb doesn't point out the weaker hearing isn't why he jumped. Not when the sounds and smells of the Busy Bean cafe fade away as he focuses on the girl who has his heart and soul.

The girl who battled vampires, Fae, evolved shifters with unwavering courage.

The girl who fought for him just as ferociously.

The girl who's happily moved away from the supernatural world as they

forge a new future.

“How was your class?” she asks, using her free hand to pull the muffin he’s ordered for her closer.

Caleb grins, trying not to focus on the moving muffin. It’ll stress him out too much. “Delightfully boring.”

Maddy grins back. “I love boring.”

“It’s the best,” Caleb chuckles. He rubs his thumb over the back of her hand. “Not that Cora seems to think so.”

“The Queen of vampires is certainly busy,” Maddy says, her voice dropping as she glances at the patrons around them. “I think the truce she’s negotiated with the Order could actually stick around.”

Caleb nods. “Kenna’s optimistic, too.”

Maddy reaches for her muffin, making him tense, only to draw her hand back. “Are you sure you don’t want to join the Order again?”

“You turned down the offer, too,” he points out.

Maddy shakes her head. “You grew up training to be one of them,” she points out. “Kenna’s your aunt. And you two are finally getting along again.”

Caleb arches a brow. He may be repairing his relationship with Kenna, but he knew long ago he’d never return to the Order. Too much has passed. “I told you this is what I want.”

“I just want you to be sure, Caleb,” Maddy says softly, her gaze falling to their clasped hands. “You’ve gone from being one of the Order, to the vampire king, to a powerful descendant of Van Helsing.”

Caleb stills as he realizes Maddy’s trying to give him an out. That she’s worried he’s chosen college and coffee and ordinary for her. He opens his mouth to tell her that’s the furthest from the truth, but Maddy isn’t finished.

“I never chose any of that. And now Quinn’s returned to Purgatory. Sylvan, Alec and the rest of the Fae have returned to their dimension. Caroline has taken over Merrick Group of Industries, determined to bring Ileana out of the coma she’s been left in as she tries to make the company a

power for good.” Maddy shrugs. “Everyone’s returned to where this all started. I was a normal, human girl when you crashed into me outside this cafe.”

Caleb’s heart swells so much it makes his chest tight. This beautiful, wonderful, caring girl, one whose a warlock herself, is making sure this is what he wants.

“One who turned out to be a descendant of Dracula,” he says, squeezing her hand.

She rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean. I never wanted this, you did.”

Rather than answer directly, he pushes the muffin toward her, rolling his own eyes. “Just eat your muffin.” Despite the nerves, he’s glad he chose this moment to do this. Maddy needs to know what she means to him.

Maddy glances at him, chewing her lip, but then picks up the triple choc chip morsel. A faint scraping sound has her looking down. Gasping.

Then stilling.

There, under the red paper muffin case, sits a ring.

“Oh, Caleb,” she breathes, reaching down to pick it up, the muffin forgotten.

It’s a simple promise ring, a small diamond nestled in the heart of a gold rose. Maddy picks it up, her hand trembling just a little, then slips it onto her finger. She looks up at him, her eyes moist and soft. “It’s beautiful.”

Caleb reaches over and takes her hands in both of his, rubbing his thumb over the vow the gold band represents. “This is what I want, Maddy. You. Me. Together.” He presses a kiss to the knuckle above the ring. “Not running, not fighting, not defeating the latest supernatural threat. Just us, actually able to enjoy it.”

“That’s what I want, too,” she whispers, her hands tightening around his.

Caleb stands, bringing her with him, then wraps his arms around her. He smiles. “If things had been different, I would’ve asked you out the day you

crashed into me.”

Maddy’s eyes soften as her lips dance upward. “Unless I asked you out first.”

Caleb chuckles. “I would’ve said yes.”

“I wouldn’t have taken no for an answer,” she shoots back, now grinning.

He sobers, emotion clogging his throat and making his voice thick. “Don’t you see? In either scenario, in any dimension, realm, or universe, we would’ve ended up at this point, Maddy. Together. Me asking you to make it forever.”

“And me saying yes,” she says, her voice husky. “I love you, Caleb.”

“I love you, Maddy.”

They sink into a kiss full of tenderness and emotion. A kiss that honors the trial by fire that brought them here, to this moment. A kiss that captures the tenderness and adoration and passion that defines every beat of their heart.

A kiss brimming with everything to come.

A round of applause bursts around them as the patrons of Busy Bean hoot and holler. Caleb and Maddy pull apart, resting their foreheads together as they smile, grin, then laugh, the sound of their joy weaving through the congratulations and celebration.

It’s normal.

It’s beautiful.

It’s everything.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tamar really struggled writing this bio, in part because it's in third person, but mostly because she hasn't decided whether she's primarily a psychologist who loves writing, or a writer with a lifelong fascination with psychology.

She must have been someone pretty awesome in a previous life (past life regression indicated a Care Bear), because she gets to do both. Beginning her career as a youth worker, then a secondary school teacher, before becoming a school psychologist, Tamar helps children and teens to live and thrive despite life's hurdles like loss, relationship difficulties, mental health issues, and trauma.

As lover of reading, inspired by books that sparked beautiful movies in her head, Tamar loves to write young adult romance. To be honest, it was probably inevitable that her knowledge and love of literature would translate into writing emotion driven stories of finding life and love beyond our comfort zones. You can find out more about Tamar's books at www.tamarsloan.com

A lifetime consumer of knowledge, Tamar holds degrees in Applied Science, Education and Psychology. When not reading, writing or working with teens, she can be found with her husband and two children enjoying country life on their small slice of the Australian bush.

The driving force for all of Tamar's writing is sharing and connecting. In truth, connecting with others is why she writes. She loves to hear from readers and fellow writers. Find her on all the usual social media channels or her website.

