

Somehow, the demons take better to having me in the town than the humans.

For the first few days, Cub and the Teens hound my steps, and as soon as I stop moving, they pounce on me, bring me down, and sprawl over me. I see them coming each time and I make sure I am not pinned, but they quickly train me not to bother, since it only means they will pounce me again.

A few of the human children try it, but I don't hold the same appeal as a mattress for them as I do for the demons.

Cub loses interest within a week, but the Teens are more tenacious, and it's nearly a month before I can walk a day without ending up on my back on the ground.

My situation amuses the humans, but otherwise, I confuse them. They ask questions, I answer, they leave. They return with more questions. They want to know about me, my life, the city, my relationships. I answer the same questions multiple times. Even once they find something for me to do, mainly as a beast of burden carrying heavy materials into places too narrow for a cart, the questions don't stop.

The adult demons keep a wary eye on me from a distance. Even when none of the young demons are present, an adult is watching. They know me as a threat, and trust isn't something they will give easily. I understand them. I watch them too. Despite the reassurances from Moores, I wait for one of them to hunt the humans.

Moores assigns me a small house as a place where I can get away from everyone, but I make little use of it. The questions are no more intrusive than what the scientists asked me when I was their subject, though satisfying these peoples' curiosity makes them happy, instead of sending them looking for ways to test me harder. They pester each other as much as they do me.

After a storm, I help repair damages to the barns, and people joke with me. I quickly get the sense that my inability to understand the humor makes the situation appealing to them. They will tell it, burst out laughing, realize I am not, then explain that the fact that the man didn't realize he was kissing his father is what makes it funny, or that the nanny was actually one of the People in disguise. When I shake my head with a lack of understanding, they laugh again.

We build a new barn to replace the oldest one, then move machinery into it. It is what humans use to process the creatures that provide them with meat, a mix of culling from the pens and kills from the hunting teams. Demons help with carrying the heavier of the machines.

I am introduced to the one the humans call Many Names.

They follow me for days, hiding around buildings, slinking on rooftops that somehow support their weight. Their stalking is clumsy, noisy. The fact I know they are doing it is almost more tiresome than waiting for them to pounce. They weren't in the town when I was a mattress, and this is what I expect this one is attempting, but after I give them multiple chances to pounce on me, and they don't, I realize their intent is more serious.

I wait until the demons are busy with other things. Protect is still watching me. Even if I don't see them, they always watches me, but the others are helping the humans, watching Baby in their hunting pen, Cub in the maze, or escorting the Teens on their hunts. I find a plaza without humans in it and wait. I don't want anyone hurt or buildings damaged by this fight.

With a hiss from behind, it starts.

I turn as they are in the air; they launched themselves from a rooftop. I make eye contact, show I'm neither surprised nor afraid, then step out of the way. Skin stretches from their arms to legs to get control over the leap, but it's too late. They crash to the ground in a mess of limbs and skin. They hurry to untangle themselves and stands tall, but ends up so thin it is amusing rather than threatening.

"I eat you," they hiss. "I am Eat the Eater!" they throws themselves at me and my surprise over the name almost keeps me from reacting in time. I grab the arm as I feel claws against my side, my black skin thickening there to keep them from piecing it, turn, add my strength to their momentum, and send them rolling away.

"I don't eat demons," I state, checking the rip in the shirt Moores gave me.

My statement confuses them, and they hesitate. "Then I am Defeats the Hunter." They runs at me, becoming shorter, bulkier, arms thick and claws long.

I understand why the humans call them Many Names now. I jump over them, slapping the side of their head hard to make my point. "You're 'Lose the Fight.'" I land and turn as they is still trying to maintain their balance. "Unless you call yourself 'Walks Away.'"

They puffs their chest out, too far, and I try not to smile. "I am Not Afraid!"

Are they a teen who thinks they should be an adult? Or do they not understand the point of a name is so others can identify them? Tell him apart from the other demons.

"Who will you be when I defeat you?"

They snorts. "No human defeats me."

The ease with language marks them as older, but I don't know where the line between teen and adult is for demons. It can't be when they learn to speak human, since that is dependent on interacting with them.

"How many humans have you fought?"

They hesitates, muzzle partially open. When they speaks, the confidence is forced. "One."

I tilt my head. "Me?"

They nod and roar, something resembling Cub's attempts more than anything of an adult's, and throws themselves at me.

I thicken the black skin over my right arm and fist as I step into the leap, hardening it, and punch them in the chest without holding back. Even this young, it takes more than one punch to do serious damage. They fly back, land on their back with a pained whine, and scramble back, the fear plain to see as I step forward.

"I am not human."

The shadow passes over us as I reach them and they give me a triumphant grin, red eyes blazing. I sigh as Protect lands behind me. Close enough the plaza's sand envelops us. Is this why they let the fight start? To have a reason to take me down, force me out of their territory since Moores won't let them kill me? Will they let me explain what happened if he was busy and didn't see?

"What are you doing?" Protect demands, annoyance the undercurrent, instead of anger. They continue before I can explain. "I told you to stay away from this one."

The demon at my feet loses their smile. "It hurt me," they say, indignation carried in the words.

The sigh is loud, the undercurrent louder. Impatience, a sense of someone being younger than they are. Of children belonging in the wilderness, hunting, until they can think properly.

"He is Eat the People. You should be happy pain is all he caused you."

“But it—”

“He!” Protect hisses.

A whine escapes the young demon. An incomprehension at their elder defending me instead of protecting them. Of siding with an enemy.

I feel Protect’s glare at the back of my head. “He hasn’t hurt the People here, even when he had the chance.”

A growl, carrying protestation. Something more complex than I can make out, but there’s a sense it shouldn’t matter.

“You attacked him,” Protect says. “And speak, when among humans. They don’t understand us otherwise.”

“It’s okay,” I say, feeling bad for Many Names now. “They’re young, and will make mistakes.” Something Jason liked to tell me in my first year of existence, when I was still adapting to my life, to the lie.

“Disobeying me is not a mistake,” Protect growls, and there is a warning in it aimed at Many Names. “It is a habit.”

I smile at the demon, who hasn’t moved from the ground. “You might want to apologize to them. In my experience, it helps calm angry people.”

Many Names glares at me defiantly. “I don’t listen to you.”

“Then go away,” Protect orders, the quiet words reinforced with an undertone of command, of implied punishment if he isn’t obeyed.

Many Names scampers to their feet and leaps onto a rooftop, hissing at me over their shoulders before vanishing down the other side. Are the rooftops sturdier than I thought? If demons are in the habit of climbing them, they have to be. Maybe I need to learn to balance on the peaks.

Protect sighs, and when I turn to face them, they’re not as large as I expect.

“Yours?”

“The child of the child of my child.” They shakes their head and let out an annoyed huff. “Stubborn, like all of them.”

“I think all parents feel that way.” I recall Claws saying something similar to me, about me, about their children. “I’ll make sure not to hurt them too badly when they try it again.” I know Many Names isn’t done trying to prove themself.

Protect’s lack of response surprises me. I can’t read their expression as they look where Many Names vanished behind the building. They notice me watching and frowns. “I will eat you if you injure Many Names.” The threat lacks its usual strength, the undercurrent of anger and determination. What comes with it is confusing. Fear and resignation, something about a lost cause. Pain of what’s to come because of a lack of learning.

Protect leaps up, wings spreading out of their back, then they beat and carry them away.

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I continue to help with the town while watching for Many Names’s next attacks, though this time I don’t give them an opening. If they want to fight, they will have to earn it. Most of the humans have sated their curiosity, and I find I miss the questions.

I eat meals with Moores and the town elders, which he explained he is part of, although he is the one with the power in an emergency. Something about inheriting the position because of his ancestor, and because he proved himself adept at thinking in the middle of difficulties.

When those meals no longer prove as filling, I leave the town at night to hunt. I am not always alone; Protect trails me sometimes, but leaves once I have my kill. Demons respect other’s hunts and kills—even mine, it seems.

I fall into a comfortable routine as the days pass, with one exception.

I’m carrying the axle assembly from a tractor, from the blacksmith back to the mechanic who maintains the farming equipment, when Sandra joins me. They are the only powered vehicles the town uses, and are kept by the farmland, away from the town proper.

“Hi, Derick.” She smiles at me. She is dressed in pants and a shirt partially open at the top. It is the right size for her chest this time, even if her intent is obvious by how the top of her breasts are exposed to view.

“Hello, Sandra,” I reply, not slowing.

“Isn’t that heavy? You know you don’t have to do all that work. Everyone’s already more than grateful for everything you’ve done already. I know I am. You can take a break. My house isn’t far from Fukui’s shop. You can take a shower there if you want, afterward.” She smiles, and I recognize it from videos Jason showed me.

“Thank you, but this isn’t strenuous, and I like keeping busy.”

“I can help you stay busy, you know.”

“What work do you need done?”

She smiles that smile again. “Oh, you know what kind.”

I do. “Not without you telling me.” Those videos made it clear what happened after one person gives another that kind of smile. Jason explaining the reasons never helped me understand why they did it, and I still don’t understand why she is interested in doing that with me. “I’m not adept at seeing the kind of repairs houses need unless they’re the result of a fight.” Playing up my obliviousness to human behavior is the best way to get her to become bored.

I see motion on a rooftop and lock eyes with Many Names. They startle, nearly lose purchase, then drop out of sight.

She presses close against me. "Staying busy doesn't have to mean carrying heavy stuff or building something. There are more pleasurable ways to occupy our time." Today is not a day when she will be easily bored, I realize.

I smile. "I don't think you are resilient enough to spar with."

"That's not what I mean," she says in exasperation.

"Then I'm not sure what you are referring to." Humans are strangely reluctant to address sex directly, and I've learned to make use of that with Sandra. I've told her no outright when she first made her advances, and unlike with Maliya, all it did was make her try harder. Now I consider her discomfort a valid method of placating her when boredom isn't enough.

I nod toward the garage and call to Fukui, then look at Sandra. "I hope you have a good day." When neither works, bringing other people into the conversation stops it.

She leaves. She will join her friends, tell them how I have refused her again. They will shun me, talk behind my back, accuse me of being "a man", and in a few days, she will try again. Maliya explained that it's how it goes for some people.

Hopefully, Sandra will find someone else to be interested in soon.

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It takes two months, but Sandra is no longer part of my routine, and I do not miss her.

Many Names is better at not being seen. When they try to tackle me, I suggest "Isn't Seen" as a name for them to take. They scoff and vanish between buildings.

I continue to work for the town. It is a game with them to see how much weight I can carry. I suspect Maliya gave them the idea. One of the larger tractors is my limit.

The demons grow more comfortable around me. I stop watching for them, waiting for them to attack someone. Only one of them is on the prowl, and I'm their prey.

Our hunt is a game I enjoy. I suspect it's because it annoys Protect.

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It's a hot afternoon when the call comes.

It's too hot for the humans to do more than sit and talk, to gather in the restaurant or one of the community centers, or the plazas, watching the children who, like me and the demons, seem immune to the heat. Cub plays with them. Baby makes an appearance, held by one of their parents, before they return to the pens. I'm not certain why. Maybe to start acclimatizing them to humans?

I don't hear the call; I feel it. My bones vibrate with it and I remember Claws in the Dark, standing before me, watching me, hoping I will change my mind. I didn't. I walked away from them. From everyone. I needed to discover who I was with no one else to tell me who I needed to be. The call makes me wonder what Claws is doing. Did he go back to his family? Travel? If so, where—

Protect rumbles, and every demon reacts to the worry and fears it carries. Even the humans react to the demons tensing. And the difference between Protect's undercurrent and the call makes me realize there's a reason it made me think of Claws.

"Intruder," Protect says. "Strong."

Moore is next to us. "Are they a danger?"

"No," I answer, feeling a joy I didn't realize I could feel. "I know him."

Claws has come for me.