

Jason tries to sit up as soon as we enter the room, but the scientist next to him holds him down. I don't know the man, and when he looks in my direction, he doesn't react.

Jason is lying on top of sheets, like the other injured in this and the other rooms. "Are you okay?" Jason asks. "How bad is it?"

"I'm okay. The worst is already healed." The captain heads to Valerie with the other two soldiers.

Jason smiles. "You always did heal fast. I was worried you wouldn't make it. Where's Claws?" He stretches to try and see the door. "He looked weak... Did he make it out of the fighting okay?"

"He's good. He's hunting Maurice."

Jason's eyes widen. "Just him?" He considers it, then nods. "I guess it's what they do. That man doesn't deserve anything better."

I crouch. "How are you doing?"

He nods to the missing arm. "Well, I've given up on my dreams of ever becoming a juggler."

"I'm sorry. You never mentioned that was something you—" His sigh interrupts me.

"Have I ever mentioned how hopeless you are? That was a joke."

I nod. "Many times."

He chuckles. "Maybe I should just accept it and stop trying."

"Probably, but I've never known you to give up on something this easily."

He narrows his eyes at me. "You know, that sounded a lot like an attempt at a joke."

"It wasn't."

He lowers his head back on the rolled up towel and closes his eyes. "I know."

I watch him. "Jason, I realize now that you were my friend, even through everything else that happened."

He doesn't say anything—he doesn't even open his eyes—but tears roll from them down the side of his head. Jason had explained it wasn't always caused by sadness, that they could happen anytime someone was overwhelmed by emotions, any emotions. It was one of the many things I hadn't understood at the time, but in living among humans, I've seen enough instances that I do now.

I suppose joy is what is causing him to cry. Our friendship had—has always been important to him. That's why he helped me escape Amanda, and then tried to coach her through taking me back. He thought it was the best way to protect me each time.

He wipes the tears away. "I'm sorry I wasn't such a great friend at times." His voice shakes as he speaks.

I place a hand on his shoulder, a gesture of comfort I've seen performed many times. "You were the best friend I had, the only friend I ever had." I don't think that what I have with Claws is friendship. The connection we share is different.

"You haven't made any friends since leaving?" His tone is worried.

"I didn't leave in the best head space to make friends. I was too angry. The closest I've come is Robert, but we're more business partners."

"What kind of business?"

"Cage-fighting. He was my manager."

"Fighting people, or..."

"Yes, humans. Don't worry, I didn't kill any of them. It wasn't those kind of fights. Actually, until today, I hadn't killed a demon since leaving here."

Jason tries to sit up again. "Derick, about the things we—"

I place a hand on his chest. "I understand why you did it." He tries to push against me, but all he does is tire himself out. He isn't strong enough, and he will never be. "Amanda wanted a weapon. Your job was to help her accomplish that. I'm still angry at the lies, but after seeing what Maurice became, I understand why they were needed. The other two that came before me also turned against humans."

Jason nods. "I shouldn't have accepted being part of it. What we did...it isn't right."

"If it hadn't been for you, what would have happened to me? Do you think whoever else Amanda picked would have tried to mitigate the damage once they realized I was more than a

machine? Would they even have noticed? Would they have done what they could to make sure I saw humans as people, not just things to protect? What kind of damage could I have caused if not for you?"

He cries again.

I open my mouth.

"You two done with your heart to heart?"

Jason opens his eyes and glares at the captain.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"You're coming with me. We're going to get Doctor Walker."

"She's still alive?" Jason pushes against my hand, then strikes it. When I look at him, he motions for me to remove it. I shake my head.

"She was alive as of when we got here," the captain says. "No reason to think she's dead until I see a body."

"It's best to wait until Claws comes back."

"He isn't coming back. Your pet can't take Maurice on, not in his weakened condition. You sent him to his death."

I shake my head. I've heard Claws's occasional roar in the distance. The hunt is still going; Maurice is proving to be a worthy prey. I don't bother explaining that to him.

"You go without him and you are going to die."

"You know what, you and I need to settle something right now."

I sigh. "Don't move," I tell Jason before standing. The captain is holding a vial containing an orange liquid in it in his fingers.

"You know what this is?"

I snatch it from his fingers before he can react. I am getting tired of his attempts at intimidation. Jason snickers at the surprised expression on the man's face.

"It's what makes you capable of fighting demons. Without it, you're nothing more than a human."

"That's the enhancer the military made?" Jason motions for it and I hand it over. "Amanda told me about it. She didn't care for it."

"The results are impressive. Less than a dozen of them on it plus Claws took on over a hundred demons, and three survived."

"Hand it over, and it'll be enough for us to get Doctor Walker."

Jason offers it to the man, but I take it. "I'm not letting you get out there thinking you can take on demons when all they will do is rip you apart."

"You think I need that to finish my mission? Unlike you, I do what I'm ordered to." He motions the other two soldiers to follow him, and then heads out the room.

I look down at Jason.

"I'm not telling you what to do," Jason says, misunderstanding my expression. "I've lost the right to ever do that."

I'd still take his counsel, if he offered it, but I was more questioning the captain's sanity. They aren't my responsibility. I told them what to expect, and if they still go it's their own—

Jason looks in their direction, worry on his face.

"Wait!" I hand the vial to Jason before joining the soldiers.

"I thought you weren't—"

"Keep your machine guns pointed at the ground. Enough of the demons here will have experience with them to know what they are. As much as possible, try not to look threatening, or like you're about to run off."

"Are you insane?" Cline asks. "They're going to be on us like demons on an old lady."

"Demons don't hunt old people; not enough of a challenge in it. The ones who are going to be around the building are going to be older, smarter."

"How do you know that?"

"Because the younger ones, those who aren't in control of their hunger, are going to be off hunting. I don't care how good Maurice thinks he is, or how powerful his control over them is. Nothing is stronger than their need to feed when they are young."

I let that sink in. “Hopefully those left have fed recently, and they can think clearly. If they understand what’s happening to Maurice, to Adam, maybe I can convince them to leave.”

“You don’t sound confident,” the captain says.

“I’m not Claws. I don’t speak their language, and I can’t do what Maurice does. I don’t know if what he did to them lasts when he’s not there to continue telling them, but what I do know is that if we go in fighting, we will die.”

“We?”

“I’m not letting you go to your death. You’re still human.”

“I thought they made you so you’d want to kill those monsters,” Cline says. I look at him, my irritation beginning to shift to anger.

“He isn’t a machine,” Jason says, leaning against the door frame. “He’s a person. He’s able to learn and find better ways to do things.”

I glare at him. He should be lying down.

“You think talking is a better way? With a bunch of man-eating demons?” The captain sounds willing to listen, at least.

“Better than shooting, yes. The four of us can’t win against all of them.”

“And ‘us’ now. Are you saying you’re willing to die with us?”

“No. If you start shooting, once the three of you are dead, I’m planning on coming back here, looking after the people here until Claws is back.” Their expressions darken. “But I know my odds out there. I won’t make it back. If you start a fight with them, you’re killing me, and everyone down here.”

“How about Amanda?”

Jason snorts, and I glare at him again. I motion for him to head back inside.

“I’ve made it abundantly clear that she is not, and never will be my concern.”

The captain grits his teeth. “What’s the difference with three of us versus four being there?”

“None, I’d say. It doesn’t matter how many people you have. If you start a fight with them, we die.”

The captain nods. “Cline—”

“I’m not staying.”

“Hemingway, stay with the civilians.”

The medic doesn’t look happy, but she nods.

“One more thing. If he comes back without us, empty your magazine into him.”

She looks from him to me. “Yes, Sir.” Her voice shakes, but the fear in her eyes shows she knows that won’t stop me.

The three of us head up.

As we reach the ground floor, something crashes through a door far below us. Heavy footsteps on metal, another door opening and shutting. Then claws on metal.

I smile. Claws in the Dark sounds lighter on his feet. The others look at me strangely. They can’t hear any of that.

The lobby is bright, much brighter than I expected. It was dark when I carried Maurice down, but it must have been close to sunrise. I haven’t been keeping track of the time.

Amanda looks miserable as we step outside, strung up on her post. She’s thin and scared, nothing like the woman who ran this place, tried to kill me.

There are no demons on this side of the street. They’re on the other side, and I can’t shake the feeling they are fighting against an urge to move even further. Do they know what’s happening to Maurice? Can they feel it? They’re clustered in small groups, and until we appeared, they were looking at each other wearily.

Now they are looking at us hungrily.

I stop in the middle of the road when the demons move forward. I can see the hunger in their eyes, but it isn’t mindless. Behind me one of the soldiers fidgets, wracks the slide of his machine gun. I glance, and they’re still pointed at the ground.

Before the demons have reached the end of the sidewalk, one launches himself into the air and lands before them, sending them scurrying back.

The demon sniffs the air as he ambles toward us.

“You’re the one the Adam brought. You left with the old one. Why are you with the food?”

“Did you hear the fighting earlier?”

“The Adam said to stay away. His favorites got to eat the food that steals from us. Not us.”

“They died.”

The demon cocks his head. “You killed them?” His voice takes an odd tone as he continues.

“You killed the Adam?” If he were human, I’d think it sounded like hope.

I indicate the men behind me. “They killed your people, Adam’s favorites.”

He looks at the soldier and then back at me. “They are food.”

“They’re humans. You know humans fight back. You know about their weapons. They don’t always become food.”

He indicates the men behind me. “They hunt with things.” Maybe he points at their guns. “Not our way.”

“Humans don’t hunt, they fight. They don’t care how they have to do it, all they care about is winning.” The demon tilts his head, and I get a sense ‘winning’ is a word he doesn’t understand. “For them it means surviving, getting what they are after.”

“The hunt.”

I shake my head. “Humans don’t think like you. They don’t hunt for nourishment. They hunt for things they want. Right now, they want her.” I point to Amanda, and the demons on the sidewalk step forward as if I’d said something to provoke them.

The one before me growls them back.

“The Adam wants her. She is special to him. No one touches her.”

If they still obey him, there’s little I can do. I hear sound from the building. Someone crashing through furniture, a few floors above us.

“Can you hear the hunt?” I know they can. Demons have as good, if not better hearing than me. “The old one who left with me, he’s back too. He hunts Adam. Adam is food.”

My tone is normal, but the demons react. Not all at first—they don’t all understand what I say—but growls spread, tones of disbelief, denial, hope.

“The Adam is chosen. The First One sent him to make humans food again.”

“You don’t believe that. You’re older than they are, aren’t you? What Adam did to all of you, it doesn’t work as well on you. You fight it.”

He doesn’t react, but more and more demons are paying attention.

“You know this isn’t normal, for all of you to be here together. Even they know it, but they’re still here.”

“We stay because we need the strength to make humans food again.” The words sound rehearsed.

“How about the rest? When Adam makes you kill one of your kind? How does that help make human food?”

The demon doesn’t answer, but the tone of the growls change in the crowd. ‘Traitor, disbeliever, weak.’

“Just leave. Adam isn’t here to tell you what do to. Tell them to leave, go back to the wild, where you belong.”

He narrows his eyes, the glow becoming visible even with the sunlight.

I screwed up.

He steps toward me, each footfall punctuated with a word. “I. Don’t. Obey. You.” His claws lengthen. “You. Are. Not. My. Kind.”

I glare at him. I feel the guns moving up behind me. I have to fight the urge to turn and tell them to lower them.

“I am not food.” My right hand elongates into a blade. “I don’t want to kill you. I am not here to kill you.”

“You are the one who—”

His words are interrupted by a human-sounding scream. A window explodes outward over us, and two tangled forms fall from the fourth floor.

They crash to the ground, and I can’t tell who the broken human form entangled among the dark mass of demon is until the head rolls toward us, to come to a stop between me and the

demons. Maurice looks up plaintively at both of us.