

“Do you have any idea of the kind of fucked up this is?” Colonel Fallon yells at me.

I don't react to the anger; it's irrelevant. I didn't cause this; Humbert is who will have to answer if the colonel finds out the truth of how Amanda died.

“Well? Care to explain how you could let this happen?”

“Her newest hybrid was out of control and killed her before I could reach them,” I explain.

“What was she even doing in the same room as one of those things?” She glares at me, as if I know how Amanda thought. “She knows they're wild when they first wake up. That's the biggest problem with her method—not that it's the last problem, other than with you.” She looks over the reports Humbert and the surviving soldiers wrote. I've been confined to quarters for the last twelve hours.

“These say that before your pickup arrived, you spoke with one of the demons and that in the middle of that, the rest of them started killing everyone in the city.”

“Rules them All showed up, and I had to keep them from killing us.”

“And that involved telling him to kill everyone else?” she demands.

“No, they did that when they found Mister Graves and his father were dead. Those were the men Rules them All allowed to maintain control of the city. Without them, they took a direct hand in it. I expect the only humans who died were the ones who objected to the change in leadership.” I wait for her to comment, but she goes back to reading the reports.

“What will you do to the city?” I ask in the silence. I want to tell her what to do, but people in power don't always like being told something, even if it is what they plan on doing.

Her glare is back on me. “That is none of your concern.”

I nod. “Rules them All is something you need to be concerned about.”

She snorts. “You don't have to tell me how to do my job. Don't worry about it, these demons won't be bothering anyone else.”

“They are not—”

Her smile stops me. “Are you volunteering to continue working with us? I mean, that is the least you owe me, don't you think? After you screwed up retrieving my scientist?”

“That is on Amanda's shoulders. Her overconfidence caused this to happen.” Not to mention how humans destroy the wilderness, force demons into cities, where they can learn to be more human. Will another demon age to become like Rules them All? Is there already one in another city on their way to it?

“It still doesn't resolve that you were here to help rescue her, and that didn't happen.”

“I came here voluntarily. Now I am leaving the same way. And without Amanda to pull me back, there is no reason for you to ever come looking for me again.”

She leans back in her chair, studying me. “You think I'm going to just let you walk out of here? You are the one success of Doctor Walker's process. With her gone, studying you is the only way we'll make sense of her notes.”

“Do you believe you'll learn much from my corpse?”

She narrows her eyes. “Are you telling me you'll kill yourself instead of working with us?”

“No, your soldiers will be the ones to kill me, because dead is the only way I am remaining here, but that will come after I have killed a large number of them trying to leave. Also, once I'm dead, you will have to deal with Claws in the Dark, who considers me his child. Family is very important to demons. He is old, he is cunning, and to avenge me, I believe he will be willing to lower himself to doing things demons consider vile. You can start this, if you desire, I can't stop you. But you would do well to consider how high the cost of trying to keep my corpse will be.”

“I remember you saying you didn't want to kill anymore.”

“I also am not interested in dying, or in being studied. Amanda saw to it that I would never allow a scientist close to me again. My own survival outweighs my desire not to hurt humans.” I smile. “You should also remember that Amanda considers me a failure, since I think for myself. I have my own needs and desires. I turned against her because I didn't want to be what she made me. Are you sure you want more people who are stronger, faster, tougher than you, and who might not be interested in doing what you want them to?”

Her lips tighten into a line, and I know better than to think I have won. But I have placed enough problems in the path of what she wants I believe I'll walk out of here without a fight.

“Fine,” she finally says, and the word sounds like a curse. “But under one condition.” I raise an eyebrow in a copy of quizzical expressions I've seen before. “If we ever have a large enough threat and go to the extent of tracking you down, you're going to help without arguments.”

“Alright.” My easy agreement puts her on edge. I can agree to it because once I leave here, they will never find me again. I will never be among a large population of humans again. They'll have no one to point to me, to where I might have gone.

“Alright,” she echoes tentatively, then looks at the reports. She gives me a suspicious look before nodding to the door. “You can go.”

I leave the office, and Humbert waits for me in the hall. “Still in one piece I see.”

“A human isn't enough to break me,” I answer, stepping around him. He grabs my arm. I freeze and take hold of the reflex to strike him. He knows I don't like being touched.

“What did you tell her?” he demands in a low voice.

“If you don't remove your hand, Gregg, her anger isn't something you'll have to worry about.” He fixes me with his hard gaze, tightens his grip in some sort of message I don't understand, then releases me. “Cline's death never came up,” I tell him.

He searches my face for something. Does he think my lies show on it the way it often does on human's faces, or in their scents? “Since you got out of there, and I don't see a battalion's worth of soldiers between you and the exit, I guess you convinced her to let you go.” He isn't happy about it, but the anger he has thrown at me before at the idea I am not their prisoner is also lacking.

“You know better than her that I can't be kept.” There is challenge in the look he gives me. A need to put my statement to the test. “Forget me,” I tell him. “Don't waste your time looking for me. Don't come after me. If you do find me again, I won't be alone this time.”

It takes a few seconds, but the realization I don't mean Claws registers. There is anger now, as if I have threatened to expose his friend to something he doesn't want him to know. Humbert may not want to acknowledge it. He may use his anger to cover it up, but he isn't able to erase who Sarge used to be. Maybe humans can't do that—let go of the past as easily as I can.

“It won't be my decision if I do,” he replies, his way of acknowledging that he won't take the initiative in hunting me. “I'm a soldier, and unlike you, I follow orders.” He turns to leave, and I grab his arm.

He looks at my hand, a smile forming. When he looks up, I see the eagerness at the threat he wants to make, but I cut him off.

“Then use your position to make sure Rules them All doesn’t survive the destruction of this city.” The amusement is gone from his face. “There is something wrong with them, but in a different way than Adam. I think that if they are allowed to, they will try to control everything.”

He doesn’t respond, only looks at my hand again. I let go. He fixes his gaze on me again, then turns and leaves. I hope he will succeed in this, because if Rules them All survives, it’s only a question of time before the military comes looking for me again.

I go looking for the one other person I need to see before I finally leave all this behind me, and I find him in the cafeteria, laughing with a man a little younger than he is. He leans in close and I stop. He is at ease, has found someone he is comfortable with, and I reconsider my plan. Jason is human, and he has someone he can be comfortable with, if not more. Jason always had an ease at being intimate.

I turn to leave.

“Derick!” he calls, “they’re finally done with you.” He is by me before I turn to face him again. He gives me a one-armed hug. I stiffen and he steps back. “Sorry, I forgot. I’m just... I’m happy you made it back.”

“Who’s your friend?”

Jason looks over his shoulder. “That’s Mike, and he is just a friend,” he replies in a tone that implies I meant more.

“You’d like him to be more.” I know Jason nearly as well as he knows me.

He sighs. “Yeah, but he’s a soldier, and I’ve been there before.”

I study him, looking for indications he is putting on an act for me. The parts of Jason I don’t know well have to do with social interactions, but I decide that the only reason he has to act now is that he thinks he knows what I want to talk to him about. And Jason can’t read me well anymore.

“I’m leaving.” I consider not saying more. If I don’t make the offer, Jason won’t have to feel guilty for his decision. “Do you mind walking with me?”

“Of course not. Lead the way.” He waves to Mike and follows me. “Do you need anything for the trip? Where will you go?”

I don’t answer him as we step into the decontamination room. It’s faster when heading out since they don’t bother with the disinfectant spray. Outside, I wait until there is no one near us.

“I’d like you to come with me.”

He frowns. “With you where?”

“I don’t know,” I lie. Just because I don’t see anyone observing us doesn’t mean they aren’t. The colonel will not leave me unsupervised. Fortunately, there is enough I can say without worrying about what she hears for Jason to make an educated decision. “You and Claws are the only parents I have left. You taught me about being human, he teaches me what being part demon means. We’ll be traveling for a while, and I’d like you to be there too.”

“Is he okay about it?” he asks after a contemplative silence. “I didn’t endear myself to him with how I tricked him.”

“This is about me, not him, and he’s annoyed at you, not angry. He won’t trust you, but he won’t object to your presence. Will the military let you go?”

“I’m a civilian, so their hold on me isn’t that strong. The reasons they insisted on having me around are mostly about you and the particulars of what happened here. There are plenty of demon experts who can handle other situations. Fallon isn’t going to be happy, but they have all of Amanda’s research, and I’ve already written down all I know about how that woman thought. There isn’t much I can add to that.”

“Do you need to get anything?”

He stares at me. “Wait, you mean right now? You’re leaving now?”

I nod to the distance. The forest is in that direction, even if I can’t see it, and I also know that is where Claws is. “He’s waiting for me. I understand if you prefer to stay. You’re human, the wilderness isn’t a place you have experience with, and there isn’t going to be anyone else for a while, but I will keep you safe.”

“That isn’t it. I’m just surprised. When you said you were leaving, I thought you meant at some point today or tomorrow, but if I turn around and head back in, you’re not coming with me, are you?”

“No. This is over, a part of my past. I want nothing to do with the military anymore.”

“You do realize that I don’t eat raw meat, that I am not an outdoorsman.” He falls silent, then chuckles. “Derick, I know nothing about the wilderness.”

“You can learn.”

He laughs. “Oh, like you and Claws are any good at teaching someone like me.”

I smile and look toward my destination. I feel the pull to rejoin Claws.

He watches me, studies me. He knows me. A large part of how I think is because of him. I know he has worked out something in what I didn’t say, in how I said what I did, when his breath catches. There is dismay in the quiet curse. He looks back at the camp, then ahead. He wants to ask. His curiosity is such that he is shaking with excitement.

“Oh, I am so in.”

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Claws waits for me at the edge of the forest. He lets out a rumble of greeting and the others step out of the tree line. On seeing them, Jason can't contain his excitement. He runs to them as Claws walks to me. The scientist keeps the children away from Jason, but then they speak, excitement building in both. Jason pulls Sarge into the conversation and then Claws is before me, his expression hurt, his rumble silent.

"I'm not choosing him over you," I tell him. "I'm not choosing at all. I can have both my parents in my life."

"He lied to me, and to you."

"He's human." I smile. "But he tries to be better."

Claws looks over his shoulder. Jason walks around Sarge, speaking animatedly. Claws lets out a sigh—something so human I know he is forcing it. "Where are we going?"

"To Protects the Community, but not by a direct route. I want to make sure we lose whoever the military sends to track us." I walk toward the others, toward the forest.

"Why there?" Claws asks, at my side. The conversation between Jason and the other scientist stops as we approach. I nod to the trees and Sarge pulls the two largest of the children onto his shoulders, to their laughter, and heads in that direction.

"It's a good place for Sarge and the children." The scientist gathers the other children and follows Sarge, Jason catching up to them after a moment of surprise. "Jason will enjoy knowing that humans and demons can live together without one side trying to dominate the other."

We walk in silence behind them for a few minutes before Claws asks, "And you?"

I consider the question. If Claws hadn't found me, I'd still be there. "The humans there don't demand anything of me—no more than they demand of one another, at least. I want to experience that for a while."

"But not for always?"

I shake my head. "Only so long as you want to stay too, and then—" I smile at the commotion of a child climbing Sarge's leg and back until they're also on his shoulder. "And then I'd like to meet your family, if you think it's something we should do."

His smile is nearly human, and the rumble of pleasure entirely demon. "Yes, they should meet the child of Fangs in the Light."

"Your child," I correct him, and the intensity of his pleasure nearly bowls me over.