

Chapter 12

The city in the distance looks like the others I've seen: tall buildings, some trying to touch the clouds, getting shorter as they move away from what the humans will consider the center of the city, no matter how off-center it is, with the occasional one breaking the pattern. We ran for weeks, interrupting it only with the occasional hunt and sleep.

Hunting with Claws felt right. It aligned with the occasional memories, so much so I attempted to go down to all fours once without realizing it and tripped. With him, we took down a larger creature. Something Claws calls a quick charger, because of how quickly they can change direction, even turn around to charge at their pursuers. The head was hard, even without horns it caused me injuries. Claws vanished and returned with an arm load of fruits and vegetables to complete my meal.

I make out a large road cutting across the plain without traffic on it. "Where is everyone."
"This territory has been emptied."

I tried to remember what the news said, all those weeks ago—I have been too occupied to bother with the television since. "If you mean the district, I thought people were just supposed to stay inside."

Claws shrugs. "The military has a camp closer to the city."

"You haven't mentioned them since we left the town." I jog alongside Claws. "Did you think I'd change my mind and leave if I did?"

"You refused to be part of my family, Derick, twice." There is no inflection in his words, not even an undertone reflecting how he feels, and that only happens when a demon purposely withholds how they feel. "You are young. What you are, and what I feel, are in conflict. I do not know how to judge your reactions." We run in silence. Then he sighs. "I have not been a parent in a long time, and how I was with my last child is not how I can be with you. I do not mean to hurt you, Derick. I apologize."

"It's... I understand." Jason didn't mean to hurt me either, but I'm something neither completely understands. "You're doing the best you can. I guess I need to remember that too. Amanda told me so many lies, even Jason did. Humans seem to enjoy lying. I prefer how honest you've been, how demons seem to be. If there are things you haven't told me about what's ahead, I'd prefer you did now."

"I have told you all I know."

I nod and run in silence for a time. "Do you know anything about this sickness that's afflicting humans?"

"Humans are fragile beings. They are always becoming sick, they even die of it."

"Have you seen something the scale of what's hitting the district before?"

He takes his time to answer. "No, but I know little of what happens here. I learned much of the world by speaking with others of my kind, who travel far, they have been hunted out of this territory. Protect the Community may be the only family left, and none I spoke with told me of him. I was surprised to enter another's territory when I did."

I nod, then slow, seeing shapes moving on the horizon. My eyesight is the weakest of my senses, but it is better than humans. The two forms are humans, walking. Not long after that, what could be the roofs of tents appear behind them.

"Sentries," Claws says, "the military base is close behind them."

I glance at him, large and four-legged, to make running easier. "You should take a less threatening form. If we're going to work with them again, it's best if we approach on their level."

Claws shrinks to a little taller than I am, walks on two legs. His skin becomes the set of clothing I am used to seeing him in. This time, the hood is pulled over his head, hiding the details in shadows by the time we are close enough for the two humans to see us and raise their machine guns.

They are dressed oddly for soldiers. Instead of dark body armor, they wear gray contamination protection. Tighter and thicker and what Amanda's scientists used when handling dangerous material, but the way it appears to be sealed, with air packs on their backs, they are more worried about the sickness than anyone attacking them.

"Stop right there," one of them says, a woman, when we reach speaking distance. When she turns to her partner and the sun doesn't reflect on her visor I make out tension on her face, worry and suspicion, which vanish under the glare when she looks at us again. "This is a restricted area, Turn around now or we'll open fire."

I keep my hands to my side, away from my body, from any weapons they could fear I'm hiding. "We're here to help."

"We don't need help," the other says, a man, dismissively. The sun also reflects on his faceplate, so I can't see his expression. "We have the situation under control."

"You do not." The growl that carries Claws's annoyance causes them to point their weapons at him and I move before they are done. I'm not risking Claws getting hurt, even slightly. Before they register it, I'm beside them, pushing the barrels up. The man presses the trigger and my knee in his stomach is a gentle shove that sends him back half a dozen steps, but he manages to keep his balance. The barrel burns my hand, but I am the only one holding that machine gun now. A slight impact of my shoulder against the woman's chest and she joins her partner, although she ends up on her back, her weapon also in my hand.

He helps her to her feet and they reaches for their sidearm. Claws lands between them, a four-legged creature again, more fangs and claws than anything else.

"Do not pull out your weapons," he warns, the words barely understandable amidst the growling.

I pull a magazine from one of the machine guns, study it. "What are you doing with irradiated rounds if there aren't any demons here?" I slide it back in, walk to the soldiers and hand the weapons back.

"There aren't." The woman eyes the machine gun in my hand suspiciously.

"Then isn't it a waste of expensive ammo to have that this deep in the district?"

She exchanges a look with her partner before taking both and backing away.

"Don't point them at us," I say as she hands one to the man. "We're here to help."

The man taps something on his belt and I ready myself for an attack. "Base, this is Tian, east-side sentry. We have a situation."

"Are you and your partner operational?" the voice is tinny, faint. An earpiece in the man's ear."

The man swallows. "Technically, yes."

The silence is long. "Report."

"We have two intruders who claim to be here to help. A man—"

"Derick," Claws says and the man takes a step back, hand tightening on the machine gun, but doesn't raise it. "I am Claws in the Dark."

"What was that?" the tinny voice asks. "I couldn't make it out."

"That—That was a demon." The man's voice shakes. "It's with the man, he's Derick, the man is," he hurries to add. "The demon says its name is Claws in the Darkness."

"In the Dark," I correct.

"In the Dark." The man's voice raises, his fear is increasing. I exchange a look with Claws. We are both far enough from them they have nothing to be afraid of.

"B—Base?" the man asks when the silence stretches to a minute. "Please come in."

"Hold position, I need to contact someone who can make a decision about this."

"Base?" the man asks again, this time with dismay. "We need reinforcement. I don't think the man's human."

"What are they doing?" the woman asks, not as afraid.

"I don't know," the man answers her. "He said he needs to have someone else make the decision."

"Typical," she replies under her breath.

"Don't reach for your sidearm," I tell the woman as her free hand moves closer to it, without taking my eyes from the man. "We are here to help, but we will defend ourselves. I'm not human. I've already demonstrated I'm faster and stronger. Don't force me to show you in what other ways I'm different."

"I'm going to the fan switch," she replies, annoyed. "The damned thing keeps shutting down, and it's like an oven in this thing without it." She moves her hand slowly to a button on the best and presses it twice. I focus and hear the whirling sound startup.

"Escort them in," the tinny voice says.

"Say again, Base?" the man replies.

"The orders are to escort them in."

"Base, the man confirmed he isn't human, and he's we a demon. Please confirm the orders."

"Are you deaf or something?" the voice asks, sounding annoyed even through the tinny distortion. "The colonel said to bring them in. You are to make sure nothing hurts them, is that clear?"

"Crystal, Base. Tian out." The man swallows and looks at his partner. "We have to escort them to the camp and, I quote, make sure nothing hurts them."

"Is that a joke?" she asks, and the man shakes his head. She looks at me and Claws. "Can anything even hurt them?"

"Your bullets can," I answer, "if you manage to hit one of us." I smile reassuringly. "I wouldn't recommend trying it."

She steps away from us.

Claws is on two legs again, but he doesn't look human. His skin hangs loosely over a massive form, an imitation of the trench coat I wore when I protected the city. His head is still more fangs than anything else and the human's reaction amuses him.

We walk between them, toward the camp, and while maintaining what they think is a safe distance, the soldiers follow us.

The camp is a series of tents connected by tunnels of the same material the soldiers wear, the same thing the tents are made of. They direct up to a large box made of thick plastic connected to the end of a tunnel by thicker tape. It's twice my height, the same in width, and half that in depth. I see other such boxes, each connected to the network of tents by its own tunnel. When the woman opens the door, I see another one, closed.

"It's a decontamination room," she says when I don't step in. "Everyone goes through it before entering, no exception." Her voice is steady. She believes what she says, but it's still a room I can be sealed in. They can pump in anything they want once I'm inside.

Claws shrinks to a size matching mine. "We will go in together. All of us. If they attempt to hurt us, we can destroy the container and go away to heal. When we return, we will not be offering to help." He looks at the two soldiers but doesn't say what will happen to anyone in it with us if we need to break out of it.

I motion for a soldier to go in. They hesitate, then step inside. I follow them, Claws follows me. His arm brushes my black hand and memory of us, pressed together in a cave, surfaces. There's a sense of something larger outside, danger, a need to protect one another. I pull away. I need to be here and now.

The other soldier closes the hatch once they are inside. The two soldiers stay as far from us as they can in the confines. A mist rises around us. The chemical smell is cloying and irritating. I breathe through my mouth to mitigate it, and the taste is worse.

It is replaced with water raining over us and I lift my head, open my mouth for it to clear the taste. When it stops the interior door opens, revealing a corridor leading to a partially open tent

flap where I hear voices, indistinct due to the number of people arguing.

The woman gets out of her protective suit, under it she wears the usual body armor, before stepping out of the decontamination chamber. She hangs the suit on a hook and offers me a towel as her partner hangs his suit. She offers on to claws, who, instead of taking it, shakes himself once and the water flies off. She mutters curses as she used the towel to wipe her face.

I'm still wet when they lead us to the flap, but no longer dripping. She opens it as a man yells.

“There is absolutely no way I am working with him, not after he betrayed us last time!”