

Chapter 22

I shoulder one of the double doors open and the people standing a few feet away startle, turning and staring at me and Humbert, whose weight I support. The soldier is conscious, but the boost has worn out, and putting a foot in front of himself is about all he can do. The eight are armed, but they don't raise their weapons. They look more confused than worried.

"How?" a man of them asks.

"What are we supposed to do now?" a woman asks.

I consider the soul stone in my pocket and evaluate the situation. Three of them have injectors. I'll need to incapacitate them before they activate the injector. I can take care of the others after and—

"You know how this works," a woman tells the others, stepping forward. There is dismay in her voice, but no threats.

"That was Risk It. No one's ever gotten past him," says the first who spoke. "No one's ever gotten past him."

She shrugs. "There's a first time for everything.

The man looks up at the side of the tower. "Oh, he is going to be pissed. I pity whoever's thrown at him next."

"I'm going home after my shift's over and staying there," says another man. "I'm not taking a chance in running into him on the street."

They don't realize we killed this Risk It. Humans can't kill demons. Not without a lot of help. Cunning is the way these people expect anyone to make it out of their maze. How will they react when one of them finds the body, what I did to them?

"Hopefully, I'm not the one on duty the next time he's fed." She takes out a radio. "I need a lift at the tower for a couple heading to the newbie house." She smiles at us, tries to make it reassuring. "Sit tight, it'll be a few minutes. Usually, we keep a car at the ready, but..." she looks at the tower. "It's Risk It, so we didn't bother." When she smiles again, it's broad. "You two are going to be one hell of an addition to the family."

"Couldn't be happier," Humbert mumbles.

A man approaches and takes Humbert's other side. "You guys look like you actually fought Risk It." He indicates my right arm, around which I've wrapped my trench coat to hide my black skin. Then the cuts on Humbert. Where my shirt is cut and ripped. I'm covered with blood, making the black there harder to deferential from my brown skin.

"We—" Humbert slurs.

"Ran," I finish for him, pressing on the injury on his side to keep him from saying any more. In his state, he might tell them we killed the demon, and the way these people talk about Risk It, like he was a coworker, could cause them to turn on us. Humans can be vindictive.

Humbert groans and tried to glare at me. I have the sense he doesn't care if he starts another fight. He was part of killing a demon. He is proud of it.

The vehicle that stops before us isn't designed for prisoners. It's smaller, fitting only four people. It has no armor, no restraints other than safety ones.

"It's a coffin," Humbert warns as me and the other man carry him to it.

"You don't have to worry anymore." He replies. "You passed the test. This is going to take you to the house. There you'll be able to shower, rest. It's going to be a few days before anyone has the time to work out where to assign you, and they might wait longer with you two. Give you time to heal."

"Will there be food?" I ask as I maneuver Humbert inside.

"The fridge there is stocked," the man answered. Humbert resists, but he's too weak. "You can relax, you're safe now." Humbert glares at the man.

"When is your boss going to be told we passed?" Our safety ends once Mister Graves finds

out. It feels like us going into the maze now wasn't on his order. He might not have considered telling anyone guarding us I was off-limit for the feeding, but I was heading there, eventually. Maybe I would have been up against Risk It, alone, or he would have offered me to an older demon, maybe Rules us All.

The man laughs, and he pulls out of the vehicle and motions for me to sit next to Humbert. "It's good to have ambitions, but you're going to have to be patient. The boss doesn't pay attention to this. It'll be a few years until he even knows you exist if you do a good enough job to get yourself noticed." He steps around and sits in the passenger seat.

I sit in and the driver starts us moving. "We've made quite a mess in there. How long does cleaning it take?" If Mister Graves won't be told we survived, the only remaining factor is Risk It's body.

The man turns in his seat. "You're still alive, so the mess can't be that bad."

Humbert chuckles, and I wonder if he was conscious when I extracted the soul stone.

"Normally it takes a while," the man continues. "I doubt you trailed a lot of blood on the lower floors, which are those in most use. But those dealing with that might work faster once they head Risk It's not been fed. Although... how many of those intruders are left?" he asks the driver, who shrugs. "They might not bother cleaning anything and just throw another soldier in there before Risk It makes a ruckus."

A soldier will know better than to raise an alarm on finding a dead demon, but they'll reach the exit without injuries. That will raise suspicion. Tomorrow morning might be when the situation deteriorates.

The rest of the drive is in silence. When the vehicle stops, we're in front of an older building. It reminds me of the one I lived in when I knew Robert; each room a small apartment. The man is out before I open my door and helps me bring Humbert inside.

Instead of a lobby, with someone behind a reception desk with bars to protect them, we are in a large living room. Half a dozen seats, a screen on the wall with a scene of a forest, the sound muted. The lone occupant stands and hurries to take the guard's place.

"Chair," Humbert mumbles, when the man tries to guide us to a side door. The guard leaves without giving us instructions.

"You need to lie down," the man says. He's muscular, younger than Humbert. His skin is tanned and his hair and beard are black.

"Awake," Humbert protests. "Food. Proteins, carbs. This stuff isn't right. If I sleep, I might not wake up."

The man gives me a questioning look, but I direct us to a chair. Humbert knows better than I how to deal with what's happening to him.

The man shrugs. "I'm Taros, and there's plenty of food in the fridge."

"Derick," I reply as we sit Humbert down. "He's Captain Humbert."

"Gregg," Humbert snorts. "The captain part can go screw itself."

Taros looks at me again.

"Where are the showers?" I ask, since I have no answers to give him.

"The second and third floors are bedrooms, they all have showers. The first on the left, on the second floor is mine, just pick any of the others."

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I return feeling better and hungrier. The room has clothing in the closet, but no glove for my hand. Humbert is eating, devouring the food on the small table before him as if he was a young demon in the throes of hunger madness.

"Your friend's famished. Just how hard was your trial?" Taros asks.

"Deadly," Humbert answers between bites. He sounds better, more alert, but still looks haggard. "What are you doing here?" he asks Taros.

Taros shrugs in his seat opposite Humbert. "They put me here when I got out of that tower.

When they need me to do something, menial work mainly, they take me out, leave me with ‘adult supervision’ while I do it and bring me back here. I feel like I’m back in training, but at least the accommodations are better than where I started at.” He gestures around us.

“So, you came here looking to work for these bastards?” Humbert asks. He looks at the empty plates. “Is there more?”

“Where are you putting it all?” Taros asks, standing. “And no, I didn’t come here to join up. I came here to... borrow stuff from the empty building.”

Humbert snorts derisively, as I follow the man to the kitchen. “You’re going to want to help yourself before he empties it all.”

The selection of fresh fruits and vegetable is slim, but there are packs of uncooked meat. I open one. The smell is off, too saturated with chemicals. I recognize it from when the time of the Lies, the first year living on my own, but after so long eating meat directly off my prey, this no longer smells normal. I devour the meat.

Taros nods, glancing at me as he prepares more sandwiches from process meats. “So, that answers that.” He indicates my hand. “I sort of figured you weren’t entirely human. You eating raw meat confirms it.”

“Humans eat raw meat,” I answer, taking another package out. They have entire meals built around it, rituals around its preparations. Humans can be odd.

“Calling us humans is another sign, and yeah, some do. But not right out of the bone like you’re doing right now.”

I look at the bone I’m holding, nearly cleaned of meat. “You don’t sound bothered.” I finish cleaning it off and pull out a package of fruits.

“I’m...” he studies me. “A scavenger. That means I can’t stay in one place too long. People tend not to like it when you borrow their stuff without asking.”

“It’s called stealing,” I say before I start on the fruits.

Taros shrugs. “I’d give it back, if I was given the chance. Seriously, I would,” he says when I eye him. He isn’t a good liar. “Look, the world isn’t the nice little place the news wants you to believe. The cities are okay, they’re big enough, it’s going to be awhile before enough people are angry at you and you need to leave. But even there, when you look in the cracks, you’re going to see things you shouldn’t. Then, when you travel between them? In the forests and places like that? Forget the animals, the demons, there’s stuff out there no one talks about. So no, I’m not particularly bothered with you not being entirely human.”

I follow him to the living room with packages of vegetables. “You’re a thief.”

“Call it what you want,” she says, placing the plates with the stack of sandwiches before Humbert. “What I am is a survivor. I’m my own person, I do things my way. I can deal with this for a while, but eventually, the structure gets stifling, then I move on. As nice as this is, I’ll move on from it, eventually.”

“If they let you,” Humbert says.

Taros rolls his eyes. “Once I decide to leave, they aren’t going to stop me.”

“There are demons,” I point out, sitting halfway between them.

Taros smiles. “Even they can be tricked. There might not be as many as the history books make it sound like there were, but there’s a lot more out there than the news tells you. After one or two run-ins with them or their wild equivalent, you find ways of ensuring they can’t find you.”

Humbert looks at the sandwich in his hands, seems to have trouble understanding why he’s holding it, then puts it down. “I think I’m done.”

“Finally,” Taros sighs. “What’s next for you two?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Humbert asks defensively.

“He called you captain, and as tattered as that is, I recognize military garb. Unless you’ve gone rogue, I doubt joining these people is something your superior approve of.”

“She can just go fuck herself,” Humbert said with the vehemence he normally directs at me.

“If I decide to join the mob, it’s going to be my own damned decision.”

I join Taros in starting at him.

“I’m not joining them,” Humbert states with a huff. “How can you even think that? But Fallon doesn’t get a say in what I do if she’s going to leave me to die.”

Taros looks at me, and I nod.

“And how can you work for them?” Humbert asks the man. “They tried to feed you to a demon. They’re going to feed others to them.”

Taros is slow in answering, and he watches us cautiously as he does. “People live, people die. I can’t control what happens to them, just what happens to me. So I’m going to do what I need to so I survive and they can take care of themselves.”

“That’s so…” Humbert searches for a word.

“Human?” I offer, and he glares at me while Taros chuckles. “My plans,” I continue, “include rescuing Claws and the rest of Captain—”

“Gregg,” Humbert cuts me off. “It’s Gregg. Gregory, if you’re going to be formal about it.”

“The rest of Gregg’s soldiers and being Amanda back to the people she works for. If you’re willing to help, you’re welcome to come with us.”

“You’re assuming a lot,” Humbert says, “thinking I’m on board with that plan.”

I shrug. “You might be done with the colonel and the military, but you aren’t someone who abandons the people under his command.” I take a chance. “His friends.”

“I had no problem abandoning you to a bunch of demons.”

“I’m not under your command,” I answer, and certainly not a friend. “I’m a pawn.”

Taros looks from me to Humbert. “You two have something of a complicated history, I take it.”

“He ran off from the military,” Humbert says, “who footed the bill to make him.”

“Like you’re thinking of doing?” Taros asks, and Humbert glares at the man, but his mouth is only a tight line. “Wanting out if nice and good, and I won’t cause you problems, even if I’m thinking of enjoying their hospitality a little longer. But there’s a lot of people out there. Humans, some of who have that military stuff that makes them stronger and faster, hybrids, and demons. They’re going to try to stop you when you run. I’m not seeing this coming to a good end.”

“The occasion will present itself,” I answer, standing. I don’t mention to either that time is not on our side. “That is one thing I have learned in the years of being on my own. We may have to help make it happen, but something will happen. When it does, we will act. Until then, we need to rest. You should sleep, Gregg.”

“In a while,” he replies. “I don’t want to give this crap a chance to drag me in so deep I don’t wake up. It’s going to be a couple of hours before it’s entirely out of my system.”

I nod. “I’m going to sleep. I’ll be sleeping for the rest of the day and the entire night, please don’t bother me.”

Humbert eyes me suspiciously. He knows how little sleep I need. But Taros is looking at me, not him.

“No problem, I’m not in the habit of bothering others.”

I feel their eyes on me as I go up the stairs. If Humbert seeks me out, I’ll explain my plan to him, but all I trust Taros to do is alert the guards if he comes to my room and finds I’m not there.