

## Chapter 25

“Stop pacing,” Humbert grumbles from the chair, eyes closed.

I continue pacing from one end of the living room to the other. “Why aren’t they back already?”

“Because convincing people to work against the interests of the people with all the power isn’t something easy to do.” He opens an eye. “Stop. You’re going to exhaust yourself before anything starts.”

“I am not made to sit around and do nothing.”

“You can’t tell me that they had you run around killing demons all the time back in the day. Even the military knows that leads to costly mistakes.”

“Of course not. They needed time to compile information on my performance, which they did by running experiments on me, Jason’s teachings. I slept when I was tired, then they kept me busy.”

“What about that helicopter ride? That was hours of you sitting in one place and not moving.” His tone is defiant.

“I was fighting the urge to throw myself out of it.”

Humbert chuckles and shakes his head. “You need to learn to enjoy the quiet times, they’re always too short.”

“Not short enough,” I grumble. I do two more circuits, then the door opens. Taros hurries in, bags in arms.

“The others are right behind me.” He hands me the bags. “Before you ask, we didn’t tell the city getting blown up, Flo still wanted to, but I figured having the military as a threat was enough. I told them the reason they’re at the gate is that doctor of yours, and that it’s just a question of time before they storm the city to get her if you don’t return her first.”

The bags contain meat, vegetable, fruits. Fresh by the smells. My stomach grumbles, but I ignore it.

“I figured you’d run,” Humbert says, standing and stretching. “You said you preferred running, and this felt like the perfect time to do it.”

“I’ve got friends here!” Taros snaps. “Yeah, I’ll leave at some point, but I’m not going to do that when they’re in a lurch.”

Humbert raises his hands. “I didn’t mean—”

“Sure you didn’t,” Taros replied dismissively. Then the door reopens. “Just watch what you tell them. I got you a dozen, more and the others will get suspicious. Unless you’re looking to start a revolt, you don’t want us to be noticed.”

Florent joins us, accompanied by men and women. They are muscular. The men remind me of those I fought in the cage, same with the women; they look like they could have handled the cage fights easily. There is a sense about them of restrained violence and no interest in finding out why they are fighting.

Florent is the exception among them. He doesn’t want to be here, and it’s obvious that no one gave him a choice in returning. He gives an uncertain wave. “These are the guys who agreed to help.”

Humbert slaps his hands together and rubs them as he smiles. “That’s great. Glad to have you on board. Have they told you what the plan is?”

I’m surprised by his jovialness. Even with his soldier, he more dour, serious.

“Get you to some doctor so the army’s going to leave us alone.” The tall man in the lead answers. His skin is darker than mine, almost as dark as the black of my right arm. Those behind him nod and murmur agreement.

“We’ll need to stop by the prison first to rescue my people. Will all respect to you fine folks, we’re going to need them to fight whatever’s protecting Walker. Is that going to be a

problem?”

The man looks to the other, and the strongest protest is a shrug. “Not for us. The only condition we have is that you aren’t killing anyone.”

Humbert raises an eyebrow. “We are going to break into two places, then run away with someone we aren’t supposed to take. You do understand that people will try to stop us, right? I can’t imagine any of you being gentle with them while that’s happening.”

“We’re going to stop them the way we want,” the man replies, tone hardening. “What I’m warning you about is that if you kill anyone, we’re done.”

“Alright.” Humbert slaps his hands together and smiles. “Seeing as I can’t do this without you, I guess I’m going to have to make sure I do it your way, won’t I.”

I study the others. For people who lie so much, humans are surprisingly bad at knowing when someone lies to them. “Were you able to find out if your bosses know about Risk It’s death?” I ask Florent. Glances shift to Humbert, who grins at the people. He enjoys their discomfort.

Taros answers in his stead. “As far as I can tell, the news hasn’t gone up the chain. No one’s ever killed a demon, so no one knows what the reaction will be and they aren’t willing to be on the receiving end of an explosion. Of course, I heard a second one was killed in the night, so who knows how long until the higher-ups notice demons are dying left, right and center?”

“Do you know who did it?” I ask.

Humbert is eager for information. Only a soldier can have done it, but if they exited the maze, they should have been taken to this building.

Taros looks at the man in the lead, who hesitates under Humbert’s gaze. “Look, I wasn’t there, so I don’t know if it’s even true. What I heard is that the guy dropped as he stepped through the doors.”

“Dead?” Humbert asks, his expression darkening.

The man steps back. “That guy went up against a demon. How else is he going to end up?”

“They took him away on a stretcher,” a woman says. “So maybe they took him to a clinic?”

“Or they just disposed of the body,” the leader replied. “Normally the demon does that by eating them.”

“He killed one and walked away,” Florent says, pointing to Humbert.

“There were two of them, right?” the leader says. “Look, unless that guy being dead or not matters, is there a reason we’re standing here instead of being on the move already?”

“That man is one of mine,” Humbert states.

“I need to eat,” I cut him off. He looks about to start a fight with them over how dismissive they are of his soldier. He glares at me and I indicate the bags, but he knows I didn’t have to say anything.

The interruption calms him. “You lot stay here. The two of us need to strategize.” He follows me when I head to the kitchen, but stays by the entrance, looking into the corridor to ensure no one sneaks close.

“Strategize?” I ask looking the content of the bags over. One meal’s worth, so hopefully, we can resolve everything tonight. I doubt getting food once we begin will be simple.

Humbert glances in the corridor and glares at someone there before looking at me. “It was that or breaking that guy’s face.” He lets out a breath. “What are the odds he survived?”

I take a large bowl from under the counter, a knife from the holder, and set about cutting everything. “Not good,” I say, not looking at Humbert for his reaction. He may not want to hear it, but he has to come to terms with it if he’s going to perform properly. “Even if he managed to get his hand on a vial of boost, he’d have to go up against one of the younger demons to have any chance of walking out. You were barely able to move by the time we exited. The military never sends only one soldier against one demon for a reason.”

Humbert grumbles and curses. “I’m going to make them pay for this.”

“Just make sure this group doesn’t see you doing it.”

He snorts. "I'm surprised you didn't call me out on lying to them."

"Humans lie. You're human." I don't elaborate. I might antagonize him further with my opinions.

"At least you aren't getting all high and mighty on me about it," He grumbles.

I mix the bowl's content and start eating. "Nighttime is the best time to mount the rescue," I state, turning to face him.

He shakes his head. "They'll expect that. The patrols are higher at night because everyone expects intruders to what to use the darkness to their advantage. Taros already said we can move about in the daytime. They won't expect that. Not to say that demons have the advantage at night with the way they see heat signatures."

"The danger of attracting attention is still there with a group this large." I indicate his clothing. Now that he has washed the blood out of them, the military camouflage is visible. "You need to change."

"You aren't going to blend in either in that." He motioned to my trench coat, with the destroyed sleeve.

He's right, but I'm reluctant to leave it behind. "A trench coat is more civilian than what you're wearing."

"Then lend it to me and it'll cover me up." He grins knowingly, challenges me.

His actions force me to consider why I want to keep the trench coat. It isn't the one from the time of the Lie or the one the colonel provided when she forced me to rescue Amanda. Jason gave me this one.

I reluctantly take it off and hand it over. It's something Jason gave me, but he isn't attached to it. Do humans do this? Attach meaning to objects because of who else might be related to them?

Humbert is surprised, but takes it and puts it on. I go back to eating, reminding myself that Jason will not be hurt that I gave it away. He understands it will not survive multiple fights.

"If they put someone else in the maze this morning like they've done the previous times, I'm down to seven, eight if the one in the middle of the night took the place of that." He sighs. "We're going to need boost for everyone, these guys too."

"Is that wise?" I ask. "They don't have the training you do, and you had a strong reaction. It could create problems we can't deal with."

"We don't have a choice," Humbert replies. "The enemy has access to it, so we'd be idiots to think they aren't going to use it. We need it to even the odds. Even if all it does is create chaos, we can take advantage of that. Hopefully, the guards in the prison will carry some and we can use that."

"Left pocket," I say, before tipping the bowl up to drink the leftover juices.

His hand shakes as he holds the pouch with the vials in it, then puts it back. "You didn't tell me you had more."

"I didn't think more than one would be needed for the maze. And until now, the only thing you knowing about them would do is tempt you to use one."

His face darkens and I turn my back to him to rinse the bowl and knife. "I too know the pull of addiction, Gregg."

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The walk to the prison is long but uneventful. Humbert wanted a vehicle, but their allocation is controlled. We attract looks from people who are part of the support system, but they wave or ignore us. To them, groups like this mean security, not trouble.

Entering the prison is simple. The man in the lead tells the guards they've been ordered to take a prisoner and we are let through. There is surprise, but no objections. Before one asks to explain the number of people in our group, we've subdued them. The four aren't armored, and only one has a pouch, with two vials in it.

"Stay here," Humbert tells the men as he and I head for the cells. "Subdue anyone who

comes in. If they have boost, take a vial each, but don't inject yourselves. I don't care what you think you can do with it in your system. It's only for if we get into a real fight."

The door opens as Humbert reaches for it, and he knocks out the man carrying a start of trays with dirty plates on it. I subdue the armed woman with him. Her pouch only has one vial in it. The soldiers rejoice at the sound of the fighting, then erupt in greeting when they see Humbert.

I ignore them as they ignore me, heading for Claws's cell. He looks worse, but he sniffs in my direction and he improves. His rumble carries joy, relief, and reproach? I study the keypad with numbers. Someone yells a string of numbers and I punch it in.

The door opens and as I watch Claws, the soldiers fall eerily silent. I glance over to Humbert, his back to me, standing before Cline's cell, before looking at Claws again. His wellbeing is more important to me.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

He reaches for me, and I control the reflex to step away, but he stops before his hand touches me. "I believed her." There is reproach, but not directed at me, I realize.

"Amanda?" why would she have come? "What did she say?"

"That you had died."

"Humans lie," I tell him, surprised he even believed her. Then I understand the impact such news would have on him. He considers me his child, but I'm also the last link to his mate. "I'm sorry. After the maze, they took us to another building. I didn't know where this one was. I couldn't tell you I was okay."

"I should not have believed her. You are the child of Fangs in the Light. You will not fall to a hunt so easily, but the elder here is so old." He falls silent, and I'm not certain he sees me, realizes I'm there. "She said the old demon got you. I thought she meant the elder."

I reach for him with my right hand, a reflex that I stop. I don't have gloves on, then I take his arm. "I'm here." Devastation flows through me—him—as the trail of Fangs in the Light he's been following for so long ends in their death. A madness takes him—me—us—different from the hunger, but as powerful, but instead of causing us to lash out, it turns inward, demands to know how we let this happen. How did we allow them away from us, knowing the dangers out there?

Then it's Amanda's words bringing the madness back. The delight in her eyes, in her scent as she tells us in detail how the child was destroyed, how she enjoyed watching it. The madness wants to blame us, but there is an enemy this time. There is someone to make pay, and we throw ourselves at her. The bars and their shock of electricity sending us back, but do not deter us. We try again and again, driven by her smirk, by the scents of satisfaction coming off her. Our child is no longer here to keep her alive, and she must be destroyed.

I hold him, his weight pushing us down to our knees. The next memories are brought to the surface on purpose. Claws showing me something he needs me to know. Him catching a fresh scent on a demon running from a city, an impossible scent, one that hints of Fangs in the Light. The curiosity breaks the madness, gives him something to latch on. He finds me, the source of the scent, but the despair is kept away by the realization that something of Fangs in the Light remains in me.

He untangles himself from me, moves away, and I'm the one who tries to maintain the touch. I want to continue to feel him, to know I provide comfort.

He forms into something that almost looks human. "I am glad you are alive." His rumble carries joy, but it is tainted with anger. "Let me eat her."

I want to say yes. I think I know what happened now. She told the guards to feel me to Risk It. She acted behind Mister Graves's back to remove me. To hurt Claws. I want to let him hunt her like he did Adam, for the delight she took in inflicting pain.

"I'm sorry. The mission needs her alive. I don't want to give the military any more reasons to come after us once this is over."

The rumble changes to surprise. "Us?"

“Move out!” Humbert yells, and there’s anger in the words that surprise me. I note Cline’s cell is still locked, but empty as I follow them out.

In the other room, the soldiers take weapons and armor off the bodies, out of lockers. Humbert has to stop a fight when Diniz tries to take the machine gun from one of the men who helped us.

Humbert is in full captain mode, but he’s angry about something and anyone who doesn’t immediately obey is yelled at, threatened. I worry it will send the civilians helping us running off, but Humbert did it to Diniz first, and that equality seems to pull everyone into a unit.

When Humbert storms out of the building, everyone falls into step. There is no hiding this is a military action anymore, and I realize I forgot to take my trench coat back from the man.

It’s just a coat, I tell myself, I will get others.

But with it is the memory of Jason smiling as I put the trench coat on.

Fine, I tell that strange part of me. I’ll apologize to Jason for handing his gift over to Humbert. Jason is human, he’ll understand why I did it, even if I don’t.