

I feel the woman's eyes on me as I formulate my plan.

"I thought you didn't want to help." Her tone is suspicious.

I keep my face neutral—something I've had a lot of practice doing over the last year—as I turn to face her. "I don't care about Amanda. As far as I'm concerned, she deserves what is happening to her, but there are civilians there." I've gotten much better at lying since my time with Amanda.

"You didn't seem to care about them a moment ago."

"I don't want to care. I'm done running around spending my time saving them." I hesitate, mimicking discomfort. "But I didn't know this was where it was taking place. I— I know someone who lives close-by. She could be in danger."

"You mean Juliette?"

"You know about her?" My surprise is genuine.

"Doctor Walker included Doctor Gourd's reports. He indicated you weren't interested in her."

"Jason was looking for me to get a romantic partner, or one with sexual interest. I feel neither of those things toward her. I had other interactions with her he isn't aware of. She was nice to me."

She smiles knowingly. "Alright. I'm glad that's making you want to help. To be honest, I don't care why you help us. You're leaving in an hour. I'll have someone take you to a room where you can wash and get dressed. There will be clothing and food there. I expect you're getting hungry."

"I'll also need weapons."

She opens her mouth, but I cut her off.

"You can't expect me to go into that unarmed. You say this is to rescue Amanda, but that can't be done without fighting a lot of demons."

"What's to stop you from using those on us?"

I smile at her. "I think I've demonstrated that I don't need them to fight humans. How many did you say were hospitalized?"

She nods after a moment of consideration. "I'll see to it you get your usual weapons."

"Don't bother with the axe; I'm not extracting soul stones for you. And I want to make something clear: I am not your thing. You don't own me. I do this, and I go my own way."

"We financed your creation."

"Take that up with Amanda. I'm not a machine, I'm a living being. I won't be ordered around anymore."

For a moment, it looks like she's going to argue. And I ready myself. I will not be used again. Instead, she stands. "We'll take up this discussion later." She opens the door and speaks to the woman outside. "Private, show Derick to the room assigned to him." She turns to me. "Be ready in thirty minutes." And she leaves.

The private is wearing the same uniform as the sergeant and colonel, but she doesn't have any decorations on her shoulders. She has a sidearm and knife at her belt, but by the lack of armor on her, I expect those are only for appearance. She looks me over, and indicates I follow.

The room she takes me to is small: a bed, a desk, and a bathroom. On the bed are clothing: black jeans, black shirt and black trench-coat. Except for the shirt, which should be white, the outfit matches what I wore when I worked for Amanda.

On the desk are a large platter of meat—cooked, still hot—and a large bowl of cut fruits and vegetables. This looks remarkably like what I made myself back then. I eat everything there. She was right, I am hungry.

I shower, then dress in the provided clothes. There's a full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door, and I look at myself. Seeing this person looking back at me, this hunter, feels strange. This isn't the coat I bought; it's identical to the ones I used to wear.

I continued wearing them, replacing them as they became too worn, because I was used to the feel of them. But I never looked like a hunter. The cut was different, they were already worn, and the jeans and shirt varied in colors. Wearing this, I not only look like a hunter, I feel like one.

I start to take the trench-coat off, but stop. Looking like one doesn't make me one. If there is

one thing I learned in my few interactions with Claws, it's that what I look like doesn't determine what I am, who I am. Wearing this doesn't make me theirs. I will never be theirs again. I am doing this to save Claws in the Dark. I will do whatever it takes to save him.

When I open the door, my escort is waiting for me. She leads me through corridors, upstairs and to an armory. The colonel is there, talking with a man dressed in the same combat armor as those who attacked me.

They turn to face me as I enter. I don't wait for instructions to join them.

"Derick," the colonel says, "this is Captain Humbert. He leads the mission. Captain, this is Derick, the asset you read about. I'll leave you two to get acquainted while I see to your weapons, Derick."

The man is stocky. He's a head shorter than I am, short blond hair, and in need of a shave. He has a machine gun attached to his vest, a model I haven't seen before, two swords—full-length, not the folding types I prefer—and a sidearm at his belt.

He studies me, his face neutral. "Let's make something clear. I don't want you on this mission, I don't need you. Me and my team are fully capable of accomplishing it without your help. But my orders are to bring you along, and unlike you, I follow orders. The mission is simple: rescue the doctor. Nothing else. The priorities are her, the team, and then the demons, in that order. Am I making myself clear?"

I nod, not that I care.

"I don't care about whatever vendetta you have against those bastards. You're going to do what I tell you and only that. You are just a tool I've been told to make use of, and an unreliable one at that. So I'm going to use you as I see fit, and you're not going to give me any lip. Clear?"

I smile. I'd love to see him try to stop me if I decide to go my own way.

"You have anything to say?"

"I'm here to get the job done, then I leave. If you think you know how to go about doing it, that's fine."

He raises an eyebrow. "That almost sounded like you don't think I know how to do my job."

"We'll find out, won't we?"

His lips tighten to a line. When he speaks, there is tension in his voice, but it's controlled. "Come on, let's get you armed." He's angry, but he's holding it back.

The colonel is next to the table he leads me to. She sets down a belt with two revolvers in it. "Forty-five caliber, irradiated bullets, like you're used to." I put the belt on. She puts a box in front of me. "A hundred extra bullets, with speed-loader." The captain isn't impressed. "Two folding swords, also irradiated." I clip those to the belt.

"He isn't getting an Assaulter?" The man taps the machine gun.

She looks at me.

"I don't need it."

"We're going up against God knows how many hundreds, if not thousands of demons, and you think those pea shooters are enough? You need something that can raze them down in bulk."

"I was made—taught to limit the danger to humans. Just because there are fewer humans than normal doesn't mean I am going to become careless with my shooting."

He shakes his head. "He's joking, right? I don't care how many demons he's killed. If their leader has them come down on him in mass, those things aren't going to keep him alive."

The colonel shakes her head. "If the prototype decides to kill Derick, I doubt giving him more armaments will help him, or any of you. That's why this is a surgical strike. In and out with Doctor Walker, and hopefully her personnel. We have to hope you can do it without being noticed."

That isn't going to happen, but if they want to think otherwise, it's to my advantage.

"Me and the boys do like ourselves a challenge. Come on, our ride's waiting." He takes out a radio. "Mount up, boys. I'm on my way."

We go upstairs, and I can hear a muzzled whoomping sound ahead, getting louder. When he opens the door the noise hits me hard, and I wince. We're not at street level, we're on the roof of the building.

I freeze as I see the helicopter waiting for us.

“Is there a problem?” The man is grinning.

We are going to be flying. Fear twists my insides, but I force it down and shake my head. I focus on the pain the noise is causing me.

Before climbing in, the man hands me a large headset. I put it on and the sound disappears almost entirely. Once inside, another man closes the sliding door and pats the pilot’s shoulder.

The helicopter moves as I sit, and my body tenses. I want to reach for something, hold on to anything to avoid falling out, but I concentrate on keeping my skin from erupting into spikes to protect me from whatever I am afraid of. I don’t know what they know about it. Amanda didn’t see much of what it could do.

After a few interminable minutes, the helicopter settles and I can almost forget I’m in the air.

“Who’s that, Captain?” a deep voice asks, clear in my headset.

“According to the colonel, he’s our ace in the hole.” He doesn’t sound convinced.

There’s twelve of them in the cabin, looking identical except for variations in their faces and hair, the only parts not covered. They each have their helmets on their lap.

“How’d you mean?” The voice is different, so someone else. I don’t find who.

The captain sighs. “That there is another one of the doctor’s creations. Because he and the demons’ leader share the same origin, the theory is that he’s going to be able to get in, and let us in while they’re all sleeping.”

“How the hell is he going to do that?” A different voice.

“Don’t know, don’t care. It’s his job to figure that out.”

“Okay, so we already consider him dead.” Yet another voice. “So we’re still bombing the entire place?”

“Shut up, Cline.”

No surprise, I’ve been lied to. “If their leader is smart, he will have me killed on sight.”

The captain smiles. “Then you better talk fast. Tell him you’re bosom buddies; you share a mom, after all. Look, I don’t care how you do it, just get it done.”

Oh, I’ll get you in. “And if I fail, you destroy the building?”

The man glares at Cline, who is sitting somewhere on my left. “Last option. If it’s clear we can’t rescue anyone, we destroy the place. There’s no telling what the doctor has already told them, but we can’t risk them taking any of that out of here.”

That doesn’t sound like a last resort option, but like the established part of the plan. They will bomb the building no matter what, possibly the entire city. And they consider the demons to be the monsters.

“How much time will I have?” I want to call him out on his lies, but that won’t help me.

“We’ll have eyes on you; we still have drones in the air. I’ll give you a way to signal for when you’re ready for us.”

I nod and close my eyes. I try to relax, to rest, but this time it’s proving difficult. I can tune out the conversation and the low whirl of the blades easily, but it’s the occasional shudder and turns that keep me tense, reminding me we’re in the air.

I tell myself this isn’t like when Claws flew us across buildings, but it doesn’t help. Simply knowing I am far from the ground unnerves me. I spend the hours it takes until we land trying to conquer this fear, but the last bounce almost has me rushing out, and I admit defeat.

But I don’t run out when the doors open. Maybe I can’t win against this fear, but I will not let it dictate my actions. It wants me out, so I stay. I wait until the captain stands, then follow him out.

I almost fall as I step out of the helicopter; my sense of balance is off. We’re in a field far from the city. The sun is coming up behind it, making it look like one black mass instead of the individual buildings that comprise it.

I feel a sense of relief at being back, as well as anger and resentment. I want to talk to Amanda and Jason, but I also want to punch both of them. I want things to go back to the way they were, and at the same time I want to make sure I am never at their mercy again.

Instead of letting the emotions overwhelm me, I shove them down. I am here for one thing and one thing only.

“This is as close as we can land without the demons knowing about it. They’re centered around the lab, but there’s always some running around, hunting people.”

“How many made it out of the city?”

“No idea. Not my department.”

“I heard about half the population made it out,” a woman says. “The others have either been caught or hunkered down.”

“It doesn’t matter.” The captain turns to face us. “We’re not here for them, remember that. Don’t get distracted by some civilian in trouble. Our objective is Doctor Walker, no one else. The mission is officially on, so load up.”

Almost as one, the soldiers take a box from their pocket and pull a vial containing an orange liquid from it. They open a flap on their right shoulder, revealing a space in which the vial fits snugly. Once it’s in, they close the flap.

The captain’s putting his box away when I look at him again. “What’s that?”

He smiles. “That’s our boost. It’s what makes it that a handful of us can take on a demon instead of needing an entire battalion to take it down. Set the feeder on standby.”

“Set, Sir,” the soldiers replied.

“You use drugs to increase your capabilities. If you can do that, why did Amanda create me?”

“Because we’re not expendable. You are.”

Somehow I doubt it’s that simple. I’m not the only one being lied to.

“Withers, connect to the drones. I want an idea of what’s waiting for us in there. Don’t get too close this time; we don’t have that many left.”

“Yes, Sir.” The man in question goes to the back of the helicopter and pulls out a large crate. He looks through it and pulls out a table, as well as a pack that he puts on his back.

“This is for you.” The captain hands me a small gray box the size of a small phone. “It’s inert until you use it. It doesn’t matter what they use to scan it, they’re only going to see a useless piece of plastic. When you’re ready for us to come in, break it open. There’s a transmitter inside, one-time use. Turn it on and we’ll be there.”

I put it in a pocket. It feels fragile, so I’ll have to be careful not to damage the transmitter.

“You go on your own. I figure you can handle whatever comes your way; you’re armed, after all. If we find your corpse when we go in, we’ll try to remember to say a prayer for you. If we don’t, we’ll take position as close as we can and wait for the signal. We should be in position by the time the sun goes down.”

“Your confidence in me is comforting.”

“I’m not your handler. It isn’t my job to coddle you and make you feel comfortable. My job is to send you to do what you’ve been ordered. Now get moving.”

I start walking. I have no idea where headquarters is from here, but now that I know how to use maps, I’ll be able to reach it without help.