

Both humans gag at the sound of ripping, crunching, and slurping coming from the mass. One of them throws up. I've seen the result of demons eating, and what Claws is doing doesn't bother me. But I only watch him for an instant; my attention is better spent on the demon before me.

He's looking at the head, transfixed. Behind him the others watch Claws, but they fidget and edge away. Maybe eating isn't a communal thing?

"The Adam has died." The demon sounds wistful. He looks at me. "The favorites are dead?"

"Yes, the humans killed them." I decide not to mention Claws's part. Let him think the humans are that strong.

The look he gives the human isn't impressive. His lips curl in a human smile, and there's eagerness in his eyes. He flexes his hands, the claws moving dangerously.

I step back before he decides to take a swipe. "You don't want to do this."

"I kill you, I become the Adam."

I back up again, and the soldiers do the same.

"You can't kill me. You can't lead your people; it isn't in your nature to gather in large numbers. Adam forced it on you."

One of the machine guns moves up, to eye level.

"Don't fire." I don't take my eyes from the demon.

"This isn't some kind of pissing contest where you get to show us just how much better than us you are. That demon intends on killing us." The captain is angry, but I don't hear any of the fear I'd expect.

"We're not killing him unless we don't have any other choice."

"Unless you aren't paying attention, it wants to kill you. And there's hundreds of other demons behind him who look like they want the same."

The captain's right. They're staying back because this one is more powerful than they are, but I don't know how long that will last. I hope Claws is done eating before that. I want to call to him, to get him to chase everyone away, but I know how much of a bad idea it is to interrupt a feeding demon. I've done it often enough in my short life. He might be older, smarter, more controlled, but if I'm wrong and he flies at me in anger, I'm not surviving that.

The demon cants his head. "You do not want to kill me?"

"No, I don't."

He bares his teeth in a hiss. "You lie. I know what you are. I have been here before. I know your kind. You are the one who—"

"I know what I was," I snap. "I'm not that anymore."

"You are food then."

"I am not food either."

That perplexes him. "What are you then?"

"I'm someone who's fed up with all the killing. I'm trying to save your life, all your lives. You need to leave before the humans destroy everyone here."

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Derick?"

I whirl to face the captain. Showing my back to a demon is probably a really bad idea, but I have to hope this one is smart enough to realize how important this is. The movement lets me see Claws is still eating. How long does it take to eat a human? Amanda never covered that in my training.

"I'm trying to save lives. You really think bombing this place is going to accomplish anything?"

"It'll be a few hundred, maybe thousands of dead demons, so yeah, I think it will."

"Why are you so adamant about killing them? Maurice is dead. They'll leave on their own without him forcing them to stay."

The man's expression darkens. "They killed humans. No one, I mean absolutely no one does that and gets away with it."

You mean other than humans, I almost say. "The only reason they kill humans is to feed themselves." While you do it for the pleasure of it, I also don't say.

"So? We're just supposed to let them do it? We're not cattle."

“Has anyone even bothered trying to find a way to coexist?”

“Not my job. Like you, I go where I’m told and I kill demons. Unlike you, I do what I’m told.”

I’m wasting my time. “Fine, then if you start something now, you don’t get to rescue Amanda.”

“She isn’t involved in—”

“Sure she isn’t. She’s right there. You think they’ll bother staying away from her? The only way you get to leave with her is if there is no fighting here.”

The man narrows his eyes. “That sounds a lot like a threat.

I stare at him, unable to understand how he got that. “It’s a reasonable evaluation of the situation. Adam was the only one who wanted her alive. The only reason none of them have killed her already.”

“I want to fight,” the demon growls.

I spin to face him. “Are you hungry?”

The question surprises him. “No.”

“Then what’s the point? To get power? To replace Adam? What will that give you?”

“Yes,” is all the demon says.

I throw my hands in the air and laugh. “I’m an idiot. I just spent the last year trying to save both humans and demons. You know what? I’m done. You go right ahead and kill each other.”

I leave the captain and demon with a perplexed expression on their faces. I’m halfway to Claws when he stands. There’s nothing left on the ground where he’d been. The only thing of Maurice left is his head.

When he stops flowing, he’s nine-feet tall. His skin tightens on himself. There is nothing drooping, nothing fraying. Nothing remotely human about him. His legs are massive, bending at odd angles with claws digging into the pavement. His arms are thick with spikes out of them. His torso is wide and muscular. There is no doubting the power there, or in the teeth-filled muzzle. But that isn’t the scariest part of him.

His eyes shine bright red, filled with bottomless anger sending anyone who looks into them cowering. Even I take a step back when they pass over me. I hear one of the machine guns clatter to the ground.

I see it coming. I see his chest fill with air, and I prepare myself. It’s for nothing. There’s no way I could ever be prepared for the roar that erupts.

Run is the message. Run or die.

When it ends, I’m curled up on the ground, unable to stop shaking.

When my ears stop ringing, the sound is replaced by the clattering of claws on pavement as demons run—no, flee. I try to uncurl, to get up, but I can’t move. To move from where I am means death.

A rumble reaches me. Low, quiet, for me only. Comfort, safety. I open my eyes and a black hand is before me, human-sized, but with claws. I take it, and Claws pulls me up.

He looks more human now, my height, and he has adopted the look I’m most familiar with: pants and a hoodie, although it isn’t covering his head this time.

Around us I catch a glimpse of the last of the demons vanishing. The only one still here is the one who confronted me. He hasn’t moved, but now he’s seven-feet tall, his skin looking like it’s made of stone with sharp edges. I get the sense that this is as large as he can make himself.

The humans are still there. Cline picks up his machine gun. The captain tries to hide his fear under a mask of disappointment.

The demon straightens, an attempt to appear taller. He growls a challenge, a statement that he isn’t cowed.

Claws’s response is more complex than I have heard or felt before. Amusement, disappointment, pride, chiding. The overall sense I get is that Claws sees his actions as stupid, but that he admires the attempt.

The demon’s replying roar is louder, and the humans move away, understanding the danger in the volume, if not the tone. Pure determination. He will not be scared by anything.

Claws bends down and picks up Maurice’s head. He fixes the demon with his gaze as he cracks it open without any effort. The demon takes an involuntary step back, and then

straightens. A show of pure stubbornness. I wonder if this is another one of Claws's children.

Claws's response is a simple menace, and even I step away. He's done humoring this youngling.

The demon tries to stand his ground, but his skin ripples, going from spikes and back to plates, as if trying to find a good defense. He takes a step back, then another. He turns and runs.

Claws sighs. "Youth," is all he says. He looks at his hand, covered in brain matter, then considers the head before dropping it. He nods behind me.

I sigh as I turn. Of course, the two soldiers are aiming their rifles at us.

"Don't move." The captain makes his voice as commanding as he can, which, after Claws's demonstration, isn't very impressive.

"Or what?" I have no idea what to think about them anymore.

"We kill you. Irradiated rounds, remember?"

"If I move," Claws says, "I will rip the weapons out of your hands before you can fire. I sent my people away. Drop your bombs if you want. You will not kill them. This building is safe for you. None of my people will come here again."

"What's to stop you from killing us?"

"Not those." Claws indicates the machine guns.

"You expect me to just let you leave? After he betrayed us? Left us to die at Adam's hands?"

Claws looks at me, then back at him. "He made a mistake. He let his anger dictate his actions. You have a saying about humans being made of mistakes. You should see this as proof he is as much one of yours as he is mine."

I can see the conflict on the captain's face.

"I'm not scared of you," he says.

"Good, I do not wish to you scare you. But I will not let you take or hurt Derick."

He glances away from us, to where Amanda is still tied. With reluctance, he lowers his gun.

"Sir?" Cline asks.

"Get out of here. I have more important things to deal with right now."

"Sir?" Cline repeats.

The captain pushes the soldier's gun down.

I search the man's face. He doesn't want to do this. He'd rather kill me right now than let me go, but he's putting his mission first.

I turn and walk toward Amanda. I'm not heading for her, I tell myself, I just happen to head for the alley behind where she's tied, but I stop as I reach her. She's alive, for which I don't care. She doesn't react to my presence, so she's probably unconscious. I don't know why, but I cut the ropes holding her and lower her to the ground.

She opens her eyes, then looks around in confusion. She sees me and surprise fills her eyes, quickly replaced with hate. She tries to say something, but no words come out. She pushes me away. There's no strength in her arms, but I move away, then leave without looking back.

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"Was it there?" I nod to his hand. We've made it a few blocks without encountering anyone.

"No. Adam didn't have what you call a soul stone."

I nod, unsure how I feel about the implications for me. "I guess that proves I'm not like you."

Claws laughs. "I have known that since the first time we met, but you are still mine."

"Aren't you angry at me?"

He looks at me and his expression changes. I can't read it. "Do you have it?"

I reach into my pants pocket and take out Runs the Forest's soul stone.

He touches it. "Come with me." He heads for an alley, picking up a page from a newspaper that's stuck under a car's tire.

"Claws?" I can't hide the worry.

“There is something I need to teach you.”

I keep my distance as I follow. There was no threat in his voice, but I killed his son. How can he not hate me?

As he walks by a door, he grabs the wooden frame and rips it out. He breaks it into smaller pieces as he enters an alley.

When we are away from the entrance, he sits. He rips the paper into pieces and makes a pile, over which he places a handful of the smaller wood pieces. From a fold of his skin he pulls a shining stone and rakes a claw against it, producing sparks. When the paper has caught on fire, he puts it away.

He looks up at me. “I am not angry,” he says when he sees how far away I’m staying.

“Why not? You were enraged when you had to kill your son. I killed Runs the Forest.”

He nods. “But I only lost one child. If Runs the Forest had killed you, I fear I would have lost two.” He adds a larger piece of wood to the fire.

“How? Who else was here? That demon? The one who stubbornly refused to leave?”

Claws smiles. “No, that was just a youth who thought they didn’t have to obey me.” The smile vanishes. “Please, sit.”

I hesitate, then sit across him.

“If I had learned you had died at Runs the Forest’s claws, I fear I would have killed my child for that act.”

“Then why aren’t you angry with me? You’re not making any sense.”

“I know.” He forces a smile. “You do that to me.”

“I’m not—”

“I know.” There’s no anger in his voice. “But you are still my child, through Fang’s essence in you.” He chuckles, a very human sound. “I am not always rational when it comes to you. I do not understand why.” He adds another piece of wood. “This is large enough. It should be done in the wild, but the First One sees everything. The First One doesn’t care humans took over this place.”

I go to hand him the stone, but he shakes his head. “This is your responsibility.”

“Why?”

“Because you ate him.”

“I didn’t—”

“I know, but if you were more of mine, you would have. In terms you will understand, you killed him, so you must send him back.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Simply place Runs the Forest in the fire.”

I looked at the stone, all that is left of Claws’s child, of Runs the Forest. I remember running with him, and I let the memory flow as I deposit it among the flame. I feel the heat through my black skin, but it doesn’t hurt.

I know it wasn’t me who ran with him, but knowing I’ll never be able to do it again hurts. “Should I say something?”

“There is nothing to be said. Runs the Forest will be with the First One, as it should be.”

“What about the others? Who will do this for them?”

“I’ll go back and collect them.”

“The humans—”

“Will not stop me.”

I’m silent as I watch the stone, the edges brightening and parts flaking away to be carried up on the hot air. I watch them rise until I can’t see them anymore, and then look at the stone again.

“Claws, what does ‘home’ mean to your people?”

He looks at me.

“When Runs the Forest was dying. I was holding him and he rumbled something. It’s the best way I can describe what it felt like.”

Claws rumbles, and the sense of longing flows over me. I nod. I watch more of the stone flake away in the ensuing silence.

“The closest human term I can find for it is ‘family’. Runs the Forest saw you as family.”

I feel the tears run down my cheeks.

“Come with me, Derick.”

“I can’t.”

He nods. He knew I’d say that. “Why? Do you really feel so close to the humans you want them over my people?”

“No, it isn’t that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know what I am.”

“You are my child.”

“That’s who I am, not what.”

He smiles at my lack of denial.

“The one thing I do know is that every time I’m around demons, I end up having to kill them.”

“You wouldn’t have to do that if you came with me.”

“How do you know? Will the others in your...I don’t even know what you call yourselves. Will they accept me like you do?”

“They are my family, my home.”

“I need time alone, Claws. Not among humans, not among your people, just alone. I’m going into the wild. Maybe I’ll figure out how much like you I am.”

“I can help you with—”

“Please stop,” I say, trying not to get exasperated. “Claws, you don’t owe me anything.”

“You know me.”

“I know, and I know you’ll do it anyway, but—”

“No. You know me. You knew it was me on that image, and you found me among all the dead.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m your mate.”

“It means you are family. You cannot fight this.”

I sigh. “I’m not going with you, that’s final. I need to do this alone.”

Claws sighs in return, but I can’t help feeling amusement in it. “Stubborn.”

I chuckle. “I guess I am. If it helps, I think I’m enough like you that the hunt does something to me. I felt it while chasing Maurice. My weariness went away, and I think I healed faster.”

“The hunt is nourishment for my people.”

“It’s part of what I need to find out, if I can survive just by hunting in the wild.”

“There are many dangerous creatures in the wild.”

I raise an eyebrow. “More dangerous than you?”

“Yes.”

I think he’s joking, but everything about him is serious. I’ve never read about the wild. Cities are where I always expected to be, even when living Amanda’s lie. What could be more dangerous than an old demon like Claws?

When there’s nothing left of Runs the Forest, I stand. He does the same, and refuses to let me walk out of the city alone.

“You have others to see to,” I point out as we walk.

“They will wait.”

“What if the humans get there first?”

“I will hear their flying machines before they are close.”

After that we walk in silence.

We stop outside the city, and this time I’m the one who steps off the road. I walk for a while, then turn. He stands there, watching me.

Then I turn and head into the wild, to find out what is left of me when the humans are no longer there.