

# Chapter 19

The guard escorts me through the cells, and the soldiers watch me. Humbert is the only one to speak when the guard opens my cell. "I'm surprised that you're back, or that one of them's enough to keep you under control."

"He isn't," I answer after the door clangs shut, but my actions here impact more than me.

"When did you start caring about us?" Cline asks, surprised.

"Don't be an idiot, Cline," Humbert replies. "He means his demon, not us."

"I mean all of you, Claws included." I sit and rest against the wall.

From his position, mirroring mine, Humbert studies me. "I don't believe you. You've never cared about us. You were ready to feed us to the demons last time. This is probably some ploy so we'll think you aren't working for them and tell you military secrets."

"The last time, our goals weren't the time," I reply.

"Unless it's to bring Walker back," he says, "we still don't have the same goal."

"She isn't interested in leaving, but yes, that is still the mission." I look at Claws, who looks more like himself, no longer afraid of what I think of his actions. He's biped, but still demon-looking, sitting cross-legged. "How are you doing?"

"I am well," he pauses, "taking into account the situation we are in."

"Do you need to feed?"

"No, our last hunt will suffice until we are done here."

Unless Mister Graves tortures him the way Adam did.

"What did Walker want?" Humbert asks.

"To parade me before the man who employs her, as a demonstration of what she can accomplish. A Mister Graves," I add, watching for his reaction.

Humbert shrugs. "I'm not into local politics, and that name never came up in my briefings. Anyone?" he asks the others. No one knows the name.

"We should rest," I say, "and avoid discussing important matters. They will be listening." I close my eyes and sleep.

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I wake to the opening of the door. Guards enter the hall, carrying trays. Two aim machine guns at the cell's occupant while one deactivates the cell's security—a code entered on a keypad—then one slides the food tray through the partially open door.

"No one does anything," Humbert orders as the soldiers tense. He studies the guards, moves to see the keypad, but as with what I can see, they block it with their bodies.

I'm the only one who gets a large amount of food. They have instructions to keep me from starving, but do they come from Amanda or Mister Graves? The can of pop included in the meal tells me she is involved in this. Is she letting me know she remembers Jason and his part in shaping me? Is it a threat or simply an acknowledgment?

"Shit," Cline says, staring at my tray as Humbert gets his meal. "What are they trying to do, fatten you up?" Claws isn't given anything.

"I'm not human," I answer, picking up the can. The taste is strong in my memory, the can I drank in Maliya's house refreshed it. Could this be a subtle message from Mister Grave that he can get me things I want? "I have a demon's need in the quantity of food I require, but my body can't process those quantities, so I need to eat more, and more often." A hunt would make this meal last longer. "Do you drink this?" I ask Cline. Regardless of who it is from, or how badly I want to taste it, I don't want to play their game.

"What's the flavor?" he asks, picking at the food on his tray.

I frown, turning the can until the lettering on it is visible. "Strawberry. Do they come in different flavors?"

Cline looks up from his food. "Don't you drink the stuff?"

"All I taste are chemicals, sugar, the carbonization. I never identified anything resembling fruits or vegetables in them." Is it possible those I bought before were all the same flavors? I remember cans at the grocery stores being different colors, but I never paid attention to the ones I took. Maybe I should taste this one, it might taste different.

"Then why do you drink them?"

His question pulls me away from the temptation. "I've grown addicted."

"And you're offering it to me?" He stares at me for a few seconds before shaking himself. "I'm... I'm honored."

"I don't like the message its inclusion implies. Amanda knows the context under which I became addicted. But she should have ensured it was excluded because of that. So this is a warning or a threat."

"Okay, consider me not quite as honored, but I'll take it, anyway. All I have is water."

"I'd take some too," the woman in the cell next to Cline says, "so how about you share with the class?"

I consider the angle from my cell to Cline, then look at Humbert. "You'll have to pass it along to him. I'm not confident I can roll it to him."

"I'll do it," the man in the cell next to me says. Diniz, I recall, he is the one who removed the skylight.

"You touch it, Din," Cline says, "and I'm going there to break you. He offered it to me."

"You're not sharing?" Diniz asks, offended.

I carefully slip my hand through the bars, and when Humbert is at his, I roll it to him.

"I might," Cline tells Diniz, "but you're a hog. You touch it and there isn't going to be any left for anyone else."

"Stop arguing," Humbert says, picking up the can and taking it to Cline. "And you're sharing it with anyone on our side who wants some. That's an order."

"What about us?" Diniz asks, hurt.

Humbert rolls his eyes. "If Coplar can come up with a way to get the can to Murray without it tipping over, you are welcome to enjoy some of this junk."

Diniz slowly looks over that side of the cells through the bars. "You are going to leave me some, right?" He asks and is answered with laughter.

Humbert sits and picks up his tray. "You have to catch what you eat, it's the only way demons can feed, right?"

Claws nods. "But as I told Derick, our last hunt will last me until we are done."

Humbert nods. "Did anyone happen to catch the code to unlock the cells?" a series of negatives answer him, and I shake my head when he looks at me. Displeased, he goes back to eating.

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The following two days are the same, meals and rest. The soldiers on Cline's side get my can for lunch, those on my side get the one for dinner. It helps make the situation more tolerable for them. They talk most of the time, but nothing relevant to our situation. There is a lot of laughter. Some stories are about their individual history, even Humbert joins in eventually.

I pace, unable to remain seated for long.

On the third, halfway between lunch and dinner, four guards enter and open Coplar's cell.

"Captain?" she asks when one of them motions for her to exit.

"What's going on?" Humbert demands.

"She's going for some exercises," the guard motioning answered. The three with him laugh, but none of the soldiers join in. "Look, you're coming no matter what your boss says. The only question is how banged up you're going to be. Thrust me, you don't want to be banged up for this."

"Go," Humbert tells her. "You hurt her and you're going to be dealing with the rest of us,

understand?”

The guard laughs again. “Oh, don’t worry. We won’t be laying a finger on the pretty lady. She’s not for us.” He looks her up and down, a leer forming on his lips that vanishes as she punches him before anyone can react.

“No, you ain’t, you piece oh shit,” she tells him. “And if you ever look at me like that again, ah-ma going to rip your balls out.”

I stare at her as the man picks himself up. Her speech pattern is an accent. Humans from different regions have different languages, or sometimes a variation in the language spoken there. It distorts how they speak other languages. But she spoke properly until now. I look at Humbert as they take her away, but it’s Cline who answers my confused expression.

“Her accent creeps in when she gets angry. I’d say that was a three out of ten. When she hits six, it’s just about impossible to understand her.”

“You’d know,” Humbert says, “seeing as you get your kicks spending your off-duty time pissing her off.”

“What can I say, Cap. My on-duty time is reserved solely for pissing you off.”

Humbert looks to the ceiling. “You are so lucky there’s electrified bars between us, Cline. You have no idea how badly I want to strangle you right now.”

The man grins. “I can step up to them if you want. If you’re careful, you should be able to reach through and grab my neck without electrocuting both of us.”

Humbert lets out a slow breath. “That won’t be necessary, sergeant. I’m going to need every soldier to be healthy to get us out of this. Yes, even you,” he adds in exasperation before Cline speaks. “God save us all.”

That makes everyone laugh, even Cline.

“What is that about?” Claws asks me.

“I have no idea,” I answer with a shrug. “I don’t understand humor. Jason explained that it’s one of the ways humans relieve tension, so that’s most likely it. Sex and fighting are the others.”

“Oh, dear God,” the woman one cell over from Diniz exclaims, “someone explained sex to something like you?”

“Jason wanted me to be human. Sex is one of the most basic of humans things according to him.”

“And?” a man asks. I look in the voice’s direction, but I don’t see him. “How was it?”

“I didn’t do it.”

“What? Never?” the same man asks.

“Is sex *that* important?” I reply, unable to keep the exasperation out of my tone. How often have I had to explain this now? “Something in the way I was made removed whatever it is that drives humans to do it.”

“So you don’t want to do it,” the man asks and I shrug. “You do know you can still enjoy it, even if there’s no desire behind the act, right? Just ask Cline’s wife.”

“No, no, Sam,” Cline replies. “You have that wrong. It’s your husband that needs to force himself to do it with you. At least that what he tells me every time he sneaks into my bed for some actual good times.”

“Fuck you, Cline,” Sam says, good-naturedly.

“Not in public I won’t. Believe it or not, even I have limits.”

The others laugh and the conversation devolves into good-natured ribbing.

Coplar doesn’t return.

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The next day, the guards take Diniz. He doesn’t go willingly.

He does not return.

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Sam is the next one they take, and they have to beat him unconscious before they can drag

him out of the cell. And a guard needs help walking. No one makes jokes. Afterward, the mood is somber. They understand what is happening, if not the how.

Mister Graves has demons to feed. And while I don't know how he selects who he feeds to them the rest of the time, now that he has prisoners, it makes for an easy way to dispose of them.

That I haven't been picked tells me he's hoping seeing the soldiers vanish will make me change my mind, or he's waiting for a specific demon to hunt me. He said I had time while he prepared things. Do I merit the elder? Or is Claws reserved for them?

Claws is the first adult demon I am aware of encountering. Those I hunted for Amanda were all adolescents, barely out of their hunger, or some still in it. But once they are no longer driven by hunger, they can think and reason. I knew of demons hiding behind humans, but how well could a demon hide if they survived long enough? Were there adults in that city, in the time of the Lies, that no one knew about?

If the demons here are all related to Rules us All, how old are they? How long have they been hiding in the city? Has Mister Grave helped them with that the entire time? I want to ask Claws, find out what he thinks of this city, Rules us All, the demons here, but I'm unsure how the soldiers will react to the acknowledgment their friends have been eaten. If they panic, they will exhaust themselves, at best. At worst, they will get hurt or killed trying to escape. To escape this, everyone left will have to be at their best.

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When the guards enter the next day, they stop before my cell.

"Him?" the one next to the lead guard ask. "He doesn't look like he's going to last five minutes. Is there even enough on him for Risk?"

"Probably not," the leader answers.

"You remember how cranky he got the last time he didn't have enough?"

The man sighs and looks around. "Bring in more guards, we'll take that one too." He points to Humbert, who stands and tenses. Before the cells are open, four more guards enter; these in full body armor. I meet Humbert's eyes, and he grinds his teeth before shaking his head. Good, he too realizes we can't take them here. All they need to do is reactivate the cells and push us against them.

"Alright," the lead guard says, "time for your exercise." Machine guns are aimed at both of us. "How about this time you come quietly? You saw how those who protested were treated, and I really don't feel like beating the crap out of more people. Believe it or not, I don't enjoy it."

He thinks he can beat me. The extra guards are only called in when they decided Humbert would come with me. They consider him more of a threat than me. Humbert raises an eyebrow. Has he reached the same conclusion I have? They think I'm human too.

This changes the situation. If they don't know what to expect from me, I might subdue enough of them before they can push me against a cell, and those aren't powerful enough to render me unconscious.

Humbert gives a slight shake of the head. I nod in response. He's used to fighting humans. Of the two of us, he will have strategies that have better chances of success in this environment.

The doors open, as if the guards think my nod was for them. Me and Humbert exit without causing problems.

If they need two humans, it means this Risk demon will be older. Did Mister Grave plan on me facing them alone and didn't pass the message? Humbert's inclusion increases the chances we can escape the maze.

This is a better situation than I had hoped for.