

I stop just inside the house. The living room, which is normally populated with chairs, a couch, and a screen for entertaining guests, instead has medical equipment. Computers, sensors and others. The room reminds me of the medical labs where I underwent experiments at the hand of Amanda's people.

"This isn't needed," I say, fighting to keep my black skin from reacting and destroying the shirt and pants. The memories are still clear. Mainly the pleasure those scientists took in finding out how much pain and damage I could endure. How far they could push me before my reflexes and mind failed.

"You're back!" The woman entering from another room is small, but thick for her height. Her coppery hair is short, her eyes brown, and her smile is what Jason liked to call blinding. Her happiness at my presence does not engender comfort. "I couldn't wait for you to be up and about. I have so many questions for you."

"I'm fine," I state, controlling my breathing, and with that, my fear.

"I'm sure you feel that way," she says, placing a hand on my right arm. My skin tightens and hardens. If she notices it as she tries to pull me to the medical bed, she doesn't react. "I'm the doctor, so I'll be the one to decide that."

"I know how my body functions. All I need is to eat and I'll be fully functional." I look at Moores for assistance, but he steps away from me. "I thank you for your help and hospitality," I tell both of them. "I'll leave now."

"No, you aren't," she says. Her smile is gone. Her expression is serious. It reminds me of Amanda, when I didn't measure up to her expectations—a rare thing until those last few days. She's still holding my arm. "I don't let my patients just walk out because they think they're fine. You were brought to me after being torn apart by a wrinkleskin. I don't doubt whatever they did to you makes you tough. You wouldn't have survived to reach me if you weren't, but you are going to sit your ass on that bed and let me examine you. If I say you're well enough, then you can leave."

I look at Moores. He is the person in charge here, isn't he?

"Feel free to argue with her," he says. "She never does what I tell her."

"Not when it comes to someone's health," she replies, and pulls on me. It's gentle, but it triggers years of reflex in doing what scientists tell me.

I take a step before I stop myself. I also have years of not being their things to command. I can do what I want. "If I don't like what you do, I will stop it." Hints of a growl slip into my voice.

"Perfectly fair." She smiles as I step to the bed. "Oh, and I'm going to need you out of those clothes for the examination."

"Maliya," Moores says, his tone a mix of exasperation and warning.

"I need to see everything if I'm to perform a proper examination," she replies, but there's more to it. I can smell her excitement as I undress. Her expression resembles Jason's when he saw a man he desired.

Nude, I sit on the bed. Her touch is clinical, but I see the tension as she fights to touch me the way people do in the sexual movies Jason showed me. I recognize what she does as the actions the support team's medical person did when they picked me up after a fight with a demon. She checks my pulse, tests the areas the wrinkleskin damaged, the bones I'd broken.

"You do heal quickly," she comments. "I can barely feel scarring where your skin was cut or ripped. Do you know how fast you heal compared to baseline humans?"

"No."

She raises an eyebrow as she continues examining me.

Without intending to, I elaborate. "All this was always done for Amanda and the scientists' benefit, to sate their curiosity. I am. I heal. It's all I need."

"Knowing your limits can help keep you alive, you know. That wrinkleskin came close to killing you."

"Then I die." The finality in my tone doesn't match how I feel. It hasn't matched for nearly a year. She raises an eyebrow again, this time looking up at me. "I don't seek to die. There is still much of the world I want to see. But I will die, possibly violently. I accepted that when the lie behind my creation was told to me. I still accept it."

"Taking on fights you can't win isn't how you stay alive," Moores says.

"I cannot stand aside when I believe a demon endangers humans. I've tried. I'm in the wilderness in part so I won't be in such a position. Would you have preferred I let a demon eat those children?"

"Of course not," he replies, "but throwing yourself at a problem blindly isn't a good way to do it."

Maliya motions for me to lie on my back.

"I didn't know I was blind," I say, continuing with the expression he used. "What you have here contradicts every-thing I have been told about demons and human interaction. Contradicts what I have experienced."

Moores chuckles at something I said.

"How strong are you?" Maliya asks before I can ask what I did wrong. A year away from humans hasn't helped me understand how they speak any more than when I was among them.

"Strong."

Now she is the one chuckling. "A stoic patient." She looks at Moores. "You have no idea how refreshing that is." The man looks away bashfully. His skin is too dark for me to tell if he is blushing, but the rest of the body language is there. "But I do wish you knew more about yourself. I doubt I have anything I can use to set up a baseline for you. Demons aren't into weightlifting, although there's that set Many Names used for a few days. Any idea where that ended up?" she asks Moores, who shakes his head. "I'm guessing you can't tell me how much endurance you have, how fast you can run?"

"I can run faster than a support van through clear city traffic," I state. "And I can maintain that speed for six or seven kilometers before I feel the exhaustion."

"That sounds like something you tested in the field and not under laboratory conditions."

"There were times when running back to headquarters was more practical than waiting for the van to pick me up." This time, when her hand runs over me, I can't keep my black skin from reacting, prickling.

"You don't like being touched?"

"It's rarely a pleasant experience."

She looks me over and her scent shifts to something I recognize as lustful. "That's definitely something that should be remedied."

"I have no interest in what you're imagining. Jason tested me. I have no sexual drive, for anybody." Or demons. The memory of Claws explaining how demons reproduce, of giving me a small demonstration. Of the flash of memories of him and Fangs doing it. Of how indifferent it left me. "Something in the process employed to make me stripped that from me."

"That's a shame," she says, then smiles, a finger tracing along my arm. "Are you sure it isn't something you haven't grown into yet? I'd be more than happy to test—"

"I am sure." I fix my eyes on hers. "I am not your toy. What you wish is immaterial to me."

"I didn't mean..." she trails off, stepping away, hands raised.

"Your smell says otherwise."

Moore's chuckles. "Looks like someone's immune to your charms, Mal."

"It's true what they say, there's a first time for everything." She smiles at me. "I'm sorry, it's just that men are usually—"

"I'm not interested in hearing your justifications," I cut her off. "Don't act on your impulses."

"Okay," she replies, put off by my directness. "Do you know anything about how they made you?" When she touches me, her touch is clinical again. She presses my black skin, and other than preventing it from forming spikes, I let it react, harden, resist her.

"They injected the man I used to be with a vaporized soul stone."

"What's that?" She touches my neck, and my black skin covers it all as she searches for a pulse.

I hesitate. "How much do you know of what happens when a demon dies?" The bulk of what I know is more lies than truth, but Claws explained some, and there was a level of reverence attached to it.

"Not as much as I'd like," she answers. "Are you being difficult?" She indicates the skin over my neck.

"I don't entirely control it. Be content with the fact I kept it from spearing you so you wouldn't touch me."

She searches my face, and I expect she doesn't find what she wants. She goes back to studying my body. "Protect is good about making sure no one dies within his territory, so no one's been able to perform autopsies, and he hasn't been forth-coming in answering my questions about their biology."

"Could have something to do with you explaining in detail human sex to him," Moore's says under his breath.

"It was for research purposes," she replies. Her blush and smell contradict her. She looks at me defiantly. A dare to expose her lie. I have seen the expression often among humans. I have no desire to do so.

"If you don't know, then I don't think I should be the one telling you. It's part of who they are. One of them should be the one to explain it if they feel it's something humans should know. They don't call it a soul stone. That was the name Amanda gave it as part of the lie. I don't know that they have a name for it."

"I'll ask Protect about it," Moore's says. "He'll be more responsive to me than you, Mal."

She nods, back to studying my black skin. "Why did you say 'the man you used to be'?"

"The man who was injected no longer exists. The process destroyed everything that made him a person, erased his memories, his personality. All it left behind is the body and the skills he knew." I think back to the explanations Jason gave me. "Muscle memory, Jason called it. Even if the memory of how I learned how to perform specific actions, like fighting, firing a revolver, is gone, my body remembers."

"Do you know how it changed you?" She taps the black skin with a knuckle.

"I can tell you what it changed, but if you're asking for the process of how it happened, I don't know."

"How do you feel about x-rays?"

I frown. "I'm not familiar with it."

"It's a machine to see your insides. It throws radiation at you and a collector assembles what it receives into an image. The People don't react well to radiation, better to some than others, but x-rays make them sick."

Irradiated weapons are what the army uses to fight demons, what I used. I remember Amanda standing over me, sword planted in my stomach. How I didn't heal as I should have. The goop Claws placed on the wound to draw out what he called the poison. "I don't react well to radiation, but I don't know how it compares to them."

She nods. "Then it's a sonogram I'll use. No point in risking your health just to see how you're put together." She rolls a machine closer and sets part of it over me. "If your hearing is close to that of the People, this might be uncomfortable."

I wince at the piercing sound when she turns it on. She moves it from my feet up, the sound becoming not intense, but it feels as if it goes deeper into my head as it approaches. I clench my teeth when it passes over my head, and by the time I realize the sound is gone, Maliya has been standing aside for a few seconds, looking at the machine's screen.

"You're right. All the breaks are about gone. Barely a few micro-fractures are left. Don't get into any fights with wrinkleskins, or the People, and in a few days you'll be fully healed." She leans in, shakes her head. "I can't believe how dense your internal body is. Can you shift your insides? Alter the density the way the People do when they reshape themselves?"

"Only my skin, and only the black part, although, as you saw, it can extend to cover more of me." I looked down at myself to assess how far it's spread. most of my right side is covered: arm, chest, waist, and half the leg.

"Does it lose any durability when you stretch it?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"That's impressive. Very much like the People. I wonder why just your skin though? How far can you stretch that part?"

"Over most of my body if I have to."

"Can you show me?"

"No." This time I don't respond to her raised eyebrow. The combination of the flashes from Fang's memories and how the black skin has progressed to cover me when relaxed has reignited my concern over what will be left of me when it covers me completely. Claws's reassurances aside, even he admits I am unique, and no one knows what will happen. Not even Amanda.

Once she understands I won't answer, she nods and looks over the image again. "Well, I'm giving you as clean a bill of health as I can. Considering your physiology is different enough from what I'm used to, I can't know what's supposed to be normal for you." She looks me over again and sighs. "You're free to go, if you think that's what's best for you."

I dress as she puts the machine back and leave the house with Moore's.

"I wish you'd reconsider," Moore's says.

Protect is outside, waiting for us, looking over me. He growls a threat, a promise of a swift death. "Are you certain?" they ask Moore's as

the man pushes the demon aside.

“Moores!” a man yells, panting, fear in his voice. “Moores! They’re back!”

I turn to face the man, looking around for the threat. Protect no longer watches me. He too searches for a threat, but instead of carrying a desire for a fight, the undercurrent in the growl is worry.

“Who’s back?” I ask them, trying to figure out what could make an elder demon worry in the middle of a forest.