

The city is empty.

It's more than I haven't seen anyone in the last thirty minutes, or that the cars are abandoned in the middle of the streets, or that no one looks out of the windows. There is a sense of lack, a wrongness I can't explain. Something I never noticed in the time I lived and hunted here is gone.

While I don't know what it is, I can feel what it means.

The city is dying.

An hour later I finally hear sounds, but it doesn't change the sense of something lacking. The sounds are the roars of demons and the screams of the humans being hunted. Some of the sounds come closer, but die before they reach me.

I slow and consider rescuing those people. I could help them. I'm armed, it would be simple, but then what? Do I rescue the next victim? And the next one after that? Even when there were only a few demons in the city, it was a never-ending proposition to hunt them. Now?

I remind myself they aren't why I'm here. I am not these people's protector, I owe this city, those people, nothing. I need to stay focused on my goal.

Sometime later I realize that the sense of lack is gone. The city is coming back to itself. The streets are still deserted, cars abandoned and overturned, but now I can put a word to the sense: life. There is life in this part of the city, even if I can't see it.

Then I can. I see the flutter of a curtain here and there. The impression of a form behind it. I even catch a glimpse of a face as it pulls away from a window.

I hear the click-clack of claws on concrete, the huffing of a demon getting closer. I stop and wait for him.

He peers out of the alley, four buildings ahead of me. A snout sniffing the air. I can't see the red of his eyes when he turns my way, but I can see the surprise on his face. He rushes toward me, eager for a hunt.

He comes to a sudden stop a dozen paces from me, a quizzical expression replacing the eagerness. He cants his head one way, then the other.

"Food?" he growls, but I can hear uncertainty. He sniffs in my direction again.

"No." Claws told me I don't smell fully humans to them. The pulverized soul stone Amanda injected me with changed me and the way I smell. On top of that, Claws's own scent still clings to me after all this time.

He growls louder, stomps in place, and makes himself larger, a few heads taller than me. His muzzle is full of sharp teeth.

"Run, food!"

I smile, showing my own, unimpressive teeth. "I don't think so." That he speaks tells me he's older, but he doesn't seem to know many words.

His eyes flash bright red with anger. He roars at me, just the sound, no meaning behind it.

Before I can reply, a louder roar comes. That one has meaning in it: "Intruder, fear me, flee."

It isn't as loud or as authoritative as the one Claws let out. That time I crumpled to the ground under its strength. I need to fight this roar, but I manage to keep standing. The demon before me shrinks and cowers. He furtively looks around for where it came from before running off.

Even I can't tell where it originated from, and I'm surprised when a form detaches from the shadow in the alley only one building away. He's tall, human-looking, although the edge is fuzzy. Not frayed, but more that he doesn't care if his disguise isn't perfect.

For a moment I think this is Claws, that somehow he got free, but something about him is wrong. I remind myself that there's no way I should be able to tell the difference—demons can change shape, so looking at one should be like looking at any of them—but there is something that I can't name, and it tells me that this is not Claws.

Just like his form isn't perfectly human, his head isn't either. He shows me what he is, muzzle and glowing eyes.

"I know you." His voice is low, gravely. "You are the one who hunts us."

"I don't do that anymore."

He tilts his head. "You said you are not food. If you are not food and not a hunter, what are

you?”

I shrug. I wish I knew the answer to that question. “If you know me, that means you didn’t come here with these new demons.”

“I have been here for much longer. I have watched you hunt. I stayed away, kept my people away from you.”

He isn’t like the demons I used to hunt. I thought that all demons were near-mindless, or not very smart at best. Amanda had told me that even those who had humans working for them, who had tainted them, weren’t all that smart.

Claws had been different, but he and Lives Alone were the only truly smart demons I’d met. Claws explained the hunger-driven madness, and how those who survived that time grew out of it, became able to think.

Here was my proof that they were in the city after all. He had been smart enough to not only stay away from me, but make sure no one with his scent came close also.

“Are you going to try to eat me?”

He laughs, a surprisingly human sound. I can tell when Claws laughs, but he doesn’t sound anything like this. “If that was my goal, I wouldn’t be talking. You would be running, giving me a hunt to feed me for years to come.”

“I don’t run.” I’m not afraid of him. I don’t fear any demons. One day I might die at their hand, but it will not be while I’m running away.

He leans forward and smiles. His lips stretch, exposing long, sharp teeth. “I can make you run.” His claws are longer now, gleaming in the light. If he forces me to, I will show him I am not his prey.

“You said you weren’t going to eat me, so what do you want?”

He straightens at the abrupt change of subject, tilts his head. He considers me. “I want you to kill the invaders.”

“They’re your people, you should—”

“They are not,” he hisses. “They are invaders. I punish those who come into my territory, who feed on my people, but they are too many.”

“Just go there and kill them. You’re older than they are, right?”

“Those who go there lose themselves. Climbs the Tower went there, fought many, killed many, but the not-quite-human ended the fighting.”

“He won the fight?” It isn’t so much surprise than wanting confirmation that makes me ask. I might be able to win a fight against the demon before me, but it wouldn’t be certain. By the sound of it, Climbs the Tower was his equal.

“There was no fight. Climbs the Tower became small before him. He went in the building, the one you came out of. I haven’t heard Climbs the Tower roar since.”

Making himself small had to be a sign of submission, or a reaction to fear. I wish Amanda and Jason had given me useful knowledge about demons instead of the lies that supported what they wanted.

“Where is the building from here?” Since he’s here, I might as well get the information.

“You will kill them?”

“I don’t know. It isn’t why I’m here.”

He nods. “You no longer protect the humans. Your kind never does.”

“You’ve seen others like me?”

“Two before you. They hunted for a time, then turned on the humans, hunting them. You didn’t turn on them.”

“The one who leads these demons, the not-quite-human, have you seen him before?”

He thinks about it. “No. Is he one of your kind then?”

“The first one.”

“Then go kill him.” His tone is hard. “I want the city back. I want it to live again.” The demon turns and vanishes into the alley.

I didn’t get my directions, so I go looking for them. With a map I find the grocery store Jason had me shop at. Knowing where that is, I can find where I need to go.

The sun is high in the sky when I sense I'm being watched. It's only a hint at first, but it grows in strength. Then I see a demon looking at me out of an alley. Instead of coming at me, he stays there, watching.

They crowd the alleys and cross-streets, almost like they are guiding me. I get confirmation when they block the way I was planning on taking, forcing me to turn, and in doing so I recognize the building in the distance.

They aren't just in the alleys anymore. They stand on top of the buildings, around them. They are not hiding in the shadows; they are the masters here. They know it, and they are making sure I know it too.

When I'm close enough, I see the beam on which Claws is tied, and I have to stop myself from running to him, cutting him down. He looks even weaker, his form more of a puddle than anything else. I wonder how his arms are being held.

Amanda is stretched next to him, and two other people have been strung up on the other poles—scientists, by the lab coat they wear, although I don't recognize them.

The demons on the building side of the street part, and a man with pink skin marbled with black is standing among them. He's watching me, then steps in my direction.

I stop when he's thirty feet from me. He takes a few more steps and stops too.

"I got word someone new was in my city. Someone who wasn't afraid." He indicates my revolvers. "Are you planning on killing some of us?"

For an answer I pull the sleeve of my trench-coat and shirt up. My black skin ripples, then forms spikes. When he smiles I let the sleeve fall back down.

The black stripes on his skin move about. "So, you're another one of her experiments. She still hasn't gotten the look to be complete, but you're more uniform than I am." He extends a hand. "I'm Adam. What do you call yourself?"

I look at the hand. Jason's lessons on how to interact with humans are far away, and shaking hands is something I didn't do, even then. "Derick."

He waits, then with a shrug lowers his hand. He moves next to me and puts an arm around my shoulders, guiding me forward. I fight the urge to get away from him. Something about him feels wrong.

He stops as we get close to the prisoners and lets go of me.

"Doc," he says, stepping close to her. "I'm disappointed in you. You didn't tell me you went and made another son. Tell me, did you treat him better than you treated me?"

She looks at him. Her skin is pale, her lips dry and cracked. "I did my best for you," she croaks. Her eyes are sunken in, her hair matted with something that might be blood. "I had such great hopes for you, Maurice."

He slaps her, drawing blood. "My name is Adam." Unlike the slap, there is no viciousness in his tone, no anger. "That man died in the box you locked him in."

"I did that to save you, Mau—" He raises a hand. "Adam, they wanted me to kill you."

"What about you, Derick? Did you escape from one of her prisons?" He looks at me over his shoulder. "You look a lot better than I did."

"She didn't imprison me. I walked away." I can feel Claws's eyes on me, and I fight the urge to look at him, to tell him that this will be over soon.

"She let you leave?" He looks at Amanda. "What happened, growing soft?"

"She said I wasn't worth the effort. That the demons would kill me for her."

Adam chuckles. "She misjudged you, just like she did me." He turned to face me. "Now, before we go any further, there's something I need to know."

I prepare myself. Not for anything Adam might do, but for the demon I feel moving behind me. He's unusually silent, but can hear his breathing getting closer.

"Stop." The command is in a conversational tone, but I can feel the demon stop. "I'm having a conversation with him, so you're not going to kill him."

The demon growls and I hear meaning in it. Not defiance, but insistence.

“No, I don’t care what you feel. You only get to kill him if I say so. Now back away.”

The demon growls louder. I don’t pay attention to the meaning in it, because I’ve caught something else, a sense of familiarity in the undercurrent of the growling. Except there’s only one demon I’m familiar enough with for that to register.

I look at Claws without meaning to. He isn’t looking at me, but at the demon behind me. In his eyes I see, I understand—pain, disappointment, sorrow. He’s afraid of losing another child.

“I said, back off.”

My head snaps to Adam. There is something in his tone that demands that I pay attention. Not the words, but the undercurrent to them, like the way meaning is conveyed when demons growl.

Behind me, the demon huffs and moves away.

“Sorry about that. He’s older, so more stubborn.” He sighs and smiles. “Teenagers. You have any kids?”

I shake my head.

“Had two myself—before this, I mean. I loved them, but man were they a handful. So, about the doc. I need to know if you’re harboring any kind of feeling toward her. If you’re here to rescue her, just tell me and I’ll get Runner back here. He really wants you dead for some reason.”

Claws growls. It’s soft. I barely hear it, and force myself not to react. If Adam noticed it, he ignores it.

“I don’t care about her. I don’t care about the humans anymore. She only cares about herself. There are others coming to rescue her.”

“I figured they’d want her back. The military spent a lot of money on her, on us.”

I nod to the other two scientists. “Are you going to string them all up?”

“No, just two more. These, with dear old doc here, were my very own torturers. They’d spend days hurting me under the pretense of testing my limits. I was so important they told me, I would help them change the world. Of course that song and dance changed the day I had enough. How much of the demon is still in you?”

“What do you mean?”

“How much do you remember of your time as a demon? I remember all of it.” He sighs. “I remember being driven mad by hunger, hunting and killing, the relief of being able to think again. I remember living in the wild, as part of it. Master of it. I remember the new smells, new sounds. Both smelled wrong, but I thought it was a new kind of prey, something that had strayed into my territory.”

He paused, and the silence was absolute. Even the demons were still and silent.

“They didn’t act like prey. They didn’t run when I roared. They hurt me without ever getting close, made the ground explode around me. I didn’t run; I wasn’t their prey, they were mine, but then it all went dark.”

He looks at his hands, turning them over. “And I woke up in this thing.”

“That wasn’t you,” Amanda whispers. “Just memories bleeding through.”

Adam continues as if she hadn’t spoken. “I haven’t been able to hunt since that time. I can chase my prey down, but it’s empty. There’s nothing in it anymore.”

He closes his hands into fists. “You took the hunt away from me!” He hits the man next to Amanda in the face. I hear bones break, and the man sags.

Adam looks at him with a perplexed expression on his face. “Well, that’s annoying. I wanted him to suffer a while longer.”

“What about him?” I indicate Claws. “I thought the demons worked for you.”

“This one’s too old to be of any use. You saw how Runner was stubborn. Well, this one won’t do anything I tell him. He showed up here trying to stop me. It’s almost like he wants the humans to wipe us out. I’d let him leave if I thought he’d leave me alone, but I can see in his eyes that he wants me dead.”

All I see when I look in Claws’s eyes is defeat, pain, disappointment. I want to tell him I’m here to rescue him, but I can’t do that, not outside where I might be watched.

“Maybe we should go inside? I’d rather not continue our conversation within earshot of her.”
Adam looks at Amanda and nods. “I know what you mean. She can be one conniving bitch.