

Chapter 20

The guards lead us through the featureless hallway that ends with another thick door. Behind it, the larger room has lockers on one side, a table where a man and woman play cards. This time, the cots are unoccupied. On the other side, a woman sits at a computer, watching the feed from the cells, while another is before a large receiver, headset on and attentive to what is being said.

Unlike when Amanda took me through here, the guards aren't armored or paying us any attention. Only a couple of steps in, Humbert's scent shifts. He's alert and while I'm not sure taking on twelve guards is any better than eight, I ready myself.

He waits until we are in the center of the room to make his move. Before his punch connects with a guard's exposed throat, the one closest to me is flying back from the impact of my fist on his armored chest. Something clinks in a pouch at his belt, but he's now too far for me to investigate, and there are more guards to deal with.

I grab the machine gun as it is raised, pull him to me, grab the pouch at his belt, then kick him away. I feel cylinders inside it, and now that I look for it, I notice the injector on his forearm. I pocket the pouch, wondering why they all smell like normal humans. They should have injected themselves as soon as the fighting started.

I slam the butt of the weapon in an approaching guard and up in his face before he falls back. The stock breaks off the machine gun and he doesn't move once on the floor. I reverse the weapon and fire in the two armored guards' chests, staggering them back. The two at the table are now on their feet. As they move for the lockers, I shoot them in the knees.

Motion in my peripheral vision makes me turn and fire at the armored man. He loses balance from the bullets, but continues toward me as the machine gun clicks empty. I drop it and the glove on my right hand rips as my skin thickens and sharpens. The punch rips the armor and skin open and he backs away, holding his bleeding chest.

"This is Humbert. We need an extraction. I repeat, we need an extraction. The mission has gone sideways and we need out of here. Respond!" He glances at me, headset on his head, then goes back to looking at what he's typing.

The response comes over the speakers. "Captain Humbert," a woman says calmly, "it's a negative on the extraction. I repeat, negative on the extraction." She sounds unbothered at telling him they are leaving him here to die.

"Are you fucking kidding me," he replies as I grab a machine gun off the floor in time to point it at the last guard still up. She has hers aimed at me. "They've already executed three of my people. They have a fucking elder demon. Are intell on this is all wrong. We need to be pulled out and regroup."

"Captain," a new voice says, sharp, displeased. The colonel. "You knew the mission parameter when you agreed to this." The guard doesn't move her weapon, but her attention is on Humbert more than me.

"Colonel, the information we were provided was wrong. Someone set us up, or didn't do their due diligence on this."

"That's irrelevant," she replies. "The mission is either a go or no-go. You know what I have to do if it's a no-go."

"There's nine of us here!" Humbert yells, desperation tinging his words. "You can't just sacrifice us!"

"You know very well that I can and will do unless you tell me the mission is a go."

"But." His shoulders slump, his voice fails him. He drops on the vacated chair, taking off the headset, and whispers. "What about the years I gave you?" he looks as I felt on the day I found out about the Lie.

"Say that again, captain. It didn't come through."

The guard uses the opportunity she thinks she has to move the machine gun on Humbert. I

fire into her chest three times. She falls against the lockers and drops, blood pooling around her as Humbert raises the microphone.

“The mission is a go.” His voice is flat. Devoid of energy, emotion, life.

“I’m glad to hear that, Captain. I’ll wait for your next contact. Fallon Out.” There’s a click, then static.

I wait for a signal while keeping the guards covered. Three are still standing, unarmed, the others are groaning and slowly getting to their feet. Only two are unmoving, the one I just shot and one with a broken neck Humbert took down.

“Humbert,” I ask as five are now up, angry. One of them puts a vial in the injector on his arm. I understand he didn’t get the response he wanted. I understand the pain of such a betrayal, but he still has to decide how to proceed. A sixth guard stands. I need to know if he will fight or not. I can’t take them on by myself anymore. A second one injects himself with Boost. A third is looking around, searching for the pouch that had been at his belt.

Humbert looks around. His eyes are devoid of life. He kneels and puts his hand on the back of his head. I recognize the surrender from the movies Jason had me watch in his perpetual quest to make me human. I place the machine gun on the floor as I kneel and copy him.

“What just happened?” a man asks, his voice slurred. I think he’s the one who led the guards.

“Sounds like they’ve been abandoned,” a woman replies. She’s angry, grabs a machine gun. “Seems like that was too much for them.” She steps toward me and presses the muzzle against my forehead.

“Don’t even think of shooting him. Everyone stand down,” the man orders. “You two back off. Why did you inject yourself? Someone get them out of here before they lose it and rip us apart along with them.”

“You can’t be fucking serious,” the woman tells him. “Look around. They killed Harrison and Nancy. No one does that and gets away with it.”

“Go ahead then,” the man replies, but his tone is dismissive. “But you’re the one who explains to Mister Grave why the schedule’s been screwed. Better yet, you tell Risk It why he’s not getting fed.”

“I’m getting your movie collection,” someone says.

“I call dibs on her room,” someone else adds.

She hesitates, glares at me, then backs away. Curses come from the two who’d wanted something of hers. Unlike with the soldiers, there is no humor in the curses, they’d wanted her to do it, to attempt to kill me and if she succeeded, end up feeding the demon in my stead.

Motion around us. The healthy helping those too injured to move. Weapons remain pointed at me and Humbert. We’ve demonstrated how dangerous we are. They will not give us a second chance.

Quickly, the only sign left of the fight is the blood on the floor. Someone moves behind me. I turn my head enough to see they aren’t armed before they pull my arms down and handcuff me. Someone else does the same with Humbert.

They pull us up, and I don’t resist. They still haven’t realized I’m not human and I don’t want to tip my only advantage. We resume our trek and fortunately, they don’t search me.

Instead of the car that took me to see Mister Graves, an armored, heavy-duty vehicle waits for us outside. It’s something I’ve seen the military use, but painted in blue and gold, instead of grays, tans, and dark greens. It’s something that can ram a demon and survive the impact. It would take a few solid hits before anything broke.

I follow Humbert in, and not long after it starts moving, it stops. I exit it at the tower and we are led inside. The lobby is large, with metal walls, just like those in the maze, down to how they are made of the same sized panels. I smell old scents of demons along with human exhaustion laced with fear, relief, pain.

We enter the elevator, the two of us pressed against six armored guards. I don’t see the

buttons, and there is no indicator showing what floor we are on, but when the doors open I recognize the short hall, the scents of me, Claws, and the soldiers. Where the door to the stairwell had been, it is now a featureless wall like the others.

I think back to the walls of the floor with the nursery. I just glanced at them, waiting in the stairwell, but they were also metal and divided into sections like those here. Does the maze extend to the entire tower? If it does, it ends on the ground floor. Amanda's lab had none of the metal walls.

The guards lead us through the corridors until we are in a large room. Our scents are here too, so it might be the same kill box we were caught in. The guards leave us here, the entryway closing once they are in the corridor. There is now no way to escape this room.

"Welcome to feeding time," Mister Graves's voice resounds over speakers, covering up the sound of metal sliding against metal, but not the vibration through the floor. "You have been chosen because you have demonstrated the kind of perseverance, of ingenuity, and just plain stubbornness that I want to see in someone working for me. But you either worked against me or had the bad judgment to go against my orders. Still, I think you deserve a second chance. As I'm talking to you, the tower is being reconfigured, so whatever map you made of it will be useless. You will have to show me that you can overcome insurmountable odds one last time, and yes, this is the last time. If you can't overcome this, I'm afraid there will be nothing left of you. Demons don't even leave bones behind when they're done eating, and you are on the menu. How can you impress me, you ask? Simple. Make it to the lobby and outside. Those doors aren't locked. They are the only way out of the tower and if you do that, you are definitely worthy of working for me. So ready yourself, because the moment a wall moves out of the way, the hunt is on."

As the recording finishes, sections slide off three walls, revealing corridors. Two are short before there's a turn, while the third continues in a straight line.

"Hurry," Mister Graves says gravely. "Someone's hungry."

I look at Humbert to prepare a plan, but the man's expression stops me.