

Chapter-27

Amanda isn't in her lab. Sarge is who points us to a door by the glass cells where he was held. The others still contain hybrids.

"She was about to help an old man when you arrived," he says.

Mister Graves's father.

"Do you remember the process?" I ask as we run. "Do you remember how you work up? Were you violent?"

"No, she was next to me when I woke up. She explained what happened."

Jason was there when I woke up. I didn't find out about my violent episode until I saw the videos. Amanda had two years to refine the process enough Sarge has some memories of who he was, but then, so did Adam. It's possible she found a way to resolve the violent awakening.

Then why did she not make more?

A roar through the door provides a potential answer. We enter an observation room with three windows, looking into three different rooms, bare except for a metal chair with restraints that remind me of the one in the video where I was created and a few machines to record the event. Even at a glance, I can see the damage done to the walls, some claws, some dents.

In the left one, an old man is strapped to the chair, roaring and trashing as the last of the vaporized soul stone is funneled out of the glass jar and into him. I catch sight of Amanda, eagerness and pride on her face, before I go to the door. Another roar comes, there is nothing human left to it. I hear metal break and restraints tear.

The door is metal, locked. Before I kick it in, the soldiers fire on the window, but it only cracks to opacity.

The roar comes again, this time accompanied by men and women screaming. In my hurry, I only paid attention to Amanda. Is Mister Graves also there? He should be if that is his father in the chair. Something hits the window as I prepare to kick the door again and pieces fall out of the frame. I move to it, thickening the black skin over my fist, and slam it into the window as hard as I can.

I barely case damage, but Claws slams two wide hands flat against it and the whole thing falls in to reveal an old man, with a face contorted with pain and fury as his wispy white hair falls out and his skin shifts in jerks, as if something under it is readjusting, growing. He lumbers toward Amanda, on her back and crawling away. I jump into the room, noticing the body of Mister Graves on the floor by the window. He is what hit it hard enough to break pieces off.

I tackle the changing old man, and he barely reacts to it. He closes a hand on my arm and tosses me away. I roll to my feet and launch myself at him again. He roars at me, something incoherent, and swings. I dodge and strike him as hard as I can. I can't let the fight go on. I have no idea what he's capable of.

The punch staggers him when it should have ripped his head clean off. His skin is a normal color for a human, but it already has the toughness of a demon. He swings at me, uncoordinated motions I easily avoid. If, like me, he kept skills he learned before, Mister Graves's father was not a fighter.

I move out of the way of a swing, and pain lances up my side. His fingers are now distorted, elongated, and end in points covered with my blood. They cut through my black skin as if it was a normal human one. Angry, I punch him without considering my action, then I do consider and push the attack, forcing him away from Amanda. I sharpen the edges on my fist and small bloody lines appear on his skin. So he can be cut. I push him away a step, and he returns with a roar, but I only need that second to form a blade of my black skin, and when I strike him again, it's through the heart.

The old man's face softens as the rage and insanity leave him, along with his life. He crumbles, and I ease his body down, fighting against its weight. I ignore Amanda's stunned

expression and I stand and turn to the window, wondering why no one helped.

Humbert moves a large handgun away from Claws—did he have a second one, or did he retrieve the one I took away?—annoyance on his face, and I understand why I didn't have any assistance. He hoped the old man would do what his orders prevent him from doing.

"No!" Amanda yells, and I face her. "You can't have killed him! Why do you keep ruining everything I do? Where's nineteen?" he demands, looking around. Her eyes lock on Sarge, standing alongside the soldiers and she rounds on me. "How dare you turn him against me? He was my greatest achievement. He's better than you!"

"I told you not to lie to him," I answer calmly.

She stomps in my direction, and at that moment, she looks like the woman I knew back in the time of the Lie. Strong, powerful, not to be trifled with. She opens her mouth, maybe to berate me, to chastise me for yet again not measuring up to her expectations. I don't find out. Her head explodes as one gunshot echoes in the room.

I look at Humbert, his face a mask of restrained anger shifting to satisfaction, as he lowers the large handgun.

"The mission was to bring her back alive," I state.

The anger is back, directed at me. "After what that bitch did to my best friend, there's no effing way she was walking out of here alive to make more like you."

"Me?" Sarge asks, surprised. "I'm your best friend?"

Humbert rounds on him and shoves the handgun in his face, only to fly into the room before he can do anything else. Sarge looks at his hand, more surprised at his action.

Humbert gets to his feet with a wince of pain. "My best friend's dead! She killed him. You're not him! Do you hear me?"

The anger in Humbert's voice makes Sarge step back.

"I didn't want her dead," I tell Humbert, to redirect his attention, and because, looking at her body, I realize it's true.

"That's bullshit!" he exclaims. "She was right before you. With your hearing and reflexes, you could have pushed her out of the way before the effing bullet blew her head off."

Could I? I don't remember hearing the hammer being pulled, but I should have been able to. I have before. I told her I was done rescuing her when I saved her from Adam. Is that why I didn't hear the hammer? Jason told me about the subconscious, but until now, I never had a reason to believe it was something that applied to me.

"I wasn't going to rescue her?" I ask myself, and hearing the question makes me doubt my statement that I didn't want her dead.

"And yet, here you are, like a good mama's boy," Humbert replies derisively.

"If I didn't come, Claws would be here alone. I wasn't giving you a chance to kill him."

Humbert snorts. "So he is your boyfriend."

"I am not human," I tell him through gritted teeth, tone hardening. "Stop applying human terms to me."

"Or what?" he asks, grinning, the eagerness back on his face.

"Or I will eat you," Claws says from the window.

Humbert rolls his eyes. "I would so love to see you—" He's on the floor on the other side of the room, his cheek bleeding where I punched him.

"Do not threaten him," I tell the man. "The fact I won't use human terms for what we are doesn't mean he isn't important to me. I am not killing, Gregg, because this is the boost speaking, but do not push me." I wait for his reply. I can see it forming on his face, something derisive again, mocking. Then he closes his eyes and grits his teeth, regaining control of himself. "How are you going to explain Amanda's death to the colonel?"

He snorts. "I'll tell her a demon started eating her before we got here."

"I doubt she will believe that. She must have seen what the result of demon bites look like."

Humbert shrugs. "Have your demon take a bite out of her then."

"No," Claws answers, rumbling disgust.

"No hunting, no eating," I tell Humbert before he complains. Claws would do it for me, but I am not putting him through that the way he's reacting at the thought.

"Fine," he says with a huff. "Then have it claw her upper body so it's not obvious the damage was caused by a bullet."

"I'll do that myself," I answer, forming claws at the end of my fingers. I claw more than her upper torso and neck. I claw her completely, give the impression she was mauled in anger. Anger I don't feel. The woman I have been angry at for over a year, that I was forced to rescue from her own creation, isn't this woman. When I'm done, I pass her body to Humbert, who hands it over to Diniz.

In the observation room, another soldier motions to Humbert as he takes off a headset. "I made contact."

Humbert jumps through the opening and takes the headset. "This is Captain Humbert. The mission's done. We have Doctor Walker. We need an extraction as the insertion point."

"Is she coming quietly?" the colonel asks.

Sarge's head snaps toward the speaker, and he frowns. Trying to place her voice? Trying to understand why no one else is reacting to a disembodied voice?

"Oh yeah," Humbert answered with satisfaction, looking at the corpse. "She isn't in a position to object anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that. The chopper will be there in forty."

We hurry up the stairs, with me, claws, and Sarge at the rear. There is carnage in the lobby. The men we left to protect the scientist and children repelled an assault. They didn't survive, but they put enough of a scare into their enemies the rest are still outside. Humans, pointing guns at the closed door, now mostly opaque with blood and cracks. Hybrids and demons also wait for us to exit. I make out so many forms I am glad we are leaving by the roof.

Inside the small room, we find the scientist, and the children, huddled at the back. Not seeing Taros or Florent with them, I look at the bodies again, and find Taros there, but not Florent. I look around while the others go into the stairwell, trying to figure out if Florent is hiding in the building somewhere, or somehow escaped already. He outsmarted a demon, after all.

We reach the maze and make our way through it without encountering opposition. Where the skylight was is a metal sheet. Claws jumps to it and rips it out before Humbert can complain. Then me, him, and Sarge carry the others out. The children laugh at the jumps, while the scientist cringes in Claws's arms. I wonder if it is because he likes his feet leaving the ground less than I do, or if it's because a demon cradles him in arms that could crush him without a second thought.

Then, we wait.