

“Terrence? What’s happening?” Moores demands in the radio the other man handed him.

“The army’s on their way.”

“They were here not two months ago.”

“Do you want me to drop down and go tell them to reschedule?” the other man asks, his tone incredulous.

“No, of course not.” Moores looks around. “How long do we have?”

“Six or seven hours, they had to leave their vehicles where the trees become too dense.”

“Can you make it back?”

“Not without them realizing the watchpost is there. They have a dozen sniffer dogs.”

“Tell me you’re exaggerating.”

“I wish. They are serious this time. I have supplies, I’ll be good up here until they leave.”

“Alright. Be careful. There’s no telling what the army’s going to think if they find you.”

“I’m just looking for glideclaws and ravenstabbers,” the man replies. “It’s not like they can prove anything else. Terrence out.”

“Like they need proof,” Moores whispered. “Allan, tell everyone to do another wash down.”

“Won’t the one we did a week ago be enough?” the man glances at me.

“We can’t risk it.”

“I can I help,” I ask.

“You can’t,” Protect growls, the angry undertone loud.

“We can use all the help,” Moores tells the demon.

“His scent will warn them.”

Moores looks me over. “You smile like demons?”

“I’ve been told I don’t smell entirely human,” I answer.

Protect snorts. “You smell like a human wrapped in the skin of one of us.”

“Then you can’t help, I’m sorry.” Around us, people run around with containers. A container is opened near us and the acrid scent makes my eyes water. It’s a much more concentrated version of what I’ve smelled around the town. I cover my mouth and nose. “What is that?”

“A concentrate of tree skitter urine. It’s the only thing we found that dissolves demons’ scent.”

“Alright, if I can’t help with cleaning the town, are there other things I can do?”

“You can eat,” Protect says.

“I’m fine,” I reply.

“I can smell your hunger through the stench. I won’t have you eat one of us while we hide.”

“I won’t. I’m not driven by my hunger.”

“Derrick, now isn’t the time to let your pride drive you. If you need to eat, do so.” Moores pauses. “Do you need to hunt? Is that also part of how you eat? You might have time for a quick hunt in the maze before we have to wash it down.”

“I don’t need to hunt,” I say, then hesitate. When humans find out how much I eat, even if I don’t mention the raw meat, it makes them uncomfortable.

“You’re going to be underground for at least twelve hours,” Moores says, “with only demons for company. I believe you when you say you don’t eat them, but even one of us would get hungry in that time. If you bring canned meats, will that let you deal with it?”

“No.” The memory of the attempts still makes my stomach turn. “I need fresh fruits and vegetables, and raw meat,” I add, watching for Moores’ reaction.

“Maliya, do you mind if Derrick empties your fridge? I’ll make you it’s restocked afterward. Your house is right here, and it’s a straight line to their hiding place.”

The woman smiles. “It’ll be my pleasure. It’ll give me a chance to see how differently he eats.”

“I eat like a human,” I say, following her inside, “just in larger quantities.”

“And without cooking it.” The door at the back of her examination room leads to a hall with the kitchen on one side, a bathroom on the other along with a bedroom. She opens the fridge and steps out of the way. “Dig in.”

I do so. Hand trembling as I pull out the can of pop. She watches me as I would a demon I expect to strike, as I slowly drink from it. It is much sweeter than I remember, sickeningly so, but it is also so good. It is memories of Jason laughing as I am baffled at a simple human expression. It is Jason, exasperated as my inability to understand the reason behind couples forming beyond the need for reproduction. It is Amanda smiling in pride as I master a test she administers.

I let out a sigh, and Maliya’s expression is that of someone let in on a valuable secret. I ignore her and pull out food, I don’t bother cutting them, I just eat. I eat until I am no longer hungry, then ignore the can she offers me, the calculating expression on her face a warning she has plans for me.

The look reminds me of Juliet, but without the restraint she showed, the realization she shouldn’t demand something of me. Maliya’s want is more like Amanda’s need to push me. To see what I can do, how far until I break. Her disappointment is mixed with amusement as I turn and leave her house.

The acrid scent outside is strong, overpowering. Can humans not smell it? None of them react to it. Moores notices me and leaves the house wall to join me. The scent is so strong on him, I step back reflexively.

“You’re sensitive to it?”

“You aren’t?” I ask.

“No, I can barely smell it. Neither do demons. They mostly register the absence of a scent. We figure it’s a defense mechanism from the tree skitters. Demons can’t hunt them if they can’t smell them, or any of the other animals who depend on smell to track. Come on.” Moores leads me to a large space between houses with part of the ground

raised. “Once you’re in, we’re going to close it, spread sand, and the wash over it. It’s going to be nothing more than another patch of ground to the dogs and soldier.”

The hole is large enough Protect can jump down. The scent of demons is strong in it, both old and new. Sunlight shows the bottom, further down than I expected. I ignore the ladder and jump down. In the shaft of light, I can’t see how large the cave is, but I get a sense of others in it. The scent of fear increases as the cover is closed, and the light disappears.

In the total darkness I barely make out any of the shapes, those I do are too small to be Protect, Kills, or Watches. Four of them, their body temperature not quite matching that of the space. A small one appeared, bright against the cool walls, running at me. Then is snatched and fades as someone wraps their skin around it. The one Moores called Baby.

I realize demons’ camouflage ability evolved as they age.

The snap of something breaking is loud, then a green light appears and I make out Protect’s form before he throws the glow stick on the ground.

“So you won’t be afraid,” he says.

Except I’m not the one who is afraid. The scent is fresh, from them. It can’t be from the adults. Baby and Cub are too young to understand what I am. It leaves three of them who watch me while staying partially hidden behind the adults. Cub hisses at me and Protect places a hand on their back.

“I’m not going to hurt anyone,” I say, hoping to calm them.

“You won’t,” Protect agrees, the undertone of threat clear.

“Eater?” someone asks, the word halting, the fear under it is palpable. A rumble of comfort fills the cave, and even I relax. Protect calming them, and me, inadvertently.

I sit on the opposite side. “Is this everyone?”

“Everyone too close or too young to be able to get far,” Protect answers. “The others know not to come close when there is a lack of scent.”

In the following silence, I make out the sound of gnawing. “How are you going to keep Baby from going hungry?”

Watches and Kills move closer. “You will not eat our child.” In the motion, Baby becomes visible. They’re gnawing at one of them. I can’t answer, I am stunned. They are feeding their child their flesh.

Cub slinks out from under Protect’s hand and toward me, sniffing the air. They hesitate as they approach. Protect tenses when I extend my left hand. Cub sniffs at it, backs, and moves to my right side. When I extend that hand, they sniff and move closer. I move it away and raise their head to follow, their neck elongating. I feel Protect watch me. The undertone in the cavern shift, a warning adding to the calm.

Cub’s head contacts my hand and rubs against it. I pull away as I get a sense of pleasure. Sight of human children running around trying to catch me/Cub, of them laughing as they run away.

Cub stretches and grabs onto my hand, and the sense returns, the joy of the hunt, of being sated, the pain of the hunger.

I fight the urge to pull away again. The previous times I felt this were with Claws and Runs the Forrest. I've kept away from demons since. I thought I was remembering details of Fang's life as they related to which of them I touched, I thought it was why I've remembered details of their life since then.

Is this another way demons communicate? Do they share memories through touch? Is Cub seeing something of my life? One of the older demons steps forward and I tense. Cub lets go, stepping away. The demon pauses, sniffing and making itself larger.

I smile and relax, the posturing ridiculous in the enclosed space, with three grown demons and only me as a threat. I reach for Cub and rub their head. They bite at my finger, but without any strength to cause damage. I made an effort and mentally distance myself from their memories.

The older demon approaches again.

"Danger," someone growls, another halting word, but the closer rumbles curiosity in response, interest, strength.

Caution comes from someone I can't identify, worry, caring.

Understanding, caring, stubbornness this demon replies and moves close enough to sniff me, staying on my right side.

Conversations happen around me in a language I understand but can't speak. A family discussing the stranger in their midst. Deciding if he's a danger, a meal, or someone to toy with. There is pain mixed in, as Baby eats. Watches pass it to Kills and who the pain comes from shifts, but there is no anger. This is something they do because it is how their child will survive.

The tone of Cub's memories shifts slowly to more hunts and eating. And his biting becomes more forceful. My skin hardens and Cub whines at being denied meat. Before I wonder how I'll have to deal with it, Protect is before me, taking it away, cradling Cub, restraining it.

The older demon watches, and then takes Cub's place under my hand. Pleasure in climbing, in balancing at the top of trees, and watching the horizon. Running through the trees, the scent of a creature in their nose, the beginning of hunger being felt. The presence of another watching over them, promising security. Annoyance at it not being needed; until it is and something big scares them.

I push the memories away, force myself to remember who I am. Do my best not to let the sense of loss at being alone overwhelm me.

Then a second demon is pressing against me. Their rumble expression questions too complex for me to understand. Slowly the smells and rumbles of fear ebb away, even as the light dies out, and in the darkness is replaced with contentment.