

"You and you," the captain points to the largest of the scientists, "are in charge of Gourd. Make sure he keeps up."

The medic stops them. "Captain, they're filthy. They can't—"

"Sergeant, I don't have the people to spare and you know it."

"I'll carry him."

"No, you won't. I need you ready to act to defend these civilians."

"Sir—"

"Sergeant, I'm going to assume this lack of common sense and self-restraint is a side effect of being off Boost. Keep this up and I'm going to call it what it is. Do you want that on your record?"

She looked at her feet. "No, Sir."

"Good. You and Swanson are on the left." He positions the rest of the soldiers around the scientists. "Gourd said there's a room three floors up," he tells me, as if I hadn't been there when Jason said that. "Do you know where it is?"

"I'm familiar with that floor."

"You and the demon are in the lead."

With the way he and the soldiers keep their weapons aimed at us as we head for the stairs, they consider us as much of a threat as the rest of the demons.

As soon as the two of us step into the stairwell, a demon appears on the landing above us. With a roar he jumps, and Claws rips him apart.

We come across two more on the next landing. I take care of one, quickly cutting him, and Claws only has pieces of the other left by the time I'm done. He looks better, more solid. The soldiers curse and complain about not being able to get a shot in. I'm surprised they didn't shoot through us.

We reach sub-two at the same time as another demon. He takes one look at us and turns. He's smarter than the previous ones.

The floor has a variety of laboratories. I was subjected to many of my tests on this floor. Jason tries to guide us from behind, but he's delirious. After the first turn he is giving us street names to reach, and comments on how he can't wait for us to reach the restaurant.

A woman takes over giving directions. I recognize her voice: Valerie. She was part of my support team when I went on hunts. I also found out later that she knew the truth about me.

As soon as we reach the room, the medic has Jason placed on the examination table and goes through the cupboard. She places the items she'll need on a rolling table. All I recognize are the cleaning and disinfecting materials, from seeing them used after the fights.

The captain catches my attention and motions for me and Claws to follow him outside the room.

He closes the door. "Okay, why exactly are you here? It wasn't to rescue us."

"I will kill Adam," Claws states. "You will help."

The captain raises an eyebrow. "I don't think so. My job is to get Doctor Walker. I'm not here to take part in some vendetta."

"What about the other scientist?" I indicate the room. They're lined up at the two sinks. "How about those still in the cells?"

"These are coming with us. I don't know how many of them are going to survive the trek back to the helicopter. Even if we don't have to deal with demons, they're in bad shape. Those downstairs are on their own until we can either come back or send more people."

"More people? We both know you're not coming back. You're going to bomb this building, probably the entire city."

The human glares at me.

"Why?" Claws asks.

"We're not going to—"

"They can't get close to Adam, and with him controlling an army, they can't afford to let this continue." I shrug. "That's my guess, anyway."

The look the human gives me tells me I'm not far off the mark.

"You will not do that," Claws states.

“Look, it isn't my call, okay? You think I want that? There are still thousands of people in the city.”

“You expect me to believe that you care?” I ask.

“I'm a soldier, I do what I'm told.”

I snort. “I know something about that. I ended up being told to kill a lot of people whose only crime was that they were trying to survive.”

“Demons kill us.”

“Because humans took away the wild,” Claws states.

The captain looks at Claws like he has no idea what he's talking about.

“Your cities have been encroaching on the forests and woods,” I tell him. “That's where they live and hunt, and you've been destroying it. It shouldn't come as a surprise they'd have to start hunting in the cities.”

“Really?” the captain snaps. “Like they can't tell we're sentient beings? There are plenty of animals in the cities, why is it they're hunting us instead of them?”

I reach for him, but Claws holds me back with a hand. “I don't see you pay any attention to the fact that demons can think too when planning their extermination.”

The human opens his mouth, closes it, and rubs his face. “I don't have the time for this. This was supposed to be a simple rescue mission, until you screwed it up.”

“You used me as you saw fit, your words. I used you as I needed.”

Surprise flashes in his eyes, then he grits his teeth. “We're going to settle this later. Right now, I have a job to do.”

“You will not destroy my people.”

“I told you, it isn't my decision,” the man snaps. Claws glares at him, but the captain doesn't back down. He points at me. “He's right, we can't leave Adam and his army running around. They're a rallying point for other demons. There's no way we'll ever survive a war against them. We need to end this here and now in such a decisive way that no demon is ever going to want to try to again.”

“War is a human thing.”

“Give me a break. You want me to believe that your people don't kill one another?”

“We hunt. We do not amass in crowds to exterminate others. We pick a prey and we hunt so we can feed.”

“What the fuck are you calling this then?” The captain indicates around us.

“This is Adam. You made him from my people. He can control them. I kill Adam, I tell my people to leave.”

“And they're going to listen to you?” The human snorts.

Claws leans forward, and the captain squeezes himself against the door. “I am Claws in the Dark. Few are as old as I am. None here. When I tell my people to leave, they will obey.”

The man swallows and sets his jaw. “And what's to say you don't tell them to launch an assault on all of us?”

“He's the reason you're free,” I snap. “Maybe that counts for something?”

“He needs our help. It's the only reason we're free.”

“No, he doesn't. We made it in here. It would be easy for just us to reach Adam and kill him.”

“No, it would not,” Claws says. “I need their help.”

“They're just humans.”

“They are soldiers. The humans have perfected ways to fight us. You are not the only one, Derick, and not all of them are mixes of humans and my people. They have ways to change themselves temporarily, be stronger, faster, more resistant to pain. If humans could not do this, they would not have become the bane of my people. They would have remained food.”

“I can't tell if you are complimenting me or cursing me,” the captain says. “But like I said, it's out of my hands. I rescue Doctor Walker and the scientists I can, then leave. What happens afterward happens.”

“You're not going to rescue anyone if you don't—”

Claws places a hand on my chest to keep me away from the human. I glare at him and open my mouth to snap at him, but he growls. It's low, and maybe the human thinks it carries an

undertone of threat, but I get the sense of calm and patience. It isn't a command, the way Adam's are, and it isn't even an order, which Claws can do. He's asking me to let him handle this.

I push away from him with a growl of my own. I wish I knew how to make it mean anything other than frustration.

Claws's features soften as he looks at me, and I nod. I'm angry, but not so much I don't understand the danger here, the need to have the humans on our side so he can prevent the bombing.

"You say you don't want the humans here to die," Claws tells the captain. "I do not want them to die either. If we do not help one another, they will die. I want Adam dead, as do your people. With your help, I can kill him. I will order my people to leave this city. With them gone, there is no need for anyone else to die."

"Except me and my unit."

"Isn't it a soldier's duty to do what will save the most people?"

"You know way too much about us."

Claws smiles, in the human way, no teeth showing. "I am old. I have watched your people for a long time."

The soldier sighs. "Okay, but if you don't stick to your end of the bargain, I'm going to put an irradiated bullet between your eyes."

Claws nods.

He indicates the machine guns. "Is there any chance there are more of these somewhere?"

"There's a crate full of them."

"Where?" He opens the door. "Walters, Nolan."

"Sub-ten—it's the bottom floor."

A man and woman join us. Each has one of the submachine guns.

"At the end of the main hall Thompson had a lab. They're in there."

"You two, last floor. There's a crate of guns in that room."

"There are probably demons there now. We've announced our presence by turning the power on. He isn't going to leave that unprotected."

The captain nods. "Boost now, and don't die."

They both nod and leave.

"Either of you going to complain about the delay?"

I shrug. "I don't expect them to come back."

The man snorts.

Claws positions himself by the closest stairwell and I watch the medic work on Jason's injury while we wait. When the door to the stairs bangs open, I'm ready to attack whatever comes through. The two soldiers step out of the stairs, cut and covered in blood. The man is limping, but carrying the crate over a shoulder. The woman has a large box in her arms.

The captain smirks at me. "Any troubles?"

"Two demons. It cost me my gun." He brings up the half of the submachine gun that's still attached to the strap. "But they're dead."

"There's no bringing the power back up," the woman says. "They ripped the panel right off the wall."

They drop their respective crates. The man's contains the submachine guns while the woman's is filled with handguns.

"Distribute them. You two are staying here with Grendel and two more to babysit the civilians."

"Sir, we—"

"I don't want to hear it. I'm not risking your boost running out in the middle of things."

"Yes, Sir, but aren't we leaving?"

The captain shakes his head. "These two made a solid case for taking down Adam here and now. If they can pull it off, getting out of here with everyone alive will be easier."

The man and woman look at one another in disbelief. "And if they can't?" the woman asks.

"Then it'll be your job to get the civilians out of here and grab Doctor Walker on the way."

Hopefully by then, Grendel will be done fixing up Doctor Gourd and he won't slow you down."

They nod and go into the room.

"I want to know your plan for taking Adam down. As far as I remember, you were tied up to a post when we got here, which means you didn't exactly succeed the last time you tried it."

"It is why I need your help. Adam fears me; he cannot control me. He will put my people between me and him."

"It's sounding to me you want us to kill him for you."

"No, I will kill him. You will distract my people. It is the only way we can get close to Adam."

"No, it isn't."

Claws and the captain look at me.

"You were there. You heard him go on about how he wants me to join his army, about how I'm going to realize you're not like me. How I'll come back to him and he'll be happy to take me back in. He thinks we're the same."

"Aren't you?"

"You don't see me going around building an army of demons. I was content being on my own."

The human snorts. "Right, that's why we found you outside a bar about to beat up a couple of guys, after you'd spent an evening beating up other guys."

Claws looks at me questioningly, but I ignore him. My hands are balled into fists. I feel my skin harden in anticipation of the punch I am considering throwing. I won't kill him, but I'll make him realize how bad of an idea it is to keep needling me like this. Something of my intent most show on my face because he takes two steps back, as if that would protect him.

Claws places a hand on my shoulder. "We cannot fight among ourselves. Adam is the enemy for all of us, my people and humans. If your soldiers harass my people in the building, Adam will focus on you, and I can—"

"Ah, fuck."

Claws and the captain look at me.

"We forgot a detail."

"What?" the captain asks impatiently.

"Adam doesn't think only like a demon. He also thinks like a human."

"So?"

"Why would me or Claws bother with turning the lights on?"

The man looks at me, still not understanding.

"I don't need light to see, and neither does Claws. So who does need the light?"

His understanding gives way to horror. His orders to his unit are interspersed with curses. Claws follows us, still looking confused.