

I head south into the forest. I hear a helicopter fly over me, then it goes away. They won't chase me here. The forests, the wilderness, is the domain of demons. They hide behind every tree, among the branches, in every hollow. It's what humans believe, and it's why there are no roads through the forests. They go around them.

This forest begins almost exactly where the city ends, and goes on for miles to the south, east, and west. People watched me enter it—they took pictures, called the police, summoned the military.

Of course, the stories aren't true. The forest isn't filled with demons, at least not this close to the city. Mature demons, those raised by their own kind, want nothing to do with humans. If they could stop encroaching on the forests, the wild areas, humans would never have encountered demons. But humans keep expanding, tearing down forests, taking over the wild, forcing the demons to retreat to ever smaller places, with an ever-diminishing food supply.

I didn't learn all that through first-hand experience. I want to be around groups of demons as much as they want to be close to humans. I don't like my chances of survival if I even find myself among them. I've killed too many of them, and stories must have spread about me, about the human capable of killing them.

Somehow I doubt they'd believe I no longer do that.

I enjoy walking in the forest, especially after the long trudge through the city, avoiding the police and the army. I like how peaceful it is, especially at night, like this. There are none of the noises that fill the city, none of the constant chaos. Not for the first time, I think I should forget about the city, settle down in this forest or another one, and while today the thought is appealing, I also know that I'm not ready to cut my ties to the humans yet. As soon as I've dropped off my passenger, I'll head back to the city.

The demon over my shoulder is quiet; the packet of roots and herbs that I wrapped over his nose at the first deserted alley I'd come across ensures that. It isn't the first time I've used it, so I know it's more convenient than having to pummel him back into unconsciousness each time he wakes up. I should have done it before first picking him up, but I didn't want the humans to know about it. They already have enough weapons against demons; I won't be the one handing them another one.

Not that I know how the packet works, just that it does. It even works on me. I get woozy if I breathe in too much of its scent. I haven't tested it against humans, but I suspect it wouldn't do anything to them. It was given to me by the person I am here to see.

"Another one?" The voice is loud and comes from all around. It's deep, but sounds bored. "Why is it you're always bringing them to me?" His voice might sound like he's everywhere, but I know he's in the clearing ahead of me. It doesn't matter that I can't see him there yet. He's never moved from that spot in all the times I've come here.

"You're the only demon I know who hasn't attacked me on sight."

When I step into the clearing, the starry sky becomes visible. Both moons are up—the largest one only half-visible, while the smaller one is fully visible, as always. The demons call them "The One's Eyes".

I look around, but moonlight isn't enough for me to see him, and as still as he is, my thermal vision doesn't register him either. "Do you mind giving me some light?"

"Will you ever bring your own?" Sparks appear, then embers among a pile of dried brush. "Haven't humans mastered the light after all this time?" The embers brighten as he blows on it and a flame catches.

"I couldn't get back to my apartment with him over my shoulders." I dump my passenger on the ground and make sure the packet is still in place before sitting opposite him. I don't know why he has a fire pit. Demons don't need light the way humans do, and they don't cook their food, as far as I know. Still, the pit was there the first time I met him, so now I make sure he has wood and dry kindling to start the fire.

The firelight barely illuminates him—his black skin doesn't reflect any of it—and there's nothing behind him to create a contrast. What I see comes from my thermal vision, patches of heat from the fire just before they even out and he vanishes from sight again.

He's more skin than body, a crumpled form on the other side of the fire. Of course, that

means nothing when demons can rearrange their bodies. He could surge to ten-feet tall all of a sudden if he wanted.

Probably.

His name is Lives Alone, and I have no idea how old he is, but I'm certain he's older than Claws in the Dark. There is a sense of the very old around Lives Alone that Claws lacks.

Thinking of Claws stirs something inside me, a desire to see him again. It's been quite some time since he saved my life, although at first I didn't recognize it amidst all the other emotions that act had generated within me.

His eyes are so dim they are barely visible across from the flames when he looks up at me. "Next time, get your light before you hunt."

"You make it sound like I planned this. I told you, I'm done hunting."

"And yet here you are, bringing me yet another youngling."

"Did you want me to do nothing? Let the army capture him and kill him? Or capture him and run experiments?"

I don't know if the army does that, but I know someone does, or at least used to. I'm the result of such experiments.

"What do you think this young one will do when his consciousness returns? When the hunger that wasn't sated hits? Do you think I can do anything?"

"He wasn't hungry. And as far as I know, the others I left with you never returned to the city."

He waves both comments aside. "I get hungry too."

It's a lie, but I don't call him on it. I'd be able to smell dead demons in the clearing if he'd eaten one of them. They leave behind a distinct smell when they die, and like their scent when living, it clings to everything and everyone it touches. No demons have died here.

"Why me?" His tone is tired. "Why don't you take him to the one whose scent you bear?"

I look away, the longing strengthening. "I don't know where he is." Claws's scent still clings to me from the times he held me. I don't notice it most of the time, but even after a year, it's still there.

"You have a nose, follow his scent." He narrows his eyes, making them almost vanish. "Or are you too human for that? Did they remove your sense of smell when they made you..." he gestures at me, "that?"

"I can smell well enough."

"Then take that with you and go. I'm too old to deal with younglings anymore."

I shake my head. "He has his own life, and I'm not part of it. The only reason his scent is on me is because he helped me."

Lives Alone lets out a sound I now know is a snort. "You think that is the reason for his scent?"

I pull out a package of dried meat. "Are you hungry?"

I hear his skin move, maybe he shakes his head. "I hunted..." his voice trails off. "A few years ago. I'm still fine."

"So the older you are, the less you hunt?"

"Of course. Can you imagine me having to hunt every few days? I'd lose my shape. I'd become a jumble on the ground, and where would I be then?" He's silent for a time, and when he speaks his voice is soft. "I'm done hunting altogether."

"You're going to let yourself die of hunger? Won't you go mad? Like him?"

His head turns toward the unconscious demon. "Do I look like a youngling? I dealt with the madness long before your kind came here."

"I don't have a kind," I reply bitterly at being reminded of the lie I'd been told.

"Of course you do; you just have to decide. But fine. I lived my life before the first of the humans stepped out of the boxes that fell from the sky. They've taken away so much of the wild that I'm happy my time is almost done." He indicates the still form. "I pity this youngling, and the ones to come. All they know is hunting humans in their forests of metal. None of the purity of the wild."

"There's still plenty of forests left."

"For how long? How long until my kind is forced to live among metal trees like humans do?"

I can't answer.

There are demons living in the cities, the few who manage to survive the hunger-driven madness. But humans are aggressive beings, always looking for ways to ensure their dominance. I'm proof of that drive. The military manages to kill demons. I'm afraid that if the day comes when the cities overtake the last of the forests, there won't be any demons left.

When I lived the lie, I thought that only people like me, hunters, were strong enough to kill demons. After that time, after learning I was alone, I found out about the military. It took dozens of soldiers to do what I could do alone, but they had thousands. I even confirmed that humans had managed to kill all the demons in the Anounga District.

I'd heard about it while working for Amanda, and I'd expected it to be another of the lies Jason had arranged for me, but it was true. If humans were able to do that, why would they stop?

I stand.

"Leaving already?"

"You don't want me here. I'm going to head back."

Lives Alone doesn't look up. "You can stay a little longer. Even for someone like you, the forest isn't safe once The One looks down on us."

"This place seems safe enough."

"The predators know better than to bother me. I spent years teaching them I was tougher than they."

"You're going to complain I have nothing to talk about, again."

His skin shudders—a shrug. "At least you can talk. The youngling isn't even old enough to have learned."

I study what I can make out of him, then sit down. It's the same each time. He complains about my presence, says I should go, then wants me to stay. I understand loneliness.

I don't know why he stays here, alone. Why he doesn't go back to his group, or to another group of demons. As far as I know, once they live past the madness, demons can go back. They aren't forced to stay alone.

Not like I have been.

As much as I hate Amanda and Jason for what they made me, for the lies, I miss talking with them. They understood what I am, what I was going through. Jason spent so much time trying to make me human.

Sometimes I wish I could go back.

"Tell me of those who made you."

Like every other time he asks me that, I hesitate. I feel fear at sharing something so personal, but like before, eventually I speak.

I tell him about Amanda, always severe, the scientist who found a way of infusing demon essence into a human being. About Jason, who always seemed happy, who tried so hard to make me understand what it means to be human. I tell him about the lies, of the demons I killed believing those lies. About the tests they ran on me. I tell him about Juliette, the rare human I met outside of the building. I tell him about Claws, him saving my life, exposing the lies. Of me helping him break into the building to take back the soul stones Amanda had collected over the years.

Like the previous times, Lives Alone asks about Claws in the Dark then, and I refuse to say more. Talking about him forces me to remember that he's out there, living the life demons live. It forces me to acknowledge the longing I feel, that even though I don't understand why, I miss him more than I do the humans I've known.