

Maurice is on all fours again. He's pushing himself so hard to keep fighting I can see his heat through the dimming chemical light. He spits. The smell of blood is so strong on him I barely smell what hits the floor. I fight the urge to throw myself at him, to bite chunks out of him. A part of me is screaming that the hunt is at an end now and it's time to finish him.

I give him time to get back up.

"You're wasting your time," he says again. "You can't kill me, and I'm killing you ever so slowly." Even with the beating I'm giving him, the weakened shape he's in, he still insists he's invincible.

I don't understand why he believes this, why he is lying to me about his condition. In the last few bouts he only managed a few strikes, when I overextended myself or became distracted.

With a grunt he pushes himself to his feet, and I'm on him before he's done straightening. His face, his stomach, his flanks. As he goes down he cuts my left shoulder, but it's shallow.

He pants hard, and I have to step away before I give in to the instinct to feed off him.

He rolls to his stomach and tries to get his limbs under himself. He pushes up, falls to the side, tries again. I let him take his time.

After the third attempts he stays down. He looks up at me, eyes glowing slightly with hate.

I nod. "I think we're done here." The urge to kill him, to eat him is still there as I bend down, but he isn't my meal.

Maurice swings for my ankle, but the motion is sluggish and doesn't have any strength when he hits it. I grab him by the neck and pull him up. If he's like me, he'll have regained some of his strength by the time I get him to the garage. Hopefully enough to give Claws a decent hunt.

I hear roars through the door and walls, but they are moving away. I consider finding them, showing what I did to their leader, to their Adam, but I can't risk Maurice telling them to rescue him.

He grabs at the door-jam, but all it takes is a yank and his claws rip through the wood. I wait until the demons are far enough away and head for the stairs. Maurice grabs at the railing and I can't just pull him away. I have to hit his hand until I feel something break in it. There is no pain in his eyes, only hate.

Sub-one is quiet.

I wonder who survived. My heart tightens at the thought Claws might be dead. I push it away. I refuse to believe young demons could kill him, no matter how many of them there were.

Voices reach me as I get closer, human voices, grim in tone. The scene, lit by the glow of more green chemical lights, warrants the tone. Demon bodies are everywhere. There must be over a hundred of them. Two of the humans are seated, leaning against a column. A third is standing, their captain. The rest of the unit is lying on the floor, one next to the other, arms crossed over their chest.

That three of them survived the fight surprises me. I hadn't wanted them to die, not really, but I hadn't expected them to survive either; they're only humans after all.

I look over the massacre, searching. I know there's no way I can find him among this. He has to be exhausted; he won't be able to maintain a form, and has no reason to look like anything I'd recognize. My eyes fall on a dark mass, one no different than the others, and I know it's him.

I can't move. He looks like nothing more than one dead demon among many. He looks up, and I let out my breath. He searches and locks eyes with me.

How I know it's him escapes me, and right now it doesn't matter. He said that mates know one another, and he has to know his children. Maybe there's enough of Fangs in the Light in me, and that is how.

The human steps in front me before I reach Claws. I consider moving him, throwing him aside, but he survived this fight, so I give him the respect that entitles him to and stop.

"You beat him?" The disbelief in his voice almost makes me smile. I'm tempted to return it to him by pointing out he survived in the same tone, but all I do is nod. I don't want to take my eyes off Claws.

"I didn't think you'd manage it."

I shrug. Claws breaks eyes contact to look at what I'm holding. His form shivers, his skin gathers on itself. I drop Maurice and he groans. It's an act, has to be. He should be stronger at

this point, not that it matters.

“That...changes things.” The captain’s tone is speculative. “We didn’t think we’d be able to get him alive.” He crouches and reaches for Maurice.

“I wouldn’t touch him if I were you.”

Claws’s growl underlines my words. He gets to his feet, his eyes never leaving the form on the floor.

The human looks in Claws’s direction and backs away. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“He’s going to feed.”

“I can’t let him do that.” He reaches for the sidearm, and I grab his wrist. “He’s military property.”

I look at him, and now I see details I’d ignored in my hurry to find Claws. His head is bandaged, as are his left arms from elbow to wrist, and he has more cuts than he didn’t bother with. But it’s his eyes—sunken in and dull—that catches my attention. He’s alive, but barely so. I can’t see enough of the other two, but I expect they are in the same condition.

“You really want to try and stop him?”

“You stop him.”

I shake my head.

“You don’t understand! We need to bring him back, we have to study him.”

“You’re not getting him.”

Claws is only a few feet away from us, and when the captain pulls at his wrist to back away, I let him go.

“I’m ordering you to stop him.”

Instead I back away too, but not in fear. Claws needs the space; somehow, I know this. If I crowd him, he’ll consider me a threat to his hunt.

Claws drops to his knees, or rather his form droops until it looks like he’s on his knees. He looks at Maurice in silence.

“Hello, Adam.”

Maurice groans.

Claws cants his head to the side and his skin flows that way, giving the impression that it will drip to the floor. He pokes Maurice with a clawless finger. “Will you give me a satisfying hunt?”

“Please,” Maurice whispers, “have pity. I can’t—”

Claws’s hand comes down fast, talons forming in the moment it takes to strike where Maurice had been. They sink deep into the floor as Maurice rolls to a crouch.

“You really think I’m that easy to kill?”

Claws smiles. “Good.” His form flows up. “You will run, Adam. Because you think you can escape, you will run.”

Maurice snorts. “I’m not running from you.”

The smile on Claws’s muzzle broadens, showing a lot of long, sharp teeth. “Food always runs.” He takes a step toward Maurice, who looks around nervously.

Claws takes another step, and Maurice takes one back. They move like this for a few steps, then Maurice bolts for the door. Claws watches him, a satisfied expression on his face, then takes off after him.

I listen to their footfalls until I can’t hear them anymore. Maurice is heading up again, probably trying to get outside, get to the demons there, get them to save him. I don’t think that will do him any good.

The captain moves closer to me. I hear the metal scraping against leather. “At least this gets that thing out of here.” I don’t move when I feel the barrel of the gun against my temple, or when he cocks the hammer. “I have a score to settle with you.”

“Put the gun down, Captain. It isn’t going to do you any good.”

“You’re not in a position to order me about. Your protection’s gone off killing my asset.”

“Unlike you I’m fed and rested, and it isn’t like you expected to capture him. You were going to bomb this place and hope he died. Now you can be certain he’s going to be dead.”

“Your pet didn’t look all that great, so I wouldn’t count on him surviving. And this is loaded with irradiated rounds, so you’re going to do what I tell you to.”

“If you knew anything about demons, you wouldn’t be saying that. As for me obeying you?”

I spin, and I have my right hand on the gun before he can do more than gasp. By the time he thinks to pull the trigger, my skin has flowed around the hammer.

“I asked you to put it down. Now you can let go, or I can rip it out of your hand.” He doesn’t do anything. “Do you really want to fight me? In your condition? I’m guessing that whatever it is, that boost is out of your system at this point. You’re just a regular human now, one already near death.”

Reluctantly, the human lets go. I take out the clip, eject the cartridge, and throw the gun and clip in opposite directions.

“Don’t think this is over. I’m going to have your ass in a cell for your betrayal.”

“No, you’re not. The deal was I walk away once you got Amanda. She’s outside, waiting to be rescued.”

“You think I care what the deal was? You screwed the deal when you handed us over to Adam. I’m bringing you back that you want it or not.”

I can’t help smiling. “You and what army?” I indicate the two other soldiers left. “Maybe you could have taken me when you were on that boost thing, but you’re not anymore. And even if you were? Let’s say you do capture me, somehow. How do you think Claws is going to react to that? Do you think you can take him once he’s fed? Fine, you take him too. What about the thousands of demons out there? What are they going to do when whatever Adams did to them fades? You lost most of your unit, while boosted, fighting a hundred demons. I’ll admit it, I’m impressed, but isn’t your job to rescue Amanda? Who is outside, already surrounded by demons.”

“You think I need you to deal with them?”

“No, you need Claws. You’re going to need him to send them away. He can survive them, not you, boosted or not, and not me.”

“Then what do you expect me to do?” His words are clipped, like he wants to bite them back.

I don’t answer him; the sound of boots and claws are coming closer. Maurice didn’t make it outside. Now he’s heading lower.

“We give Claws time to feed. We go to sub-two where we’ll be out of his way and you can get patched up. If your medic didn’t survive, Valerie can probably help. Some of the other scientists too. When Claws is done, he’ll send the demons away, you go grab Amanda, and I leave.” I look him in the eyes. “If you want to hunt me after that, you’re welcome to do so.”