

I lose track of time as I lie in the darkness. It was only once everyone settled that I'd finally fallen asleep. Hinges creak over me, light seeps in, then pours in as two forms rush out, knocking the lid open. Once my eyes adjust to the brightness, Moores is looking down on me.

"It's safe to come out."

I consider my situation, then admit defeat. "I'm going to need help." I nod to the three sleeping demons draped over me.

Demons are heavy. That isn't normally a problem since I am much stronger than a human. I've carried older demons over my shoulders after defeating them. But lying on my back, with arms pinned under them, I have no leverage.

Protect steps into the light and smirks at me before leaping out. Moores reappears, and even with his features mostly hidden in the bright sunlight, I see the smile.

"I was expecting things to be more tense," he says.

"It seems that up close I'm not as scary as the stories they've heard." I pull on an arm and only succeed in making one of them growl and shift so more of their weight is on it. They don't wake.

Moores chuckles.

"Can't you order them off me? You seem to be able to control demons."

"Have you ever tried to control teenagers?"

"Why would I... That was a joke, wasn't it?"

"You've clearly not spent a lot of time around teenagers if you think that."

A roar sounds, carrying security, a time of ending, of return.

Three heads snap up from my chest. Then they are running up the wall and vanish into the light, leaving me alone, able to breathe easier, and without the shadows of their memories crowding my head.

"Looks like Protect saved you," Moores comments. "Another unexpected thing."

"I think that letting those older demons smother me showed him I'm not a threat."

"We collaboratively call them Teens. They'll all take a name over the next few years, but since we can't tell them apart the way the People can, we don't try."

I climb the ladder. "They don't mind?"

"Vocalizing names are for our benefits."

Moores reaches for me, and after considering it, I give him a hand. I feel him pull, see the strain and surprise on his face as I continue climbing.

"How heavy are you? The team that brought you in mentioned you were heavier than you looked, and Maliya said your body was denser, but that felt like you weight a ton."

"I don't know the numbers. I just know not to jump into lakes or rivers, and to make sure whatever roof I leap onto is solidly built." Around us, excitement rises. People gather and point up. Protect lands, and soon other forms appear from the alleys, stepping into the light and among the people.

I tense at how many there are—easily twenty demons of varying ages. How did this many demon still in the forest surrounding the town manage to avoid being found? A few hours and they'll have eaten everyone here. Even as the thought occurs, their actions contradict it. The demons walk among the humans, looking them over, sniffing them, offering un-clawed hands for them to shake. The humans hug them, the children run around the younger ones. Cub jumps up and squeaks a roar as he glides back down.

A young woman shows a scratch on her arm to a demon with pride. I catch the words "sniffer" and "soldier" from her. The demon ripples in anger and looks around for a target, but the woman calms them. The tone coming off the demons is happiness, concern, home.

Moores takes my arm. "Come, how about I feed you while they make sure everyone's okay? Once they catch your scent, they're going to have a lot of questions for you."

I have spent enough time among openly dishonest humans to sense there is more to Moores's offer, but I go with him. Unless he plans to offer me to the demons, I can handle whatever he has in mind.

The building he leads me to is a few streets away, larger than the others, made of concrete with a metal roof. Other than the angle, I might be able to land on it. Inside, a dozen tables fill the open space—all empty except for the largest one, occupied by five women and three men. Two unoccupied chairs are left. Smells of cooked food fill the air.

They all look at me the way Amanda did, the last time I saw her, before I cut ties with her and the lies. Disappointment. As if all her attempts to have me killed were my fault, and not her decisions.

I wonder what they believe I did to warrant such expression.

I consider leaving—I don't owe them anything—but the large platter of food before one of the free chairs reminds me I am hungry.

Moores leans in close. "They just look threatening. You've defeated some of the People. I'm sure you aren't afraid of a few old men and women." His body language tells me he intended his words to be for me alone, but he spoke normally, and by the roll of the eyes from some of them, they heard him.

"I am not afraid," I state, and decide not to mention that demons are easier to deal with because I can strike those who threaten me.

My hunger influences my decision. I step to the chair with the food. If whatever this is turns into something I don't want to deal with, I can leave. At least I will have eaten. Once I'm seated, servers bring food for the others.

"How did you know I'd be hungry?" I ask Moores once he's seated next to me. Everything on the platter is fresh. The raw meats, cut vegetables, and fruits are arranged into something that has a sense of order to it. I'm reminded of the paintings Jason insisted created emotional reactions.

"Maliya told me that your metabolism runs closer to that of a late teen than a full adult. You also can't store as much food as they can. It was an educated guess after that."

As I eat, the names of the people I'm sitting with are given to me, but I don't recall them. My hunger has all my attention. A quarter of the large platter is gone before I am sated enough to pause. They're looking at me, only a few having eaten.

"Is this going to be an interrogation?" I ask.

"No," a man says, "we're just—"

"Don't coddle him," an older woman snaps. "He shows up, and barely a week later the army is at our doorstep months ahead of schedule. I think we're entitled to answers."

"I'll answer your questions," I reply before Moores protests. "Are you willing to answer mine in return?"

They exchange looks, then the old woman nods. I motion for her to start, which takes her by surprise.

"Are you on the run?" she asks.

I have been running, but I know that isn't what she means. I have to think back to Robert and talk of criminals escaping the law. He called the time before they were recaptured, "being on the run".

"I haven't broken any human laws, but as you've worked out, I am a creation of the military. I escaped them, but I suppose that yes, I am on the run."

"I told you they were here for him," a man says angrily.

"When they arrived," I say, setting up my question, "the man who ran to hand Moores the radio said, 'they're back'. That implies they were here before. You just said ahead of schedule, which means they come here regularly. Why would the army come here without me to draw them?"

They look at one another again. There is a reluctance to answer.

"Officially," Moores says, "it's to make sure we don't need anything."

Rolls of the eyes and snorts are the response.

"They're wondering why we aren't dead," the old woman says.

"The sickness," I say, and they nod. I go back to eating while I wait for them to ask the next question. They seem unsure out to proceed. Do they usually deal with uncooperative people in these kinds of situations? Or maybe they've simply never had to interrogate anyone before.

"How badly does the army want you back?" a man asks. Unlike the others, who wear clothing made for working outside, he wears a suit—brown, with a white shirt and black tie. A cane hangs off the back of his chair.

I think it over, consider what I am comfortable telling them. "I don't know. When I first broke away from them, they didn't pursue me. I didn't know of the military connection to my creation then. They forced me to work with them a year later, and we had a...disagreement, on how to proceed as part of that mission. When that was over and I refused to go back with them, they chased me hard for a few months, then it slowed. I came to Anounga in part because I hoped the sickness would make them reluctant to follow me, and it looked like that worked, until now."

"You aren't afraid of it?" the old woman asked suspiciously.

"My creator ran every test she could think of, many of them to test my resistance to human sickness. As far as she could tell, I am immune to anything that affects humans. I counted on that to include this sickness." I eat a little more. "How many demons are here?"

"It varies," Moores answers, ignoring the glares, "and they call themselves the People. Demons are something of our mythology, and the only reason they aren't insulted by it is that they don't understand the concept."

"Protect is the only one who stays," an overweight man says. "This is his territory, and he considers the town to be the center of it. He leaves to hunt, and patrol the borders, but he always returns. He can fly back quickly, if needed."

"Mated pairs who are related to him," the woman to his left continues, "like Kills and Watches, come back when they are ready to have a child, and they'll stay until the child picks their name. Once they've done that, they're considered adults, and the bond between them loosens enough they go their separate ways."

"At this moment, there's nineteen of them in the territory," Moores finishes. "That includes Baby, Cub, the Teens, and a few others who haven't picked a name yet."

"And not one of them hunts you?" I ask, not bothering to mask my disbelief.

"There's the occasional miscalculation, when they're young," a woman who looks to be the youngest of the group says. "With someone like Cub, the hunger can come on suddenly, and they don't always have the control yet to resist it. But one of the parents will always be close by. If not, Protect will take them to the pen before too much damage can be done. The worst I can remember happening is a few scratches. The People aren't bad."

"Why has the army redoubled their effort to find you?" the old woman demands.

"I don't know," I answer. "It's possible they weren't looking for me specifically. I'm told my scent is more like a demon—the People—than humans. Maybe a sniffer dog caught it and it led them here. I've never seen the military use animals, but I've mainly encountered them closer to cities. Are they something specific to Anounga?"

"No," a plump woman says. "They've been bred for centuries. They're one of the first ways we discovered to warn us of approaching danger of hungry..." She searches for words. "Well, we still thought of them as demons back then. I know the military has come up with more high-tech methods, but sniffers are still the most reliable ones."

"Then, if they were indeed looking for me specifically, I don't know why. They have my creators, so they can make more like me."

"The military is possessive," a man says. Like the others, he's dressed in casual, sturdy clothing, but his body language is harder, straighter, more ready to fight. "They might be looking for you just because you belong to them."

"That was a point of contention between me and the leader of the team I worked with last. The situation prevented him from stopping me when I left, but he has been part of the groups hunting me." I pause. "Why are you not sick?" I ask, then go back to eating.

They are uncomfortable, looking around. Even Moores seems to search for how to answer. How to say something without revealing too much?

"We don't know," the old woman finally says, deflating slightly. "Maliya's best guess is our isolation. But it doesn't answer all the questions, like why when someone came back from the city sick, they got better quickly, while the news says it takes months for someone to get over it, with heavy treatments."

"It's one of the things we've kept from the military," Moores says. "If they knew that, they'd turn the town into a research center and Protect would kill them, which would only escalate the problem."

I eat in silence, my questions answered, waiting for more from them. It takes minutes before any of them speak, and when Moores does so, it isn't a question.

"Derick, I know you want to leave, but if there's a chance the military is after you, I think it's best if you stay a while longer. Terrence confirmed they all went back to their vehicles, but from his vantage point, he can't be sure that every soldier left. If the sniffers have your scent, someone could have stayed behind. Outside the town, they will be able to pick up your trail."

Some at the table nod, others frown. I am a point of contention among them. "I'll stay," I say, and Moores relaxes. It isn't the military's

presence that influences my decision.

I look at my black hand, remember Cub rubbing against it—they and the Teens piled onto me. The memories of family and belonging that came with them. This town and how they greeted the demons, and that they, in turn, were concerned for the humans' well being.

I haven't felt belonging like this since the time of the lies. I lost that when Amanda and Jason betrayed me.

I should leave.

Being among them will only bring trouble—to them, to me. But after being locked in a cave with demons, I realize I am tired of being alone.