

“What do you mean, ‘I’m not leaving’?”

Claws stands and reshapes himself to look more human. He’s a little shorter than I am, looking like he’s wearing jeans and a hoodie. The edges of his ‘clothing’ are frayed, and with him I know this is a sign he’s tired. He needs to concentrate on maintaining this form when what he should be doing is focusing on getting out of here.

He fixes his gaze on me. “I need to end this, to kill Adam.”

“Why? I know you don’t care about the humans, so why are you trying to save them?”

“I do not do this for them.” He tilts his head, and his tone becomes quizzical. “But why are you so willing to let them die?”

“They aren’t worth saving,” I almost yell. Doesn’t he remember what he showed me? “You said that yourself. They always lie and scheme against one another.”

“Is there not one human you feel deserves to be saved? Among all of them in this city, did you not meet one you thought was better than the rest?”

I almost say no. I want to say no.

I sigh. “There’s Juliette. She lied to me, but she was trying to help.” I look around. “If she’s still here, then yes, we should take her and her children with us.”

“Do you think you can find them before the military sends those bombs?”

“I don’t know! I don’t care! If it’s a choice between saving her or you, I’m getting you out of the city.”

“I am not—”

“Leaving, I know. Damn it, what have humans ever done for you?”

“They killed my mate.”

“Then why are you trying to save them?”

“Because of what else humans will do to my people if Adam is not stopped. Do you think they will stop with the bombs on this city? Will they see that Adam is controlling my people, that this is *his* doing? Not theirs? No, after this, they will hunt us wherever we live.”

“They’re already hunting you.”

“Humans protect their cities. They hunt those of us who come to feed. They still respect the wild, let us have that. If I do not stop Adam, nowhere will be safe for my people.”

I rub my face; he can’t be that naive. “You think they aren’t going to exterminate you anyway? Amanda made me to kill your people. She wasn’t going to stop at only one. They weren’t going to be limited to the cities, like I was. Why do you think the military sent this team here? For her, so she could continue trying to perfect a demon-killing machine.

“Those are for the future to worry about. Adam is for today. The threat he poses to humans will make them destroy my people, today. I am here, today. I will act, today.”

“You’re going to die, today, if you do that.”

“Then I die, but I die trying to stop him. And I will not have to see what comes next.”

“How can you be so damned calm about that?”

He smiles. It’s a human one, but it isn’t pleasant to look at; his long and sharp teeth are bared. His eyes blaze. “I am not calm. I rage, but my rage serves me. I unleash it on the enemy of my people.” The light in his eyes dims, and his teeth shrink until his muzzle looks more normal. “What have you accomplished with your rage? Have you directed it so it makes your world better? Or is it a wound inside you, festering, poisoning you?”

“Who cares what I’ve done? I did what they forced me to do to survive. You think I’d have made it this long without my anger? The humans destroyed what I was! The reason I existed! Why should I care what happens to them?” I feel the spikes on my arm. It readies itself for me to lash out at him, at anything or anyone close by.

He places his hands on my shoulders, and I have to hold myself back from hitting him. “Then leave, Derick.” There is no anger in his words. I hear sadness, but not anger. I want him to be angry. “Go on surviving. Keep on living, continue letting your anger feed on you. I am staying. I will stop Adam, or die in the attempt. I will either remove the reason for the humans to seek vengeance on my people, or I will no longer be there to see what form it takes. I am at peace with either end.”

I shove him away. “You’ll be dead! You can’t do this!”

“You are right—by myself, death is the most likely result. Stay and help me. Give your rage a target that will help those around you instead of simply letting it hurt you and them.”

I throw myself at him. Who does he think he is to tell me what I need to do? Like he has any idea what I’ve gone through since leaving this place. The things I’ve done, had to do. I punch and I kick, but he blocks and dodges. I’d forgotten how quick he is, even when he isn’t at his best.

He catches my fist and pulls me off balance. His other arm wraps around my chest and presses me against him. I kick and pull, try to break out. I even feel the spikes press against his skin, but if he feels them, he isn’t letting that bother him.

*Calm yourself, young one. I am not your enemy.*

They aren’t words. He rumbles and it rolls through me. It reminds me of the roar he used to command the demons to leave so long ago, but this doesn’t hit me like a mace. It’s cool water flowing through me, dousing the intense heat of my anger.

*You are safe.*

I’m crying.

Claws isn’t holding me anymore, he’s supporting me. Then my head is against his chest and I cling to him. “I’m so tired of the pain.”

“I know,” he says.

“I don’t know what to do to make it stop.”

He doesn’t say anything else. The rumbles continues to flow through me. It isn’t quick, but my tears stop falling. I don’t let go; the comfort he provides feels too good. Better than any fight I’ve won, than any hunt I was on. For the first time since leaving this city behind, I feel myself relax.

“You are wrong, Derick.” His words don’t interrupt the rumbling. “The humans didn’t destroy your reason for being, your world. I did.”

I want to tell him he’s wrong. I want to lash out at him for daring take the blame for the humans’ actions, but I can’t work up the strength. I can’t get angry with his rumbling cooling it.

“When I found you, saw what the humans were making you do, were making Fangs in the Light’s child do. When I saw you hunt and kill those who were only trying to survive, I knew I needed to bring you to your senses. I thought that if I showed you the truth, I would get my child back.”

He’s silent for what feels like a long time.

“I was selfish. In my zeal, I never stopped to consider the harm I was doing to you. You are but a child, and I ripped you out of everything you knew, the only thing you knew. Even when we parted ways, I didn’t understand the harm I had done to you. If I had but an inkling, Derick, I would not have let you go. I would not have left you alone to deal with it.”

His arms tighten around me. “I didn’t realize what I had done until I saw you here. I am sorry for the pain I have caused you, Derick.”

“You’re not the one who lied to me.”

“No, but I could have been gentler in exposing them. I should have stayed with you and helped you deal with the consequences.”

I push away, and he lets me go. He tilts his head, looking at me.

“I’m okay,” I say, then laugh. “No, I’m not. I’m pretty sure that once you stop rumbling I’m going to be angry again. I can’t be angry at you, I won’t let myself do that, but if I shouldn’t be angry at the humans, what am I supposed to do with it?”

“Shape it. Direct it at those who deserve its heat. There are bad beings in the world who should be stopped.”

“Like Adam.”

“Him, and others. There are humans who prey on other humans. There are those among my people who hunt not to feed, but for the pleasure of the kill. Not all humans deserve your protection, Derick, but more of them do than don’t.”

I lean back against the service counter. “So, we stop Adam, then I deal with the rest of the world?”

Claws nods. “I will help you.”

I take a breath. “Okay, then the first thing to do is find you someone to hunt so you can feed.”

“No, I will feed on Adam.”

“You can’t go after him in your state.” I can feel the anger, under the cool of his rumbling, and I can tell that if not for it, I would be screaming at him right now. “He already took you down, and you were in better condition then.”

Claws shakes his head. “He didn’t. He had my people attack me. He had—” his voice hitches, “—Runs the Forest attack me.”

“Who’s that?”

“Adam calls him ‘Runner’ instead of by his name.” The anger in Claws’s voice makes the rumbling fade, and I feel my anger come to the surface, but before it overwhelms me, the rumble comes back.

“Your son.”

“My child, yes.”

“But how can Adam get your son to attack you? There has to be a connection between the two of you. He had to know who you were.”

“He did, as did I. It was my undoing. Runs the Forest is older, so I tried to reason with him. I didn’t understand what Adam could do. I was distracted, and in trying to keep Runs the Forest from hurting me and me from hurting him, the others overpowered me. They cut me over and over, forcing me to exhaust myself healing. Adam’s power lays in how he can impose his will on my people.”

That’s what I’d felt before. “It’s like what you’re doing to me.”

Claws shook his head. “I can’t make you fight for me, protect me. Not all can calm others. I expect none but me can do it to you, because I know a part of you. Adam can do more. His will inserts itself into you, replaces what you want. I have never encountered one who could do this before. He tried to use it on me, but I fought it off.”

I smile. “He said you were stubborn.”

“I have a will of my own. I have learned to endure much over my life.”

“He said Runs the Forest was stubborn too.”

Claws smiles. “He is my child.” He falters. “It is a trait I have given many of them.” He looks at me and the smile returns, if not as bright. “Maybe Fangs in the Light also contributed; your stubbornness isn’t of my doing.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

He looks at me, an unreadable expression on his face, then lets out a sound that takes me a moment to identify. Laughter. It doesn’t sound like how he laughed the previous times I was with him.

He’s laughing at me?

His body ripples with his laughter, turning liquid in places and pooling at his feet. “You are Fangs in the Light’s child,” he says between breaths.

When he’s calmer, he looks at me with a mix of longing and affection. “Fangs in the Light could be stubborn, as you can be. It made Fangs in the Light a great hunter, never giving up, even when I sometime gave up.”

“Adam said something about Runs the Forest being willful because he’s older,” I say to move the conversation away from Fangs; thinking about his mate makes me uncomfortable. “I also didn’t see anyone really old there. Do you think it only works on the young? Those who don’t have the will to resist him?”

Claws smiles. He knows what I’m doing. “Possibly willpower isn’t a factor of age, but it does help. But the young are also impetuous. They believe they should get more for the little they hunt. Adam promises them bigger hunts, more fulfilling food. He tells them they are right to want more. They already want what he offers, which makes them easier to control.”

“How come there aren’t others trying to stop him?”

“The humans are too.”

“I mean of your kind. You aren’t the only old demon. Why aren’t there other older ones here, helping you?” I think back to the one who told me to kill Adam, to get rid of the invaders, and

wonder why he isn't helping.

"My people do not know it is happening. They do not have the human tools that let them talk over a distance, see what happens in other places. We learn of the world through those who enjoy traveling it, like Runs the Forest. What is happening here will reach them, but long after it is over. If we fail, it's possible they will learn of it at the hand of the humans who come to kill them."

"Did you come here because of Runs the Forest?"

"No. Before seeing him here, it had been a long time since he left for his own life."

"Didn't you pick up his scent among the others when you got here?"

Claws chuckles. "There are too many scents for me to identify one among them, even that of my child. I came here because the path Adam took passed close to where my people make their homes. Because I know you, I recognize the threat he poses, so I took them away before he knew we were there."

"Do you think he built his army by going to villages like yours and getting the young to turn on the older demons? Kill them?"

"It is how he did it. I heard the youths talk about it like it was a thrill, a great victory."

"That's sick. Isn't there enough pain and violence out there already?"

"For the hungry, violence is the path to being fed. For those whose anger controls them, it becomes the anger's tool so that the anger can feed off the pain it is causing."

I look away from his gaze.

"Adam doesn't seem to be angry, and he can't hunt anymore."

"There is anger in him. He hides it, but you saw it."

I remember Adam striking the scientist for what Amanda said.

"As for hunting. Like you, he doesn't need to do it to gain nourishment, but humans don't hunger only for food, and that hunger can be taught to my kind."

"You think Adam wants power, that he wants to rule this city."

"The city will not be enough for him. The hunger I see in him will never be satisfied. Even if he gains control over all of this world, he will still hunger for more."

I push myself away from the counter. "In that case, we need to go and stop him now."

"Yes, we must." Claws smiles as he walks next to me. As we leave the store, he adds, "We can't fight this army alone. We will need the help of the soldiers you brought."