

Maurice collides with me. I push him aside and roll to my feet. My left flank hurts, and my hand comes away bloody as I touch it. His hand never came close to there in the tumble, but if his black stripes can do what my skin does...

I unhook my sword and ready myself for him.

Maurice looks at it. "Really? You just accused me of being like them, and you're going to use their weapon to fight me?" We circle each other, stepping into darkness, and then greenish light. "Drop that abomination. Fight me like we're meant to fight, tooth and claws." The stripes on his arms move to his fingers, turning them dark, and extend past the tip, forming into claws.

I consider the situation, moving in time with him. "We don't have fangs," I say as I fold the sword and hook it to my belt. I'm not dropping it for him to then use against me. "And I'm partial to swords over claws." My skin extends past my hand and forms a thin, narrow blade.

Maurice throws himself at me before it's fully formed. I block one hand with the unfinished blade and try to avoid the other. The claws on that hand extend and they rake through the trench-coat, making me bleed again.

I punch him and he backs away, and when he comes back again I'm ready. He slashes left and right and I block, parry, and step away, waiting for an opening.

When it comes, I stab at his stomach. I cut through the jacket and shirt, but the skin underneath isn't striped, it's solid black. My blade slides off it.

He grins, takes a step back, and the stripes separate. He lunges. I sidestep and swing for his head. He sidesteps and I glance off the side. I cut some hair off, but the skin underneath is also solid black. He grins again as I step away.

I rush him and he backs up, but then he's pressed against the wall. I raise my blade to strike him down. I see the amusement in his eyes as the stripes amass on the left side of his head and neck. At the last moment I shift my weight and punch him on the right side, connecting with his pink temple.

He stumbles to the side, kicking a light-stick away and bringing us into shadows. He shakes his head and glares at me. The punch should have knocked his head off. It would have if he were human, but like me, even without his black skin's protection, he's tougher. At least I've confirmed that his skin isn't quite as instinctive as mine. He needs time to reposition it, and it seems to require a conscious effort.

His main advantage is that he can cover any part of his body, while I'm limited mostly to the right side of my torso. I can cover all of my head, then down to my hip. One day I know I'll be able to cover my entire body, but by then I expect I'll be entirely black. Surprisingly enough, that thought doesn't worry me as much as it used to.

He throws a chair, which I cut. He throws more of them as he tries to get away from the wall, but I move with him, batting them aside or breaking them.

I cut another one and Maurice is in my face, claws coming down. The surprise at how fast he moves keeps me from getting out of the way, but the claws glance off the black skin now covering my head.

Surprise registers in his eyes, and I use the moment to grab him by the neck, lift him up, and slam him down against the floor. The tiles crack, but he doesn't react to it. He punches me in the chest, on the right side, with enough strength he lifts me off him. I could feel the blow through my black skin.

Before I come down, he connects a foot to my stomach. I fly back into the wall, crack it, and lose my breath. When I get back, Maurice is up.

"So you have a few tricks up your sleeves," he rasps. "They're not going to save you." He motions for me to come at him. "I had hopes for you, Derick. I wanted you as a trusted lieutenant, maybe a general in my army. Now I'm going to have to kill you for your betrayal and impertinence."

He's stronger, and his reflexes are faster. We're about even in toughness, but his stripes are more versatile for protection. I didn't expect to be at this much of a disadvantage. I'm the fourth generation; I expected to be physically superior—then I could have handled his better tactical skill. I need to find an edge over him, but if he has a weakness, I can't see it.

I pause as a thought almost forms, but it's interrupted by Maurice coming at me. I throw myself to the side, swinging for his legs. Again I cut through the clothes, but his stripes are protecting him. They didn't solidify, but there are enough of them to keep the blade from biting into flesh.

I roll, get up, and he's already on top of me. I grab his right hand before he can claw my left side. His other hand turns the right side of my coat and shirt to ribbons. I grab that hand and wrestle with him.

"Don't you get it?" Maurice hisses. "I'm the superior design. I could have killed you already, can't you see that? Can't you see that if you stand against me, I'll kill you?"

The thought finishes, and I do see. How many are there? Can I shoot them? No, that won't help.

I let him throw me aside. I land, roll to my feet, and pocket the glowing stick. The only pocket of my coat that's intact is the left one. He comes at me. I throw myself away, grab another stick, pocket it. He doesn't realize what I'm doing until I have five of them. He pats his pocket, and growls when he doesn't find more.

He can't see in the dark.

That doesn't seem to make sense, not entirely, but why else add light to this room? Did he ever do anything in complete darkness? Yes, but did he put himself in danger in the dark? No. I'd thought he was in the rafters to get a better view of what was going on, but it placed him out of reach. The moment he was fired on, he ran. He had the emergency lights on when I brought the soldiers in. He said it would intimidate them when they saw all the demons coming at them.

He can't protect the last two sticks. I faint for one, and go for the other while he protects the first. He follows me as I move, so even that is enough for him to see.

I rush him, feel the claws dig into my side as we impact, but the coat flaps out of the way. All Maurice does is dig them in my flesh as we fall. I grab the stick, shove it in the pocket, and close the flaps over it.

I push myself away, and he stands. His heat form looks around. I'm careful not to hit broken chairs and debris as I get to my feet. I feel the weight of my gun on my hip. I could shoot him and get this over with, but his death doesn't belong to me.

Wood crunches as I step on it, and Maurice spins to look in my direction. His hearing is as acute as mine.

"You think putting me in the dark is going to save you?"

I move around him. He continues facing the last sound I made.

"You're at as much of a disadvantage as I am. You can't win this."

I'm next to him, and punch him in the face. He reels back with a grunt.

"I'm not like you," I say, giving him time to regain his balance. "I have my own strengths."

He lunges at my voice, but I've already moved away. I elbow him in the back. His swing goes wide. I make noise as I move away, and I expect him to come for me, but he doesn't.

He straightens. "Derick, don't you see how we complement each other? I'm stronger, tougher, and faster than you, but you can function in the dark." He tilts his head, listening for me. "Earlier you implied I wanted a woman, an Eve to create more of us. I'm not human—I don't need a woman to have a progeny. You and I, we can do it. You don't remember your demon side, so you don't know that, but I can show you. Together we can make mo—"

I punch him, and he slashes at my chest before I've stepped away. I can't stop the hiss of pain, and he uses the sound to come at me. I don't get out of his way. I hunker down and harden my shoulder.

The impact takes me off my feet, and we struggle for dominance. When we're no longer moving he's on his back, my hand tightening around his neck. I can feel his skin trying to harden it, but it looks like it can't if it's already stressed.

I lean down. "I know how demons reproduce." The anger at what he wants from me slips into my voice. "You think I'd ever do that with you? With someone I despise? When I don't even want to do it with someone I care about?"

I was wrong. The stripes manage to slip under my hand so I can't crush his throat, but he has

trouble breathing. All I need to do is stay like this and he will suffocate.

He tries to speak. “Does—” The rest is garbled. I should ignore what he wants to say, but I’m curious what he thinks I’d want to hear at this point. I release my grip enough to let him gasp. I can’t tighten it back.

He locks eyes with me. “Does he know?”

“Know what?” Of course Claws knows I won’t reproduce with him.

“Does he know you killed his son?”

“How?” I realize too late he counted on my surprise. I’m in the air, pain in my chest and the sound of something ripping. I land and try to get to my feet. The room is lit again. The left side of my coat is gone.

“How do I know?” Maurice croaks, rubbing his throat as I stand. “You’re still alive. I told him you were down there when the lights came on. I told him to go kill you. I didn’t have to try very hard; Runner hates you for some reason. I guess you killed someone he cared about.”

The memory of running at his side surfaces and I clamp it down. I can’t be distracted. “How do you know he’s Claws’s son?”

Maurice shrugs. “I can feel the connection between them, like I feel the one between you and him. It’s something I can do. Something I was given so I could lead them.”

“You call sending demons to their death leading them? Why did you send Runs the Forest against me, for him to kill me? I thought you wanted me to join you.”

“Kill you? He’s a demon, you think he could do that? You’re like me. We were chosen. The First One picked us.”

I almost ask what he means, but whatever this is about it isn’t important. “Then why send him to his death?”

“So you’d see demons aren’t your kind. What do you think that Claws of yours is going to do when he finds out? You think he’s going to accept it? That he’s going to be understanding? You killed his son.” Maurice laughs. “You might as well join me right now; it’s the only way you’re going to survive his wrath.”

My fists are shaking. My right arm is thick with my skin, sharp ridges slicing what’s left of the shirt open. His words feed my anger, because I can’t deny what he says. Claws’s unreadable face scared me more than if he’d shown how angry he was. I don’t know how I would feel if someone killed my child.

A growl escapes my mouth.

No, I know exactly how I feel.

Before I realize I’ve moved, my fist connects with his face. Before he can react I punch him in the stomach, the shoulder, the chest. Each time blood flows.

He strikes me in return, I feel the cuts and the blood on my unprotected skin, but I don’t feel any of the pain. All I feel is my rage at what he forced me to do. At Runs the Forest’s death at my hand, by his order.

I have him against the wall. His face is black as I pound it over and over, but while his stripes keep the ridges from cutting him, they can’t do anything against the impact and his head lolls down after each blow. I support more and more of his weight, and then the blackness on his face separates back into individual stripes.

I raise my fist for what I know is the last time. The front of it becomes a sickle, thin and sharp. There’s enough space between the stripes for me to slice his head clean off his body. I am going to end this...thing that is responsible for Claws’s child’s death.

I hesitate.

“Get on with it,” Maurice whispers.

I lower my fist.

Maurice chuckles. “You can’t do it, can you? No one can kill me. I’m the First One’s envoy. I’m his prophet. I’ll bring his glo—”

I punch him across the face and let him fall. He’s still chuckling.

“You’re going to die, Maurice. But I don’t own that. I’m not the one you hurt the most today.”

“That demon of yours?” His chuckles become full-on laughter, which stops when I kick him in the stomach. I feel the satisfying crunch of ribs breaking. I kick him again and he slides the

length of the wall.

He uses the wall to push himself to a sitting position. “He can’t kill me. He’s weak. He can’t go against the First One’s will.” His voice gains confidence. “I was sent here to lead His children to victory against the humans. To put them in their—”

I punch him again. He swings at me, but he’s too slow.

“Just shut up. I don’t care about what the First One has planned for you. You starved Claws, so you owe him a hunt. You’re right, he is weak, and yes, if I just brought you to him now, you’d win. That’s why I’m going to tenderize you for him.” The smile I feel forming on my face can’t be a pleasant thing to watch. “So you’re going to want to forget any plans you or the First One have, because whatever time you have left until the hunt is going to be taken up with me.”