

“Okay, that’s enough talking. We need to get moving, but the problem is that now that we’re all on the clock, no one wants to stay behind to look after the civilians.”

“I thought soldiers knew how to take orders.” I don’t even try to stop myself from smiling.

“We do, but being boosted doesn’t affect everyone in exactly the same way. It’s made a few of them willful, and if I don’t take them, they’re going to just go off on their own, leaving everyone here vulnerable.”

“Have them come. I doubt anyone here is in danger.”

“Really? Have you been in the same places I have?”

“Claws, do demons know the difference between civilians and military?”

“Only if they have had encounters with them before. Otherwise, they are all food.”

“We’re not—”

“The point,” I cut the captain off, “is that Adam sent them to kill you, not them, but because they don’t know the difference, they just killed everyone. The cells had stacks of canned food. You don’t bother feeding your prisoners if you’re just going to kill them outright.”

I look around at the wounded. “Even if he did send the demons to kill everyone, so long as they stay here and keep the noise down, Adam isn’t going to know there’s anyone still alive other than you, and that’s if he goes down to check. He’s the only one who could tell most of your people aren’t there. He’s not going to look at every other body and do a head count.”

“He’ll know I’m missing if he looks,” Valerie says. “He remembered me; I saw it in his eyes.”

“That’s if he bothers checking the bodies. How hard is he going to look for you if he knows you’re still alive?”

“He’s going to be too busy dealing with us,” the captain says. “And if not, he has to suspect we’re free, so he won’t venture into unsecured areas. His best strategy is to re-enforce his position and put as many of his best fighters around the entry points as possible.”

He motions for the soldiers to join them. “According to the blueprints, there are only three ways into the garage from inside the building: the two stairwells and the elevator.”

“There’s a heavy machinery elevator at the back of the garage,” I say.

“That’s not on the plans.”

“Doctor Walker had it added not long after Maurice was finished,” Valerie says, “but it only goes to sub-ten. It’s there so Thompson could quickly move weapons to the armory.”

“Does Maurice know about them?”

I leave them to the discussion and go to the stairwell. I open the door and listen. There’s growling and claws on floor, but it’s distant, and none of the sounds are moving closer.

“The stairs are clear for the moment,” I tell the captain, interrupting the talk. He’s the one who wants us to get moving, after all. “Do you want Claws and I at the front or back?”

“You’re staying in front,” Cline says.

The captain glares at him, but nods.

Claws enters the stairwell, and as I follow him, I hear the clicking of claws on the metal stairs, but somewhere below us.

“Heads up,” I say as I run down the stairs. We can’t afford to get caught between two groups of demons.

I’m down to sub-five when I know for certain there’s only one of them and that he’s coming closer, but the echoes make it difficult to tell how far he is.

I unfold the sword. The sound of metal sliding against metal is faint, but the demon stops. I keep going. Sub-six, sub-seven. He moves, and I pick up the pace. At sub-eight I see the top of his head.

His eyes narrow on seeing me, and I jump at him before he can roar. My sword is aimed at the top of his head, but he moves and I spear his muzzle as we collide and tumble down the stairs.

At the bottom, he shoves me away in through the open doorway. I stand and unfold the other sword. I’m sore, but nothing feels broken.

He gets to his feet, pulling the sword out of his muzzle with a silent snarl. He throws it aside and grows. His muzzle is the only thing that doesn’t want to change as fast, while it drips black blood. Quickly he realizes that being larger isn’t an advantage in the narrow stairwell.

I could take advantage of it, but if he roars, the sound will carry all the way to Adam, and possibly every demon in the building. I turn and run. I hear him hit the sides of the door, as his instinct to chase me overrides his knowledge he won't fit. He fights against it, wood breaks, then his claws scrape the ground as he runs.

I run straight. I'm not familiar with this level; Thompson's lab is the only room I have any familiarity with. I burst in, and immediately move against the wall next to the door.

He runs in past me, and I slash his shoulder. He screams outrage and shoves me away. I hit the wall, and barely keep my grip on the sword. I use it to block, and the strength of the blow sends it flying out of my hand. He rears for a slash, but I throw myself on the floor between his legs. I slash at his back with my hand as I stand, but he's already turning and I only cut his sides. He roars, and I don't see the hand that hits me. I get back up and try to block the next blows.

His hands are blurs, and my chest stings. The front of my coat and shirts are in tatters. My chest and stomach are covered with red lines. I have no idea how he hasn't gutted me.

"Wrong," he says, and the word is distorted, like he isn't used to speaking.

"Not something I can help."

"Wrong!" The word turns into a roar, and there's an undercurrent of pain and loss in it—anger and the promise of violence.

I back away. He considers me guilty of something. This is personal for him.

He throws himself in my direction. I slash at him as I throw myself out of the way, and feel the edge bite into his flesh. I roll and stand. The long gash on his arm is already closing.

The edges my skin forms are sharp, but they aren't irradiated. He can easily heal those. I look around for my sword, locating it by the entrance, behind the demon. I step to edge around him when he roars again.

The force of it hits me hard and is almost familiar, but it's the intent in it that has me on a knee. I smell wrong, not right, like someone, but not them. What does that mean? I don't smell like anything, just me. I'm not—

"You smell so much like Fangs in the Light," Claws in the Dark told me.

The demon before me moves from foot to foot, like he's waiting for me to attack. His sense of pain and loss. The familiarity in the tone of his roar.

I have trouble breathing. "Runs the Forest."

"Run-ner."

"Runs the Forest, I didn't—"

"Run-ner!"

How do I explain to him I didn't do anything to Fangs in the Light? I didn't kill his mother, or father, or however demons see them.

"Die." He stretches the word, and my body vibrates with the hate he feels for me.

"Don't do this."

"Die."

"Claws is here. You're not alone."

He roars, more of the hate.

Does the name even translate? Does he understand it? I raise my hands. "I don't want to have to fight you."

He throws himself at me. I run out of the way, and I feel pain in my side. Even before I'm on my feet, I'm flying from the fist in my back. I hit the wall with enough force I can't get my feet under me. He grabs me by the neck and throws me away.

"Don't want to kill you." I make it to all fours and I reach for my revolver. "Go home, Runner."

The kick sends me up. I hit the ceiling, the floor, and bounce a few times.

"Home," Runs the Forest rumbles, and through my pain and dizziness there's a sense of it being here, but also being gone.

There's a wall behind me, and I force myself to sit. My hand falls against the hilt of my sword. "Your home is the wild. Go back to it."

He roars, and the rage is undercut with pain so deep I feel tears falling down my cheeks.

"You're going to die if you stay here." I close my hand on the handle. I force myself up. "This

place isn't for you." I take an unsteady step forward. He doesn't understand anything of what I'm saying. I don't speak their language.

In this moment, I wish I'd retained something of the demon that was used to make me, enough so I could make him understand that I don't want to kill him, but I can't afford to die. Claws in the Dark needs me.

"Please, Runner, d—"

He runs at me, and I raise the sword. He impacts me, and I black out when I hit the wall.

I come to partially under him. I don't know how much time has passed, but I'm still alive. I pull myself out from under him, and he whimpers.

I turn him on his side. The sword is through his head.

"I'm sorry."

"Home." The word is barely audible among the pained rumbling. I get a sense of it being here, of it being now.

I shake my head. "You should have left." Tears are falling as I hold him.

"Home," he rumbles, and I remember running by his side, our bodies shifting as the terrain demanded. I remember the satisfaction of the hunt. The moment when I sink my teeth deep into the flesh of my prey. I remember the joy of running through the trees, of looking up at the eyes and knowing that—

Nothing. The memory ends there.

Runs the Forest isn't moving anymore, his eyes are dark. Why did it have to be this way? Why do I always end up having to fight and kill them?

I know I need to get up and rejoin the soldiers, rejoin Claws. I'm going to have to tell him about this. It's going to hurt him so much.

I make it to my knee and pull the sword out. I wipe it on my coat and fold it. I form a blade around my hand. I hesitate, then hit Runs the Forest's skull as hard as I can. Once I have his soul stone, I get up and head for the stairs.

As I climb them, my body feels better, but I just feel worse. Adam's words come back to me, that Claws isn't like me—the implication that he is going to abandon me. If I tell him what I did, he'll have every reason to hate me. If I don't tell him...

I feel the stone in my hand.

He'll find out eventually, when he goes through the dead. When he realizes that stone has already been taken. I did it, so I need to be the one to tell him, to return the stone to him.

I expect to see them in the stairwell as I get close to sub-two, but they aren't there. I hear conversation beyond that door.

I open it, and for a moment I don't understand what I'm looking at.

"Well, look who decided to come back."