

The front of the group is on the fifth-floor landing when people enter the stairwell from above us. On the sixth, they engage the enemy. Me and Claws have been relegated to the back so we can't help, not that the soldiers need it. The guards they fight are human, and while I notice some of them have something similar to the soldiers strapped to their forearm, they don't have the training and coordination to make the best use of their boosted bodies.

They've pushed to the eighth floor when a door below us shatters open. A glance over the guard rail shows me too massive arms coming up. Hybrids. I catch Humbert's eyes above me as he punches a human guard.

"Looks like you two get to prove your worth after all. Pass the doc to whoever's closest to you, then make sure you keep those things from decimating our rear."

I hand off Amanda to a short soldier, a man who hasn't said anything the entire mission and looks unhappy at being turned into a carrier—not that he was doing anything; the stairwell isn't large enough for him to reach the fighting ahead, and he won't be needed below.

I'm down three steps, revolver in one hand, unfolded sword in the other, when Humbert's voice comes again. "Before I forget, if you can't keep up, we're taking off without you and you can fly on the back of your dog."

Two landings later, the first hybrid comes into view. I shoot it, chest hit. It staggers back, and thin pink blood leaks from the wound. But instead of seeing its internal organ, I only see a cracked bone plate.

The blood reminds me of the one I fought in the cage, but there are differences. This one's skin is thicker, the bones harder I expect, the eyes less...animalistic. Robert said the military had multiple experiments going, and implied I wasn't the only one to escape them. Is this where the scientist's research started? Or did he also leave the military with his knowledge?

I fire at the knee, and that explodes into a stump. It falls sideways and down the stairs, but the others just step over him. They are all men, I note, and the stairwell is only large enough for two of them to fit side by side. There are four still standing; a look over the side doesn't show more coming.

I fire at knees again, but they jump over the shot. I surprised the first one; these will not be disabled easily. One shot hits a hybrid behind the one I aimed for, but the shoulder impact doesn't seem to bother him. I holster the revolver and tear my right glove as my skin extends into a second sword.

The first two reach us and I take one, slashing at him, and step back, drawing him higher to separate them, give myself and Claws more space to fight. The irradiated sword barely cuts the skin, while my black blade goes deep into the bone. Unfortunately, this one is smarter than the one I fought in the cage, and I don't get many hits in before he finds his first opening and punches me in the chest.

Pain explodes in spite of it being covered by my black skin, and I'm sprawled on my back on the stairs, catching my breath. He grins at me maliciously, giving me the time to prepare myself, before pushing his perceived advantage. I plant a foot in his chest and kick him down the stairs.

I'm on my feet as a guard jumps from the landing below and opposite us, grabs the railing, and propels himself into me. I note the injector, the savage expression, and punch him as hard as I can. Bones break, he hits the railing on the other side to more bones breaking, then he tumbles down the well. I turn to deal with the next approaching hybrid as I slowly back up the stairs to keep up with the soldiers.

Claws appears before me, pushing me against the wall just before gunfire erupts and he takes them. When he moves away I see the bullet wounds, small, but not closing, which means irradiated bullets. Before I think about it, I have my revolver in hand and fire once in each of the guard's chests. Two go down with a surprised expression and a gaping hole where their heart had been. The revolver clicks empty when I fire at the third one.

A hybrid tackles me as I reach in a pocket for bullets, and the revolver tumbles down into the well. Annoyed, I throw the hybrid after it, then grab the one pummeling Claws, sending it down after the other. We're on the tenth floor landing. Below us, human guards have taken the place of the hybrids, but they are keeping their distance, taking shots at us as they can.

I glance at Claws again; his injuries have healed slightly. He calms me with a rumble: healthy, strong it says, and I nod. Now isn't the time for me to be distracted; I'm susceptible to irradiated bullets too.

The pace picks up as the soldiers finish the last of the guards ahead of them. We reach the thirteenth floor and hurry into the maze. I look for anything to bar the door, but short of ripping off a wall, nothing is available.

"At the end of the corridor," Coplar yells, "you make a left! It's going to be the next right, then— Why have you stopped?"

"It's a dead-end!" a man yells back.

"It can't be! My map shows it goes on for a hundred meters and—"

"Your map's wrong!" Cline yells, "I knew we couldn't trust you. You think you can just join us and replace—"

"Shut up!" Humbert yells as the door slams open behind us. "Coplar, find us a route. Angelo, you have the doc, so you and Coplar against the wall, everyone else in front of them. The doc is the priority, Coplar after her."

"Cover would be nice right about now," Cline comments.

"That's what our two sacrificial armies are for," Humbert replies, him and the soldiers taking position behind us.

"They have irradiated ammunition," Claws says.

"And they have boost," Humbert snarls. "If you aren't happy about it, lodge a complaint with whoever stole it from us."

"Boost isn't a threat to us," I tell him, taking his sidearm and emptying it into a guard rounding the corner. I ignore Humbert's protest as I put it back in its holster.

"I have a path!" Coplar yells in victory.

"Angelo, stay with her. Everyone else, form up around them. We stay between them and the enemy."

I want to rush the guards, fight, hunt, but hold back. With the soldiers laying down cover fire, a retreat is the best strategy. Someone taps my side as we reach the intersection between us and the guards peaking around the corner, only to duck back at the burst of bullets fired in their directions. Cline offers me his sidearm, and I take it without questioning the man's generosity.

The ground vibrates, a steady feeling under my feet and in the air. Claws looks around, searching, but all there is are the walls around us, then guards rounding the corner. I fire at them along with the soldiers. When the gun clicks empty I almost run at them, but Claws's hand on my shoulder keeps me with the soldiers.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Coplar complains. "The walls can move. The way's now closed."

"Then find us another one!" Humbert yells.

I take the magazine Claws hands me as he fires his machine gun one-handed, and I reload.

“What’s the point?” Coplar replies, angry. “They’re going to close that on us too!”

“How thick are the walls?” I ask in a lull.

“How the fuck do you expect me to know that?” she replies.

“Maybe look when one moves?” Cline says off-handedly before I formulate a reply.

“What are you thinking?” Humbert asks, then fires a short burst at a guard running from one side of their intersection to the other.

“I’m stronger than you, and Claws is much stronger than I am. He might be able to punch through and rip us an opening.”

“That’s going to cost us our largest cover,” Humbert replies.

“He dies,” I say, “and so do you.” The anger in my voice has the captain staring at me, worry momentarily replacing the anger. Does he understand that if he allows Claws to die, the guards won’t be who kills him?

The ground rumbles loudly, and the wall at our back slides away.

“Oh, this can’t be good,” Coplar says. “It’s a large room without any exits. We can’t go there!”

“And we can’t stay here,” Humbert yells back, “or go the way we came.”

“It’s a kill box, Captain!” she replies.

“And we’ll kill anyone trying to enter it!”

We rush in. The room is easily fifty meters on all sides, but Coplar is right; since they control the walls they can lock us in.

“You,” Humbert points to Claws, “go to the other side. You’ll be our decoy, with your boy here. Get their attention. Cline, take position with half on the right side, I’ll take the left with the rest. We shoot them down the moment they’re past us.”

“Claws needs to stay here in case they close this opening,” I tell him.

“No, you are going to do what—”

The ground vibrates again, and Coplar yells and points to the opposite side, to the wall sliding out of the way. We run for it, me and Claws taking the lead easily. We’re in the middle of the room when a roar hits me like a demon punch.

*Submit.*

I stagger to a stop. It takes all my concentration to keep my legs from folding under me, from obeying. I look at Claws, worried. If the command hit me this hard, how did he—

Claws is down, smaller than I’ve ever seen him. He’s trembling, not even trying to stand.

“Stand up,” I tell him. “We can take whoever that is.”

He looks at me, and the terror in his eyes is such I almost drop to my knees. Claws isn’t afraid of anyone or anything. Even Protect, for as older as he is, only engendered respect, not fear.

Anger propels me to stand between him and whoever is in that corridor. I will not let anyone hurt him anymore. The soldiers are at our back, aiming ahead and behind, at the guards entering the room. Gunfire erupts around me, but I barely hear it. The roar is ongoing; the demand that I submit is the only thing I can fight.

Something moves in the corridor’s darkness, slowly enough I get hints of its size as they lumber forward, their heat adjusting to the air they displace. This demon is huge. The roar stops as they enter the room. They are tall, massive, commanding, and as they look around, they fix their glowing red eyes on me and roar again.

The command hits me harder, now mixed with amusement and disdain, and Claws whimpers. The right sleeve of my trench-coat rips apart as spikes push through it, but I don’t move. I am the only one standing between Claws and that thing.

“No,” I say through gritted teeth. Or at least I think I say it. The command reverberates through my bones, the roar makes my ears ring, but I will not obey. I am not some young demon that bends to an elder’s will just because they are older, stronger. I am—

I don’t see the blow. I know it didn’t come from the demon, but as my consciousness fades, I also know no human can hit me so hard I’ll react. There are only humans behind me.

Except for—