

Chapter 15

The man closes his mouth as he raises his hands. A scientist, wearing a lab coat over a suit. His fear quiets, replaced by worry and the look of curiosity and interest every one of them I've met ends up having at some point. He is older, his face is wrinkled, his hair a mix of black and gray, what Jason called 'salt and pepper'. Interestingly, I'm the source of his worry rather than Claws, who holds the child.

"Don't move," Humbert orders through clenched teeth. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm—I'm Barkley Dunn." His voice trembles and he attempts to sound more confident. "I was trying to find Jezebel before she caused trouble."

"Why would she—" Humbert begins, stopped by Cline's snort. He glares at the man. "Do you feel the need to comment, Sergeant Spencer?"

"No, sir," Cline replies and immediately continues, "but take it from someone who has raised a kid. Toddlers are walking disaster zones."

Humbert sighs, then focuses on the scientist. "Where is Doctor Walker? Lie and I'm going to have the demon eat the kid."

"I do not eat cubs," Claws replies, looking the child over from all sides.

The scientist doesn't even glance at Claws. His worry doesn't increase. He knows demons well enough to understand a child isn't a worthwhile hunt for one as old as Claws.

"I don't know any Doctor—"

"Listen to me," Humbert Snaps, "I'm going to cut that—"

"Amanda," I say, cutting him off. I don't know if he is serious about hurting the child. He sounds serious, but with how thick the demons' scents are, I can't smell him. Humans enjoy lying, and empty threats are a tactic they employ.

"Oh, her," the man replies darkly.

"Someone got on the good doctor's bad side," Cline comments. Humbert doesn't react. He lets him get away with more than I expect, considering the sharp tones he occasionally uses.

I'll ask Jason about it when this is over.

The scientist snorts. "Do you have any idea what that woman's done to my research? I've worked for Mister Graves for nearly thirty years. I've given him the hybrid soldiers who helped secure his properties, not her! She shows up, makes a bunch of impossible promises, and all of a sudden, I'm only good to look after Jezebel and her siblings."

"Looks like Gourd was right," Cline mutters.

The scientist looks at the child and his expression softens. Juliet had a similar expression when she spoke of her children. He might not like how it happened, but he doesn't mind the position.

"So, if she were to vanish, you wouldn't mind?" Humbert asks.

The scientist looks at him, at the accompanying soldiers. "You're here to take her back?" his expression turns calculating.

"Yes. I can't promise they won't send someone else to demand retribution for kidnapping her, but our job is just a retrieval."

"Hand me Jezebel, and I'll take you to her."

"That isn't how—"

Claws hands the child over to the scientist.

Humbert curses. "You realize you just handed over the only leverage we had, right?"

"He is its—" Claws sniffs the child. "Is this a man or woman?"

The scientist smiles. "Jezebel is female, a woman."

"He is her parent," Claws says. "I will not take a cub away from him. He has agreed to help

and is he as honest as a human seems able to.”

The child coos at the scientist, “Hey kiddo. You good for a nap now, or are you going to take off to explore all those scents around the building again?” He heads for the door. “I’ll get her to bed and take you to Amanda. One of you can come with me. Everyone on the floor below is sleeping. So long as you’re quiet, there won’t be any problems.”

Humbert glares at me as he follows the scientist. “If this blows up because you and your dog can’t follow orders, I’m putting a bullet in both your heads.” I fall in step behind him with Claws at my side. Like me, he isn’t worried about the captain’s threats. “Bruce, you stick with Doctor Dunn, make sure he doesn’t try anything. Coplar, keep a drone with them, just in case.”

Beyond the door is a small hall, built to human standards, which leads to an elevator and a stairwell. The scientist takes the stairs. One of the soldiers points to where the striker plate used to be. It, and the door frame where it had been, was ripped out. No debris on the floor, so it was some time ago. The stairwell is filled with scents: the child, others like her, human scents and something odd, human and not human, but not quite demon either.

On the next landing, he waits for Humbert’s nod before opening the door and heading down another human-size corridor with the soldier called Bruce. The striker plate on this door has also been ripped out. A drone zips after them before the door closes.

“Residential floor,” Coplar whispers. “I see living rooms through open doors. A kitchen. This is too far up to house the regular thugs, so it’s for the people this Graves person considers important. He’s in a nursery now. Twelve cribs, five are occupied. If I get the drone closer, I might wake them. Judging by their size, Jezebel is the oldest.”

“You guys noticed the doors were forced?” a soldier says. “You’d think that if they were attacked, they’d have replaced them with something stronger to protect the kids.”

“The cub may have done the damage,” Claws says in his version of a whisper, which is loud enough to reverberate up and down the stairwell. “She is not fully human.”

“They’re experimenting on kids?” Cline asks in disbelief. “Cap, if they’re doing that, we have to—”

“Not the mission, Cline,” Humbert replies. “We’ll make our report and the Colonel can decide what she wants to do about it.” The rest is grumbled. “Probably hire the guy so she can use the kids.”

“They’re coming back,” Coplar says. “The scientist didn’t do anything suspicious.”

The two men return and Humbert spends a few seconds looking through the door’s window, searching, as if he didn’t trust Coplar’s statement. Boost has side effects. I saw it make the soldiers more aggressive during the last mission. Is this lack of trust in his unit another one?

“Where is Doctor Walker?” he asks.

“In her lab,” the scientist replies with a roll of the eyes. “She basically lives down there.”

“All the way down. Mister Graves had the third level of the parking lot sealed and converted into a research lab. We can reach it from the stairwell.” He starts down the stairs.

“What’s the security like?” Humbert asks.

The man stops and stares at the captain. “Did you see the patrols? The demons, my hybrids? We hold the city. Why would we worry about guards inside the buildings when no one can reach them?”

Cline chuckles. “I think we prove the flaw in that logic.”

“The military isn’t who we were concerned about. Another thing we can thank her for. I told them she’d be nothing but trouble. The only real problem we’ve had over the years are rival families, but they’re gone. Left when the evacuation order was given. Scared of the sickness, like everyone else.”

“And aren’t you scared?” Coplar asks.

The scientist looks like he’ll answer her, then only shrugs. He starts down the stairs again. “Everyone but her is going to be asleep. I don’t think that woman ever sleeps.”

As the scientist promised, we don't encounter guards or alarms. The only sound in the stairwell is our footsteps and the whirl of the drones over our heads. Coplar wanted to map every floor, but Humbert refused. Since they had a guide, they couldn't waste the time on something they wouldn't use.

"The quicker this is done, the faster I can finally deal with him," Humbert told her when she insisted, pointing to me.

On the bottom floor, scents envelop me when Humbert opens the door. Disinfectant, blood, human exhaustion, the chemicals of machines. For a second I'm no longer here, but back there. Amanda's experiment, her pride. I shake my head to chase the memory away.

The drones fly ahead of us, splitting off at each intersection and rejoining as the scientist leads us.

"I have eyes on Doctor Walker," Coplar says. "I'm looking at her through a closed door. She's working. Looks like a lab, but it isn't the second-rate thing Intel said it would be."

"Mister Graves never skimps on what we need," the scientist says. "It's why his family has always been the one to run the city. He keeps everyone who works for him happy."

"We go silent," Humbert orders. "That means you too, Doctor. You say anything from this point forward and I will shoot you." The scientist swallows and nods. Humbert motions for him to continue leading us.

We pass rooms with equipment. Some clearly older and disused, by the dusty scents of those rooms. Others have more recent machines, and the scents are fresher. Some have desks and computers, six we pass show signs of being used. Other scientists, or assistants. We turn and the scientist points to the door at the end of the hall. Above the door, the drones hover quietly. Humbert makes hand motions and we stop. Then Cline and another soldier head for the door.

I fight the urge to go. I want to see Amanda; see what she is doing. I tell myself it's to see if she's hurting another innocent, and I'm almost convinced.

The two soldiers look in the window, each in different directions. They make hand gestures and Humbert motions for us to proceed, except the scientist. Him, he assigns a guard with instructions to keep him there. At the door, Humbert takes Cline's place and looks in. He makes hand signals before looking at me and Claws. He's even more unhappy.

If it's with our presence or our inability to understand the signals, I can't tell. He indicates me and Claws, then the floor at our feet. The intent is clear, but I don't acknowledge it. He controls his irritation, then gives a five-count with his fingers, at the end of which he bursts into the room, followed by the others.

Once all the soldiers are in, I follow them. They surround Amanda at her desk, too focused on her computer to immediately react to them. They look around, searching for opposition. When she finally notices them, her expression is annoyance more than relief.

The room is larger than I expect. There is a desk on the left of hers. The wall opposite the door is divided into six glass rooms, each occupied by a hybrid at different stages of growth, from early adult to the one on the far left who seems to be ancient and decrepit.

Amanda looks around, sees me. "No!" Her voice startles the soldiers and they aim at her. She looks much older than I remember her. The lines on her face are more evident. She is thinner, her suit hanging loose on her under the lab coat, her hair is longer, but the color is flat. The Amanda from the time of the Lie took better care of herself. "You don't get to ruin this too! I left you alone. Get out of here and let me do my work!"

"Doctor Walker," Humbert says, "I'm Captain Humbert. We're here to take you home."

She looks at him as if only now noticing the soldiers. Her eyes harder. "Home? You mean those people begging me to give them soldiers who can save the world but won't give me the tools I need? That home? Well, you can go back there alone. Here I'm not chained when they ask me to do something."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Doctor," Humbert replies, his tone aiming for understanding, but

the irritation might not help. "I have my orders."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "I don't care what you've been told to do. I'm a free woman. You can't force me to go anywhere."

"Doctor." Humbert openly glares at her now. "The knowledge in your head is military property." She returned the glare. "The fact you're using it here means you're guilty of treason. Do you really want me to arrest you and drag you out of here by force? I've been tasked with bringing you back. The how I do it has been left entirely to me."

"You think you can force me to leave?" She asks, tone smug.

"Look around, Doctor. Twelve of us, one of you."

"I think you lost the ability to count when they crammed your head with all the ways you can threaten and kill free people."

Humbert looks at me and Claws and tenses. He'd been too focused on her to notice us until she directed his attention. "Trust me, I'd love to forget I'm stuck with them, and I am more than happy I didn't need them." He grins at her and pats his machine gun. "They know better than to try to help you."

She sighs, and the sound takes me back there for a second again. I became familiar with it over the last year I was hers, as I learned more about the city I lived in, became less enthusiastic about obeying her orders exactly. When she caught Jason insisting making me more human would help me in the long run.

"The narrow-mindedness of the military will never cease to amaze me. Why would you ever think I was referring to those two?" Her smile is also one I recognize, it's the one she wore when she thought she had the upper hand on me. When she believed she was about to win.

I see her hand reach for the button under her desk, and I'm not fast enough. She knows my speed, my senses, and she'd purposely distracted me with Humbert's reaction. I pull her away from the desk, but the alarm is already sounding. She fights against my grip, and I can't deal with her and whoever is coming. I shove her at a soldier who catches her. Before she can try to escape him, I punch her in the jaw. She slumps in his arms.

"Are you crazy?" the man demands. "You're strong enough you could have snapped her neck."

"I spent months fighting humans in a cage. I know exactly how much force to use to incapacitate someone." I put her over my shoulders.

Cline is next to me, raising her head and looking at her eyes. "We have sedatives," he says.

"I don't," I reply. I look at Humbert. "Are we going to argue about my methods now, or are we evacuating?"

"We're going active!" Humbert yells, and the soldiers press a button on the injector on their forearms. "Formation!"

The change in them is visible. I smell it. They are still controlled, but the aggression emanating from them increases, as does their eagerness to unleash it.

They are now on the hunt.