

# Chapter 14

Jason grabs my arm as I head for the exit. He'd wanted to talk with me after the meeting, but the colonel kept him as me and Claws were escorted away. Me to a room where I could rest until Humbert was ready with his preparations, Claws outside, at his request. My room was guarded, but it had a shower.

"Derick, I need to know if you were honest when you said you aren't here to kill Amanda."

I tense at the hand gripping my bicep, but control the impulse to wrench it away. He lets go; he knows I dislike being touched. He knows why. "You don't trust me?" I'm surprised. Jason knows me better than anyone other than Claws, and he was quick to trust me the last time I saw him.

He searches my face. "Me and Amanda inadvertently taught you about lying. You lied to Colonel Fallon when you rescued us. I don't know how good you've become at it."

"I'm not going to kill her," I state and turn for the hatch; I stop as he reaches for me.

He doesn't touch me, hesitating, before lowering his hand. "Don't kill her, please."

"I don't know why you care so much about her, Jason." I have trouble controlling my anger as I remember arguments I overheard them have. I lacked experience and context then to understand the full meaning of what was said, the tone used. "She didn't treat me any better than she treated me."

"This isn't about her," he replies with a shake of the head. "It's about you. If you kill her, it's going to change who you are."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Do you think I haven't killed a human before?"

The question surprises him. "I—I don't know. But I know you. If you have, it was in the heat of battle. If you kill Amanda, that's going to be in cold blood."

I don't understand how it is different, but Jason needs the comfort. "I'm not going to kill her. For all that she deserves it, I can't seem to contemplate doing it."

He relaxes and unslings the duffel bag off his right shoulder. "I figured you'd want some equipment for the mission. I doubt Captain Humbert plans on giving you as much as a tissue."

I take the bag and open it. Black reinforced fabric is the first item, and I smile as I take the trench coat out.

"I didn't bother with shirt and pants. What you have on looks fine and I didn't want you to strip in public."

I put the gloves on, then the gun belt. The weight of the holstered revolver is comfortable. The three boxes of irradiated bullets for in pockets, then I clip the two folded swords to the belt and freeze at the last item in the bag. An ax.

"They're going to—" Jason steps back as I glare at him., "Derick, it's—"

"No." I stand. "I will not supply you with soul stones; they aren't yours." Not that I need an ax anymore to split demon bones.

I expect him to argue, but he nods. "It's not like they can force you to do it even if you carry it." It takes the bag. "Be careful. There are a lot more demons and people than you've dealt with before, not to say those hybrids. And don't trust Humbert. He hadn't forgiven you for betraying them."

I shrug. "I'm not worried about him. If he tries to do something to me or Claws, I will kill him."

Jason isn't happy with that answer. "Just try not to be in that position. You don't want the army deciding you have to be taken out."

"I've avoided them for more than a year. I'm not worried."

"You avoided Humbert, his team and whoever friends he could convince to help him. That wasn't the military wanting you, just him on a personal vendetta. Fallon is about the only one who understands the worth and danger you represent, and she was fine with letting you go. Give her a reason and she will send everything she has after you."

I consider his words, if this is really him worried about me or passing a message along. Two years ago I'd know the answer, but like me, Jason has changed. "Tell her I won't kill Humbert unless he forces my hand. If that isn't enough for her, they can hunt me and pay the price." I walk away before he can reply.

The outside is lit by spotlights hiding the night sky in their brightness. I hadn't realized night had come. I look up and can only see hints of one of the two moons.

"Hey, look at that," one of the soldiers standing with Humbert says, "if it isn't the Captain's favorite person." His voice is familiar, but I don't recognize him.

The man and woman standing on either side of him and Humbert share an angry expression when they look at me. The eight others look at me only with curiosity. They wear black body armor with a machine gun strapped to the front. One carries a case, while another has a pack on her back and her helmet as added devices on it.

"You're late," Humbert says.

I wait in silence. A few seconds later they step back as Claws lands next to me. His form shrinks, becomes more human, finalizing into someone a head taller than me with a trench coat and hood hiding his non-human face.

"Yeah," the man who initially greeted me says, stretching the word. "That's not creepy at all. Cap, are we sure this is a good idea?"

"No, Cline, we most definitely are not," Humbert answers through clenched teeth. "But the Colonel prefers to take Gourd's advice over any of us who have actually been in the field, so we're stuck with this."

"Sucks to be you, Cap." Cline grins.

Humbert glares at him. "Why do I put up with you again?"

The man snorts. "Because me putting up with you is the only things that tells those greens there's something resembling humanity still in that cold hard heart of yours."

"That's starting to sound suspiciously like insubordination, Cline," Humbert says without taking his eyes off me.

Cline looks horrified. "No disrespects intended, sir! I swear it, sir!"

Humbert rolls his eyes and points into the darkness beyond the spotlights. "Get your ass and everyone else's loaded up before I decide to leave you behind, Cline."

"Yes, sir!" Cline gives a salute. "You've heard the man, load up, unless you prefer staying behind and missing all the fun we're going to have." He gives Humbert a grin, then runs off as if his life depended on it. The two who don't like me following and the other eight doing the same after a slight hesitation.

As he looks back in my direction, Humbert's smile vanishes. Being able to smell his emotions, what I know of human behaviors, doesn't help me understand what happened. Humbert is amused at Cline's behavior, yet threatened to leave him behind. This must fall into one of the multiple things Jason tried to teach me during his long courses on human interactions.

"Come on," Humbert says, annoyed. "As much as I'd want to, you I can't leave behind." He turns and heads in the other's direction without looking back.

"Why aren't you any of you wearing protection against the sickness?" I ask when I fall in step next to him.

He scoffs. "We're about to throw ourselves in the middle of a hive of demons, hybrids, and whoever's working with them. It's kind of late for me to worry about catching some mysterious sickness. And it's impossible to fight properly in those contamination suits."

As soon as we are away from the intense light, I make out our destination and I have to force myself to continue, stopping only when I'm next to the helicopter, when I have to contemplate stepping into it.

"This close to the city," I say, "going on foot will be stealthier." Claws stands behind me, a low rumble offering comfort and security.

“Are you scared of this little defenseless helicopter?” Cline asks mockingly. He gives an exaggerated shudder when I glare at him.

“How do you reckon that twelves of us,” Humbert says, “plus you two can fight their way through an army guarding that tower and not attract attention? Not to mention how long that’s going to take. The mission is in and out, just like last time. Only this time, I’m not trusting you to prepare the way for us. You’re sticking to me like shit under my shoe and I’ll scrape you off the instant you become a liability. Am I making myself clear? Now tell your guard dog to stop growling unless you want me to put an irradiated bullet between its eyes.”

Claws’s growling increases in response to the threat, but the undertone doesn’t change. Claws takes Humbert as seriously as I do. I still place a hand on his arm and he quiets back to a low rumble.

“Good to know you can control it. For a while there, I thought you were its bitch.”

I don’t know what he means, so I simply continue to look at him.

“Cap!” Cline calls as we glare at one another. “As much fun as it’d be to watch you kick his ass, we’re on the clock. Just put the damned leash on him and pull him in. We have a party to get to.”

Humbert grinds his teeth, then climbs in. “Get in, or stay here,” he says, smiling. “The Colonel can’t bitch at me if you’re the one who decides not to come, so please, give into your fear of heights.” He snaps his fingers. “You wanted to walk to the tower, so why don’t the two of you—”

I climb in.

Cline shakes his head. “What have I told you about being nicer to strange people, Cap? Are we going to have to go over the courses on social inter—”

“Shut up, Cline.”

I sit facing Humbert as Claws reaches for the top of the opening. Arms stretching to twice their previous length. The helicopter leans to the side as he pulls himself in.

“What the hell?” a voice says over the intercom. “Captain Humbert, I was told I was transporting people. What did you just put in my bird, a tank?” the helicopter still lists as Claws takes the seat next to mine.

Humbert flicks a button next to the speaker. “If you have a complaint, take it up with Colonel Fallon. Take us up.”

“I don’t even know if I can,” the voice says, then there is the click of the intercom being shut off.

The blades spin up to speed and their noise increase. The others take headsets hanging from the wall over their heads as Humbert pulls the sliding door closed. I put my headset on and the volume decreases slightly, but remains uncomfortably loud.

The helicopter shudders, then jerks up. I tense, grabbing onto the seat. I know this is safe. I have flown in one before. That trip lasted hours. This will be much shorter, so it will be fine.

The plastic cracks in my grip.

My hand relaxes before it registers I am wrapped in calm. I am safe, it says, I am protected. Even if I can’t hear Claws’s rumbling over the noise of the spinning blades, the undertone still reaches me.

I open my eyes to Humbert’s disappointed expression.

“We’re at altitude, Captain,” the pilot’s voice comes over the headset. “Whatever you loaded my bird with wasn’t enough to ground us.”

“Glad to hear it,” Humbert replies dryly. “Now go stealth and take us to the target.”

The helicopter tilts, and the noise diminishes to the point I barely make it out. I remove the headset and it increases a fraction. Humbert smirks at me.

“Still think your way is better?” he says, motioning for me to put the headset back on. “We’re high enough,” he continues once I have it back on, “even demons can’t hear it.”

“They’re going to see its heat,” I counter.

“No. The underside is covered with the best shielding available, and all the heat is directed to be above us. The blades disperse it as it leaves the exhaust. That means we won’t be heard or seen. Also the insertion point isn’t being watched.”

“The rooftop?” It’s the only place that justifies flying to it.

“I am so glad they taught you a thing or two about tactics,” Humbert says with a roll of the eyes. “You know, instead of just setting you loose on demons like the animal you are.”

“Do you have any information about the insides?” I ask instead of acknowledging the jab.

He shakes his head. “The blueprints are so old there’s no way they’re accurate. The walls are thick stone and bricks; blocks sonar pretty well. Sergeant Coplar is our Mapper. She’s got her drones and we’ll know the layout of every floors minutes after we open the door to it.”

“Sooner,” a woman says, “if the air ducts are large enough for them.”

The helicopter slows. “Captain, we’re approaching the target. As per orders, I’m not touching down. You are jumping out and I’m leaving, returning only one your signal.”

“You heard the pilot. Be ready the moment he gives the signal. Coplar, have your drones ready. Diniz, you’re in charge of cutting our entry point and setting up the ladder, so you get the honor of showing us how to jump out.”

“Sure thing, Captain,” a different woman answers.

“Out!” the pilot yells.

Humbert slides the door open, and two soldiers are out before I stand. The helicopter is no more than my height away from the roof. I step off. The helicopter wobbles hard once Claws is out of it, then steadies. By the time everyone is on the roof and the helicopter is flying away, the glass is removed from a skylight in the center of the roof.

Drones fly out of the large pack the woman had on her back, making barely any sounds, and they vanish into the building. The clunks of a metal ladder extending down greet us when we reach the skylight.

“This is deeper than we expected,” Coplar said, looking through an eyepiece. “By the numbers I’m getting, I’d say they converted the last two floors into a single one.”

“Down we go,” Humbert orders, then turns to me. “You two are last. I don’t want you breaking the only way in and out we—”

I step off the ledge and fall into the building. I land and take out the revolver, scanning the space around the ladder. The walls are sheet metal sections, each the same width, floor to ceiling. A corridor on three of the walls extends into darkness, our own exit from this room.

Claws silently lands next to me and drops to all fours. “Many of my kind,” he says, sniffing the air. “Recent, humans, afraid.”

“You just can’t follow orders, can you?” Humbert demands once he and the others have joined us. “Load up,” he orders, “on standby.”

The soldiers take a vial out of a case at their belt and slide it in the dispenser on their left forearm. Unlike the last time, these are built into the armor.

“Cline,” Humbert says without turning around, “I swear. If you open your mouth to ask if you can activate it now, I am telling the demon to throw you out the skylight.” The man’s mouth closes with the click of teeth against teeth. “Coplar?” Humbert asks.

“I have a path to a door at what should be the edge of the floor, but I don’t have the whole thing yet. This place looks like a damned maze.”

“Call the drones back. We have the exit, that’s all we need.” Humbert shines a light on the walls. “Hopefully, the other floors aren’t going to be like this.”

The woman’s comments and the scents permeating the air tell me what this floor is used for, and I am not comfortable with the implications.

“Coplar, you have lead-position. Cline, you, Jurgen, Matilda, and Omar have rear-guard. Everyone else between you and me and the two armies. If I give the word, the six of you open fire with everything you have and don’t worry about hitting me.” Humbert smiles at me. “I hope that

makes your situation clear.”

I ignore him as I step behind Coplar.

The corridors are large enough a demon can expand their form as they hunt and not worry about being boxed in. We pass multiple corridors, many dead-ends, most I can see turns and intersections, and a few open spaces.

We slow when Coplar indicates the exit is ahead. A few seconds later, a door is visible at the edge of the beam. It creaks open and the lights are turned off. We hunker down, gun raised, waiting for an attack.

The expected motion in the light from beyond the door is low to the ground, and I can't understand what I'm seeing as it approaches.

“Is that a kid?” someone asks when the form is halfway to us. It loses its balance and falls on its rear. It does look like those I have seen in cities, but this one wears a medical gown. It laughs and bounces in place.

“Nobody moves,” Humbert orders in a whisper, “this could be a trap.”

Claws steps around the soldiers, almost sliding on the ground like a slitherer. The child giggles and reaches for him. I follow him, curious about what a child is doing here. Claws picks it up, sniffing. When I reach them, I catch the scent too. Demon, and not a scent that adheres to it. It is the child's scent.

Steps come from the other door, hard sole shoes, approaching. “Jezebel?” a man calls out in a loud whisper. “Jezebel, where are you? What have I told you about getting out of your crib?”

The man bursts through the door, pushing it open all the way and lets out a shriek of fear in time with the sound of the racking of machine guns.