

Chapter 24

I wake to sounds of movement and the smell of meat frying, along with something sweet. I shower and head downstairs, where Taros stands before the stove and Humbert sits at the table, looking down at his plate.

“Morning,” Taros calls. “After watching you eat yesterday, I didn’t know what you’d want for breakfast, so I hope it’s okay if I didn’t make you anything, but if you can’t wait, feel free to take soldier boy’s plate. It doesn’t look like he’s going to be eating it.”

Humbert doesn’t react to the comment.

There is no fresh food in the fridge.

“Coffee’s over there, serve yourself.” He indicates the coffee machine, but I fill a glass with water.

“If I need food, how do I get it?”

Taros glances at me, then at the fridge. “I know there’s food in there, and I saw you look.”

“I need fresh food.”

He chuckles. “We all need that, but that doesn’t mean the rest isn’t going to get you by.” He grins. “City living isn’t the same as being on the move, right?”

His expression says there is humor in what he said. “I’m allergic to the preservative used in anything that isn’t fresh.”

Taros empties the content of the frying pan on a plate. “So this doesn’t even look a little appetizing to you?” I shake my head. “Spiced bacon with sliced potato in caramel is the one thing I miss when I’m on the move.” He is eating before he reaches the table and sits. “What’s on the agenda for your two?” he asks between bites.

“I need a sense of the forces in the city,” I answer, joining them at the table. He makes a face at my glass of water then overemphasizes how much he enjoys his coffee. I watch impassively. Jason did this when in my early days, back when he thought my refusal to eat the food he prepared was simply stubbornness on my part. “I can move about unnoticed, even in the daytime, but Gregg doesn’t have my capability for jumping rooftops. We’ll need to move at night, and know-how the patrols move.”

“And where the fuck are we going to go?” Humbert demands angrily, cutting off Taros.

“We have a mission to finish,” I remind him.

He rolls his eyes. “Have you looked around? It’s three of us ag—”

“I’d rather not be included in this,” Taros says, “if you don’t mind.” He continues eating.

“Oh, I do,” Humbert replied, “and you should too. Considering this place is about to go up in the mother of all balls of fire.”

“In the ensuing silence, something crashes on the floor in the living room, followed by cursing.

I’m at of the room as Humbert stands, reaching for a sidearm, and Taros curses. I block the door leading out of the building and the man skids to a stop. He carries a bag. Humbert grabs him by the collar and shoves him against the wall. The bag falls to the floor, something shatters, and cans roll out, followed by an acidic liquid.

Taros lets out a curse when he enters, “Let him go, that’s Florent, I know him.”

“What is he doing here?” Humbert demands, “spying on us?”

“Bringing food,” Taros replies, angry. “Or did you miss the bag you made him drop?”

I pick it up and look inside. Pickles are mixed with the glass of the broken jar. The cans are a variety of preserved vegetables and meats.

“Who are you?” Humbert asks. The man tries to answer, but the arm on his throat prevents him. Humbert regains some of his sense and loosens his hold.

“Flo,” the man croaks. “I was bringing stuff Taros said he was low on, and I was told he had

roommates so I figured I'd look through the kitchen to see what else needed to be resupplied." He tried to push Humbert away, but the solder doesn't budge. "What did you mean by a ball of fire?" he asks fearfully.

"Yeah, what did he mean by that?" Taros asks, looking from Humbert to me. His tone is harder.

"You want to tell them?" Humbert asks, not looking away from the man he's holding, "or should I?"

"You told the colonel the mission is still a go."

He snorts. "Sure, and in a few days, four at the most, she'd going to figure out I was bullshitting her. If she happens to catch Walker walking around without an escort? This place is going to go boom within minutes of that."

"Will Colonel Fallon believe that even if Amanda works for Mister Graves willingly, we can't retrieve her?" I ask. Humbert knows the colonel better than I do, but the impression of the colonel I have is that she knows and trusts the people she assigns to a mission.

He glares at me before releasing Florent, but grabs his arms as he runs for the door. "I told her we were caught. If Fallon doesn't see us move about outside, doesn't see something to show the mission is still progressing, she's going to sanitize the area."

"Can you contact her, to apprise her of our progress?" I ask.

"And by sanitize?" Taros asks at the same time.

Humbert glares at me. "Do you know anything about mission procedures? There's no calling in for updates until the mission is screwed. We already know what's happening if I tell her that again."

"But why would anyone blow up the city?" Florent asks.

Humbert stares at him. "You're kidding, right? Do you have any idea how much of a threat to the rest of us this place is? A bunch of criminals who found a way to work side by side with demons?"

"Wouldn't it make more sense for the military to study this place?" Taros asks, then raises his hands at Humbert's glaring. "Hey, I'm just saying. Seems to me that if a bunch of criminals found a way to make it work, everyone else should be able to do it, right?"

"Hey, we're not doing anything illegal," Florent protests, then squirms under our stares.

"Maybe not at the moment," Taros replies, cutting off Humbert. "But I figure that's because there's no one to commit crimes on. I think we all know what's going to happen here when people come back to the city." Taros doesn't mention giving humans to demons to hunt, neither has Florent. Are they so inured that they consider it normal?

"It isn't—we won't—" Florent closes his mouth, admitting defeat.

"I don't care what you think we should do," Humbert says. "And neither does eh military. It does what it wants and it'll always do that. They don't give a fuck about anyone else." He looks Florent over. "Even if you could run out of here, get out of the city and not have the camp sentry shoot you, I don't see you convincing anyone not to blow up this place."

"Okay, then how do we make sure they don't bomb the city?" Taros asks.

"We accomplish the mission," I answer.

"Oh wake up, will you?" Humbert said, glaring at me. "You can't believe that's going to do it. They know what's going on here. Walker is the only reason this place hasn't been leveled already. The military has been telling the people in power demons can't work with humans for centuries. There is no way, they'd going to let a place that contradicts them stand."

"Then it is time for them to understand they are wrong," I say, thinking of Protect.

"They don't care! They don't want to learn how to fix what's going on, they just want to keep going on!"

"Then, that isn't something we work on." We gain nothing from discussing something we can't affect right now, if ever. "Our mission is to get Amanda. Once we've done that, you can work

on keeping everyone here alive.”

“Me?” Humbert asks in disbelief. “You’re the one with this idea he can save everyone.”

“I’m not interested in saving everyone,” I answer, which earns me disbelieving stares from the other two with us. “My only interest is in no longer having to kill. Them, everyone else, they can deal with their problems.”

“Are you saying you aren’t going to help us?” Taros’s body language is defensive, moving to offensive.

I rework what I said, attempt to make my tone calm. “I am saying that I know my limitations, the limit of my influence. I will finish the mission, ensure that I, Claws, Humbert, and his soldiers make it back to deliver Amanda. Once that is done, I expect I’ll have to fight for my freedom. I won’t be in a position to worry about what happens to you and this city.”

“But you can tell them not to do it, right?” Florent asks, his voice tinted with desperation. “You can explain the demons here aren’t like those elsewhere.” He falters, looks at the floor.

“You did go through the maze, right?” Taros asks.

“Of course, I got here after the evacuation, so I had to go through that like everyone knew.” Taros looks at him expectantly, but Florent’s lack of comprehension doesn’t change.

“And what do you think happens to those who don’t make it out?”

The man opens his mouth to protest, then closes it and swallows. Humans like to lie so much; they lie to themselves too.

Taros nods. “Don’t get me wrong, what I’ve seen here is pretty amazing, I’ve had a few encounters with Demons before—” he shudders “—and the ones here are nothing like that, and I think that if someone studied at this place, they could work out ways to recreate it without humans being food, but there is something wrong here and if you don’t realize it, Flo, it’s because you’re deluding yourself.” He looks at Humbert. “That doesn’t mean I’m okay with blowing up the city. There’s a lot of people here who are like me and Flo, we got pulled in it against our will.”

Humbert points at the door. “Then you go tell someone who can do something about it. Because that’s not me. I’m stuck here, just like you.”

Florent swallows hard. “What if we help you? If we help you rescue that person you’re looking for. You could put in a good word for us, right? Maybe it would show them they don’t have to blow us up?”

Humbert stares at the man, surprised, and I wait for his decision. This is his mission. I will attempt it even if he decides he won’t do it, but it will be easier if he is on board, in the lead.

He smiles, and I know that smile. Humbert is about to lie to them. “You know, if you can make that happen, I promise you I will put in a good word for you and this place.” He nods confidently. “I can even get them to cancel the bombing. The only problem I see, is that you can’t get others here to help us.”

“Of course I can,” Florent says, “it’s easy. Once they know the danger they’re in, and that by helping you it means they’re going to save everyone’s life, they’ll do it.”

Taros groans, Humbert stares. I know enough about humans to understand their reactions.

“What exactly did you do before getting roped into this group,” Humbert asks. “I’m asking because I can’t think of one job where you can keep the level of naivety you’re showing.”

Florent looks from one to the other, uncomprehending.

Taros sighs. “There’s no way someone like Jimmy Graves is going to hand over the person they want.”

“So, we don’t tell *him*.” Florent sounds like it so obvious we should have realized that already.

“And how do you tell everyone,” Taros asks, “and not have him find out?”

“Oh.” Florent deflates.

“But his idea isn’t without merits,” Taros continues. “Not everyone, of course, but I know a handful of people who will be willing to help for a chance to get out of here...” He trails off

without finishing his sentence.

He knows Humbert lied, but he isn't calling the man out on it. The look he gives me says he knows I know he lied too. He isn't happy about it, but he's figured out this is the best chance he has to survive whatever happens next.

"There're recruits like me and Flo, newer people who are in this because the alternative was getting shot in the back and being thrown to a demon a second time."

Humbert is pensive. "You're saying you can get us to the prison, and then to Walker's lab?" he doesn't sound convinced.

"Of course," Taros replies, smiling. "You passed the test. Those who survive the maze aren't enemies anymore, they're brothers in arms." Humbert glares at him. "Come on, everyone knows that shared pain and experience create unbreakable bonds. So long as you're with one of the older people, we can walk around the city without problems."

"Are you telling me everyone here believes this bounded bullshit?" Humbert asks in disbelief.

Taros snorts before Florent opens his mouth. "Of course not, but we're more than happy to make believe we do and stay alive. Now, I can't promise how many of the people I'll talk into helping will stick around once we've freed prisoners. I figure by then it's going to be obvious fighting is going to be involved and a lot of us here are like me, strictly the running away type."

Humbert nods. "I can deal with that, but thank's for the warning." He nods in my direction. "So like as that big ass demon doesn't show up, us and the prisoners will be able to deal with anything that comes our way."

"Rules them All isn't going to be a problem," I say. "They don't care about Amanda."

They all stare at me. Humbert is the first to have a different expression, and it's one of disgust. "I'd wondered where you'd gone to last night. Looking to get buddy-buddy with a better demon? Aren't you worried the one you're with is going to be jealous? I can't imagine they're going to take it well."

"That isn't why I did it." I shouldn't be surprised at how humans keep assigning their way of thinking to me and demons, they've done it for as long as I've interacted with them. Still, I am. Humbert should know better. I lobe the soul stone at him. "I needed to know what their role was in all this. And how they would react to Risk It's death." Humbert looks at the stone, frowning. "You killed them, so you get to honor their death. I'll show you how."

Taros and Florent look at the soldier before stepping away from them, awe on their face and terror in their scent.