

## Chapter 21

Humbert simply stands there, eyes unfocused.

I listen for indications the demon is approaching. Nothing yet. No fresh scent on the slight breeze. Maybe they start on a different floor to give us time to get lost in the maze.

“Humbert,” I call to the man without effect. “Captain Humbert, snap out of it! We have a mission to accomplish!”

He slowly turns his head to look at me, eyes glazed. They harden, narrow. “Mission?” he snaps back. “Don’t talk to me about any mission! You heard here, I’m expendable!”

I watch him and realize he expects something from me, a reaction of some sort. “So am I,” I say, not knowing what else he wants. “You had no problem sacrificing me to Adam and his demons if it helped you accomplish your mission.”

“That’s different,” he replies, tone still harsh, but also dismissive. “You’re just something that was made. I was born! I gave the colonel over twenty years of my life! She can’t just throw me away like that.”

“That only happens if we don’t succeed in the mission. You did tell her it was still a go.”

He stares at me, dismay replacing his anger. “It’s the two of us against a demon. One they said you weren’t enough to feed, and I know what you’re capable of. How the fuck do you expect me to have any kind of chance against something that can take you apart?”

I pull a vial out of a pocket. Unlike those the soldiers used, this one is metal, with one end rounded, the other terminates a ridged rubber stopper with a short needle under a clear plastic cover. “Will this help?”

His twitch is faint, but noticeable. Restrained need, fought need. I expect I looked similar on seeing the can of pop with my meal.

“Where did you get that?”

“From the pouch the guards had.” I watch him and decide not to mention how many I have. “I took it from one as we fought. Can you use it without the injector?”

His hands shake as he reaches for it. “The injector is mainly to control the does and so we don’t have to fumble with it when we need one.”

I pull it away. “Dose? What will injecting an entire vial into you do?”

Anger flashes, need, desperation. He buries it under dry laughter. “Oh, it’s going to make me really dangerous.”

“Can it hurt you?”

“Why? It’s not like you care.”

“If you’re going to fall while we fight because of this, it isn’t worthwhile.”

“I’m going to be fine,” he answers with a casualness I’ve learned to recognize as a lie. I step back as he reaches for it again. He curses. “I’m going to be fine,” he repeats with more confidence, but I already know he’s lying. He glares at me. “One, I’m dead without it. Two, it’s the effects of withdrawal that are dangerous, but I’ve always dealt with them better than the others. It’s why the colonel put me in charge. I’m one of those super-stable people.”

I hesitate. He might still be lying. Even I have an easy time rationalizing my addiction. The distant roar and the fact that he is right about not being able to survive what’s coming decide it for me. I hand it to him.

“How long will it last?”

He looks it over, his breathing shallow. He removes the cap and exposes the needle. “I don’t know. This is the black market stuff, and I’ve never injected myself with a full vial before. This guy seems to get only good quality stuff for his people, so this should at least work. A regular dose lasts an hour normally. This will either last longer or not, I’m pretty sure it’s going to hit harder.”

The roar comes again, but I stop him before he injects himself. “How stable are you going to be while under its effect? Do I have to worry about you trying to kill me?” I can’t tell where

they're approaching from.

Humbert tries to move his hand. "Worried you can't beat me?"

"Not when I also have a demon to fight."

"You're safe," he says, giving up on fighting my grip. "This would have to be really bad stuff to affect my judgment to the point where I don't know my allies are anymore." I search his eyes, but I know nothing of how boost works. He smells honest, so I let go of his hand and he injects himself and sighs in contentment.

"How about after we've defeated it?" I ask, as his scent changes. Aggression, hunger, hints of a young demon mixed in. The military version doesn't have that.

He smiles at me, eyes slightly glazed. "You're pretty confident we're going to beat it." His speech had hints of a slur in it. Before I can worry about it, he shakes his head and his eyes clear.

"If we fail, we're going to be dead. Then, those we care about will also die. I don't see a point in entertaining that idea. Do you?" He doesn't respond. "Are you okay?"

The smile turns malicious. "I haven't felt this good in years." He levels his gaze on me. "I'm not going to kill you until after the mission is done, so stop worrying about that. Now, how about we go kill ourselves a demon?"

The roar is loud enough this time, Humbert turns his head toward one of the three openings. I point to a different one, the one where it sounded the closest. With the maze, it means little, other than it had to travel the shortest distance, so hopefully—before I can explain myself, Humbert is running in that direction.

His eagerness at taking my instructions catches me by surprise, and I question the wisdom of boosting him. Will he be this focused on anything else while affected by it? I run after him. It's too late to regret the decision now.

After three intersections, we are in another kill box. "Wait!" I call before Humbert enters one of the other two exits. He stops and turns to glare at me. Before he can speak, another roar comes. He looks at the exit I point to, then is running for it. I follow. I could use his narrow-mindedness to lead him away. It wouldn't take long before the roars would be too faint for him to know where they come from, but then I'd have to deal with his anger once he realized what I'd done. I don't know if I can lead him around until the boost no longer affects him before he realizes it.

We encounter the demon after six other intersections. They're large, three times my size, but that isn't what makes me pause and hold Humbert back. I've fought larger. It's how they stop on seeing us, instead of charging. How they study us, calculating, evaluating. Traits of a demon well past the hunger madness.

Humbert wrenches out of my grip and runs for them. I chase him.

They shrink and are half their previous size by the time Humbert reaches them. He is much faster than the previous time I've seen him fight on boost. They step aside and punch him, sending Humbert into the wall, hard. I harden my black skin over my arm and hit them. The demon takes one step back from the blow, then backhands me. I slam against the metal wall hard enough my vision unfocused for a few seconds.

"Where did it go?" Humbert demands.

I shake my head to clear it. It's only the two of us in the corridor. I raise a finger to silence him, and I'm surprised when he obeys. I hear only our breathing and heartbeats. The demons' scent doesn't go past us, so they went back the way they came. I follow it to the next intersection, but it's thick in all four directions.

"Why didn't it kill us?" Humbert demands.

"They want a hunt," I answer, trying to focus, to find distinctions in the scents that will tell me which is the most recent.

"It had us! Demons don't run away!"

I glare at him. "They still have us. We can get out without going through them."

“Then tell me where it went!”

I’m about to snap at him, pointing out it’s what I’m trying to do when a huff from my left stops me. Unfortunately, Humbert heard it too, and he’s running there. If he can’t strategize, this will be much more difficult. I run after him again. Three turns later, Humbert is stopped in the middle of a four-way intersection peering into each corridor.

“Can you stop just running after them?” I ask, sniffing the air. On my right, the air is less dense with their scent, and there’s a trace of clean air and airflow coming from deeper. Not outside air, but possibly a way off this floor? Unless it’s from an air circulation system? I haven’t seen air vents, but they have to be there.

“If I can hit it often and hard enough, it’s going to die, they all do.”

“You have to be able to hit them first. That isn’t going to happen unless we work together to divide their attention. They’re stronger than we are individually and they’re smart. I can cut them, but without body armor, I’m not sure how many hits you can take, even boosted.”

“I can take anything it dishes out,” he replies. I don’t comment on his bleeding nose and split lip. “Where is it?” he demands.

“I don’t know.” I walk around the intersection. Other than that one corridor with less of his scents, nothing sets the other apart. “But I think there’s an exit that way.”

“You want to run?” Humbert’s demanding tone is broken with disbelief. “I’m not a coward!”

I stifle a sigh. “This is a hunt,” I tell him. “They want us to run so they can chase us.” I wish I’d gotten to eat the wrinkleskin, so I’d know if being the one hunted is as satisfying when you turn the table. “No matter where we go, they’re going to be on our trail.”

Humbert grinds his teeth. “I don’t like this.” He speaks slowly, as if he had trouble choosing which words he uses. “It’s wrong to move away from it.” He rubs his face, then looks at the blood on his hand. “This isn’t what I’m used to. The rage shouldn’t be this raw, this violent. I really want to rip something apart.” He looks at me with an expression that borders on Jason desiring a man he considers attractive, without the underlying violence I see in Humbert’s eyes. I don’t move. He’s like a wild creature; motion could set him off.

“You said I didn’t have to worry about you until after the mission was over.”

He nods slowly. “I’m okay,” he says, but I’m not certain I believe him. “I can control this.” He slows his breathing and when he opens his eyes, I see reason in them.

“If it helps. We’re going to have to fight them. They aren’t going to let us go, we’re their meal.”

His smile turns vicious and the little reason I saw clouds over. “Then we need to make sure we give it a fatal case of indigestion.”

Killing. He’s fixed on the idea.

I promised myself I was done killing demons. But that was when I dealt with adolescents, wasn’t it? Demons too young to understand what they were doing, even once they were past the hunger madness. *They* deserved a chance to learn not to hunt humans.

This demon chooses to hunt humans. Even if I don’t want to kill them, will they give me a choice?

I follow the fresher air, listening for the demon. Once they realize we’re not chasing them anymore, they will turn to hunt us. I want to run toward the exit, find a place more in our favor for the coming fight, but if we disturb the air too much, I’ll lose the trail.

I see the hall with an open door at the end as I hear the scraping of claws somewhere ahead of us. There are three intersections between us and it. The demon knew what we’d do. Did they plan it, or simply adapter faster than I expected? I run and hope Humbert follows. The door is a stairwell, the one we took. I smell the soldiers in it once I enter it.

Humbert stops at the doorway and turns to face the corridor, waiting.

“We’re going down!” I yell at him.

“We can take it,” he replies, far too calm for my liking.

“There’s no room to maneuver. If they get between us and the door, there’s nothing we can do but back into the maze again. We’re going to be trapped.”

He looks at me over his shoulder, his grin maniacal. “No, *it’s* going to be trapped with us.”

I grab the man and throw him into the stairwell. When he stands, I block the doorway. Fight the urge to push him down the stairs, as I’m certain the demon is looking at my back, smiling at the easy kill I’m giving them. “I want us to survive. We need a better location to take them from, so we’re going down.” Humbert glares at me. “Move it, soldier!”

He tenses, then, to my surprise, turns and hurries down the stairs.

I follow him. Where the door to the next floor should be, the one where the child, Jezebel, is, is a featureless wall. The next landing has a door, but I push us further down. At the next landing, a metal floor blocks access to the rest of the stairs. The demon is in the stairwell now, their claws clicking on the metal stairs. Up isn’t an option. I open this door.

The hall is narrower with chairs and potted plants along one wall. The demon can still fit, but this is designed for humans. The walls are the same metal sections as the maze, so I’m not surprised when at the ‘T’ intersection there’s half a broken desk against the wall. The reconfiguration of this floor into part of the maze destroyed it. I can’t smell how old the wood is, mixed with the demon scents. Maybe this is just to give the illusion the building is used for anything more than the hunts. Although people live on one floor, so why do that, if the rest is a maze? Maybe Mister Graves has more than one building that serves as hunting grounds.

Humbert pulls the metal legs off a chair, leaving him holding two short sticks with jagged ends. He grins at me. “Now I’m armed.”

I go back to studying the scents. Old, very old. Maybe so few people make it out of the top floor maze they rarely need to reconfigure the rest. This could be because they weren’t expecting us to make it off. So no one moved the furniture out of the way.

I look around for cameras. Someone must monitor the hunt if that’s the case. Maybe Mister Graves uses them as entertainment for his people? Humans do seem to enjoy watching others perform for them. Maybe broadcasting this also serves as a reminder of what waits for his people if they disobey him.

I rub my face. Now isn’t the time to wonder about human complexity, it’s going to get us killed.

I head left, Humbert recalcitrantly following. The floor is metal and my footsteps are loud on it. They advertise our location to the demon, but the echo also lets me get a sense of the intersections we enter, like not going left as it ends quickly.

I find a room with low ceilings, a conference room with a large table and chairs, but at one end there’s also a large desk of dark wood that reminds me of the one Amanda had in her office. Whoever sits there expects to intimidate those at the table.

In the distance, the demon grunts and snarls. Sounds designed to scare their prey. There’s no chance of losing them, our scent is fresh in the air. I kick the desk against the door we entered from. “Aim to cut them. They’ll heal, but it’ll drain them. Don’t bother trying to break their bones.”

“I do know how to kill demons,” he snarls at me.

“You know how to kill them with irradiated weapons. I’ve had to fight them with my hands for more than two years now. I’m strong enough I might be able to break their bones, but I’ve never gotten to test it.”

“I’ll—” he grinds his teeth, takes a breath. “I’ll distract it so we can try.”

I nod. “The low ceiling means it won’t be able to jump over us and it’s going to have to remain in a smaller form, but don’t let that make you think it’s not strong. We’re fighting an older demon, not an elder, but they’ve been around long enough to develop smarts.

Humbert glares at me and it takes visible effort not to retort.

The demon will know I’m not human, my scent will tell them that, but will it tell them how much of a threat I am? Will it make me more or less attractive as a meal to them?

The desk explodes into the room, and the demon runs at us through the debris. They're human height, but bulkier. Humbert runs at them, I move to the side. They focus on him, and somehow Humbert dodges every attack.

I start on mine, cutting their back. I manage it three times before they swipe at me and I have to back off, blocking and dodging their attacks. Humbert takes over the offensive, using his poor excuses for weapons to rip the demon's skin open and they have to slip their attention.

We continue like this for a few minutes, exchanging position between attacking and distracting, until a blow brings Humbert down and he's too slow to move. I interpose myself, taking the claws aimed at him in the side. I make use of being this close to them by cutting their face. As we separate, their lower jaw falls to the floor.

I throw Humbert over my shoulder and run out of the room. How long until they shake the surprise off? The cuts on my side are already covered with my black skin. I barely lost any blood.

"Will you stop shaking me?" Humbert growls.

"Can you run?" I ask, not slowing. A turn, then another.

"If you call what you're doing running, then yes. I just got winded. You're bleeding, by the way."

I put him down and check my side. I curse. The cuts went further than my black skin can reach. I concentrate. Push my skin, force it to stretch until it covers that too. There is no strain, but I'll pay for it when this is over by having more of my body covered when my skin relaxes.

"Are you going to drop from blood loss?" Humbert sounds more like himself, and I can decide if that's a good thing at the moment.

"I heal faster than a human." Of course, that only helps if the hunt is long.

"Can you hear it?"

"They're still grunting in the room, so still healing." Ahead of us is an open door with the metal gray of stairs.

"Let's go finish it." Humbert heads back the way we came.

"It's still too much of a threat," I reply. "Let's see how many floors we can put between us and them so we can regain our strength."

"But it's weak," he tells me, a tone bordering on petulant.

"So am I, so are you. And we didn't hurt it that much." I point to the door. "Don't make me order you, soldier."

With a defeated sigh, Humbert heads for the door. We go down what I think is three floors before we encounter the next door. Only the number of landing is uneven, so I either miscounted or the tower is laid out strangely. I didn't pay attention to that when we went to Amanda's lab.

The scents here are only human, filled with fear and recent. I breathe in more carefully, looking for any I recognize, but none of them are from Humbert's taken soldiers. Why aren't demons chasing the humans on this floor? I put the questions aside as I run through the corridors and rooms. Offices, laboratories, meeting rooms, a kitchen, there has to be a way to leave this floor.

"Hold up!" Humbert calls behind me. I curse and retrace my steps until I find him in the kitchen, fridge door open. "There's food in here," he says between shoving food in his mouth.

I join him and he hands me a plate of cooked meats. I eat them, then drink water. He hands me a bowl of fruits smelling of chemicals when metal grins and rips in the distance.

"We're out of time." Something breaks. The floor vibrates from moving walls. The demon is on this floor, and against the will of whoever is in charge of the maze, I suspect.

Humbert follows me out and through the corridors. After a few intersections, the sounds are louder and ahead of us. Somewhere we got turned around. Humbert grins and runs toward the growls. I curse and follow him. We find the demon in a large room with a higher ceiling. This was multiple offices.

They smile at us, their muzzle crooked and half-formed. "This is a good hunt."

“It always freaks me out when they speak,” Humbert says, stepping to the side and grabbing broken furniture to use as weapons.

“Now, I eat.”

“Especially when it says something like that.”

I want to ask how many adult demons he’s hunted, but the demon is on us. I dodge and cut its side. Humbert hits it with a metal chair which breaks apart. A claw cuts my black skin, but it’s healed before I roll back to my feet.

I’m surprised at the lack of follow-up attack, but then see why. They have Humbert pinned to the floor, a hand spread over his entire torso. They lower their muzzle to his head.

I jump on their back, planting my blade as deep as I can. The demon roars and rears. I scrape the ceiling. Their head turns until they are facing me.

Now *That* is unsettling.

“I will eat you first, then. I will be rewarded for eating the eater.” They grab me and pull me off.

“I’ve never eaten anyone,” I grumble, slashing at their arm so they’ll drop me, but I don’t have the leverage to cause enough damage.

They hesitate, tilting their head as they look at me, then give a human-like shrug. “I will still eat you.” They lean in, maw wide open. I’ve seen muzzles from this close before, smelled demon breath, and someone, it never occurred to me to do this until now.

I shove my right arm down their throat and they pause, a quizzical sound coming from them. My arm isn’t large enough to keep them from breathing, and I don’t know demon anatomy enough to grab anything vital. And with how malleable they are, there might not be one vital part for me to grab, other than the head and brain.

But they still need to breathe, and I expand my black skin until the sleeve of my trench coat rips. The quizzicalness changes to concern. They expand their throat to make space, and I keep filling it with my black skin. Fear replaces it as they realize I can keep up with them.

They pull on me, but I form spikes on my arm to anchor me. They trash, exhausting themselves in the process. They claw at my back but don’t stab. It’s not effective against other demons, and they probably haven’t needed to fight this hard against humans.

My feet touch the floor as they lower themselves, and I push against them, realizing what they want to do. If they bury me under their mass, I won’t be able to breathe. It can’t either and I’ve been blocking its airway longer, but I don’t know how long a demon can go without breathing, while I know my own limits. My knees buckle under their weight and I drop to one. My only option is to release them and throw myself back, but that will give them time to recuperate. I need to push my advantage, even if—

A metal rod appears in their eye, and before I can wonder where it came from, a foot lands on it, shoving it deep into the demon’s head, into their brain. They go limp and I pull my arm out as they crumble to the side.

I turn and a bloody and broken Humbert grins at me. “You have no idea how satisfying that way.” His eyes roll back, and he falls toward me.