

Chapter 17

Consciousness returns painfully and I reflexively touch the side of my head to establish the extent of the injury. It's tender and the pain flares. Outside of Amanda's care, I've fallen unconscious only once, under the wrinkleskin's claws. This was one strike, administered by someone who knew what he was doing, know how tough I am, even without my black skin protecting me.

I push the sense of betrayal down. He did not betray me, cannot have done that; there is something else happening here. I can accept betrayals from humans. They lie even when they think they're helping me, but demons are straightforward. Claws might withhold something from me, but it doesn't lie, he doesn't betray me.

Under my hands, as I push myself up, the floor is cold and metallic. The buzzing of sounds resolves itself into words, conversations, voices I recognize. A variety of tones: annoyance, amusement, derision.

"Well, well, well, look who's finally waking up." Humbert says dryly. I look over my shoulder, through metal bars. He sits on the floor across the corridor from me, leaning against the back wall of his cell. The only thing in it with him is a toilet. "For someone who's supposed to be indestructible, you sure took your time waking up. We've been conscious longer than you."

"To be fair to him," the man in the cell next to him says, "none of us were hjit by his boyfriend."

"Just whose side are you on, Cline?" Humbert demands.

"Yours, of course. That doesn't mean I can't appreciate that his head stayed attached. I know Murray's would have come right off. Pop." Cline makes an explosion gesture with his hands.

"Fuck you, Cline," a woman says. Except for the back wall all sides of the cells are bars and I can see them on my left and right, as well as on Humbert's side. Each one contains one soldier, Claws is in the on next to me.

He shrinks in on himself as I look at him. Angry I grab a bar separating us to rip it out of the way. Electricity explodes through me, then I'm on my back, trying to get my limbs to move. The world dissolves into static for few seconds, then control slowly returns as the pain diminishes. I roll onto my stomach and push my self to my feet again.

Humbert's mouth moves, but only gibberish comes from it. He shakes his head in annoyance. Cline tells him something, then points at me.

"...Fried his brain," his words finally resolve themselves and I look at him. "I think it's wearing off."

"Are you okay?" Humbert asks with reluctance.

"It hurt more than I expected." I have to think all the way back to the experiments Amanda's scientists conducted on me to remember something resembling this level of pain.

"I think they jacked up the power in both your cells to take into account how tough you and your boyfriend are," Humbert says. "Granted, I don't know about him, since it hasn't moved."

"Claws isn't my boyfriend," I snap, anger flaring unexpectedly.

Humbert chuckles. "How am I supposed to tell? With the way you two are attached at the hip?"

I glare at him. "I don't have whatever allows you to be romantically attaches to anyone, human or demon. If you're going to keep wasting time assigning some human relationship to us, then think of him as my parent."

"I didn't think you were the type who cared." Humbert sneers at me.

"I don't!" I take a step toward the bars before I can stop myself, intent on going over there and pounding into him just how little I care about his opinion. My hand is almost at the bars before I can stop myself.

"His brain might still be on the scrambled side," Cline says. "The electricity was strong enough he smoked for a second or two."

Does that explain my lack of self-control? I've never been electrocuted to this level, and when they tested my resistance to electricity, I was allowed to rest afterward. I want to turn and look at Claws, find out why he did what he did, but if I reacted this way to Humbert's taunting, how am I going to react to Claws's answers? What kind of damage can I cause to him if I can't control myself?

I need something safe to think about while my body fixes itself. "Can you give me an update?"

Humbert smirks and I feel the glare forming, the angry retort trying to force their way out of my mind as he enjoys my weaker position.

"The obvious part," Cline says, "is that we've been captured." He ignores the look of betrayal Humbert gives

him, and I can't stop the chuckle. I don't know why, but somehow that's funny to me. A clear sign my mind isn't back top normal. "Once you were down, more guards and hybrids stormed the room, which was better than the alternative, considering that big ass demon brought yours to its knees and turned it against you."

"The demon ordered Claws?" the fight is a blur of motion and feelings. I remember the demon's demand for submission, resisting it, some amusement at my effort but I'm certain there were no attack orders mixed in.

"It didn't say anything," Humbert says after a pointed look at Cline, "but there had to be something, right?" I see him fight urges and finally rest his head against the wall. "All joking aside, the two of you are kind of devoted to one another. The arrival of that demon had an effect on your—" He snaps his mouth shut on the coming mockery. He breathes silently for a few seconds. "It affected Claws. After what I saw with Adam, I didn't think anything could scare it, but it was terrified, nearly literally a puddle on the floor. I don't know what passed between them, demons talk in a range we can't hear. None of the scientists haven't worked out how yet, but that's coming."

As he works at maintaining self control I realize Moores's people did something the military hasn't manged yet, and they did it centuries ago. Of course, the military is more interested in killing demons than communicating with them. That has to have impeded their research.

Humbert lets out a breath and nods to Claws's cage. "He knocked you out, we were stormed, and here we are. I'm surprised they didn't kill us right there. I woke up a good hour before you."

"I was up before that," Cline says proudly.

"Doctor walker came by a few times in that time to check on you. She ignored the rest of us, big surprise there."

"She was annoyed you weren't awake the last time she came by, maybe—" Cline checks his bare wrist, grins his teeth. "Maybe ten minutes ago." He runs a finger over it. Below where the injector assembly would be. It's here humans were watches or bracelets. His entire jacket is gone, as are that of every soldier.

"Disappointment seems to be the only emotion I engender in her." My calm response and lack of desire to snap Humbert's neck is enough of an indication I'm back in control of myself. I turn to face Claws. He hasn't moved. He's as far from me as he can be in his cell without touching the bars. I step to the ones separating us, hating that they are there.

I crouch. "Why?"

He looks at me, the glow in his eyes dim. Normally I attribute it to a demon being near death, or weak from injuries, but I can tell Claws is healthy, despite the few injuries he received in the fight. That same sense that lets me pick him out of a crowd, regardless of the shape he's in."

He pulls himself into something even smaller. "Rules us All would have killed you."

I force details out of my scrambled memories. The roar, Claws crumbling, me nearly folding under it. His plight giving me strength. Stepping between the two of them.

"I was trying to protect you," I say.

"I know." His expression softens and I smile back. "I do not wish to lose another child. Rules us All could not abide your stubbornness. Any who resist Rules us All die. Those who submit live."

Humbert snorts. "The rest of us seem to have fared well enough. And trust me, not one of us submitted to anything. We fought until they brought us down."

"You are human," Claws answers in a dismissive tone I rarely hear him use.

"What those that mean?" Cline asks, but we ignore him.

Claws did what he always does with me, what he thought was best. I don't like it, but I understand it. "Their name is Rules us All? Do you know them?"

Claws shakes his head.

"And do they rule all of you?"

"No. My people do not have societies the way humans do. We have families. A family can be large, and it will have an elder who holds power over the other because age brings it. But it will not extend outside of the territory."

"So its name is pure ego?" Humbert asks in derision.

Claws looks at me, confused, and I have to think back to Jason's teaching for an answer. "They call themselves Rules us All just because they believe they should, not because it's fact?"

Claws is silent for a few seconds. "Names are..." he trails off, searching for something.

“Descriptive,” I offer, and he shakes his head. “Claws in the Dark describes who you are,” I explain.

“It is more complex. The words are for you, for them.” He rumbles and I get a sense of him, hunting, stalking, more, something that reverberates in my bone. How I knew his call. “I was Runs Swift when the madness ended.” The rumble shifts and becomes a sense of object passing him quickly, but that vibration remains the same. “I was Sneaks Around when I left my parents for the wilderness.” More stalking, slow, a sense of pleasure at pouncing on prey. But that vibration is still the same. I would have known him in those phases of his life. “Words are a human thing. We are who we are, who our family shapes us into being, who we learn to be.”

“So, he might be names Rules us All because of his family?”

“I do not not. Humans are involved, and Humans change everything.” The annoyance in his tone is sufficiently palpable some of the soldiers raise their voice in protest. “My people have never sought to rule. We do not have a word for ‘ruling’ for placing one over the others. An elder is still part of the family, not above them.”

“But you have the concept of submission,” I reply. “Rules us All demanded that you submit, that we both submit. You demanded it before, back in the city, when you defended me from...your child.”

“It is not as what I have observed of humans. We intruded on Rules us All’s territory. My child disobeyed me by threatening you.” He falls silent and I wait. “Rules us All should have hunted us off his territory if we did not submit. It is how things are done for us.” He motions around us. “Not this. The word submit is not ours, it is human.” He things again. “Respect, is what I demanded of my child. Respect my position as his parent, his elder.” He is silent again. “Humans have changed everything.”

“Then,” I hesitate, what I am thinking does against what Claws said, but Protect the Community shows me a way humans can have changed things here. “Can humans have named him Rules us All?”

“That’s bullshit.” Humbert says. “No one would ever want to live under a demon’s rule.”

I look at the man over my shoulder. Moores and his town aren’t exactly ruled by Protect, but they are fine with the authority he represents. But when I answer him, I’m thinking back to the city, the time of the Lie. Among it, there was something that remained true, even once I left. “You don’t believe that. Some humans let demons order them about. Gangs who’ll find them one of them people to hunt in exchange for protection.”

The man snorts. “That’s not the same. Those are small-time criminals who’ll feed their own people just to save their skin. Anyone with more than a handful of braincells would fight against a demon, letting them rule us is a recipe for genocide.

Claws looks at me questioningly. That is a word I encountered in my own learning. Amanda and Jason were careful never to let it enter my vocabulary during the time of the Lie. “It’s when one group leads to the complete destruction of another,” I tell him, surprised he hasn’t come across it himself.

He nods. “What humans are doing to my people.”

“Hey!” Humbert exclaims. “We only kill you because you hunt humans. You leave us alone and we’ll be more than happy to live in peace.”

I snort. “My existence proves you wrong, Captain Humbert. Amanda’s continued research proves you wrong, the military’s continued support of her research and others like hers do the same.” I look at him over my shoulder. “Maybe not all humans want demons exterminated, maybe you don’t, but Amanda does. Your military does.”

Cline laughs loud and heartily. “Oh, snap, he got you there, Cap.”

I stare at the man, baffled. “You don’t deny it?”

Cline shrugs. “I’ve been a soldiers for more than twenty years. I’ve had to make peace with a lot of horrible things. I do believe that what we do is for the good of the most people in the long term. I wouldn’t still be doing this if I didn’t.”

“Killing my people will not be good for anyone in the long term,” Claws states.

“You are wrong there,” Amanda’s voices sounds through the cells. “You are so very wrong.” A door opens and she enters. “Demons are a bane on this world. You kill and eat indiscriminately, you’re nothing more than animals, just smart enough to corrupt anything and anyone who comes in close to you.”

“Doctor Walker—” Humbert begins.

“Don’t even try to proclaim your innocence, Captain,” she cuts him off. “You’re here, with that.” She points at Claws. “I knew you were tainted when I saw you let it leave without trying to kill it. When you didn’t bomb that city after we left it. I don’t know what lies you told your superiors, but that they didn’t remove you tells me they are no

better.”

“Kettle,” Cline says, “Let me introduce you to Pot.”

She stares at him incomprehensibly.

I step to the bars. I don’t know the expression Cline used, but I have an idea of what he is alluding to. “You’re protected by demons.”

“That’s not the same,” she replies, her tone cold. “They’re a means to an end. Mister Graves is only keeping them around until my project is perfected.” She points at me. “Then, you will be what protects us. Well, you’re successors, those who can do what they’re told.”

I watch her face. Look for deception. She believes what she tells me. “Then, do not lie to them, Amanda. I can’t tell you what I would have done if I’d know the truth from the start, but the pain of finding out you lied to me, you and Jason, is why I left.”

“It told you that!” she snaps. “You were fine until it showed up and talked to you. Until you let it feel your head with its lies about me. If you’d killed it like you were made to do, none of this would have happened.”

She believes what she says. I search for the hard, but fair and rational woman I remember. The one driving me to be better, arguing with Jason over what better meant. Did she ever exist? She lied, but the level of conniving required to put on such an act is beyond her, isn’t it? Or did I simply not know what to look for back then?

I don’t recognize anyone in those eyes. The Amanda I knew isn’t there. That she might have never been there doesn’t matter. I breathe easier realizing that. “I’m done, Amanda,” I say. “I’m done thinking of you as anything more than another human. Once we deliver you to the military, you won’t have to worry about seeing me again. The woman I—” my throat constrict, but I force myself to say it, to get out so it will be gone. “Cared for no longer exist, if she ever did. The next time you are kidnapped, I won’t come to your rescue.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Just how full of yourself do you have to be to think I ever gave a damn about you? You’re a machine. Not even that, you’re just a proof of concept.” She snaps her fingers and the door opens again. Six muscular humans enter, each armed with machine guns. “Once you’ve demonstrated to Mister Graves my process works, you’ll have outlived your usefulness.”

Claws is up as close to us as his cell allows. “Do not hurt him,” he warns, growling until he almost touched the ceiling. “If he does not return unharmed, I will hunt and eat you.”

She snorts. “If you think you scare me, you’re wrong. I’ve seen you cower. You’re not so scary when you’re not the biggest thing around, are you?”

Claws growls. “You do not understand my people if you think anyone will keep me from eating you if you harm my child.”

“She’s mine!” she yells. “I made him! I don’t know how you got him to think he has anything to do with monsters like you, but that’s not going to be a problem for long.” She motions at the guards. “Take him out of his cell. Mister Graves is waiting for the demonstration.”

Claws growls, demands submission in the undertone, fear mixing in, increasing when the humans don’t react the way demons would. It continues to increase as exasperation replaces the demand.

“It’s alright,” I tell him, “they won’t hurt me.” I smile at him, since I can’t send my confidence to soothe his fear. “They’re only human.”