

Silence falls as we enter the large room, and Captain Humbert glares at me. Opposite him, a familiar-looking woman in the middle of the half-dozen assembled people on that side of the conference table studies me. There's enough room around it that people walk back and forth, handing papers and memory sticks to those at the table.

"Me and my team spent half a year hunting him down." Humbert points at me. "We'd still be part of it if you hadn't pulled us out to do bullshit recon here."

"Captain." The woman at the center of the people responds to him, tone hard. "You are going to keep a civil tone. You are the one who told me the only way to pull off this rescue is with an entire army." She motions to me. "There's your army. Not only that, but unless I missed something, my guess that's the demon from your reports, the one you said was at least as effective as Derick, while he was injured. He looks to be in good health now, so it's looking like you'll be getting two armies."

The timbre of her voice places her for me. That annoyance at someone else being an idiot. She was the woman in charge of Amanda's previous rescue.

"Colonel," Humbert replies, teeth clenched, "if you want me dead, just put the gun to my head and pull the trigger."

"Don't be overly dramatic, Captain. I'm certain that if there was still animosity over the misunderstandings of the last mission, Derick wouldn't be here." She turns to me. "It's good to see you again, Derick. I'm glad to see you're whole and healthy. Am I correct in assuming this is Claws in the Dark?" She gives him a small nod of greeting. "He's the only demon you've been reported working with, but that was a year, two months, and sixteen days ago." There is a sharpness in the way she tells me exactly how long it has been that gives me the impression that despite her word, she harbors anger toward me.

"I am Claws in the Dark," he answers.

She watches us. "I'm glad to have your assistance, if that is what you are here to offer."

I nod, wondering why she isn't more surprised at our presence. Was the warning from the soldiers who escorted us in enough?

"I wish you'd been honest with me about your motivations last time. We could have come to an arrangement so that you wouldn't have had to betray your unit."

"You mean an arrangement that would have ensured you captured me and Claws by the time it was over?"

Humbert's snort mirrors my opinion of me having been part of his unit.

"We wouldn't have," she replies.

"It's the only thing the army does," I state, almost snapping. "You hunt down demons, kill or capture them, and experiment on them to find more ways to destroy them."

"That's a rather narrow and misinformed opinion of what we do." She raises a hand as I glare at her. "But this isn't the time for that discussion. Once this operation is over we can sit down, and I will be happy to explain the role we play in the grand scheme of things, and the role you can play in it."

"I'm here to rescue Amanda, again, nothing more," I state, doing my best to stay calm at the implication I'll continue working with them afterward. "Then we leave. And this is the last time. You can thank Claws for my presence here. If I'd been able to talk him out of this, I'd have been happy to let you deal with it alone. Next time, make sure she's properly secured."

"That's one thing you don't have to worry about," the colonel said. "The good doctor isn't getting any say in how her next lab is set up, or the security measures around it. No one will be able to get to her there."

I put the future of Amanda out of my mind, as well as my lack of belief in the military's ability to keep anyone secured. The only important thing is this mission; anything after that will be their problem.

"Where is Amanda being held?"

She motions a thin blonde man forward and he places a screen on the table. He's familiar too. When he connects a keyboard to it, I remember him: her assistant, the man who handles technology for her, or something like that.

He types, and the screen comes to life. An overview of the city. More typing and the angle and position of the camera shift to focus on an older building, a dozen floors in height. Buildings drop in height around it, except for one, much taller, visible in the distance.

"This is Memorial Tower," the man says, still typing. The view moves around the building, giving me a sense of how large it is. It takes an entire city block. "It was built on the location of the first landing to commemorate the arrival of—"

"Harry," the colonel says gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "This isn't the time for a history lesson."

"Of course." He gives me an uncomfortable smile. "My apologies." He types again, and the screen divides into multiple views. Some around the building, others further away, but with it still at the edge, again. This time it's to give me a sense of location, I think. Only, I'm wrong; what the images have in common are the people in them. I stare at the images. Humans, things not quite human, and demons are moving about the street without obvious conflict.

"How many people are in the city?" I ask. If not for my experience with Protect and Moores, I'd say what I am looking at is impossible, but how can this have taken place in a city this size and I've never heard about it?

"A lot more than should be," Humbert answers, annoyed, and he glares at a man in a uniform I've never seen before. I'm about to put him out of my mind when the man speaks.

"We began evacuating the city three years ago, quietly, to avoid creating a panic. It was in the early days of the sickness, and the hope was that this would keep it from spreading. As of last year, it should have been empty."

The news never mentioned the city was evacuated. When I watched the news in Moores's house, there was only a discussion of evacuating it.

"A recon drone picked up movement not long after that," Harry continues. An image of a dark form standing on a roof, clearly not human, replaces all the other images. Then another, of something that might be human, but looks wrong, in a street. Finally another, of something peering out of a broken wall. "The initial assessment was that somehow demons had moved back into the city, despite no sniffer patrols ever reacting to new demon scents outside the city."

"It turns out," the colonel said, "that the reason they never sniffed them outside the city was that they were already inside." Images of people now walking streets, some with demons, most without. "It turns out that not everyone left when they were ordered to, and they took over the city since it was empty."

"Not the city, Ma'am," Harry corrects. "Only the area around Memorial Tower." A map of the city appears, with blocks highlighted in red. "I've gone over every report and every drone footage. As you see, it's irregular, but that looks to be approximately twenty city blocks around

the tower. It's nearly impossible to get a precise number, but my approximation is that there are a thousand humans in that area, with a large percentage of that in guard positions at the edge of the area." A series of pictures of men and women walking and standing in pairs, armed. Some are accompanied by demons.

"If you'll allow me to draw an analogy from ancient history, the tower is the castle in the center of a medieval city, with the building around it serving both to house people and protect it. It seems to be fully functioning too. There are stores, restaurants. The city was disconnected from the district power grid once we thought it was empty, but it has enough solar capture capability within it that this area can be powered."

"Didn't those cities have walls around them?" a woman in uniform asks.

Harry stares at her, surprised. "They did."

"Then your analogy doesn't work. I don't see a wall here."

"Right," Humbert says derisively, "because nothing says 'let's not draw attention to ourselves' like building a wall in the middle of a supposedly abandoned city."

I understand nothing of that conversation, except the important point. "Memorial Tower is the most secure location in this city."

Harry nods. "What I've been able to confirm of how the guards are distributed around the city adds weight to that." The map returns, but this time with lines creating concentric paths, the building at their center. "The size of the groups on those paths varies too much for me to give numbers, but I've counted twenty of what we've been referring to as 'hulks.'" A new image, a being almost human, but too tall, too big, their muscles stretching their skin to the point I can make out the individual muscle strands under it. A video replaces the image, and it shows that the hulk lumbers instead of walks. "Some of the groups have a demon patrolling with them instead of a hulk."

"What's it feel like to know you've been replaced and outclassed?" Humbert asks me, smirking.

"Pause the video," I tell Harry, something drawing my attention and giving me a reason to ignore the captain. Next to the hulk stands a human in a short-sleeve shirt. "Zoom on his left arm." I tap the gray thing over the forearm. "That looks like what you used to inject yourself," I tell Humbert, and his face darkens.

"Yes," Harry says, "from all accounts, they've gotten their hands on PFB-324. What the soldiers commonly refer to as 'boost'."

"Or one of the black market variants," the colonel adds. "Let's not forget we lost the monopoly on boosts years ago. But it does mean that even the humans here can be a problem, on top of the demons and those hulks Doctor Walker has created."

"Those aren't hers," a new voice says, and I spin to watch Jason enter from a different tent flap. "I wish you'd stop saying they are."

I look at Claws.

"I did not know," he answers before I voice my question.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Jason, astonishment mixing with anger and worry.

"Doctor Gourd is here because I ordered him to be," the colonel answers, and I glare at her.

"What are you doing putting him in danger like that? He's a civilian; he has no business being near a potential combat zone."

"Good to know you still care about my health, Derick," Jason says, grinning.

"Of course I care! How can you think I don't?" I point to the sleeve of his right arm, folded and pinned to his bicep so it doesn't dangle about, empty. "You lost your arm to save me."

He sighs and rubs his face. "And here I was, hoping the one thing you'd have gotten out of your travels was a sense of humor."

I narrow my eyes at him. "This is not a place where humor belongs."

"Humor belongs everywhere," Jason protests. "And I'm here because with working with you for more than four years, with Amanda for twice that, and reading every report available on demon-human interaction, I'm the closest thing to an expert on this situation."

"And you could tell them everything they need to know while being in another city, where it's safe!"

"Except that I wanted him to be here," the colonel says, her tone making it clear she was in charge.

In the ensuing silence, Claws growls. "You used me."

"No one could find Derick," the colonel says, "and we needed him here."

Claws steps toward Jason, and while the man doesn't move, I see fear on his face. "You used me, Jason," Claws growls, his form losing humanity. "You did not say this was to get Derick here when you told me of my kind in this city."

Every soldier in the room pulls their sidearm—even the colonel, who remained calm until now. I fight the urge to put myself between the two of them. Jason caused this, he can deal with the consequence. I prepare myself to defend Claws if this turns violent.

"If I'd told you that," Jason replies, his voice steady, "you wouldn't have gone looking for him. You care too much about keeping him safe. You needed to see the situation—come to the conclusion you needed his help on your own."

Claws shoves Jason away a step, and the man barely catches the item that slides down his chest. "Derick is right," Claws tells him. "Humans enjoy lying too much." He returns to my side while Jason looks at the phone in his hand.

"If you're all done with the drama?" the colonel says with a sigh, holstering her sidearm. The other soldiers are slower, with Humbert being last, but all sidearms are holstered.

While that's happening, Jason looks at me, pleading replacing the fear. I shake my head. He did this. He broke Claws's trust. If he wants it back, he will have to make that happen.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told you before, Doctor Gourd," the colonel says. "Your belief this isn't Doctor Walker's work, is because you don't realize that without access to the equipment we provided her with. There is no way for her to recreate someone like Derick. These are what she can do with whatever technology these criminals got her. But that doesn't mean these hulks aren't dangerous—even more so since they are able to work with demons without problems."

"Wonder where we saw that before?" Humbert mutters under his breath.

"If boost didn't burn out close to eighty percent of the people using it within six months, Captain Humbert, I'd be happy to stop looking for alternatives. But as yet, Doctor Walker's work is the only thing that's given us someone capable of reasoning. And you, Captain, know how damaging a mindless soldier can be."

"Just give me more people," Humbert replied, tone bordering on belligerent, "and I'll take this whole damned city for you. Using these two guaranties Walker ends up dead." He points at me. "He hates her." Points to Claws. "It's afraid of what she can make. Neither of them as an incentive to want to take her alive."

The colonel looks at me. "Are you doing this for a chance to kill her?"

“No. I said I’d rescue her.”

“You lied before.”

“Claws was in danger,” I reply. “You were forcing me to work with you. Neither of those is true now.”

She looks at Claws. “What about you?”

“Derick does not want her dead.”

“But do you?”

Claws nods. “But I will not eat her unless Derick tells me he wants it to happen.”

“Oh, come on!” Humbert exclaimed in exasperation. “Don’t tell me you believe them.”

She fixes her gaze on him. “You have your armies, Captain, and your orders. Get to it.”