

“I can’t believe you expect humans to help,” I grumble. We’re heading not toward headquarters, but to a taller building, the tallest we can see.

“It is one of their cities.” Claws’s tone is even, not reflecting the annoyance he has to feel. It’s the fifth time I’ve said this. The fact that I know what he’s planning to do once we reach that building doesn’t help my mood.

“What do you expect them to do? Distract the demons by getting eaten?” The anger slips through. Claws isn’t dousing it anymore, and it takes effort not to let it color all my thoughts and words. I look up as we reach the building, and my stomach does flips at the height.

“The human’s military has been fighting my kind for a long time. They are not the helpless beings you think them to be.”

“They seemed pretty helpless when demons fell on them earlier.”

“You mean when you betrayed them?”

I don’t answer, but the reminder of what I did does a good job distracting me from the vertigo and dousing the building anger.

The last time we came through here Claws had made himself smaller, passing himself off as a child. There had been a human at a desk, supervising those coming and going.

Now the lobby is empty. The walls are covered with claw marks, the desk is gone, and one of the elevator cars is in pieces on the floor, its doors ripped out, probably at the same time as the car itself.

The scent of demons is thick, but Claws says it’s a few days old. I can’t tell. We’re still close enough to where Adam’s base of operation is that their scents are everywhere. It works in our favor, and against us. Our scents are hidden amongst all the others, but it also means that it’s near impossible to smell a threat coming on the wind. It’s one of the reasons Claws picked this building to reach the other.

I’m silent as we go up the stairs, focusing on keeping my fear under control. It isn’t working, and by the time we reach the roof, all I can think about is what Claws plans to do.

“This won’t work.”

“It did the last time.”

I look at him. His skin is more frayed, his form drooping slightly. “You weren’t exhausted last time.”

“I’m not—”

“You can barely hold yourself together. How are you going to maintain wings for that long?”

He looks at himself, and over a few seconds his skin tightens until his clothing become more defined, looking almost new.

“There.” He looks at me.

I don’t point out the bottom of his ‘pants’, which have begun fraying again. “There has to be another way.”

“I can’t think of one. Adam has many of my people close to him. We would have to fight them.”

“We can take them.”

“But not in silence. They are still young; they do not appreciate the value of keeping their presence hidden. One of them will roar and attract the others.”

“He’s going to have sentries on the roof.”

“I saw none in my time as his captive. We are mostly ground predators. We can climb, but we were old before I and Fangs in the Light realized we could catch the wind with our skin and travel further in the air. The building Adam took as his own is tall enough that a fall from it could kill one of my kind, so they will not want to spend too much time there. They are young, and still think the only way to reach it is through the stairs or to climb the sides.”

That explains why the scents are faint up here. We are even further up. “Adam is going to have thought of it. He remembers his military training.”

“Adam thinks himself one of my people. He relies on his strength and the army he has built to win his fights. He uses what the human part of him has learned because it helps him handle this number of beings, but he believes humans to be even more worthless than you do.”

“That was the anger speaking, okay?”

Claws smiles. “He only uses what he needs to so he can direct his army. He does not use anything else he learned as a human.”

“How about the drones? The demons who took them down had to start from a roof as high as this one.”

Claws doesn’t answer immediately, so I turn.

“He forced them to throw themselves to their death to destroy them. But it illustrates how he thinks. Even after the first one, he did not set up sentries to look for them. He waited until one came low enough for them to see before sending someone to destroy it.”

“Okay, fine. We might as well do this now. The longer we wait, the more tired you—”

He grabs me, and we’re off the edge of the building. I keep forgetting how fast he moves. I hold on to him and try to squelch my fear—no, my terror—that we’re going to fall to our death. Part of me wishes he hadn’t grabbed me. A stronger part knows that I’d rather we both fall than leave him alone to face Adam.

It doesn’t keep me from screaming as we fall.

It lasts far too long, and then we’re no longer in free-fall, but we’re still falling too fast, I’m certain of it. The sound of the wind catching in his wings is different from what I remember. I consider opening my eyes—I even start to, but then I shut them tighter. Knowing the state of his wings isn’t going to help me calm myself. I’m already close to losing the little self contr—

Claws shudders and he drops me.

I have a second of utter terror that I’m going to fall to the street, then I hit a hard surface, roll, and come to a stop against a wall. I’m in pain and panting. I’m unwilling to open my eyes. I don’t want to see the damage. I could be dying.

The pain doesn’t increase, so I decide I’m not dying. If I’m going to live, I need to look around. I’m on the roof, not the street. My trench-coat is ripped in places where the gravel dug into it, but it protected me from the worst of it, as it should. The pain is mostly from bruises.

I’m resting at the foot of the outbuilding housing the stairwell. I force myself up and see Claws, on all fours, his skin sagging. I wince as I hurry to him, but the pain is already receding. “Claws, are you okay?”

He shakes his head. “I am tired. Keeping this form is becoming difficult.”

“Then don’t.”

He shakes his head again. “You won’t know me from the others.”

“I know your scent. I know you. I even recognized you from a picture without sounds or smells. You were just drooping skin tied to a beam. I still knew it was you.”

He looks at me, and I don’t recognize the emotions in his eyes.

“How did I know it was you?”

I see the hesitation. “Fangs in the Light was my mate.” He lets himself fall on his side, his form more flowing than falling. “Mates know each other, just like I know my children. Sounds or smells are not needed. We simply know.”

“But I didn’t know you that first time.”

His body shudders. An attempt at a shrug?

“You are not entirely like us, not truly my child, even if I consider you as such. I do not know why you know me now, when you didn’t then, but you do know me, and that is good.”

His form flows around him, and when he looks solid again he is on all fours. No, he’s four-legged. He vaguely resembles one of the animals I’ve seen in the forest. He shakes himself and seems stronger, more alert.

“We need to move. There is a chance one of them looked up and noticed us, or heard our landing.” His face is long and thin, more animalistic now. Words coming from such a muzzle seems strange. He sniffs the air and pads around the building.

“Where would Adam keep the humans?”

“I don’t know. There are plenty of rooms he can lock the doors of.”

“Ordinary doors will not hold trained soldiers.”

His form shifts as we get to the door—elongates, becomes thicker at the torso and arms. His claws stretch as he digs them around the door, then pulls it out.

I consider his question. If not a normal room, then what could hold them?

“The best place I can think of are the storage rooms on sub-five. They were empty the last time I saw them. The walls looked thick and solid. Even the large windows seemed thick. If I had to hold someone anywhere, it’d be there.”

Now that I thought about the rooms, they seemed too solidly built for storage. There hadn’t been any scent of demons, but Amanda had years to have them scrubbed out.

“Actually, I think those were cells meant to hold demons.”

“And you doubt the humans’ resourcefulness?”

As we walk down the stairs his form shifts, and for a time he’s six-legged and larger, something I’ve never seen before, then he shrinks in upon himself and is back to having only four legs. At times he’s lean, others bulky.

“How much concentration does it take for you to shift from one form to another?”

“None, if I am letting it flow as needs demand.” He becomes long and sinuous. “It is if I want to maintain a specific form that I need to concentrate.”

“That’s why you were fraying at the edges when you looked human, but not now.”

He compresses as we go down another flight. “Yes. I am not thinking of what form I am holding.” He stops and looks at himself, and as if in response he becomes larger, a smaller version of what I think of his normal form.

His head snaps ahead of us and the ears become larger, pavilions pivoting left and right. I listen and hear something further down. Claws looks at me, and I nod. Silence is vital from now on.

The door to the third floor is ajar, bent out of shape so it can’t close anymore. I hear growling beyond it, but it’s faint, far. I peek through the opening. No demons are visible in the faint light.

We continue on.

The door to the ground floor is gone. Demons are moving around. Metal whines, then snaps. Demonic laughter, metal clanging against the floor.

I put a hand on Claws’s shoulder and peek out for an instant. Four demons are in the lobby, metal pipes littering the floor. The demons seem focused on them.

I peek again. One picks up a pipe, studies it, then bends it, creating the whine I heard. When it’s shaped like a ‘U’, he turns it over and tries to straighten it. He ends up with something wavy that he shows his neighbor. He barks a question and they both study it. The other two are now preoccupied with what might be the door.

I push Claws ahead while they’re all distracted. The last I see of them is the demon pulling at both ends of the pipe, breaking it in half.

The door to sub-one is held open with a long spike rammed into the floor. It reminds me of the ones Noah used to test my reflex. The garage beyond the door is dark. I hear the sound of movement, faint in the distance. Not someone walking, more scraping against the floor. I can vaguely see a slight change in temperature, low to the floor.

I realize I don’t know if demons sleep. They get tired, but Claws regained his strength from eating, and implied that a good hunt would be better. I need sleep, but much less than humans. I turn to ask Claws, but he has continued moving. I run and catch him by the door of sub-five.

The door is intact. I pull on the handle and it swings silently. No sound comes from beyond, but the scent of demons—more than I can count—is thick, and recent. The darkness is near-total, but it doesn’t hinder either of us.

I close the door behind us, controlling it so it makes no sound. The silence is absolute; not even the ventilation system is running.

“Where are those rooms?” Claws whispers.

“Further down.” I keep my voice low too. “These are examination labs.” We pass a large window, and while I can’t see in the darkness, on the other side I know there a wide metal table with hooks, large saws, knives, and other kind of machinery. I realize now that the equipment there is ideal for cutting up a demon, even a large one.

We cross an intersection, and I stop at the next window because light comes from within. There are no tables, no tools or machines. Only humans huddled together around a lamp on the floor. They are filthy and look to be sleeping, but a woman looks up and exclaims something I can’t hear through the thick glass.

The others wake and look around until they see me. They run to the window, crowding it, banging on it and yelling, crying. I can see hope in their eyes.

The hope is replaced with terror as Claws rears up and places his forepaws on the window to look in. I see his body elongate again out of the corner of my eye, but I'm not paying attention to him.

Everyone in the room flees to the back on seeing him except for one man, who stares at me. He's my height, his black hair straight and oily. His beard is black and wiry, with a bit of gray in it. His blue eyes are fixed on me.

He says something.

His lips form one word. He moves closer to the window, not paying attention to Claws, who is looking from him to me. I see joy in the man's eyes. He cries and says more that I can't hear.

I'm looking at Jason.