

We make it a few hundred paces before demons block our path. They growl and shift forms, eyes shining red with rage, hands forming claws. I look over my shoulder at Adam. I can't see his face at this distance in the low light, and I wonder if he's decided to kill me after all.

What he said to me was a lie. He was trying to get me to change my mind. Maybe he does feel that we are united in what we are, but what he really wants is another soldier in his army. He did want to make me his lieutenant.

His mouth moves. I barely hear the words, but the undercurrent in them carries to us loudly. It is and isn't like with a demon's roar. I can sense the intent in it, but where a demon needs to increase the volume of their roar to increase the strength of the instructions, Adam's are strong in spite of him speaking softly.

Adam tells them to stand down, and even I feel myself relaxing. It takes an effort to remain on my guard. The demons stop fidgeting. His next instructions are for them to move away, and I steel myself against the command. The anger in their eyes increases, but they step out of our way.

As soon as we are clear of them, I whisper to Claws, "Can you walk on your own? We need to get out of here. I don't trust Adam not to change his mind." I look up. "And they're going to blow this place at some point."

Claws stumbles, and almost pulls me down with him. He gets his feet under him and grabs my arm. He stares in my eyes, the red in his almost extinguished. His growl is so weak I barely feel the anger in it. He tries to speak, then shakes his head.

He's too weak. His skin trails behind him, giving him the appearance of wearing a long cloak. He needs to eat. Fortunately, I know where there's a grocery store.

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The scent of rotting food wafts over us as I push the door open—a too-sweet smell that leaves an off taste in my mouth. I'm not surprised that the food has gone bad. Most of the residents would have left within days of Adam's army arriving, if not hours, and none of the people who stayed would venture this close to his base of operation.

What I didn't expect was for the lights to still be on, and I can hear the hum of the freezers in the back. The ventilation system does its best to chase the smell of rot away.

I let Claws down so he can lean against the customer service counter. As I go to pull away, he grabs my arm and tries to pull me down. His hand slips away. He doesn't even have the strength to keep me with him.

"I'll be right back. I'm just going to get us food."

He looks miserable with his skin pooling around him. I hesitate to leave him alone, but what he needs is food. I can't carry him the whole way. Once he's eaten, he'll be able to tell me what else he needs.

I grab a basket and keep away from the produce and meat sections I'd prefer to shop from, because of the smells. I initially ignore the canned aisle; I've never bought anything from it.

Jason specifically instructed me to stay away from canned food, because there was too much extra stuff in there I wouldn't like. I hadn't questioned his words while I lived here, and never even looked at this aisle.

But once I left, it became yet another thing he'd told me I questioned. I knew they kept for a long time, so they were what I stole. I discovered the hard way he hadn't lied about them.

The meat in the cans tasted wrong, even for being cooked. The fruits were far too sweet, and the vegetables didn't taste like anything. Not long after eating them I threw up, black goop mixed in with the partially digested food. The only time that had happened before was when Amanda had poisoned me.

I'd wondered if it was my unique physiology that made these foods incompatible to me, or if humans knowingly ingested poisons. I didn't ponder the question for long. With those as food, I'd have more important things to think about to ensure my survival.

I go through the doors at the back of the store, and then to the freezers. Claws would be used to fresher meat, but it should allow him to regain his strength. I throw packages of frozen fish in the basket with the red meats, then bring that back to Claws. He makes faces after he eats some, but goes back for more.

After bringing him two baskets, I go back for my own food: frozen fruits and vegetables. Jason had liked those. He'd mentioned how he enjoyed them on a hot day, making a smoothie by blending them with milk.

I rip the door off the freezer in anger and stare at it. His betrayal hurt more than Amanda's. Hers made sense, now that I know how she was. I was a machine to her, nothing more. In her eyes I was defective, so the simplest thing to do was to take me apart and start anew. When I didn't want to cooperate, it was normal that she'd work harder at disposing of me, but Jason...

The door's handle whines in my tightening grip, then breaks, the door clattering to the floor.

Jason had taught me how to act around other humans. I thought he wanted me to be what he considered normal. I had to remind him I wasn't human, so I couldn't be normal, but he didn't stop. He insisted I do my own grocery shopping so I would have to interact with people. I didn't like doing it.

I still don't. I am not human, so I shouldn't have to interact with them, but what he taught me allows me to do it. To find out he also thought of me as only a machine, that everything he taught had been just so I would feel closer to humans than demons...

The first night I spent in my apartment, with money and food assured, was the first time I cried. I cried over the realization that his friendship had been nothing more than an act.

I don't cry over it anymore; it's in the past. But sometimes, when I think about him, I get angry. It's good that he isn't around when I do; he might not survive it.

I dump frozen fruits in the basket, only making sure it's the natural stuff. Humans will add stuff I can't tolerate even to frozen foods, that and sugar. Humans love to put sugar in everything they eat.

I come back and sit across Claws. He's already gone through one basket as I open a bag of strawberries. His skin isn't drooping as much, and he eats slower.

"This will not be enough," he rasps, barely above a whisper.

"There's plenty more in the freezers." I shove a handful of berries in my mouth.

He shakes his head, and the way his skin flops about makes him look like he has hair. "More of this will not help. I need to hunt."

"You're in no condition to hunt. You need to eat and build up your strength so we can get out of here. Then you can hunt."

"I will not build up my strength with these, no matter how much you bring me. I need a hunt for that."

"There's nothing here for you to hunt." I put finality in my tone.

He smiles at me. "There is."

"You're not hunting humans."

"There are others than humans in this city at the moment."

"You'd hunt another demon? Another of your kind? Why? There's plenty of food here."

He throws a bag of fish at my feet. "That isn't food. I don't know what it is. It helps, but it isn't food."

"It's fish." I lob it back at him.

He catches it and cuts the package open. "Food is on legs. It runs when you chase it. It makes you feel fulfilled when you finally bring it down, sink your teeth into its flesh, drink in its fluids. Haven't you felt it at the end of a hunt?"

I think back on it. It's been a long time since I had a hunt where I felt anything but anger at having to fight a demon to save humans. "Back when I lived here, I'd feel a sense of satisfaction when I killed a demon, but that was because I was keeping humans safe, and it was what I was made for." I chuckle. "I certainly never ate a demon."

Claws's eyes go wide. "You didn't eat your kill?"

"Of course not. You've watched me hunt a few times, right? You saw what I did."

"I thought you were sated. I understood you didn't hunt simply to feed yourself. I knew you

were different. Your scent is...that of a youth, but you show no signs of the hunger madness. You can reason better than some of the older of my kind. Still, I did think that when you were hungry, you ate at the end of your hunt.”

I shake my head and indicate the baskets. “This is what I eat, although I prefer it fresh.”

He looks at the half-empty bag of fish, then me again. When he speaks, his voice is soft. “You smell so much like Fangs, but are still so different.”

“Who’s that?”

“Fangs in the Light was my mate.”

I laugh. “Are you telling me they made me from a wom—” My mouth snaps shut as the realization hits me. I glare at him and he tilts his head, looking at me quizzically.

He lied to me. Of everyone I have encountered in my short life, I didn’t think he’d lie to me. The sleeve of the trench-coat rips as my skin ripples, forming spikes and edges.

“It was never about me.” I have trouble breathing. “You were never helping me. You were trying to get her back.”

“Derick, I—”

“Don’t fucking lie to me! Everyone else can lie to me, but not you! You’re supposed to care! I came here to save you because you’re the one person who never lied to me! I betrayed humans for you!”

There’s no anger in his eyes, only pity. “I do not lie to you, Derick. Not then, not now. Your scent carries some of Fangs in the Light, but that is not who you are. I knew it when I caught it on the demon who came back to us. Your scent is more like that of Fangs in the Light’s child. I know who our children are, and yet, there was another one who was Fangs in the Light’s child, but had nothing of my scent. I did not help you because I sought to be reunited with Fangs in the Light. I helped you because, in essence, you are my child.”

With that, my anger’s gone. I hold on to the counter to stay standing. It’s even more difficult to breathe than before. “That’s why you wanted me to come back with you.”

He nods.

I think back on what he did for me: preventing that demon from killing me, introducing himself to me ever so slowly, gauging my reactions. Forcing me to confront the lies I’d been told.

I look at my black hand. The skin smooths. “I’m sorry for lashing out at you.”

“You have had a harsh youth—you still do. You have been used and lied to. The youths who survive the hunger madness in cities come back to us much as you are—unsure of things, grabbing onto kindness, then lashing out when the act isn’t perceived as honest.”

“But I’m not a kid.”

He smiles at me in the way humans do, and somehow I know it’s nothing like the way demons express the sentiment. “To me, you are a child. You should still be among us, hunting small animals in the wild, knowing nothing but the hunt and the hunger. It would be a few years still before your hunger grew too large for small animals not to be enough.”

I sit back down. “From what I’ve seen, I’m happy I’m not going through that.” I grab another bag. The fruits in it have begun thawing, so instead of ripping it open I cut a corner off and tip it up, drinking the juices and munching on the softening fruits.

“Since Amanda made me from Fangs in the Light, does that mean you see me as a woman?”

Claws tilts his head and I get the sense he is thinking, trying to work something out. He smiles. “No. Male and female, men and women, those are human things. We do not have that distinction.”

“Then how do you have kids? I’ve seen recordings of how humans do it. I thought it was messy and didn’t see the point.”

“Sometime after we have found our mate, we will feel the desire for a child. We find a dark and intimate place and spend time there, mixing our essences. When we leave it, we have a child.”

“How do you ‘mix essences’?”

Claws considers the question. He looks around and smiles again. “This isn’t the proper place for it, and you are not ready to have a child, but I think I can give you a sense of it.” He extends

his hand to me, palm up. "Place your hand above mine." He indicates my black hand. "Bring it lower slowly. If something happens, do not fight it; it will not be harmful." He closes his eyes.

I do as he says, starting a foot above and lowering my hand. Nothing happens until I'm three inches away from his. The skin on his hand ripples ever faster until small tendrils reach up toward my hand. A moment later, the same happens with my hand.

The tendrils can't stretch far enough to reach each other, maybe no more than an inch. I lower my hand more and stop when they almost touch, watching the tendrils wave about, like they are calling to each other.

One closes the distance and they touch, then another and more. Within a few seconds most are touching, and with a gasp I pull my hand away, holding it to my chest.

"I am sorry." Claws is looking at me, concerned. "It should not have been painful for you."

I shake my head. It wasn't because of pain. It was my first sense of what being a demon was like, of what being Fangs in the Light had been like. I could remember having done something much like this with Claws before, but more of it. Not our hands, but our entire beings. I had the memory of the experience being intense, but just the memory.

Other than awakening it, what we had done hadn't made me feel anything, just like watching the pornographic movies. I could see what happened, and in this case feel some of the reasons behind it, but I don't understand the point of it.

My hand is back to being normal, smooth and black.

I stand. "Since you said you need to hunt to regain your strength, we should get on that now so we can get out of here as soon as possible."

Claws looks up at me. "I am not leaving."