

Despite Taros's warning, no one runs off during the trek to the tower, even after one of them is killed when a patrol surprises us—Humbert refused to let me or Claws scout ahead—and opens fire without hesitation. When that fight's over, Humbert points to the body, gives a speech about their enemies having no qualms with killing any of us. When he offers for the civilians to leave, they instead are galvanized, and want revenge. The smile on Humbert's face when he leads us ahead tells me he wanted this response.

By the time we reach the tower, Humbert is confident no one has sounded the alarm. None of the patrols we faced could run, and none of them included demons—nor did they have radios. Some units were smaller than we expected, and while Humbert doesn't question it, I suspect Rules them All gave the demons instruction not to get in our way, and not to warn the patrols. He said it was Mister Graves's responsibility to keep what was his, and unlike Protect, I am realizing Rules them All does not see the humans here as part of his family.

Humbert looks back, his expression grim. The dead patrols will be found while we are getting Amanda.

Leaving the city will not be this easy.

The door to the stairwell opens as we fill the lobby, and guns come up as a scientist I recognize exits, seven children in tow, and a baby in his arms. He freezes, looks at us in disbelief.

"Are you serious?" he exclaims. "My luck can't be this bad!"

I jump between them before this escalates. I catch Humbert's eyes, and he raises a hand to stop the others from opening fire. I turn to the scientist. "What are you doing?"

"Look," he replies, "I don't want trouble. I have nothing to do with her." Soldiers grumble their disbelief. But he indicates himself and the children. "We're getting out of here before that woman starts thinking she can experiment on them. Jimmy's so in love with what she claims she can do he's just going to hand them over when she asks. This used to be a good working environment, you know."

"Not happening, Doc," Gregg says in a hard and angry tone that worries me. "You even think of moving, and it's a bullet for you. Don't count on him to stand in the way; I can fire through him."

When I turn to face the soldier, he grins at me. Our few days together have done nothing to build the camaraderie Jason claimed happens to people who work together. I am still something to him, not someone.

"Are you going to kill him in front of the children?" I ask, watching his reaction, watching the civilians. "Are you going to kill the children too?" Claws is to the side. Far enough Humbert doesn't consider him, but he is ready in case this turns into a fight.

Humbert's expression wavers. He tries to hold on to the anger, but his gaze darts around me in time with the sounds of motion. "We can't just..." He trails off. I tense as he seems ready to fire, then he lowers the machine gun. "What are children even doing in this building?"

"Families are everywhere," I state, and hope it's enough for him, that the scientist is smart enough to understand what I'm doing and keep silent. There is nothing but the scent giving away the children are not normal. So long as Humbert believes them to be regular children, he will not consider killing them.

"We can't let the kids go out there," a soldier says, though I don't look at who. "With the bodies we left, this place is going to be a war zone in no time."

"That's more reason for us to leave now," the scientist says. "Before it starts."

I face the scientist, confident Humbert won't shoot me in the back. "You won't make it far enough." I can't think of any good options, so I give him the best one I have. "You need to stay here and hide." I find a metal door in the back corner. "In there. Barricade yourselves inside and we'll get you on the way out. We'll escort you to safety."

"Don't go making promises you can't keep," Humbert says, but I ignore him, watching the scientist.

"What if you die?" he asks. "I don't think they're going to help us then."

"We will not die," Claws states, joining us. "Derick and I will protect you and guide you out of the city." He rumbles contentment, happiness, comfort, and the children settle down. Humbert curses, as the scientist looks to the door I pointed to, then herds the children to it.

I turn to face the men. "Some of you will have to stay behind to guard them."

"I'll do it!" Florent hurries to volunteer. He doesn't have a weapon, and spent the fights cowering. I idly wonder how he survived the maze, but Taros interrupts by volunteering too. He is armed, but looks sick still. He didn't consider that standing by the friends he made would result in this level of violence, of death. Four others join them.

"You're cutting down our forces for people who aren't our problem," Humbert growls at me in low tones. Before I point out the ones who are staying behind are those who were the least effective in the fights getting here, Diniz stabs Humbert's leg with a vial.

She grins at me. "Thanks for the distraction."

"What's the meaning of this?" Humbert demands, glaring at me as if I was the one who'd stabbed him.

"You're the best fighter we have, sir," she answers. "Giving up your boost for one of them was a stupid decision and you know it." She glares back at him once he's looking at her. "You can court-martial me for it once we get out of this."

Humbert steps into her personal space, but she doesn't move. "You better survive this, Diniz, because I am going to make you pay for this insubordination. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

"Boost up!" he snarls, then shoves me out of the way to enter the stairwell. We only make it down one flight before there is opposition. The fight is harder than it should be; there are too many of us to be effective in the tight quarters, and the boosted civilians don't listen to orders. It costs us one civilian and many injuries, but because of the boost, the pain enrages them into craving more fighting.

We reach the third floor without another fight, and I rush ahead to look through the window in the door to Amanda's lab. She looks in my direction. The group behind me is noisy, and her eyes go wide with fear as she sees me. My satisfaction at her reaction, then her running off out of sight, doesn't last. Men too large for their skin come into view, running for the door. I step back with a yell of warning, then the doors shatter.

The hallway is large, but there are a lot of us, and the hybrids are massive. The first one through focuses on me. He's faster than I expect, and the punch he lands staggers me back and breaks bones despite the black skin covering my torso. He barely reacts to the punches I throw until I grow spikes out of my black fist, but even with finally drawing blood, he pushes me to the wall, his heavy fists denting it when I dodge his strikes.

A black hand covers his head and slams it into the wall until it is embedded in it, and he no longer moves. Claws protects me from the bullets while I catch my breath. When the gunfire ends, he moves. Humbert looks at me, a superiority-filled grin on his face.

Where the doors were is now covered by metal. Something similar to the walls in the maze, although it seems to be the only section like it. A last-ditch effort to keep people from breaking in, not a way to change the configuration of this floor.

I punch it with my black fist and it resonates. Claws does the same to a similar result, barely making a mark. I find the gap between it and the wall and push my black skin in it, hardening it, giving me purchase and pull. Claws joins me, and together the door grinds until something snaps and it opens.

Amanda is at one of the glass cells as she looks at us over her shoulder. "You can't be here!" she yells, her voice breaking with fear. "You're supposed to be dead!" The glass slides open. "Sarge, protect me and kill them all!"

A form runs out of the cell, short and compact, and I don't have the time to slip through the gap Claws and I have made. He tackles me and I fly into the soldiers. I'm up as he's on me again, his movements a blur that only let me get impressions of what he is: dark gray skin, lighter than the body armor, black hair, brown angry eyes. He looks familiar, but humans don't come in gray.

I shove him away, and I recognize the shape of the body armor, if not the color. It's military in the design, like the one the soldiers wear. He doesn't have a shirt under it, and his skin is a uniform gray a few shades lighter than my black skin. When he strikes, the punch lands harder than a human, but not as hard as a hybrid. His eyes are filled with determination, anger, and his scent is...strange.

I hear the click of a trigger press, and my attacker is gone. The bullet hits me in the chest and I barely stay on my feet. My black skin is intact—not an irradiated bullet, just a heavy caliber.

I look up in the ensuing silence, surprised by it and the scene. My attacker is before Humbert, the man's large handgun pointed at Amanda's new creation's head. But instead of firing, the handgun trembles. Claws is at my side, arm keeping me from advancing.

Before I can voice my question, Humbert provides an answer.

"Cline?"

The hybrid tilts his head, confused. If I ignore his color, along with the cues I rely on to identify people—if all I use is the form of his body, I recognize him too. Cline was missing from his cell when we rescued the soldiers. He was put in the maze overnight, the one the civilians said he collapsed as he walked out. Had to have died.

"I—" the hybrid says. The word is raw, hesitating, as if he didn't know he could speak. "I'm Sarge?" I think the lack of confidence is from being unsure he can speak, but then he asks, "Do you know me?"

The change in Humbert is instant. No doubt, only rage. I jump over Claws's arm.

"No."

Pain explodes in my shoulder, the left one, as the flash of the gunfire blinds me and the impact throws me into Sarge, who keeps me from falling. My black skin catches up to the injury, stopping the bleeding.

"Move," Humbert orders, pulling the gun's hammer back. "Or the next bullet goes in your head."

"You can't kill him, Gregg." I'm unsure he even can. Sarge's confusion has to be why he didn't move. He vanished before the previous one. Once he gets over it, once Humbert's actions convince him we are the enemy, I don't think anyone will be able to shoot him, let alone touch him.

"That's my effing job," Humbert says through gritted teeth. "Killing demons and abominations like you two." He snarls. "You got a pass because Fallon ordered me to, but that thing doesn't get to live."

Claws is behind Humbert, and the man is so focused on me and Sarge he isn't aware of it. I feel better with him there, ready to act if I can't defuse the situation.

"Do you know me?" Sarge asks, the question soft enough I doubt anyone but me and Claws hear it.

"Yes," I reply.

I didn't exist for days after the process that made me. For days I was nothing but something that raged and attacked. Jason explained it to me, and after watching the recording Amanda kept from me, I believe that is the truth. It can't be more than hours since Sarge has been made, and he can think. He has a sense he is someone. Even once I started thinking, there was no one there. Not until Jason made me someone. It took him months of work until I was a person.

Humbert nods, thinking my answer is for him. "Then move."

I do.

Even boosted, Humbert is slower than I am. The gun points at the ceiling when it fires. Claws moves out of the way of Humbert's flying body, and the soldiers stop his fall. The gun in my hand is heavy. Not something the military normally uses, something closer to my preferred revolver. I take the magazine out, let it fall to the ground, eject the bullet from the chamber, drop the gun. Humbert glares at me as it clatters to the floor.

"He is a victim," I tell him, but it's the soldiers holding Humbert back that convinces me I can turn my back to him. Sarge is even more confused. "Amanda did this to you against your will." I feel Claws at my back.

Sarge shakes his head. "I volunteered." He touches his chest. "She told me that." The words are more confident; he is remembering how to talk. "I got hurt protecting her from people like them." He snarls at the soldiers, but then frowns as if he doesn't understand why he did it. "Making me like this was my reward."

"She lied to you," I say, my tone as calm as I can make it. "Humans do that."

"Why?" he winces, and presses a hand to his temple. "Why would she do that? I'm a soldier." He looks at me, the others. "I fought with..." He drops to a knee, holding his head. "We're here for her." He pants. "She said I was here to protect her. We were attacked. Everyone but me died." His hand is on his chest again. "I was going to die, but she got me back in time. She could save me, reward me for being brave." He looks up at me, desperation mixing with the confusion.

"You came here with us," I tell him. "To bring her back to the people she works for."

"Derick," Claws says, his tone urgent, "something is happening. I sense something." I ignore him, Stay focused on Sarge.

"Why did she leave? No, she was taken." He cries out, grabbing his head again. "I don't understand. Did we take her?"

"She's a sociopath," Humbert says. "She doesn't give a damn about you or anything other than her research. You're just a thing to her, something to use or remove. Derick, if your demon says something's happening, we don't have the time for this. Wrap this up now."

Sarge looks at me imploringly.

"Can you accept that things are more complicated than what Amanda told you?"

Sarge nods.

“Once this is over, I’ll explain things as best as I can. You’re not like me, but we’re both her creations. Until then, I need you to help us finish the mission you and the others were sent here to do.”

He nods and stands. Direct instructions seem to calm him.

Humbert grabs my arm and turns me so I face him. Claws is to the side, motioning for Sarge to join him. Humbert is in my face, angry.

“This isn’t over. You keep that thing under control or I’m putting a bullet in it, you, and that demon of yours. Am I clear?”

I nod.

“When this is over,” Humbert threatens, “you and I, we’re going to have a talk, and you better pray I’m in a good mood by then, because it’s the only way you’re going to survive it.” He shoves me aside and points to the metal that closed back over the door. “Someone blow that effing thing open!”