

Chapter 23

Taros and Gregg's breathing is deep and steady; they are sleeping. Guards are patrolling around the building. The men who escape the maze might have proven themselves capable, but aren't trusted yet.

I open a window on the third floor. The guard walking along the wall doesn't hear it; He doesn't look up. The roofs are the domain of his allies, so he doesn't need to bother with them. I hurry to the roof and look at the city's skyline. I see no indication of where the one I need is, and even if I remember his scent for our one encounter, it will take too long to locate it and then follow. What I need is a guide who know them and the city.

Fortunately, I know how to get one to come to me.

I jump to the next roof, the one after that and a third without slowing. Between two buildings I see a guard and hybrid patrolling. Neither looks up. As I leap off the fourth roof, I hear the follower I gained. Their steps aren't entirely quiet as they land, the rumble of excitement lets me track their approach even once they move silently. They gain on me through the fifth and sixth roofs, are close enough they can pounce on me as I watch the edge of the roof.

Instead of jumping, I drop between the buildings and grab at a fire escape to stop my fall. I watch as they drop to the ground, reshaping themselves to soften the landing. Their red eyes look up as I climb onto the metal landing, bright with annoyance and anger. I put a foot on the railing and jump to the facing building and run.

A human would sound the alarm, tell the others where I am, look to predict my path, block it. A demon likes to hunt. When I reach the edge of the roof I pause to look over my shoulder. They appear over the edge. When they are running on the roof, I step off it and quietly land on the fire escape.

I look up, waiting.

They appear at the edge, look down at me. "You are clever," they say, head canting. "I am not hungry, but I will hunt you if that is what you want."

"If you catch me and eat me while you're not hungry, is that a waste of food?" I shrug when they lean forward quizzically. "I've only had to hunt demons who were hungry or suffering from hunger madness before."

"I hunt you."

I wait. They make a motion, it starts at the hand, claws moving, then ripples to the arm and body. A message for someone who understands demon language? I keep waiting.

"It is not pleasant," they say, annoyance in the undercurrent. At the recollection of the sensation, or me who isn't playing my part and running scare, I have no way to tell. "It is heavy, but it is not a waste."

"Thank you."

"You are strange." They cant their head in curiosity, sniff the air. "You look human, but smell like the human things, not like humans, not like the People."

"Humans made me. I'm part human and part demon."

Their eyes brighten. "Is this a hunt for you then? I will not make it easy."

I shake my head. "I'm not hunting tonight. I need to speak with Rules us All, but I don't know where to find them."

They look at the moons, then around. "Rules them All is at the aerie." They motion to a tall building in the distance. The one I saw in the reconnaissance pictures during the briefing. I'm now close enough to see that the top floors are destroyed.

"Will they eat me if I show up without warning?"

"Rules them All isn't hungry."

The older a demon is, the less they need to eat, but they also move less, to the point where they simply sit in one place between hunts. Or at least it's what Lives Alone told me. Rules us All is

much older, and yet, they move. They came to the maze to subdue Claws.

I jump to the other roof and walk backward, watching for the demon to follow. When they don't I turn and start running.

The building is outside what Harry called the kingdom, the only section the military is interested in. That would be why they didn't address the building, the aerie. They might not even know Rules us All lives there. The number of guards I see as I travel drops to nothing once I'm outside the perimeter, and demons also become rarer. Those who see me don't give chase. Did the demon I spoke with somehow send a warning explaining what I'm doing?

The aerie is so much taller than the buildings around it I have to climb its side. When I reach the top, it's covered by debris. Claw marks on the floor and the larger piece give me an indication of how this happened. The scents of the destruction are a few years old. A wall is still standing in the center of the, and as I approach, Rules us All's scent grows stronger.

Did the demon I spoke with call them Rules *them* All because they don't recognize Rules rule, or is it a human thing again? Something they say to make a point with humans, and not among themselves?

I walk around the wall, and part of the side is also standing. When I pass it, I see there is another wall opposite it, forming a room taking a quarter of the floor's space. I stop at the impact of a rumble. Acknowledgment, warning, amusement.

When I don't hear motion, the approaching of claws, I speak, keeping in mind what Claws said. "I don't know how to enter with respect. I don't have the language for it."

"Then just enter." The voice is deep and carries a sense of being tired. I realize it's in the words' undertone. Unlike Claws, Rules us All can put the undertone in his words. Is it something they do consciously, or something that comes with their advanced age?

I step around the wall.

The room also lacks a roof. Debris litter this part of the floor too. Rules us All is on my left, seated on a large chair made of bones against what is the back wall of this space. Skulls in various shapes and sizes hang from the wall behind them. I pause when I notice a large number of them are human skulls.

"Humans collect from what they hunt," Rules us All says. "Display them, show how skilled they are in the hunt." The undertone is amusement, curiosity, and something I can only identify as envy, although it isn't exact. I try to understand why they tell me this. Are they looking for confirmation?

"I don't know much about humans and why they do what they do."

"Strength," they say. They make the human motion for me to approach. "Humans want strength, power. They don't grow into it as we do. Sometimes, humans lie about the power they hold."

"Humans like to lie," I reply, approaching.

"It protects them. Hides how weak they are." Their red eyes aren't as bright as I expect, but the strength behind them is unmistakable. "Do you lie?"

"I've had to," I answer without hesitation, "but I don't enjoy it. I don't lie to demons, only humans."

"You have a weakness to hide from humans, but not the People?" they are amused, curious.

"Humans don't accept that I'm not interested in their world. They keep pulling me back in, demand that I work for them." I stop to get my anger under control. "They claim that because they made me, I have to do what they want."

They study me in silence. "Are you here to ask that I free you from them?" they motion in the direction of the military camp.

"No. I'm here because I want to understand why you worked for them."

They watch me, then the laugh hits me and I stagger back. It isn't a sound, not even a rumble. It's simply the intent of the laughter.

"I don't work for them, Eater of the People. They didn't make me."

"You heard about that?" I grumble.

"I am Rules them All. I hear many things." Do they realize humans altered their name? Do they care that humans did it?

"Then why are you here? Why do you let the humans treat your people as if they are theirs?"

"I am here because this is mine," Rules them All says, and the undertone hits me. A sense of standing between his people and threats. Of maintaining order in a time of chaos and change. Did they try to explain that to humans and it's how humans decided their name was Rules us All? "I was here then humans fell from the sky in their spaceships. The wild is mine. I do not give up what is mine. I allowed the humans to come here, to grow their families. I watched and learned. Humans are...interesting and strange. I enjoy those things."

"Mister Graves seems to think all this belongs to him."

They give a human shrug. "Humans are strange. Sometimes they lie so they feel they have more power."

"So you let him claim that the city belongs to him?"

"It serves me that he thinks so. He made it so humans left, keeps them from returning. He controls those here so they stay in their place. He feeds my people sometimes."

So Rules them All isn't infallible. Mister Graves claimed he made people leave and they believe him. They might not know about the sickness. If I tell them they were lied to, will they care? They know humans do it, seem to make use of it too. Will enraging this demon help me?

No, it won't.

"Do you know what he plans to do with his father? Us a souls stone, a part of your people to make him into a hybrid?" I touch the one in my pocket. I know what I must do with it, but the undertone from Rules them All speaks of deep caring and I worry I'll enrage them if Risk It was their child, or a child of one of their children. Protect seems to care about the entirety of his family. Is every demon here related to Rules them All?

"Matthew," they say, then trail off. Reminiscing, I think Jason calls it when humans do it, and I realize the undertone might not be about the dead demon. "I watched him grow. Humans have short lives, they fight to keep them. I understand the need to not relinquish what is his. To refuse the First One's call. He isn't the first human to try. If Matthew succeeds, I will welcome him and we will hunt together. Claim more of the wild."

Claim?

"So, you don't mind that they're going to use a dead demon for that?"

"If the First One can't keep those who are theirs, how is it my concern?"

"Even if it's your child who died?"

The words come with amusement. "My children don't listen to the First One's claims. I taught them better. Any who will hunt them will die."

Demons don't lie, they have no need. That has been a constant since first meeting Claws. But Rules them All is odd, different from any I've met. They like humans, how they think. They speak of claiming the wilderness. Claws only speaks of it as something that is, not something to be claimed. Is greed something demons can learn? How will that affect what I have to do?

"If I take something Mister Graves claims as his, will you consider that I'm taking it from you?"

"If you can take with is his, then he doesn't deserve to keep it. His hunts are not my responsibility."

"Then why did you stop us from leaving?"

"Your parent intruded on what is mine. Unlike you, Claws in the Dark can show me respect, but didn't do so. I don't suffer intrusions lightly. I should have added his bones to my wall, but Jimmy asked me not to. He said it would anger you." They lean forward, their curiosity palpable.

"Would it have?"

Their question distracts from working out who Jimmy is.

How would I have reacted to Claws's death at Rules them All's hands? I haven't spent that much time with him, but I've always known he was there, somewhere in the wilderness. What would it be like to know he was gone? The thought makes me uncomfortable. It isn't the anger I felt when I learned about the Lie, but it's similar.

"I think it would have."

"And what would you do about it?"

I can't take on Rules them All, I know that, and yet... "I don't know."

"Humans are quick to anger and act harshly," they say leaning back in their seat of bones. "Don't be like them."

I put thoughts of Claws dying out of my mind; it's harder than it should be. Rules them All confirmed we can take Amanda. That's all I need to know.

"Why claim more of the wilderness?" I ask before I consider the wisdom of it.

They watch me, amused. "Because it is there." The undercurrent is certainty, the rightness of them taking it, taking for the sake of taking? The confusion I feel shows, because they laugh in the human way. "I have heard of one like you who gathered the People. Who claimed a territory."

"Adam," I confirm.

They cant their heads. "Those who speak of him call him Wants to Rule."

I nod, the name makes sense from a demon's point of view. "He's dead."

"Hunted by Claws in the Dark, with help from humans. Were you there?"

I nod. Demons travel and spread stories, that is how Rules them All heard of Adam.

"Matthew talked about it, after I told him. The television didn't mention Wants to Rule, not even by his human name. Humans like to hide what makes them look weak. Matthew liked what Wants to Rule did. Said that if he was younger, he'd do it. That I would help him gather the People and that together, we would calm the wild. That we would decide who can hunt in it."

"If the procedure works, is that what Matthew will do?"

They shrug, then smile. "I do not need Matthew to claim the wild." The undertone is pride, strength, inevitability, and more that I can't identify, and I stare at them.

Demons can learn from humans. Those who survive in the city form something resembling criminal organizations, wrapping themselves among humans to make themselves more difficult to find, but it doesn't change who they are at their core. They hunt to feed, protect their territory. But they don't lead them the way humans think of leadership. They protect it because demons protect what is theirs, their family, their territory. But this sense of superiority I get from Rules them All?

I felt it in a fight, where strength is pitted against strength and one is superior to the other. But expansion? A belief they have the right to everything? Until now, I had only seen it in humans and Adam.

But unlike Adam, there is nothing about Rules them All that feels insane. They are someone who, once they make up their mind, do what they have decided to. That is what the sense of inevitability I get from them is. The only aspect that works against their desire is the unwillingness to work with other of their kind, but outside their family.

Demons are solitary on some level. A trait I share with them.

I take out the soul stone, confident I'm no longer in danger of enraging them. "This is Risk It."

They glance at it. "You hunted him?" there is no undertone.

"They hunted me, but I won. I've been shown a way to honor them, return to the First One, but I don't know if that's how you want it done."

"Why do I care what you do with what is yours?" they say, no longer interested.

I pocket it and find I'm not sure how to end the meeting. With Claws, I just walk away, but humans can be finicky about rules and rituals. Rules them All had shown enough human behavior that I worry I might offend them if I walk away.

“I don’t have anything else to ask. Unless you have an objection, I’ll leave.”

The amusement comes on a soft rumble, then comes the human gesture shooing me away.

I walk to the edge of the building. Now that Rules them All isn’t an issue in taking Amanda, all that’s needed is for me and Humbert to free his soldiers, make our way through the city to Amanda’s labs, fight whatever humans, hybrids, and demons protect her, and fight our way out of the city.

I believe Jason’s description of this situation would be “piece of cake”.