

A man steps between us, Moores. "Protect, stop!"

I reach to pull him out of the way, trying to understand what he thinks this will accomplish, and the demon speaks.

"He threatens Cub." Their voice is deep, the rumble carries worry.

I freeze. My hand holding Moores's arm.

"I'm certain this is just a misunderstanding," Moores says.

"There is no misunderstanding," the demon replies, the undertone adding anger.

The man sighs. "Just talk with him." Moores turns to me, noticing my arm, and he looks uncertain. "Derick." He hesitates, focuses on my black hand, and nods. "This is Protects the Community. We call him Protect."

We? I look around and the people are looking at us. No fear, no panic.

"Protect, this is—"

"I know Eats the People," the demon snarls.

"What?" I snap back.

"You can't hide your scent," they continue. "Travels the Wild told of how you eat us."

"I don't eat demons," I reply, offended, and add, because some people seem worried now, but are looking at me. "I don't eat anyone. I don't even hunt demons anymore, not unless they threaten people." I motion to the group of children, smaller now, searching for the demon cub. It ran off, I think, but then I see its head poking out from under one of the older boy's arms. Looking at us, at me. They hiss at me until the boy pushes them back behind himself, determination on his face. He will protect them from me, I realize, is what it means.

I look around again. The adults now holding children show concern, but they are looking at me. I am the one they worry about, not the demon. How am I the one who scares them with a demon nearly twice my height here? When a demon cub is among their children?

"Alright everyone," Moores calls, voice firm, "this is just a misunderstanding. No one got hurt. Go back about your business."

"How?" I ask the man. "How is this possible? How is that cub not tearing the children apart? How is this demon not eating you right now?"

The demon snorts. "I do not eat humans." Offense is the undertone.

"You eat anything that moves," I snap back. "I know how demons are!"

"Evidently, not as well as you think," Moores says with a chuckle.

I glare at him. "I was made to hunt them. I was taught everything there is to know about demons. When they're hungry, they eat anything they can hunt." I point at the cub, their head now poking over the boy's. "When they're young, eating is all they think about."

"Only when there's nothing for them to hunt," Moores says in a calm tone. It reminds me of Jason when he tried to teach me about human interaction, about why I need to behave in human ways. My lack of understanding always tested his patience, but he kept his voice steady. He never showed it unless he was making a point with his impatience. "There are a lot of animals in the forest," he continues. "Some are dangerous enough they give even Protect a good hunt. Cub..." The man hesitates, looks at the children. "Findlay, when did Cub eat last?"

The boy standing before the cub, his arms crossed over his chest now, shrugs. "I don't know." The cub moves, and the boy, Findlay, moves with them, and tries to block their view of me. The demon's little red eyes glare at me before the boy blocks it.

Moores sighs. "It's everyone's job to keep track. You know how excitable Cub gets when he starts to become hungry. Take him to the pens." He turns to me. "At their age, Cub can go an hour between eating. They're basically a large dog during that time."

"With claws that can tear a child apart," I point out, watching Findlay grab the demon cub by the nape and pull them away. The cub snarls, pulls, and protests, but they don't fight back. They don't attack.

"I take it you've never had a large dog." Moores smiles. "Even a pet can injure you if you're not careful around them."

"Jason was worried I'd eat it," I answer. Jason had brought one, in my first months of life, called it Caroline, and after sniffing it, I asked if he was going to teach me to hunt it. He took the dog away and never brought another back.

"You'd eat a pet?" Moores's expression is odd, curiosity mixed with disbelief.

"I didn't know what a pet was. If it was with a human, I wouldn't eat it." My explanation doesn't comfort him. "They don't give me a good enough hunt to make it worthwhile."

"So, you are part demon. I suspected, because of how black the skin on your right side is, and its texture, but I wasn't certain."

I put my right hand in my pocket. Hide it from view. "Why do you let this demon herd you?"

"We aren't Protect's herd," Moores replies, and the demon, Protect, rumbles annoyance. "We're his community."

"Family," the demon says.

"The concept doesn't translate well," Moores adds.

The rumble speaks of belonging, caring, keeping safe; it reminds me of how Claws feels about me. I watch the demon. I don't know if they can lie through their roars and rumbles—if they ever feel a need to lie through them since humans can't sense them. I still have difficulty believing this demon, this elder demon, cares for humans.

Their gaze is fixed on me. They wait for me to act. I can count on one hand the number of times a demon waited for me to do the first move. It's still unnerving.

"You call yourself 'the People'?"

"It's another term that doesn't translate well," Moores says, but Protect rumbles and I am enveloped in a sense of belonging, of being cared for. Like when I'm with Claws, but more encompassing, weaker, spreading further. Protect cares, but not as much as for his own kind.

Something Jason told me, not long before I left him and Amanda, comes back to me.

"Anyone who can think wants to be part of something bigger. It's normal. It helps them survive, it helps them thrive."

At the time, I thought he was referring to me. Asking about when I'd have a team was a common thing for me. Did he mean demons?

Claws spoke of family units. He had had a mate, Fangs in the Light. I know of two cubs. Runs the Forest—I swallow at the memory of having to kill him. There was the one who tried to kill me, early after I first met Claws in the Dark. He has implied others in our conversations—cubs, relatives—but I never had a sense he thought about other demons other than to worry how their actions would endanger his family.

The sense of belonging emanating from Protect makes me feel...small.

"How do you keep that cub fed?" I ask, so I don't have to think about how I feel. "There can't be enough creatures in the town for it to hunt."

“We breed them,” Moores answer.

“How do you breed creatures?” I remember videos, from when Jason tried to teach me about human sexuality.

“Very carefully,” Moores replies, smiling, and I stare at him, trying to understand what he means. My lack of reaction surprises him. “It’s going to be easier to show you. Protect.” He looks at the demon. “Are we good?”

“No.” The word carries mistrust. “You cannot stop him if he decides to attack the cub or one of you. Eats the People isn’t human or of the People. Something like that shouldn’t exist.”

“I won’t attack anyone,” I tell them, and the demon is in my face, skin rippling away from the forming muzzle, showing long and sharp teeth.

“Why should I believe you?” He sniffs me. “You are too young to stop the hunger.”

“I’m not driven by it,” I reply, keeping my skin from reacting to their proximity by will only.

Moores pushes Protect away from me, and the demon steps back. I stare at him. The amused rumble from Protect confuses me almost as much as seeing a human shove an elder demon away. Are they amused at me, or at Moores, for presuming they can force him to move?

“As you said, Protect, he isn’t a demon. You should know better than anyone that humans have a habit of doing things they shouldn’t.”

Protect shakes his head, an annoyed rumble leaving him. “Do not bring up the First One. You know I dislike it.” I’m surprised again, but this time it’s at the lack of a threat in the words.

Moores smiles. “You were young, there’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I am not ashamed!” the demon roars, teeth bared in Moores’s face. Everyone still in the plaza, except for me and Moores, steps back.

He pushes the muzzle aside casually. “My apologies.” Moores smiles at Protect, and with a huff, the demon turns, takes a step, and launches himself in the air. Wings form out of his back and they beat, taking him out of sight.

I no longer know what to be confused about. Moores’s lack of fear of the elder demon. The way Protect includes the human when he rumbles of family. The boy leading a cub by the scruff of the neck. And now this?

“Did he fly away?”

“Yes,” Moores replies, amused. “He likes his dramatic exits.”

I stare at the man and realize I asked the question out loud. “Demons can’t fly. They’re too massive. I’ve only seen them glide.”

“It’s just a question of having the right ratio of muscle to mass. Of the demons here, Protect is the only one who flies.”

“There are more demons?” I look around, searching the shadows, sniffing the air, but all I can smell is Protect.

“They’re in the forest. I didn’t think it was a good idea for them to be in town while you were here.” He steps toward the edge of the plaza. “But you asked about animal breeding. Come, I’ll show you the pens.”

“Who is the First One?” I ask as we walk along a smaller street.

He lets out a breath. “My ancestor. That was centuries ago.”

“A human is the First One?” I asked, trying to reconcile stories of how the demons believe they came to be with that revelation. I search the sky, but it’s too early to see the moons. The one demons believe is the First One’s eye, watching over them. Lives Alone and Claws told me some of their beliefs and history.

“What?” Moores looks at me. “Oh, no, not that First One. That’s some legend the People have. This one is my ancestor. The one who founded this town. If not for Protect, I wouldn’t even know about her. We have records about leaving the homeworld, of arriving on this planet, but after the landing, things get muddy. People were too busy surviving, adapting, to make records. Our ship landed where Turtines stands now.”

“There were other ships,” I say, recalling something Lives Alone said. How, if he’d known what would come of the boxes falling out of the sky, he would have killed them all.

Moores nods. “Every nation that could manage it built one.”

“Why did they come here?” Neither Claws nor Lives Alone knew the answer. Even Robert, one of the rare humans I considered a friend for the short time I was in the same city he lives in, didn’t know, and he was someone who had read everything he could find.

Moores doesn’t answer immediately. He’s silent for the rest of the walk through the town, and partly as we walk through the forest. There is no path, but the man walks confidently. The smell of the acrid cleaner clings to every tree. Why do they clean the forest?

“I don’t have the details,” he finally says. “Or rather, I didn’t look into them. I’m not a historian. What’s happening now is what I care about, rather than what happened then, on another planet. There was a war. I don’t know over what. It got bad enough people felt it was better to leave than see the results. And here we are.”

“And the First One, your ancestor, was among them?”

Moores chuckles. “No, she came along a good century later. She got fed up with the city, the government. The world is a big place, and back then it was still mostly unexplored. She and a group of people who felt like she did left the city. They traveled for months and eventually ended up here. Districts weren’t a thing back then. They settled, and almost immediately discovered they weren’t the only ones living here.”

“Demons.”

“The People, yes. Things weren’t as dire back then.” Moores pauses. “I don’t mean the meeting was friendly. We were trespassers on Protect’s land, and they are territorial, but they still had plenty of animals to hunt. Even the younger ones weren’t as driven by the hunger then. There were a few altercations, but eventually, they were able to communicate.”

“How?” Demons have to be old to be smart enough to learn our language.

“My ancestor was a linguist, and she had a bunch of scientists with her. One of them had a sensor that detected the sub-vocalized band the People use when they roar, or purr, or rumble. Basically, anytime they make a sound, there’s more to it than what you hear.”

“And you understand it?”

He shakes his head. “We can’t hear it. Even with machines, figuring out what each frequency means is beyond us, but it told her there was more to the People than they initially thought. And in the end, trying to figure that out wasn’t needed because she taught the People to understand us.” He chuckles. “The way that Protect recounts it, she said some rather inappropriate things, and he was a young leader then, but ultimately they were able to understand each other, and agreed to share this territory.”

“She taught demons to speak?” I ask, the ramifications beyond what I can comprehend. I always believed demons had worked it out on their own, since demons had never interacted with humans—or so I had been told.

“Only those here.” Moore pauses again. “But the People do travel, so it’s possible one of them here left and taught others. It’s much more

likely other scientists worked out how to communicate with their local groups.”

The implication that other humans could have interacted with demons without conflict doesn't escape me, but Moore's sounds uncertain. He's making suppositions.

The man sighs. “Then humans started expanding, deciding what belongs to whom. They created the districts, gave themselves complete authority over everything in them. They cut down the wild. Even here, this far from everything, the results were felt as the People who lost their forests fled deeper, and Protect had to fight them off. Here too the food the People hunt became strained, and for a time, it looked like the humans living peacefully with the People would fall victim to their hunger.”

We step out of the forest and the scents assault me.

“And then, someone introduced animal husbandry.”