

# Chapter 18

Amanda leads me, with the guards surrounding me, outside. The building we exit is short, made entirely of concrete. I fight the urge to look up as we approach the waiting car. I know somewhere above us drones watch, but I don't want to let the people watching know I'm aware of them.

"In." Amanda points into the open back door.

"No." I go in and the colonel had no choice but to assume I betrayed them again.

She looks at me, disbelief on her face. "Do you think you have any choice? I might not have any of the poison I created for you, but those guns are still loaded with irradiated bullets."

I cross my arms over my chest. "How much of a demonstration to this Mister Grave am I going to be, if I'm bleeding and dying?"

The smile that forms on her lips is odd, different from the nasty one she wore the last time I rescued her. There is outright malevolence in it now. "You're going to be a better one than if we just stand here all day. In the car, now."

A guard hits the back of my head with the butt of his rifle. "You heard the lady. Get it."

I turn slowly to face him, more to show him the hit didn't affect me, but also for time to plan. If I can force him to be more aggressive, the colonel might understand the situation I'm in and not consider the mission a failure yet. They didn't say it this time, but I expect bombing the city is still how they will deal with the situation if the mission is considered a failure. They already consider anyone still in the city an enemy.

"Do you think you can force me?" I ask him, indicating the machine gun he holds with a nod.

The man smiles, a show of teeth that tries, and fails, to imitate the way a demon threatens an enemy. He raises the machine gun, muscles tensing. He expects to enjoy this, maybe be praised by Amanda, or whoever he considers important.

The weapon's butt is halfway to my face when I move. I snap it out of his hand and break it over my knee before the man's momentum sends him off balance and he falls on the floor.

The others step back as I drop the machine guns' pieces next to the man and he gets to his feet. They are aiming at me, but check with one another, uncertain what to do. I'm surprised at their hesitation, don't the hybrids show this level of speed? They didn't in the stairwell, but I thought it was because of the tight quarters. Maybe it's the cunning that worries them? The hybrids don't seem all that smart. I smile at them without bothering to show my teeth.

Safeties come off.

"Don't shoot him, you idiots?" Amanda yells at them. "Are you looking to die? What's going to happen to that big demon of yours if you aren't there to protect it?"

I face her, putting the others out of my mind. "Me staying alive isn't protecting a demon, but you."

She scoffs. "Like I'm scared of that thing." And she isn't. Somehow, she has twisted her perception of reality in such a way that she believes she's immune to Rules us All's anger, or any of the other demons here. "Now, you're getting in, or I'm telling these men to empty their guns on your legs and they'll drag you in." I consider pointing out that won't keep me from killing them.

I step into the back of the car and hope the display was enough to show the colonel I am not doing this willingly. A guard sits on each side of me and they comment on how I will give them pleasure once this is over. I fixed one, my face impassive as he laughs at the other's description. It was a lewd act, the kind even Jason blushed describing when he was explaining why men engaged in sex even if there were no chances of producing offsprings. He falls silent and I turn my gaze on the other and fear replaces lust in the car.

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When the car stops, we are at the edge of the part of the city these people occupy, what Harry called their kingdom. Another block and the buildings are uninhabited. The building is three

stories high, made of bring that is in better condition than those around it. A man in a red and gold uniform I don't recognize opens the door for us as we approach. He gives Amanda a slight bow, removing the red and gold cap, then donning it back as he straightens.

Amanda doesn't slow as she crosses the lobby. The stairs are at the back, large enough all of us can go up side by side. Instead, they surround me again, with Amanda in the lead. Men and women come and go, looking busy or bored. The busy ones look like administrative staff, the others are arms, so guards. The furnishing is what Jason would describe as lavish, something emphasizing comfort and demonstrating wealth over utility. Something the rich did, he'd added in a dismissive tone, because they have so much money they feel everyone has to know about it.

Money is a mark of power among humans, so this Mister Graves is powerful.

What does it say of Amanda that all the furniture in her office was utilitarian? Even back in the time of the Lie. Was it an acknowledgment she wasn't in charge, or is this something more complex?

The stairs curve into a landing connected to a balcony and continue to the third floor. A guard unlocks a door as we approach, opens it, and I'm shoved in. The door closes and locks behind me.

There are no windows or other exits. Two of the walls comprise shelves filled with books. A step ladder rests against the shelves, allowing access to the top ones. The scent is interesting, old, slightly moldy, dry. Jason showed me books as part of my education. It's an older method of recording information that some people still prefer over computer files. Robert spoke of reading books when he talked about all the reading he did.

I breathe in again and tease apart more of the complex scent. It differs from the books Jason showed me. Those had a sterility to them I associated with everything back then. This... I make out tree pulp, some chemical I don't know, leather. Do humans perceive these nuances? I've never seen an indication their sense of smell was that advanced.

A fireplace is in the center of the left wall, it has logs in, but it isn't lit. Chairs, lavish again, large enough a full-grown hybrid can sit in one comfortably. A cabinet has fancy, unmarked bottles on display, and even at this distance, I smell the alcohol.

I look around, trying to understand the purpose of the room, why they left me alone in it. It isn't a holding cell. The door is wooden, I can break it with one kick. Unless the elder demon is in the building, I can get out before they get here. There is a sense of age in this room, and Jason explained that many things gained value as they become old. I can destroy everything here before they react.

Is this a show of power? Is this willingness to place this wealth at risk a demonstration of how wealthy they are? They don't care if I destroy everything here?

Humans are confusing.

The door opens and I face it.

The man who enters is thin. He's dressed in a dark blue business suit, and as the bearing of someone used to give orders and having them obeyed. He reminds me of the colonel in how he studies me. Amanda looks shabby next to him, in her ill-fitting gray suit and lab coat over it. He is a little shorter than I am, his skin not as dark as mine. Tanned is how Jason would describe it.

He smiles, and it only shows pleasure. "So, that is Derick?" he asks Amanda.

"Model four, yes," she answers with an annoyed shake of the head. "Jason is the one who insisted on naming him. Hiring him was a mistake."

The man nods, but isn't paying her any attention anymore. He walks around me. I keep facing Amanda, trying to determine what she intends here. It's only the three of us. Is the absence of guards another show of power? This man isn't important enough to matter if I kill him? Neither is Amanda?

"And he's your most successful one to date." A statement. Interesting. Has Amanda not made others in the year after she was rescued from Adam?

“He’s the one who’s survived the longest,” she finally answers with reluctance. “But I wouldn’t consider him a success, since he betrayed me to side with the demons.”

“I suppose you have a point.” There’s amusement in the man’s voice. “How about a demonstration of his capabilities?”

Now I turn to face the man. He’s at the cabinet, studying the bottles before taking one and pouring some in a glass. “How about a drink?”

“You know I don’t drink, Mister Graves,” Amanda answers.

I don’t show my surprise at the revelation as the man clucks his tongue. “And now you’ve gone and ruined the surprise.” Everyone has acted as if Mister Graves is the person in charge, and this man doesn’t smell like he’s lying. If he’s so important, why is he here without protection? Amanda is delusional, but this man has to understand the danger I represent.

He turns to face me, glass in hand. “And the offer is for you, Mister…” he trails off. “Is it Mister Derick, simply Derick, or maybe Mister Dark?” He smiles. “I understand you consider the demon who accompanied you to be related to you. Personally, I like Derick Dark, it suits you.” He motions to me, to my black trench coat.

I study him in silence.

“Answer him,” Amanda orders.

Humans don’t subvocalize, but they have ways of communicating without speaking. Body language. Demons also have that. Jason explained it’s something that happens to any social species because they aren’t always able to speak to communicate. He worked hard at teaching me some of it. Others I picked up on my own. I expect I use it often without realizing it. Jason also explained that it’s ingrained so deep in people that it’s instinctive. But there is a large subset that needs conscious decision to use.

Humans shake hands to express a pleasurable meeting. They throw items to show displeasure. Make gestures as a codification of language. Those vary from one location to another, but in my travel, I have noticed some that are constant. I do not interact with humans enough to have used many of them. I shook Robert’s hand the last time I saw him.

When I raise my hand, the gesture is mechanical. I don’t have the practice to make it smooth. I make a fist and raise the middle finger. I don’t bother turning to look at Amanda.

She gasps and the man spits his drink, then chokes on his laughter. I feel satisfaction at her reaction, and am puzzled by his.

“How dare you,” she sputters. “I made you, you will show me respect and do what I tell you.”

I face her and chose my words carefully, drawing on the many conversations I overheard in my time among humans. I want to be certain my words carry the right tone. “Go fuck yourself.” Her face reddens as the man laughs harder. She grabs the tall lamp next to her and steps toward me, holding it like a weapon.

“That’s enough, Doctor.” The man’s tone is cold, the laughter is gone in an instant. Amanda stops and I’m surprised at the worry I see in her eyes before she covers it up with a sneer directed at me.

“I apologize for his behavior,” she says, placing the lamp back. “I did warn you he had defects.”

“No need to apologize, Doctor. I like a man who has a mind of his own. Mindless soldiers have their place, but Doctor Dunn already provides me with those. I’m expecting something better from you, Doctor Walker, and Derick is much closer to what I want to see than you seem to think.”

“You misunderstand what he is, Mister Graves,” she tells him. “Number four isn’t free-thinking. He’s a slave to the demons, he does what they tell him. He’s more like them than us. That’s what I’ve been trying to solve.”

I feel the man’s eyes on me. “I think you’re underestimating him, Doctor. A demon wouldn’t have bothered giving you the finger. If he’d felt insulted, he would have eaten you. If what you said didn’t matter, he would have ignored you.” He smiles. “That was a very human reaction. Those are

the kind of things I want you to preserve when you put my father through the process.”

The implication takes a few seconds to sink in as I’m busy watching Amanda. There is no defiance in her, and it surprises me. The Amanda I remember, the one I have dealt with, even here, lashes out when someone disagrees with her. In the time of the Lies, only Jason was immune to it, and I believe it is because of how skilled he is at using language.

I turn to the man. He is seated in, his glass in hand, studying me. “Why would you want your father to be what I am?”

“Not exactly what you are,” he says. “I need him to retain his memories, but Doctor Walker tells me she’s close to achieving that.”

“Won’t that make him like Adam?” I ask her. “Didn’t he teach you not to try that again?”

She snorts. “If I let failure stop me, you wouldn’t exist, so count yourself lucky. I learned from Adam. You’re a result of that learning, and you let that demon of yours kill him. At least show his memory some respect.”

“I’m also not interested in a version of that model,” the man says. He indicates the chair angled to his. “Why don’t you take a seat, Derick?”

“No,” I answer flatly, then consider how he has treated me and add. “Thank you.”

He nods. “From the reports I read, Adam’s main failure was a lack of emotional attachment to people, as well as mental instability. From what I read, that’s been resolved with you.”

Does he believe that? He smells like he does. Did Amanda lie to him? “Why would you put your father through this, make him like me? I thought humans respected and honored their parents.” Amanda’s lack of reaction confirms she doesn’t see herself as such.

The man raises an eyebrow. “Don’t you see what you are as an honor?”

“I’m a killer. I don’t have that attachment to humans you want. Jason did his best, but I hardly understand you. I had to teach myself not to just kill, to be better than that.”

“But you were able to.” The man leans forward. “Don’t you see how amazing that is? She made you one thing, but you broke away from it. You took your destiny into your own hands.”

“Doesn’t your father already have that?”

The man leaned back in the seat, his face clouding over. “My father is dying.” He took a long drink. “He’s old by human standard. He built everything we have from the ground up.” The smile that forms is sad. “My father is a powerful man, but time remains out of his control. We have medicine, we have machines, but that only extends life by decades. Do you have any idea how long demons live? Do you know that no demon had ever died of old age? For all we know, demons are immortal.” He points to me. “You’re immortal.”

I shake my head. “I will die.”

“You’re going to die fighting,” the man states. “And it’s going to have to be something strong that kills you. But what if you had an easier life? I’m not saying sitting around not doing anything. But what if you weren’t alone? What if you had people working with you, for you? What if you had a team to help you in your battles?”

Memories surface. Craving others like me. Asking Amanda why I worked alone while other cities had teams. Her replies were lies, but they didn’t invalidate the yearning for others.

“Is that what you want for your father?”

He chuckles. “My father will make what he wants, or take it. I’m asking you, Derick. Once Doctor Walker has perfected her methods, I can give you that team. I can give you a family. Isn’t that what you want? It’s one of the few things human and demons have in common, a desire for family.”

The offer is honest and I want to say yes. My time with Moores’s people, Protect’s people has made me realize I don’t want to be alone. But it’s so much a reflection of what I asked Amanda that I can’t trust it. I can’t trust them.

And I am not alone anymore. “I have a family, Claws in the Dark.”

“He can stay with you,” the man says without hesitation.

“What?” Amanda protests. “That isn’t—”

A glare silences her. As pleasant as the man is with me, there is an undercurrent of viciousness in his body language. It’s fleeting, but it reminds me of the first child of Claws I met, the one who wanted me dead, wanted to make me suffer before he ended me.

“What do you say, Derick? You can have it all. You can be your own boss, except for when I need you to do jobs for me. Claws in the Dark can use the maze when he needs to feed. I’ll even make sure it’s animals if the good doctor has indoctrinated the dislike of hunting humans too deeply for you to overcome and let him do that.”

His implication that Claws wants to hunt humans makes the urge to rip the man apart surge and I hope it doesn’t show on my face. In that offer, he has revealed something about himself I can’t stand. He doesn’t care.

He cares nothing for me, for demons, for humans. All he cares about is him, what he wants. The rest of us, inside his little kingdom, are only alive because he feels we are of use to him. Knowing that, I know what my answer has to be. There is only one thing I can say to ensure I and Claws live.

But I can’t say it, I can’t agree to this offer. And while Jason and Amanda have taught me to lie without meaning to. I would have to lie to myself to agree, lie to Claws to get him to agree. I also can’t just tell him no. His responses to Amanda’s outburst show me it takes refusals worse than she does. I search through everything Jason taught me about dealing with humans for a way to answer him that will not end with Claws and me ripped apart immediately by the elder demon.

“I appreciate your offer, Mister Graves. I’m honored that you think I have a place here, but I have to decline. I don’t function well among other people, among humans. You’re too complex. In time, I’ll be a liability.”

He leans forward, studying me. “Please reconsider, Derick.” He is earnest. “You know I can’t let you leave. The best I can offer you is time in a cell until I’m ready to deal with you. There’s no way in which this ends with you alive if you don’t work with me.”

“As I told you, I will die. It is the one thing Amanda has taught me I still accept. I don’t have a desire to live forever.”

He leans back, and I see the calculations in his eyes. “You’re playing for time, which is admirable.” He smiles. “She made you a fighter, and you’re hoping to find a way out of this, to escape with your team, even if you don’t care for them.”

I don’t deny my plans. I wait for him to decide. If I have to, I’ll fight here and do my best to return to Claws.

He nods, then sighs. “Alright, have it your way, Derick. Dream of your escape next to your demon. In time, you’ll see it can’t happen and think you’ll reconsider your position. I’ll have you escorted back there, but—” he raises a finger “—be warned that the instant you cause trouble, I will have Claws executed first. Unlike Doctor Walker, I understand how dangerous he is, and how much you care about him.”

I nod. A silent promise not to cause trouble until I’m confident we can all leave this place alive. Me, Claws, Humbert, and his soldiers, no matter how long and hard the captain complains about it.