

# Chapter 6

The forest is still around us, but this clearing is enormous. We walk alongside pens containing creatures. I recognize some from my travels, my hunts, the larger ones mostly; others are foreign. Each pen contains twenty or more of one kind of creature and is large enough they can run.

“What are they?” I point to six-legged creatures in a pen. They have short necks, long legs, and thick bodies with a coating of green-gray down. They run the periphery of the pen.

“Protect calls them fast-runners. We call them horses because they resemble an animal of that name back on the homeworld.” He points to another pen. “We raise a variety of animals, each better suited for each hunting age.”

“What do you feed them?” Each pen has a trough creatures eat from.

“We only have vegetarian animals, so they’ll eat anything plant-based. They’re how we get rid of most of our farming leftovers, but we also grow plants specifically to feed them. The variety ensures they’re healthy.”

A structure is before us, in the distance, tall and large, far from the pens. Before I’m done taking it in, Moores has turned and is heading to a set of three pens, which, unlike the others that are made of wood, are made of concrete. Two meters tall, without openings in them.

I stop when I notice the demon perched on the opposite side of a pen, looking in. They’re half the size of Protect and only look up when Moores speaks.

“It’s okay,” he calls to me—he kept walking. “That’s Kills. He’s here for the same reason I want you to watch.”

The walls have steps leading to a walkway that lets us look over the top. In the pen is motion, quick, darting. It’s a chaos that takes me a few seconds to resolve into half a dozen small creatures of similar size and colors. One of them leaps, its body shifting in a way that throws it off course from its target, and I identify that one. A demon, the smallest one I’ve ever seen.

“That’s Kills’ cub. They’re only a few days old.”

Kills watches us instead of their cub; watches me. They are silent, but alert, ready to act.

The cub lands on a creature. There’s squealing, growling, the tearing of flesh, dark gray blood. Then the cub is running after another of the creatures. There aren’t even bones left of the one it just ate.

A stronger demon scent reaches me on the shifting wind and I turn. A new demon of a similar size to Kills approaches from the creature pens.

“That’s Watches,” Moores says, following my gaze, “Kills’s mate. They’re bringing more skitterers for the cub. As it gets better at catching them, they’ll need to keep throwing in more, and then a larger type. In a few years, they’ll get a few minutes rest between bouts of eating. When Baby can go an hour between feeding, they’ll transition to the maze.”

I stare at Moores. “Years?”

Watches opens their arm, the skin retracting, and a dozen of the skitterers drop into the pen.

“It’s how long it takes,” the man answers matter-of-factly.

Watches settled next to Kills, and join them in watching me. One of them rumbles, a warning. Moores leads me away, and once we’re what I think is far enough, I look over my shoulder. Kills and Watches are looking into the pen, leaning against one another.

A memory flashes. Fangs in the Light pressed against Claws in the Dark. They are in a tall tree, looking down at a cub catching a slithering creature twice its size. The memory is filled with pride and happiness. Then it’s gone, leaving me wishing to recapture that feeling of belonging, and wondering where the memory came from.

Is it something I got from touching Claws? Those are the times when I usually remember something of who Fangs was. A flash of memory so sudden it didn’t register then, and the situation here brought it back? Or are they coming on their own? Is the essence of who Fangs in the Light

that was used to create me growing as my black skin covers more of my body?

Moore's guides me to the largest structure. It's over ten meters tall. A ladder leads to the top, and a walkway leads to an observatory platform in the center. The building is over fifty meters wide on each side and it is a maze of corridors and rooms.

"This is the maze," Moore's says. "We can change the configuration, and size by closing and opening the halls. The younger ones can't handle the full maze, but Cub is of an age when he can."

"You named a cub, Cub?" It only now registers that each previous times Moore's as referred to this cub, he meant it as a name. I look at the paths within the structure. It isn't a true maze, only a series of divisions extending the distance someone in it needs to travel to reach two points. Some walls have elevated platforms, lending themselves to ambush from above. Some rooms have blinds built into them, others are empty. A crude representation of what a demon can encounter during a hunt.

"The People don't take names until they can reason enough to choose one. And it's not really a name in the way we think of them. They don't need words to identify themselves, each one knows the others using scents, the timber of their rumbles, and others things we can't register."

*I know you.* Claws had said when I asked how he'd found me that first time. My scent, my being. Later I saw an image of him tied to a post and I knew it was him without any scents or being able to hear him. He didn't even look anything like when I'd seen him before, but I simply knew it was him.

"What we use," Moore's continues, "even if they are the ones who decide what it will be, are more translations of the roles they play in their community, or something they decided marked them as different. Protects the Community, Kills in one strike, Watches the Territory. The scientists who've looked into it theorize that until they had to deal with us, the People didn't even bother establishing who they were the way we do."

The platform shakes and I turn to face the arrival, stepping back until I'm at the edge of the platform.

"We know who we are," Protect says, "humans can't learn." They watch me, glowing red eyes flicking to the edge. I watch them think, their body tightening. They are looking to occupy less space or preparing to pounce on me.

"Different modes of communication lead to different ways of thinking," Moore's replies, still looking at the maze. "So we need to adapt, compensate for what we don't get."

The difference between community versus family from back in the town. Both mean the same thing to one, but not to the other, and neither can get the other to understand that.

Moore's hasn't reacted to Protect's arrival. An expression of his comfort, or did he know they were coming? I fight the urge to yell at the man to run, to escape, but doing so might draw the demon's attention to him, the attention utterly fixed on me at the moment. I am without weapons and facing a demon older than any I've encountered before. Years of training scream at me to attack, take the offensive. I know better, but the belief no demon can be trusted is ingrained deep into me.

"There!"

Moore's exclamation breaks the tension and Protect is at the edge next to the man, head darting as they look the maze over, an eager and pleased rumble drifting off them. I'm so surprised by the change in behavior I take a few seconds before moving and joining Moore's on his other side.

I look and spot a creature running in the halls, making sounds of distress. It's a smaller version of the creature Moore's called horses, its coloring is more red than gray. I spot someone else, quick motion, from shadows to shadows to shadows trailing after the horse.

Protect moves and focus on them, the clearer threat to Moore's. They move up and down, a joyful rumble coming from them, and I realize they are bouncing in excitement, gripping the edge so tightly their claws are bending the metal. I notice many such damages around the platform.

I try to pay attention to the hunt, but it only serves to remind me I haven't eaten in too long.

The last hunt ended with me unconscious. And Moores's meal did little to sate me. To distract myself, I study the structure more carefully. The walls are a mixture of wood, metal, and concrete. There's a sense of the change in material being dictated by necessity that the expansions came by force rather than planning.

"This can't hold a demon," I state. "There's too many purchases for them to grab hold and launch themselves in the air. If not just climb over the walls."

Protect lets out an annoyed growl with an undercurrent of "shut up if you aren't going to enjoy this", but they speak. "When the child thinks of the sky as a place they can be in, it is time for a true hunt."

"We have detectors spread over three hundred hectares around this clearing and the town so we can keep track of one of them if they get out without us noticing."

Protect snorts, amusement is carried under it, and I share it. Keeping track of a demon isn't the same as catching them.

"Once they can think in three dimensions," Moores continues, "they're close to being able to reason. They can also go weeks without eating."

I think back to the demons I hunted in the cities. I didn't know they could think back then, but too many used rooftops for it to be a result of reason. I watch Cub track the creature, use walls as jumping points to do rapid turns.

I crouch and study them. Their target is land-bound, so they don't have to consider height beyond what they can jump. In a city, the ground isn't that safe or simple. Cars are moving obstacles, people can defend themselves, even if not effectively, the police has guns which will annoy a demon.

Demons avoid needless fights. Those who survived learned that attracting attention brought in the army, which could kill them. So they stayed to the shadows, the alleys. Stalked and pounced. Did the rooftops become the lowest safest place so of them adopted, as I did for their ease of travel? Here, Cub only had the prey to think about. The ground was safe, so they could focus on hunting, feeding.

I swallow my hunger.

The horse has made it to a large open space and rounds on Cub and they enter. It raises its front legs and I see it has two blunt claws at the end of each. Cub jumps back as it brings them down, then forward, clamping their jaw on a leg. The creature rears again and Cub is sent flying. I tense as they land, roll, and are up again, running at it. The creature limps back and I can see the leg's bone.

Cub catches up to it, jumps on its hindquarter. The horse bucks, but Cub's claws are deep and they stay on. When it tires, Cub travels along its back, stopping and digging their claws as the creature shakes itself. It's violent enough Cub's hind claws slip out, leaving gouges, but they bite for more purchase.

In a few quick steps Cub reaches the neck, but instead of digging their claws in, they extend themselves to wrap around it, then viciously bite it. Blood flies as the creature attempts one last time to dislodge Cub, but it's too late.

I smile at Cub's victory.

Protect lets out a huff of annoyance and they're looking at me. I glare in return and they focus on Cub again. I can appreciate a good hunt as much as they can.

The horse falls on its side, then grows still. Cub flows out from under it and sets about devouring it. I have not watched many demons eat. When I came across one before, it was in a city and humans were who they'd be eating. I stopped them. I was present when Claws ate Adam, but my attention was on the military and other demons, moments away from attacking me again. It isn't graceful, it's efficient and quick. Within twenty minutes, there are only bones left.

"What are you going to do when you run out of space for all the demons here?" I ask. I don't see how this system can function over an extended period. "Once the cub in the other pen is older.

How are you going to handle having both of them use the maze?"

Moore is watching me. "I'm not sure you understand how they mature. It's going to be years until Baby is old enough to be in the maze. By then, Cub should be able to go maybe a day without feeding and have enough control to be able to wait if needed. They aren't like us. Demons live for a very long time, and they mature much slower."

Amanda and Jason never mentioned this. Did they know? Does the military know how demons live or are they simply interested in exterminating them all?

It doesn't matter. "Thank you for rescuing me," I say, standing. Demons or humans, I decided not to deal with them anymore. "I'm leaving."

"No," Moore says.

"No," Protect echoes, but the threat in the undercurrent stops me. I'm more of a threat to him, to them, now that I know about the cubs.

"Don't threaten him," Moore chastises the demon and I have to turn, just to see how Protect reacts.

"He will tell others," the demon says, in a tone borderline on being hurt.

"No, I won't." Moore watches me, concerned. "I understand that you're afraid. What you have here goes against what humans know, what they believe. If I was still the hunter I was created to me, I have no idea what I'd make of this, how I react to the two of you standing side by side. I'm not that anymore, but I don't want to be involved, in this, or anything thing else. I came to the wilderness to be alone."

"Being alone isn't healthy," Moore says.

"Being around people isn't good for anyone," I reply, a statement that conflicts with how I feel, but I bury that. It will pass. If I stay, something will happen. I'll get angry at the humans, or the demons.

The man studies me, then sighs. "Fine. It's your decision." He raises a finger as Protect opens their mouth and the demon glares at him but closes it. I'm baffled again at how a human can dictate anything to a demon.

"Before you leave," Moore says, "Maliya will want to examine you. Make sure you're okay. You clearly are, but she isn't going to let you leave without confirming it." He raises a hand to silence my protest. "If you want to argue with someone, do it with her."

I'm surprised that I obeyed him. Why? How did a gesture keep me from speaking? Protect looks at me with an expression that is oddly similar to a human smirk.