

Someone stops between us, Moores. “Protect, stop!” I reach to pull him out of the way, but the demon stops me by speaking.

“He threatens the cub.” Their voice deep, the rumble carries his worry.

“I’m certain this is just a misunderstanding.”

“There is no misunderstanding,” the demon replies.

Moores sighs. “Just talk with him.” Moores turns to me. He looks uncertain.

“Derick, this is Protects the Community, we call him Protect.”

We?

“Protect, this is—”

“I know Eats the People,” the demon snarls.

“What?” I stare at him.

“You can’t hide your scent,” they continue. “Travels the Wild told of how you eat us.”

“I don’t eat demons, I don’t eat anyone,” I add, offended. “I don’t even hunt demons anymore. Not unless they threaten people.” I motion to the children, searching them for the demon cub. I think it ran off, but then see its head poking out from under one of the older boy’s arms. Looking at us. It notices and hisses at me until the boy pushes it back behind himself, a determined expression. He wants to protect it from me, I realize.

I look around at the growing crowd, I see interest, concern, other expressions I don’t understand, but not fear. How are these people not terrified of a demon standing among them, of one of them among their children?

“Alright, everyone,” Moores calls, “give us space, it’s just a misunderstanding. No one got hurt.”

“How is that possible?” I ask. “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.”

“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. When they’re young, eating is all they think about!”

“When there’s nothing else for them to hunt,” Moores says in a calm tone, and he reminds me of Jason when he tried to teach me about human interactions, about why I need to behave in human ways. My lack of understanding always tested his patience. “But there are a lot of animals in the forest, some dangerous enough to give even Protects a good hunt. Cubs,” the man hesitates, then looks to the children. “Findlay, when did Cub eat last?”

The boy standing before the cub shrugs. “I don’t know.” He tries to keep the demon cub from looking around him. “It’s not my job to keep track of that.” The demon’s little red eyes peer at me before the boy moves it back.

Moores sighs. “It’s everyone’s job to keep track. You know how excitable Cub

gets when he starts to become hungry. Take him back to the pens.” He turns to me. “At their age, Cub can go an hour between eating. They’re basically a big dog during that time.”

“With claws that can tear a child apart,” I point out, watching as the boy, Findlay, grabs the demon cub by the nape and pulls them away. The cub snarls, pulls, and protests, but they don’t fight back.

“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 worried I’d eat them,” I answer. Jason had brought one, in my first months of life, had called it Caroline, and after sniffing it, I’d asked if he was going to teach me to hunt it. He never brought another one after that.

Moores looks at me oddly. “You’d eat a pet?”

“I didn’t know what a pet was. If it is 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’re part demon? I suspected it, due to how black and the texture of your right side, but I wasn’t certain.”

I put my right hand in my pocket to hide it from view. There is no fear or disgust in his tone. Only curiosity.

“Why do you let this demon herd you?” I ask.

“We aren’t Protect’s herd,” Moores says, “we’re his community.”

“Family,” Protects rumble.

“The concept doesn’t translate well,” Moores adds.

The rubble tells of belonging, of caring, of keeping safe; it reminds me of how Claws feels about me. I stare at the demon. I do not know if demons can lie through their roars and rumbles. It’s a system of communication humans can’t sense, but I have difficulty believing this demon, this elder demon, cares for humans.

Their gaze remains fixed on me. They wait for me to do something. 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 yourselves the People?”

“It’s another term that doesn’t translate well,” Moores says, but Protects rumbles and I am enveloped by a sense of belonging similar to that of family, of caring, but it’s more encompassing and weaker, distant. Protects does not care as much for the rest of his kind.

I remember something Jason told me, in my last months before I left.

“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 referred to me, I regularly asked if there were going to make more of me; if I would have a team, like the larger cities did. Could he have meant demons?

Claws spoke of family units. They had their mate, Fangs in the Light. I know of

one cub, Runs the Forest—I swallow at the memory of having to kill him. He implied there were cubs, relatives, but I never had a sense they thought about the rest of demons other than to worry how their actions would endanger his family.

This sense of belonging makes me feel.... Small.

“How do you keep that cub fed?” I ask so I can stop feeling as I do. “There can’t be enough creatures in the town for it to hunt.”

“We breed them,” Moores answers.

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

The question stumps Moores for a few seconds. “It’s going to be easier to show you. Protect, are we good?”

“No,” they reply. Mistrust in the rumble that accompanies the word. “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 it shouldn’t exist.”

“I won’t attack anyone,” I tell them, and they are in my face, their skin rippling away from the forming muzzle, showing long, 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 forming spikes in response to their proximity.

Moores pushes Protect away from me, and the demon moves. I cannot tell if the demon’s amused rumble is at my surprise or the presumption that a human can force him to move.

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

Protects shakes his head, an annoyed rumble leaving him. “Do not bring up the First One. You know how I dislike it.”

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

“I am not ashamed!”

I almost drop to my knees at the anger underlying the words. People around us step back, but Moores does not move.

“My apologies.” The man smiles.

With a huff, Protect turns, takes a step, and launches themselves in the air, their back forming leathery wings that take them out of sight.

“Did he fly?”

“Of course.”

I stare at Moores and realize I asked out loud. “I did not know demons could fly. I have only seen some glide.”

“It’s a question of having the right ratio of muscle to the rest of their body mass. Of the demons here, only Protect can do it.”

“There are more demons?” I look around, searching, sniffing the air.

“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 walks toward the edge of the clearing. “But you were asking about animal breeding, come I’ll show you the pens.”

“Who is the First One?” I ask as we leave the town.

He lets out a breath. “My ancestor; that was centuries ago. If not for Protect, I wouldn’t even know about her. We have records about leaving the homeworld, of settling on this planet, but once we got here, things get muddy. People were too busy building cities to make records, it seems. Our ship landed where Turtines stands now.”

“There were other ships.” Lives Alone mentioned being around when humans arrived, of seeing metal boxes fall from the sky. Of wishing he’d killed them all, now that he knew what they would become.

“Yeah, every nation that had the resources built one.”

“Why did they come here?”

Moore is quiet as we walk through the trees. I don’t see a path, but there is the smell of people walking here, along with that acrid smell. Do they also clean the forest?

“I don’t have the details. Or rather, I didn’t look into them. I’m not a historian and I’m more interested in what’s going on now, than back on another planet. There was a war, I don’t know over what, but it got bad enough a lot of people felt it was better to leave than see the results. So they came here.”

“And the First One was among them?”

Moore chuckles. “No, she came along a good century later. She got fed up with the city, the governments. The world was big and till mostly unexplored back then, so she and a group of people who also had enough left. They traveled for months and ended up here. This area wasn’t part of the district back then. They settled and almost immediately found out there was another group already living here.”

“Demons.”

“Yes.”

“How did they survive?”

“Things weren’t as dire back then. I don’t mean the meeting was friendly. We were trespassers, and demons are territorial, but they still had plenty of animals to hunt, so even the younger ones weren’t as driven by hunger. After a few altercations, they were able to communicate.”

I stop. “How? Demons have to be old to learn your language.”

“The First One was a linguist.” Moore continues and I catch up to him. “And she had a bunch of scientists with her. One of them had a sensor that directed a subvocalized band when demons 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. “Humans can’t hear it. We need machines and we don’t need them since she was able to teach demons to speak. But she was able to decipher that subvocalized band and reproduce it. She used that to communicate with them. Protect was a young leader then.” He paused and chuckled. “The way he recounts it, the First One said some rather inappropriate things, but ultimately they were able to talk, and they

agreed to share this territory.”

“She taught demons to speak?”

“Those here, but demons travel. It’s possible one he learned left and taught other demons. I don’t think we’ll ever know if they all learned from here or of other scientists worked out how to communicate with their local group.”

Moore sighs. “Then humans began expanding, cutting down the wild. Even this far from everything it was felt as demons fled deeper in the forest and Protect had to fight them off. The food source became strained, and it looked like we would fall victims to the demon’s hunger.”

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

“And then someone introduces animal husbandry.”