

## Chapter-28

“Looks like they’re early,” Diniz says, pointing to a shape in the distance. She and Humbert are the only two soldiers still on their feet, although they’re wavering as the boost wears off. The others are sitting on the roof, fighting to stay awake.

I follow her gaze and immediately know that isn’t the helicopter. Even if they are in that silent stealth mode, they wouldn’t drop toward a roof as it is, as they are.

Humbert curses as they land on that far roof. “Weapons hot!” he yells, the words slightly slurred as he fights to stay standing. The other soldiers curse as the large demon jumps high, spread their wing and glide toward us, but they get to their feet.

I place a hand on his machine gun, forcing it down. “You can’t fight Rules them All.”

Humbert glares at me, but his eyes unfocus. “I can take out any demons,” he growls tiredly and tries to raise his weapon.

“Even if the boost wasn’t wearing off, and you were all uninjured, you couldn’t win a fight against them.”

“So what’s your plan? You’re going to feed us to it for your freedom?”

“No, but if you fire on them, they will kill you, possibly everyone on this roof. If that happened there will be nothing that will stop them.”

He tried to focus on me, to decipher what I mean, but he’s crashing. “So what? You’re going to talk him into letting us go?”

“That is the plan.” I turn to face Rules them All, who lands on the edge of the roof. I walk toward them. “Again, I don’t know how to welcome you with respect.”

Claws is at my side, smaller than I am, letting out a submissive rumble. I can’t tell if he hopes to protect me, or needs me to protect him.

“I don’t expect it from your kind,” they respond, “or theirs.”

“You said that you didn’t care if we took Amanda.” I indicate the body at Diniz’s feet. “We did that, and now we are leaving.”

They don’t look away from me. “Matthew had gone with her. How is he?” the tone is inquisitive, but the undertone uninterested, who is this for? Do they think the soldiers care if they considered Mister Graves’s father close? Can they tell the soldiers from any of the other humans in this little kingdom?

“Matthew is dead,” I answer.

“How did it happen?” Again, they speak with curiosity, but the undertone doesn’t match it.

“I killed him,” I reply, as Humbert says that Amanda killed him. He lets out an annoyed sigh that turns into a yawn.

“Humans lie,” they say, barely glancing at Humbert. The undertone is amusement. “Did you kill him to hurt me?”

“The process Amanda used to change him drove him insane.” I search for a different way to explain as their focus sharpens, and the undertone is quizzicalness edged with a sense of not trying to confuse them. “It gave him hunger madness. She must not have expected it, because she and Mister Graves, Jimmy, were in the room with him when it happened. He killed Mister Graves and was about to kill her.”

They breathe in. “A bullet killed that human,” they state.

“Things got complicated,” I answer. “Humans tend to cause that.”

They study me, then give a human nod, the undertone satisfaction. “No one controls the humans anymore.” The undertone turns speculative, a sense of possibilities, of opportunities. Of wanting more.

“One of them will raise to take the lead again.” I watch them as I decide what to say next. I don’t believe demons need to be exterminated, but there is something about Rules them All that worries me. Other than those in the throes of hunger madness, I have never encountered one who

had a hunger to have more the way they do.

“Only if I let them,” they say, raising their gaze over us and the undertone gives a sense they are looking at more than just this city, this little kingdom they consider theirs.

“You should leave,” I say. Maybe if they leave humans behind, they will return to something more like other demons. “Your people aren’t meant for cities. They’re meant for the wilderness. If —”

“This is mine!” they roar. “I will not give it back.” They lower themselves to look me in the eyes. “You will not take it from me.” I do not look away and the undertone becomes annoyance at my stubbornness. A sense of being an unruly child, and Claws moves closer to me.

I nod. “Very well.”

“You can stay,” they tell us, the undertone one of magnanimousness, of unending understanding. “I will protect you from those outside. They fear you like they fear me. You will be accepted among my humans.”

Humbert snorts.

Rules them All’s head snaps in his direction. “That is derision. Are you mocking me, human?” the anger in the voice is slight, but the undertone is filled with warning, with a sense of treading carefully, of anger easily turning into rage.

Humbert doesn’t sense it, he’s only human, and I can’t tell him the danger he is in, puts us all in, so I glare at him and hope for the best. He notices me and seems puzzled by my expression. He steadies himself, and when he speaks there is respect in his voice. “No, I’m sorry. I’m just fed with the game those in power play. If you’re going to eat us, just get on with it.”

Rules them All stares at Humbert, the silent undertone puzzlement and an inflation of importance. Humbert has acknowledged Rules them All has power, and that is what they are focused on, the how the soldier thinks little of it.

“You are not worthy of the hunt,” they say, then smiled, showing far too many teeth, even for a demon. “But one day…” they raise their head and roar. Things are changing, the sound warns, gather, hunt, prepare.

I grab Claws’s arms as he moves to turn toward the humans with us. The touch brings memories of hunts we have been on. The excitement of the chase, the taste of blood on our tongue, the feel of meat going down our throat.

My stomach rumbles in hunger

The part of me that is demon isn’t so strong yet that I give in to the need to hunt that Rules them All projects, into the hunger it elicits in me.

The roar ends and Claws stops pulling on my grasp. He lowers his head, a rumble of shame escaping him. He presses against me, rumbling for forgiveness in not being strong enough to resist.

“I will control the humans here,” they state, as yells of fear come from below. Screams of pain.

“What you’re doing isn’t wise.”

“You do not tell me what to do, thing of humans.” They are in my face, growling a threat I know they can carry through, the number of teeth in their maw increasing as they smile. “I am Rules them All. I say what is done.”

I nod again. I have tried. Like Amanda, they will not listen. I can warn them of what is coming, but they will not believe humans can be a danger to them. They will lash out to show they are stronger, which will cause humans to respond in a large, more destructive way. Unlike them, I believe humans are the larger potential threat.

They step to the edge of the roof and look at us over their shoulders. “Tell those outside who I am. Tell them to prepare themselves for the change.” They jump high, wings spreading from their back, and glide toward the Aerie.

“I can’t believe you actually talked it into letting us go,” Humbert says, amazement in their

voice.

I don't think I did. They are letting us go so we can spread word of who they are, nothing more. They think that will make the military submit to them quicker. I have never met a demon with such an ego. I don't tell Humbert. I don't tell him what needs to happen. I can't know how good Rules them All's hearing is.

Faintly, over the screams from below, I hear the helicopter approaching. It isn't silent this time. It lands on the roof away from us and an amplified voice sounds over the noise.

"Time to go! I don't know what's happening, but things are a mess down there."

Humbert looks around. "Diniz, you go in, take the body." He yells and barely makes himself heard. With her, the soldiers move toward the helicopter. He turns to me and points to the scientist and children. "We can't fit them in. They're going to have to wait until for a second run."

He is lying, but before I can argue about there being fewer soldiers than when we came in, about the children being small enough not to take that much room, Claws has a hand on my shoulder, his rumble offering comfort, asking for trust.

"I will see to them," he says, and Humbert narrows his eyes. "I will take them to safety. You will know where to find us."

Humbert snorts. "Sure, you definitely looked like you were going to protect anyone when you were eying them like your next lunch." He yawns. "Eff this. You do what you effing want. But you—" he points at me "—are coming with me."

I want to go with him, but I nod. I have to speak with the military, make sure they will do what I only suspect they are planning to. We turn for the helicopter and a third form falls in step with us, causing Humbert to stop and face Sarge.

"What the eff do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going with you," he answers, the question seeming to confuse him momentarily. "I'm a soldier, like you. I have to report in."

"No effing way." Humbert points to Claws. "Go with your kind. That's where you belong."

"I—" Sarge looks from Claws to Humbert. "Gregg?" the name is filled with hope and pain.

Humbert pushes himself in Sarge's face, his anger burning away the exhaustion. "Don't you effing dare say my name. You don't know me." His face turns into a snarl. "I'd never know something like you."

Sarge steps back, the pain clear on his face. His shoulders slumps. Unlike me, he remembers who he was. The cost of what Amanda has done to him. Humbert doesn't understand what he is ripping out of the man he had called his best friend.

"You will not be alone," Claws says, a rumble of comfort rolling off him. I feel at ease under it. Sarge nods, and even the children settle. "I will not let you be alone."

"You can help keep the children safe," I add, to give Sarge something else to focus on. Humbert is already heading to the helicopter, and with a yearning look at his back, Sarge turns to follow Claws.

I step into the helicopter, sit, and put on the headset as Humbert bangs the wall to the cockpit twice.

"I expected you to want him to come," I say as the helicopter rises in the air. "Amanda made him, that makes him the property of the military, like you keep saying I am."

He glares at me. "He's nothing like you. And I don't want him anywhere near the military." He looks out as he grabs the sliding door. "I don't want them getting their hands on him." I hear the sorrow in his words as he pulls the door shut, cutting himself away from his friend. When he sits back down, there is only anger on his face. "Cline's dead." He looks at the others "if anyone asks, she effing killed him, is that clear? Cline died doing his job. He was the best of us."

There is no hesitation in the other's agreements.

When Humbert looks at me, the threat in his eyes can't keep them from glimmering with unshed tears. I nod. I don't care about any threats he thinks he needs to push on me. I understand the

desire to preserve a memory. I have no issue giving him that.