

Protect and I stand well outside the town. No amount of reassurance lets the demon consider allowing Claws near their people. When they roared their reply, the volume deafened me, and the strength of the undertones nearly brought me down. The permission to enter is mixed with a warning, with a sense of how strong Protect is, of how large their territory is, and something more complex that I can't grasp.

Now, we wait.

The sun travels and is approaching the top of the trees when Claws steps out of them. He is tall, almost as tall as Protect, massive. His skin clearly defines his body. None of the fraying edges that were there most of the last times I saw him. He is healthy, well-fed. I breathe easier, while Protect tenses.

"Claws!" I call, and head in his direction. He shrinks as I walk, adopting the form of a tall and muscular human, except for his head, which remains demon-like, narrower, with a long muzzle. His skin adopts the contour of clothing: pants and a jacket with a pulled-back hood. I have the sense he has practiced the form. The transition between pieces of clothing is better-defined.

He places a hand on my shoulder. "Derick, I am happy to see you are healthy. Has the wilderness been good for you? Did you find yourself there?" His glowing red eyes search my face.

"I don't know," I answer. "I've enjoyed the running and the hunts." My throat tightens. "I've missed you."

As usual, the attempt at a human smile, on his teeth-filled muzzle, isn't something that would comfort a human, but I see the pleasure in his features. "And I you. I have thought of you often. Fought the desire to follow your scent. I hope that when you are done, you will come with me."

"I—"

Claws lets go of me and steps away, his body rippling before settling back into human form. "Elder," he says, growling something complex: respect, stubbornness, authority, strength, subservience, dominance. Then I lose it, but it feels similar to what Protect sent when they roared permission. When he looks back at me, Claws is worried, almost scared.

I feel Protect behind me, not quite looming.

"Protect, this is Claws in the Dark." I hesitate. I want to add something to describe his relationship to me, but I don't know how to explain it so a demon will understand. "Claws, this is Protects the Community. This is their territory."

Protect steps around me and Claws steps back. Even though Claws's human shape is taller than me, he is small compared to the other demon. When he stops moving and lets Protect approach him, Claws shows none of the worry I saw. Protect sniffs Claws, then me.

"He doesn't carry your scent," they tell Claws.

"He is mine," Claws snaps, then stiffens, seems uncertain. "Derick is no one's. He belongs to himself. My link to him is through how the humans made him, using my mate."

"Fangs in the Light," I tell Protect. I can't recall if I mentioned them.

"Do you..." Claws hesitates. His form melts, loses its humanity, returns to something creature-like. "Do you claim him?"

"Would you challenge the claim?" Protect asks, superiority in his tone.

Claws looks at me, expression pleading. I have no idea what he expects of me. When Protects looks at me, they're curious.

"I don't know what you're doing," I tell them.

Protect snorts, and I've heard it often enough now to recognize it as amusement. "I don't claim the human."

"I'm not human," I state reflexively as Claws bristles in annoyance.

"I don't claim whatever you are, then." Protect faces Claws. "He's yours if you claim him."

"He is family," Claws says, form settling on something not quite human. "My child."

"He's young to be alone." Protect sounds concerned, and reproach is the undertone.

"He is stubborn," Claws answers, a gentle glare in my direction.

Another snort. "My territory is wide. Do not hunt the humans in it. Do not approach their settlement without warning. They are my people."

Claws doesn't seem surprised at the statement. "Will you let Derick leave if he desires to?"

Protect looks at Claws curiously.

"Why would I want to leave?" I ask.

"Amanda has been taken." Claws watches me as I keep myself from reacting.

"I ask again," I say through clenched teeth, "why would I want to leave?"

"Who is Amanda?" Protect asks.

"The woman who created me."

"Your parent?" he asks.

"No!" I snap as Claws growls protests, anger, and violation in the undercurrent. "I refuse to think of her like that. That woman doesn't care about me. Her research is all that matters to her." At least Jason cared. He tried to temper what they did to me, the killer they made me to be, by attempting to teach me what it took to be part of a community.

"Then why would you care if she was taken?" Protect asks.

"I don't," I tell Claws.

"She was taken from the military by other humans," Claws responds. "They were organized, strong. They took her to a city in the territory humans call Anounga."

"How do you know that?" Working out they were strong and organized is one thing; they had to be to succeed against the military. But for Claws to know where they took her means he spoke to someone close to what happened. The military wouldn't speak with Claws, even if he helped defeat Adam. They'd rather kill Claws and study his remains.

Claws takes something from a fold of skin, a phone. "Jason told me."

"You talk with him?" I'm surprised at the wistfulness in my voice.

"Who is Jason?" Protect asks, and I don't know how to answer him. As much as I hate Amanda, as much as I hated Jason for a time, I haven't been able to be angry at him since the rescue, now that I know his side of what happened.

"Jason is the other human who played a part in making Derick who he is," Claws answers when I stay silent.

"His other parent?"

Claws looks at me.

"I don't know, okay?" I say, fighting anger at having to deal with this. "What do you want from me, Claws?" Was that desperation in my voice? I shut down any thought of Jason, of that time. Of the memory of holding him as he bleeds out from his destroyed arm. "You know I didn't work with the military to rescue her. I was there for you. Why would you think I'd care she was taken now?"

"Because of the damage she can do. The humans who took her have equipment. They have resources. There are few reasons to take her specifically."

I close my eyes. Force myself to think about the info, analyze it. "How do you know so much? And don't say Jason. There's no way anyone let him close to that information after he sided with us during the rescue."

"He is who told me," Claws answers, and while I know Claws isn't lying to me—he never lies to me—I can't believe it. "I will go rescue her," he says.

I stare at Claws. He doesn't like her—hates her for what she did to me. I understand he sees her as dangerous, but why would she be more dangerous now that some random humans have her than when she was with the military?

Claws isn't telling me everything.

The realization hurts. Not as much as when I found out about the lie, Amanda, and Jason's betrayal, but I thought I could always rely on Claws.

"Derick," Claws says, and hesitates. He knows me well enough to read my expression. There may be something in my scent; human emotions carry on their scent. Maybe there's something in the undertone of my voice, for all I know. Something he kept to himself, a way to know—

"Why is one human dangerous?" Protect asks, watching us, and stopping my spiral into paranoia.

"She made me," I answer, once I have regained control of my mind. I voice my thinking as I try to work out why Claws believes he needs to act. "She could make more, if she can recreate what happened with me."

"Has made more," Claws says, and it takes me a few seconds to find my voice.

"If she succeeded in replicating me, the military would use them. They have her research, they'd make hundreds. The forest would be filled with them."

"She did not make them for the military; she made them for the people who took her. Jason said they are not like you, but they have been seen in the city. He believes she is working on a new approach. I have been to the city. I fought one. It is nothing like you. It didn't smell of us or have your skin, but it is strong, if clumsy. One is already dangerous. If she perfects them and those humans unleash them, it would be a problem for everyone."

I snort, and there's no amusement in it. "Let the military deal with them."

"They have tried."

I stare at Claws. "Are you telling me you're working with them?" So, the military that came to the town was indeed looking for me? "Did they send you to get me?" I ask, my suspicion returning.

"No, Derick. They did not send me. I do not work with them, but they are at the city. They will do something, and without our help, they will most certainly fail."

"They want to capture me! Kill you! You do remember the promise Humbert made, right?"

"If he tries to take you, I will stop him," Claws says, voice and the undercurrent offering comfort, safety. "But I cannot let Amanda make more of her creatures. If she perfects them, they will threaten my family, my kind. You know her obsession is with destroying all of my people."

"So you rescue her, hand her over to the military, who get her to make more like me so they can kill you. How does that make any more sense? Why don't you just eat her?"

"Do you want me to?"

The question stops all thoughts.

She doesn't deserve to live. For what she did to me, for the threat she represents to demons, for the pain her research inflicted on the families of her test subjects and the people they used to be. The answer is simple. If there is one human who deserves to die, it's her.

So why can't I answer Claws?

"Bring her to me," Protect says, "I will eat her."

"No," I say before I can stop myself, then curse. "Don't say it," I warn Claws as he opens his muzzle. I don't want to hear again about how she's still my parent, regardless of how she treated me. I've seen how parents, human parents, are supposed to act toward their children. She doesn't deserve to be called that.

But somehow, despite all that, I also don't want her dead. Even after she tried to have me killed, tried to kill me herself.

I let out a breath and study Claws. The determination. He has made his decision. "You're returning there no matter what I say, aren't you?"

He nods, and I curse. The military will fire on Claws as soon as they see them, and they'll be armed with irradiated weapons. With me there, I can reach them before they fire on us. Explain why he's there to them. Without me, there is no chance he survives encountering the military.

"I swear, Claws," I growl, "this is the last time. The next time that woman gets herself captured, kidnapped, or whatever else, you aren't going to rescue her. You're going to let the humans deal with their own problems."

"So long as it does not lead to a large threat to me and mine," he answers, and I sigh.

I look at Protect. "Looks like you're getting rid of me."

"Good," the demon answers without undercurrents. "I will let everyone know they can celebrate."