

Moore takes the radio from the man. "Terrence, what's happening?" he demands.

"The army's on their way to town," the man answers calmly.

"They were here not even a month ago." Moore glances at me.

"Do you want me to drop down and tell them to reschedule?" the other man asks, sounding bored. "Who knows, maybe this time they'll be the kind of soldiers who are more than happy to do what you tell them to?"

"Now isn't the time for levity, Terrence. How long do we have?"

"Six, maybe seven hours. They left their vehicles in the Edmond clearing, but they're going at a fast walk. No lazing around this time, no smelling the flowers or trying to pet a Stinker." The man chuckled.

"Can you make it back?"

"Not without them finding the outpost." Terrence sounded serious this time. "They have a dozen sniffer dogs with them."

"Twelve?" Moore asked, sounding dismayed. "You can't be serious; they've never shown up with more than four."

"Do I sound like I'm joking, Moore? They have twice the soldiers, and they are armed. If I didn't know better, I'd think someone told them about our community in its entirety." Cabinets opened and closed. "I'll be good up here; I have supplies for two weeks. Just make sure they aren't going to stay more than two days. I'm going to be out of coffee by then, and you don't want me decaffeinated, right?"

"Be careful. There's no telling what they'll do to you if they realize our sentries are to keep an eye out for them."

"Hey now," Terrence replied, sounding offended, "I'm just up here looking for gliderclaws and ravenstabbers. Just getting a bit of hunting in, you know that." He paused. "Anyway, it isn't like they can prove otherwise. Going radio silent until I see them drive away. Terrence out."

"Like they ever needed proof," Moore whispers, handing the radio back. "Allan, tell everyone to do another wash down."

"But the last one is still there," the man replied. "Many Names keeps complaining about it."

"They're going to have to endure it. We can't risk the sniffers finding a spot that wore out faster. Tell Many Names's friends to go over everywhere they've been. They keep scratching those spots to remove it."

"Can I help?" I ask.

"You can't," Protect snarls, the anger loud enough even Moore looks at him.

"We can use all the help," Moore tells the demon.

"His scent will warn them."

"You smell like a demon?" Moore asks, looking me over. He only sounds mildly surprised.

"I've been told I don't smell entirely human."

Protect snorts. "More like a human wrapped in our skin."

"In that case, you can't help, I'm sorry."

Around us, people run around carrying containers and washcloths. A container is opened near us, and the acrid scent that emanates from it makes my eyes water. I sneeze repetitively. It's what I've been smelling around the town, but far more concentrated.

I cover my mouth and nose. "What is that?"

"A concentrate of tree-skitter urine," Moore answers, watching people join the work as word spreads. "It's the only thing we found that dissolves the People's scent."

"If I can't help with cleaning the town, what else can I do?"

"You can leave," Protect says. "Run away. Run fast. Leave us."

"Protect!" Moore snaps. "We don't send out people to be captured."

"He isn't of the—"

"I don't have time for this." The man glares at the demon. "The army's coming. We only have a few hours to get everything done."

Protect looks at his feet, then back up at Moore. "Then he must eat."

"I'm fine," I reply reflexively, ignoring the hunger.

Protect snorts again. "I can smell your hunger through the stench. I won't have you eat one of us while we hide."

"I won't." I face the demon. "I'm not driven by my hunger."

Moore steps between us. "Derick, now isn't the time to let your pride drive you." I glare at him. "Are you hungry?"

I almost say no, to continue contradicting the demon, but the urgency in the work happening around us pushes my annoyance aside. "Yes."

"Do you need to hunt? Is that also part of how you eat? We might have time to get one of the horses in the maze." He pulls a watch on a chain and looks at it. "It'll have to be a short hunt. We'll need the time to wash it down once you're back."

"I don't need to hunt," I answer, then hesitate. Humans get uncomfortable when they find out how much meat I eat, even if I don't mention preferring it raw.

"You're going to be underground for at least twelve hours," Moore says, eyes fixed on me. "Possibly more. I don't know why the army's back early or in force. You're going to be only with the People. I believe you when you say you won't eat them, but even one of us will feel their hunger after that long. If you bring canned food, will that let you deal with it as it comes?"

"No," I protest, my stomach turning at the memory of my attempts to eat that. "It has to be fresh. Fruits, vegetables, raw meat, lots of it." I watch for his reaction.

"Maliya, Derick's going to empty your fridge. I'll make sure it's restocked, but we are right here and it's a straight line to the blind from here."

The woman smiles. "No problem. It'll give me a chance to study how differently he eats."

"I eat like humans," I say, following her inside. "Just in larger quantities." And when I'm among them. Eating at a table with plates and utensils is difficult to make happen when in the wilderness.

"But without cooking it." The door to the back of her examination room leads to a hall with the kitchen on one side, a bathroom on the other, along with a bedroom. She opens the fridge and steps out of the way. "Dig in."

I do so, stopping when I see the can of pop. Moore said it was difficult for them to get them. Hand shaking, I reach for it, and notice Maliya watch me the way a demon does when they're about to strike. I briefly consider putting it back. It's the only can there. But I have missed this so much.

I drink from it slowly, fighting the gag at the sickeningly sweet taste. It should be enough for me to never want to taste this again, but I relax as the other tastes join it. It tastes like Jason laughing, after I've again been baffled by a simple human expression. It tastes like the man, pacing in my living room in exasperation after explaining again why humans form couples beyond the need to reproduce. It tastes like Amanda, smiling in pride as I master a test she administers.

I let out a sigh, and Maliya's expression is that of someone who has discovered a secret long guarded. I ignore her and pull food out. I don't bother cutting anything. I just eat. I eat until I am no longer hungry. I sigh again, then notice her approaching, a can of pop in hand. A calculating expression on her face warns she isn't doing this to be nice. She has a plan for me.

The expression reminds me of Juliet, but without the restraint she showed, the realization she shouldn't make demands of me. Maliya's want is more like Amanda's need to push me. To see what I can do. How far I can go until I break.

Her disappointment is mixed with amusement as I turn my back to her and head outside.

I sneeze as soon as I step out. The acrid scent is overpowering; it's all I can smell. How do humans not smell it? None of them react to standing over a container, to applying it to a wall. Moores notices me and hands the cloth to the young woman next to him. The smell is so strong on him, I step back as he approaches.

"You're sensitive to it?" he asks, surprised.

"You aren't?" I reply, covering my nose, breathing through my mouth in an attempt to lessen the effect.

"I can barely smell anything. Neither do the People. For them, it registers as the absence of their smell over the town. It's an adaptive defense system for the tree-skitters. The People can't hunt them if they can't smell them, nor can any of the other animals in the wild that depend on smell to hunt. Come on."

We hurry down the street, past houses, with each being washed down with the liquid. Those that aren't smell so strongly they must have just been finished. Moores steps between two houses and I nearly balk at how strong the scent is there. I force myself to follow, and we pass yards with gardens, toys, people going over everything with cloths. They wave at Moores as we pass.

The alley widens into a small clearing formed by the yards of multiple houses. An off-center part of it is raised like the lid on a container.

"Once you're in, we're going to close it and make sure it matches the rest. We'll dump the urine on it and as far as the sniffers and soldiers will know, it's just going to be another section of yards people use."

The hole is large enough Protect can fit in. The scent of demons that rises out of it is strong, old and new, but it vanishes almost immediately as it mixes with the acrid scent. The sunlight shows the bottom, further than I expected, and a ladder attached to the side. Protect can stand to his full height in there.

I drop down.

The shaft of light I stand in keeps me from seeing the rest of the cave, but I sense others. The scent of fear increases as the lid closes and the light disappears. Once the darkness is total, I barely make out shapes. Those I do are too small to be Protect, Kills, or Watches. Four of them, their body temperature not quite matching that of the space we stand in. A small one appears, bright against the coolness of the walls, running in my direction. Snarling and snapping of teeth.

It's snatched off the ground and fades away, wrapped in a demon's skin, hiding them from me. I figure it's the one Moores called Baby. I realize a demon's ability to adjust their body heat evolves with age.

Something snaps like breaking bones, and I ready myself for an attack. An object glows green, the light intensifying as Protect shakes it before throwing it to the floor.

"So you won't be afraid," the demon says.

Except I'm not the one afraid. The scent is fresh, from their side of the cave. It can't come from the adults. Baby and Cub are too young to understand what I am. As my eyes adjust to the light, I make out more forms, peering around the adults. The one looking at me from behind Protect hisses, and the demon places a comforting hand over Cub's head.

Cub lowers it, as if trying to avoid the touch, glaring at me petulantly, then after another hiss in my direction, leans into it, closing their eyes in contentment.

"I won't hurt anyone," I say, hoping to calm them.

"You won't," Protect agrees, the undertone a mix of threat aimed at me, and a sense of protection for them.

"Eater?" one asks, the word halting, the fear palpable in it. I locate the demon who spoke, larger than Cub. They notice me looking and vanish behind the adult.

A rumble fills the cave, low, felt instead of heard. Protect calming them, calming me too, I realize, inadvertently.

I sit, leaning against the wall. "Is this everyone?"

"Everyone too close or too young to be able to get far," Protect answers. "The others know to stay away when our scent vanishes."

We fall silent, and in it, I make out the sound of someone gnawing. "How are you going to keep Baby from going hungry?" They had to hunt constantly, Moores had said, as we look at them in the pen.

Two of the adults move closer together. One of them is the one who snatched Baby off the ground. Watches and Kills. "You will not eat our child." As they move, skin shifts, and I see Baby, gnawing on part of the one holding it.

I'm too stunned to reply. They are feeding themselves to their child.

Cub slinks out from under Protect's hand, and ignores the rumbles from the elder with a shiver of skin I think of as a shrug. They sniff the air, hiss, and sniff it again, taking another step closer to me. Protect tenses as I extend my left hand to Cub, and we all freeze.

Cub sniffs again, steps closer. Protect rumbles and is ignored. The elder lets out a huff, and amusement emanates from the other adults. Cub sniffs my left hand then quickly backs away, watching me, then approaches again. He sniffs it again. Then his muzzle is against my leg, Cub moving to my right as if searching for a specific scent. They stop as I extend my right hand, move to it, sniffing. I raise it and their neck extends, raising their head to reach it.

The calming rumble gains an edge to it. A warning from Protect.

Cub's head presses on my hand and they rub against it. I pull away as memory of pleasure wash over me. I see human children running away and around me, a mock hunt, trying to catch me/Cub, running away screaming. Pleasure in the chase.

Cub's hands grab onto my hand and they pull themselves to it. More memories, sensation. Joy of a hunt amidst the walls. Parents watching, rumbling encouragement. I fight the urge to pull them off as memories of being sated come, of curling in a warm corner after eating.

I'm confused. I've only felt this happen when touching Claws or Runs the Forest. I thought it was triggering Fangs's memories buried in me because I'd remembered events involving Fangs interacting with the other.

Is this another way demons communicate? Do they share memories through touch? Is Cub seeing something of my life? Of Fangs's?

A larger demon steps out from behind the adult. The one who spoke one word. Cub lets go and steps away. Is it instinct to give the older one space, or was Cub taught to do so? The older demon pauses, sniffs the air, makes himself even larger.

I chuckle at the posturing, ridiculous in the enclosed space and among the adults. Three of them and only me as a threat. If I do anything to harm them, I will die.

I reach for Cub and rub their head the way Protect did. They move away from my touch, but grab a finger, gnawing on it without strength. Memories of accidentally hurting one of the human children doing this, of their parent's chastising, of wanting to make the friend's pain go away.

I make an effort to distance myself from the memory, and they fade until they are shadows of events.

The older demon approaches again.

"Danger," comes from the other side of the cavern. Another halting word. In response, this one steps closer, rumbles curiosity, interest, and strength.

"Caution," flows back from someone on the other side, along with a sense of worry and caring.

Understanding, caring, and stubbornness is the reply, and this demon sniffs me, moves to my right side, sniffs again.

Conversation flows around me in a language I understand, but can't speak. Family discussing the stranger in their midst. Evaluating the danger he represents, the potential meal, the worthiness of the hunt.

It's spiked with pain, Baby eating. I watch the one holding them look down at their child. Rubbing their back even as they are being eaten by it. Love overshadows the pain. They pass Baby on to the other, not in anger or resentment, but because it's the agreed-upon time. There is no anger at what they are suffering. It is what they have to do to ensure their child survives.

The shadow-memories from Cub shifts to that of hunting and eating. They become forceful and the biting intensifies. My skin hardens in reaction, and Cub whines at being denied meat. Before I wonder how to deal with that, Protect is before me, taking Cub away, cradling them, restraining them.

The older demon watches, then takes Cub's place under my hand. Pleasure in climbing, in balancing at the top of trees, watching the horizon. Running through the trees, all the scents to discover and match to the taste of the owner. The beginning of hunger. A shadow over us, knowledge that it will protect us. Annoyance that we are too old to need it. Running to it as something large and smelling hungrier appears before us.

I push the memories away. Separate myself from them. Do my best not to let the loneliness that comes with that overwhelm me.

A second demon presses against me, their rumble questions too complex for me to understand. As the chemical light slowly vanishes, fear diminishes, and once only darkness remains, contentment is there with it.