

For a moment I wonder what she's doing here. Then I hear footsteps in the building getting louder. I get in the small van, and she slides the door closed behind me. I sit on the floor.

"Are you bleeding?" she asks as she moves around me to get in the seat behind the driver's seat. I reach under me and pull a small plush thing. It might be the representation of an animal?

The van jerks forward.

"Derick, how badly are you hurt? Do you need to go to a hospital?"

The back of the van has bench seats, but they are loaded with things I don't recognize, or understand why are there. Why is there a miniature car? Or a small reproduction of a woman wearing a white dress? There are books, of varying thickness and sizes, but what are they doing piled up in the van?

Why is Juliette here?

"Derick!" I look forward, and she quickly glances at me over her shoulder. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

I shake my head. I'll heal. I always heal.

I rest my head against the side and close my eyes. I am tired, so very tired. My forearm throbs. I rub it and feel the skin ripple. Instantly I'm alert. The skin on my hand and forearm undulates and bulges. The images of the tube with the dark liquid flowing into him comes back to me.

Flowing into me.

"It's in me." I claw at my skin.

"What did you say?" Juliette asks.

"It's in me!" I dig my fingernails into the skin and pull.

"What are you doing?" The van wobbles, and I'm thrown on my side. When I straighten, the damage to my skin is healed, leaving darkened lines.

"No, no, no." I dig harder, deeper. "I have to get it out!" My own skin fights me, hardening, darkening. The few time as I manage to rake deep enough to draw blood, the wound heals as I make it.

It hurts, but I don't care. I'm not one of them. I'm not a demon, I'm a hunter. I can't be like them. I'll cut my arm off before I become one of them. I search through the pile on the seat, looking for something sharp enough to cut me.

"Derick!"

I look to the front, and I get a sense she's been calling me for a time now. Her eyes are on the road, but she's holding a thermos between the seats. She glances at me.

"Drink this."

I reach for it, but stop before I grasp it. "What's in it?"

"Something to help you."

Help me? I look at my arm. "Is it going to take it out?"

"Yeah, sure. Just take it."

I grab the thermos, and the top resists my pulling it off for a moment, then I am drinking the contents. I gasp at the first swallow, but I force the rest down. I'll endure anything to get rid of the demon inside me.

"How long until it starts working?" I already feel better, calmer.

She doesn't answer me. She's speaking on her phone.

"He was starting to panic, so I gave it to him. Yes, he drank it all."

The words become distorted, then forms start to blur. "Juliette?" I call to her, but I don't understand the sound that comes out of my mouth. My limbs become heavier. I have trouble keeping my eyes open. I try to call to her again, but I can't get my mouth to work.

I eye the thermos. She said it would help me.

She lied.

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A strange scent tickles my nose. I try to scratch it, but I can't move my arms. My right one

throbs badly. I try to remember what I did to it for it to feel this way. My memories are fuzzy. I remember wandering, going back. Watching something.

It takes a lot of effort, but I open my eyes. My shirt is at my feet, a bloody rag. And I remember bunching it against my chest. To stem the bleeding. Why was I bleeding? There's a paste on my stomach, and I can make out a line through it.

I remember the sound of the sword unfolding. The look of disdain on Amanda's face as she plunged it in me.

With a gasp, I look up, remembering. I escaped, and Juliette was there to drive me away. She drugged me. Why?

I'm tied to a chair by my arms and legs.

She betrayed me too.

I try to break out, but I can't. The leather strips are stronger than they should be.

Why did she bring me here? Why did she tie me up? Where am I?

The room is large, a few hundred feet on the long end, half that on the narrow one. Daylight comes in through the only window, at the far end. Broken furniture litters the space.

"You're awake."

Of course. He's here. In my confusion, I didn't pay attention to what the scent was. His scent.

"I thought you were leaving the city," I say, looking in the darkened space where the voice came.

He steps into the dim light enough I can see him. "I did. I was waiting in one of the woods on the outskirts. I would have stayed there until you left, and then found you. But I found out you needed help, so I came back." He looks like he did when I last saw him. A little taller than me. A hoodie and jeans making him look almost human.

I frown. "How did you find that out?"

"Someone inside called me."

I stare at him. "You have a phone?"

He reaches in a fold of his skin and pulls out a small rectangle. "How else would I reach the humans who assist me."

Assist him? Someone in headquarters works for him? Who? Why? That voice on the radio? The friend? I need to tell Amanda that she has a traitor. What am I thinking? She tried to kill me.

Something else falls into place. "You sent Juliette."

"I did."

I shouldn't be surprised. Everyone has been lying to me.

"She doesn't have your scent on her. If she worked with you, it would be impossible to miss."

His body shudders in what might have been a shrug, and he indicates the phone. "I keep my distance from most of the humans. Those I have to interact with stay far from you." He points to the phone. "This makes it easy."

"I... That's impressive. I didn't know demons could be this smart."

Claws snorts. "That's because you never leave that building. The older demons in the city know to not attract your attention."

"That's impossible. No demon can hide for long; they all make mistakes."

"No, you only know of those who do."

I shake my head. I don't want to think about this, not now. "What's this stuff on my stomach?"

"A healing poultice. It's drawing the poison out of your body."

"Poison?"

"The thing on your weapons."

What poison? Then it dawns on me. "The radiation?" Why was that hurting me?

No! No, no, no. I pull at my restraints. I need out.

"You need to stop that, you can't break it. It's tendrope. The only way to remove it is to cut it."

I try to straighten, to break the chair, but it resists. I try to tip it over so I can slip my legs out. It doesn't move. Bolted to the ground? I shake and pull until I'm left panting.

"What did Juliette have me drink?" I ask to give myself time to think. There has to be a way

out of this.

“A sleeping draught. I gave it to her in case you resisted coming here. She called saying you were beside yourself, clawing at your arm. I had her get you to drink it before you did too much damage to yourself. I didn’t know how quickly you healed.”

“I had to get it out.” It sounds stupid now. It isn’t an object to find and remove. It was dust, then a liquid. It’s been in me all this time.

Claws studies me. “Get what out?”

“Amanda pulverized a soul stone and injected that into me. It was part of how I was made.”

He steps to me and sniffs. “It explains your scent.”

“What scent?”

“You smell like—” he watches me and shakes his head. “Like one of us.”

“No, I don’t. I know what demons smell like. I don’t smell anything like that.”

His lips stretch into a smile. “Most of our young can’t smell their own scents either.” He crouches before me. “It’s the reason I came here, looking for you. One of the young who made it back to us had your scent on him.” He runs a finger on my chest. The touch is almost gentle. “I had to know what had happened to you.”

“I am not like you,” I growl, trying to pull away. “I am not a monster.”

He barks laughter. “Oh, you are a monster, make no mistake.” He looks into my eyes. “But it isn’t what they put in you that makes you so. You were one before that ever happened. Humans are the monsters. They corrupt the wild with their cities and machines.” His smile turns sad. “The part of us they put into you only made you a stronger one.”

“No! I fought to protect my people!” I yell.

“You murdered my young!” he screams back.

I pull at my right arm, and it rips free. I grab his throat before he can react and squeeze. “I was protecting my people from creatures like you,” I growl, pulling him close.

He’s choking. He grabs my hand and tries to force me to let go, but he can’t, I’m too strong for him. My hand remains clutched tightly on his throat. My...black hand?

I open it, and he backs away. I stare at it, the blackness rippling. There’s a sharp-looking fin on it that melts back down as I look. I look at the armrest. The leather strap is on the floor, cut.

I shake my arm. “Get it off!” I try to pull my other arm free, but it’s tied. By reflex, I slash at it. My fingertips elongate, becoming sharp. The pain is intense as I cut my flesh with the rope, but I don’t care. It’s free. I can get free. I reach down to cut my legs free, but he grabs my arm.

“Stop!”

“Let go of me! I have to get free.”

“You’re hurting yourself!”

“I don’t care!”

“I do.” I notice the tenderness in his eyes, the concern. He brings my hand up, so I have no choice but to look at it. “You need to calm yourself.” He’s bleeding. My forearm is covered with spikes piercing his hand. “This isn’t something on you, it is you. You are afraid, so you protect yourself.”

I can feel calm flowing through where he holds me. It’s like he’s talking to me through my hand. There is no forcefulness behind it, but encouragement. My breathing slows, and after a moment my forearm smooths out. The blackness remains.

He reaches down and cuts the straps off my legs.

I can’t take my eyes off my black hand and forearm. The blackness extends almost to my elbow. “Why is this happening to me now? Did you cause this? There’s never been blackness on me before.” As I say that, I see the man tied to that chair, the IV going in his neck. The blackness rippling in his body, cutting his straps. I shudder.

“I don’t know. Our skin is us, it protects us, it helps us survive. The youths can’t control it, so it changes to their moods, but you’re not like us. I can’t know why now.”

I offer him my arm. “You need to take it away.”

“I can’t, and even if I could, I wouldn’t.” He takes my arm in his hand. I sense caring from the contact. “This is you.”

I pull away. "No! I can't have that. I'm not a monster!"

I see disappointment in his eyes. "You're no more a monster than I am. Or than humans are."

I scoff. "Right, I've seen what demons do. Not just the hunting, but how they work with humans to do even worse things."

He stands. "What do you expect?" he growls. "We are predators. If our young who survive the hunger's madness don't get out of the city, they will find other predators, others of our kind you have not killed, or even human predators. When you get multiple predators together, they become more cunning, more dangerous. They become pure predator, with no ties to either kind. They see all of us as their prey."

I look at my hand again. "Then why did you say I was a monster?"

He sighs. "I needed you angry. I saw your skin ripple as I tied you. I thought you were hiding. I needed you to show me your skin, to confirm what your scent told me. I didn't realize you weren't aware of it."

"Cut it off."

He looks at me in horror. "Haven't you listened to what I said? This is you."

"No, it isn't. I'm not this thing. I'm—"

"Human?"

I find I can't hold on to the anger. When I speak, it comes out as a whisper. "I was." I see that man who wore my face wake up on that chair, the confusion as he looked around.

Claws places a hand on my shoulder. "If you were, you aren't anymore."

It isn't fair. He didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for it.

"What time is it?"

"Afternoon. Close to the midpoint between the sun's zenith and its setting."

"I have to go."

"Where?"

"Back there. I need to talk to Amanda."

"What could you have to say to her? She tried to kill you." There's an undercurrent of anger in his tone.

I stand. "You think I don't know that? This still stings." I point to my stomach. "I still need answers from her."

"She will lie to you."

"Probably." I sigh. "I still have to ask the questions." I turn, and there's a table behind me. On it is a black trench-coat like those, I use in my hunts. It's dirty and cut in places. I frown and reach in one of its pockets, pulling out gloves. It is one of my trench-coats.

"Where did you get this?"

"It was found in the garbage outside your building and brought to me."

Found outside? It should have been incinerated. That's what happens to any coat that got too much of a demon's scent on it during a hunt, which happens all the time. I sniff it and only smell Claws' scent on it. I look at him, and I see... embarrassment?

"I couldn't have that scent on it, not if you're going to wear it."

I study him, trying to understand why that would matter. Smart demons make as little sense to me as humans. I put the gloves and the trench-coat on and open the door.

"Derick, please don't go."

"Go back to where you came from, Claws in the Dark," I say, keeping my back to him. "You don't belong here, and what I do isn't any concern of yours." I step out of the building.

"You're wrong," I hear him whisper as the door closes.