

I wake, and for a fraction of a second, I can't tell where I am. The weight I expect over me isn't there. I don't hear the river or smell the forests. Instead, I hear voices in the distance and smell...not them, but something acrid that makes my nose itch. I'm on a bed, in a room. While the voices are distant, closer, the sound muffled by the walls, someone moves.

I sneeze, and my body hurts. When I'm properly fed, I heal faster than humans.

Living in the wilderness means not all my hunts have been successful. I haven't starved, but I have had to learn to live with hunger and its pain, with my body not always being at one-hundred percent.

Steps approach and fear surfaces. Who are they, and what do they want? Why am I here? Why can I not smell anyone in this room? Learning that humans are more complex than I'd originally been led to believe hasn't led to me being comfortable around them, but if they intended me harm, it would have happened already.

The wooden walls indicate this isn't a military installation, so I have not been captured. I am weak, but I am still stronger than a human; if their goal is to hurt me now that I'm awake, I won't make it easy for them.

The door opens and I remain still. The man who enters is old, indicated by the white hair in tight, wire-brush curls cut close to the skull. His skin, which is much darker than my light brown—when it isn't covered by my black skin—is wrinkled on his face and his hands. He doesn't show obvious weakness, and the thought drifts up that he would make for a worthwhile hunt, if a short one. I ignore it; I'm simply hungry.

"Thank you," I say. I am out of practice with being polite, but Jason's lessons are still there. I haven't thought about him—or Amanda's lab, my creation—in a long time, and I push them out of my mind; I cannot be distracted now.

"You're welcome." His voice is steady and he smiles. I can't tell if he's amused, being polite too, or there is another reason for it. Jason's teaching never pushed deep into what drove humans; I learned those lessons on my own. I can easily tell if someone intends me harm, but the rest of the time, humans are something of a mystery. I can tell more from a demon's body language in the few seconds the man stands in the doorway than I can from the man himself.

"Where am I?" I must ascertain my location, my situation, my condition, and make a plan of action.

"My home. The hunting party who found you bandaged your wounds, but they couldn't do much more. They brought you here. The wrinkleskin did quite a number on you. I'm surprised you managed to kill it."

"I'm harder to kill than I look." Hopefully his observation and my comment serve as a warning if his intentions are to hurt me.

"I can tell that." He chuckles. "My name is Moores."

I stand, the covers falling to the floor, and step to him, offering my hand. "Mine is Derick." Jason's teachings are ingrained deep into me.

He looks away as he shakes my hand, smiling. "There's clothing on the dresser. It should fit you. I'm afraid that what you had on is gone. Wrinkleskin blood doesn't get out of anything, and the smell draws more of them to you. You're lucky the one you killed was a loner."

I pause in the process of putting on the pants; I ignore the underwear. "They hunt in packs?"

"In family units," Moores answers. "From what I could tell—they brought it back along with you—this one was a juvenile. Old enough for a mate, but not having found one yet."

"You study them?" I pull the shirt over my head and turn to face the man.

He smiles. "More a consequence of looking after the people living here. The animals in the surrounding forests have different ways of hunting, and some change as they age. I've had to learn about them, to ensure everyone is taught how to be ready. Everyone is also taught the basics of how to bandage wounds and stop the bleeding, but a fair number of the animals are toxic. For as deadly as the wrinkleskin is, it's among those with the more straightforward damage." He motions as he steps out of the room. "Come, you must be hungry."

I follow him past another room with a bed and instruments that remind me too much of the experiments Amanda's scientist ran on me before I left. Is he a scientist? Or are those simply what he needs to look after the humans here?

The acrid smell is everywhere. I sneeze again. "What is this smell?"

He looks at me over his shoulder and I can't decipher the expression. It isn't fear, so possibly concern. Worry?

"I'm sorry, I cleaned the house while you were unconscious. You must have a good nose to smell it. I barely smell anything."

Acrid isn't how the cleaners smelled back at Amanda's laboratory, but I know better than to expect anything I know from that time to be the norm. There were too many lies. Even Jason lied to me, for all that his intentions were better than Amanda's.

The kitchen is simple: a stove, an oven, a fridge, storage. The table has two chairs, and they are made of the same kind of wood as the walls and floors. There is a sense of age to them, of being worn in the way the surfaces are smooth. They, and the house, have stood for a long time. Possibly the man has lived here a long time also.

"Sit, I'll prepare something." The man moves to the fridge. "Do you think you can handle solid food, or is a broth better right now?"

"Solid." The chair creaks under my mass, and the man's gaze stays on me a little too long. If the hunters carried me to him, he knows I am heavier than I look. Heavier than a human should be. What does he know of the experiments the military has conducted over the years to fight demons? Has he contacted them? Is this him waiting for them to come take me?

My black skin ripples under the shirt as fear resurfaces, but I take control before it forms spikes to protect me and rip the sleeve. If the military is coming, then the best course of action is to feed myself. Heal, regain my strength. I can't take them on in my current condition.

He takes out meat, vegetables, then a frying pan. I almost stop him as he puts that on the stove. I prefer my food uncooked; it tastes better. Raw means just-killed, and I know the best nourishment for me comes from the creatures I hunt so I get both types of nourishment. Even if that is not true when it comes to how humans store their meat, I still prefer it that way.

How different does he believe me to be? My weight, my black skin, will have told him I am not entirely human, but has he made the connection to demons? Letting him know I want my meat raw could be the element that lets him figure it out.

"Where are we?" I ask as he cooks. Both to keep him from asking about me, and to continue assessing my situation. "I entered the Anounga District while I traveled, but my understanding was that with the sickness gripping it, everyone needed to remain inside. The last time I heard the news, there was mention of evacuating the district." That was nearly a year ago, the last time I passed through a human settlement. I'd inexplicably craved their company.

"We're two weeks from the district line," Moores answers without looking away from his work. "Inside the district." He hesitates. "We do what we can to listen to the orders, but this isn't a city, with all the food production handled by factories and delivered to your door. We have to farm what we eat, hunt for some of our meat." He indicates the meat still on the counter. "Wrinkleskin meat is actually quite good when it's prepared properly."

I look at it, but don't feel any satisfaction at knowing I will be eating its meat. "I didn't get a chance to taste it." The disappointment is loud to my ears. It was a good fight. I wanted to know if it would have been as nourishing as if I had been the one hunting it.

"I'll talk to Ambrose, make sure she keeps some of its meat for you. You don't want to eat it right off. It's not deadly, but wrinkleskin blood will make you sick if it isn't washed out of the meat."

Someone else will eat my kill. The realization annoys me. I killed it, I eat it. I push that instinct down too.

Demons are possessive of their kills. The one who puts in the energy is the one who eats it. Mated pairs are the exception, but then, they hunt together. Even a cub won't get a share from their parents. Demon physiology drives them to only eat what they hunt. The hunt is integral to their nourishment.

I can survive without the hunt, without killing what I eat. I did it for years when I killed demons for Amanda, under the lies that there were others like me, and that we were all that kept humans safe.

There is no one else quite like me—there never was. And humans don't need me to keep them safe; they have the military. Humans have brought the demons on themselves by destroying so much of the wilderness.

The demon instincts I gained when I was created have become stronger with my time in the wilderness. I enjoy the hunt, the kill, the eating of the result. And, it turns out, I am possessive of what I kill. I can ignore the instinct to go get my kill back, but the annoyance remains.

Moore places a plate before me, and the smells force me back to his house.

The food smells wrong. Cooking does that, makes it wrong. It won't hurt me, but I won't get any enjoyment out of this meal.

"I know you probably don't feel too hungry," the man says as he places utensils next to my plate, "but you need to eat to regain your strength. Healing takes a lot out of you." He places a glass of water.

"Do you have any pop?" I ask before I realize it. And with the question comes the craving for the sickly, chemical, sweetness of the drink. It has been nearly a year since my last one, but the nearly normal setting triggers it. Eating at a table, using plates or bowls, came with the one can of pop I allowed myself. With the craving comes memories. Jason leaning on the kitchen island, asking questions, trying to understand how I thought. Doing what he could to make me as human as I can be.

I push the memory away. I stop myself from wondering how he is, what he is doing. I no longer think of him as the parent I saw him as back then. Back in the time of Amanda, of the lie. While I no longer hate him as I do her, thinking about him is uncomfortable, so I prefer to avoid it.

"I'm afraid I don't," Moore says as he sits opposite me with his own plate of cooked food, his own glass of water. "We live in a more basic way. And even before the sickness, getting something like that delivered here from one of the cities was complicated and expensive."

I nod and eat, focusing on the implications of what he said to keep the taste of burnt meat and vegetable from turning my stomach. We are far from any large settlement, away from any of the roads. Leaving will require traversing the wilderness, facing more of the creatures living in it.

Despite wanting to gag on each forkful of the horrible taste, I clean the plate and want more. I need more. This barely did more than remind me how hungry I am. I need to be sated so I will be able to face what the wilderness contains, but to ask for more will point out how different I am. It could inform Moore on how to control me, contain me. I will have to find something to hunt before I can leave.

"Good," Moore says as he takes my cleared plate away. "That will help you. Come, you need to get back to bed. I'm sure walking to the kitchen has tired you out." He places the plates in the sink and leaves the room.

I eye the fridge as I stand. There is more food there. Maybe enough to sate me until I can hunt. I catch myself before stepping toward it. I am not so hungry yet. I can play at being human a while longer.

I lie on the bed after he has left me there and wonder exactly how long I can play. How long I can lie here doing nothing but listening to my hunger. To the distant sounds of people.

They would make for a simple hunt.

I ignore the thought. Humans aren't food. Not to me.

I'm not that hungry yet. I will not let myself ever go that hungry.