

Chapter 12

I don't have time to wonder what she's doing here. I can hear footsteps behind the exit. I step in the small van and she slides the door close behind me. I sit down on the floor.

"Are you bleeding?" she asks as she sits behind the wheel. She looks at me over her shoulder. "Oh my God, you are bleeding." The van starts moving.

I shift about and then reach under me to pull out something. It's a small plush animal. Holding it I look at the back of the van. there are bench seats there, and things piled up on them. A small plastic truck, large and thin books, a reproduction of a woman in a white gown. What are those things? I should ask Juliette about them, and how she came to be here, but I'm suddenly very tired, so I rest my head back against the side and close my eyes.

I think I'm going to sleep, but all I can do is think over the video I watched. What they did to him.

I open my eyes with a start. What they did to me!

I look at my arm, and suddenly I know why it's throbbing. "It's in me."

"What did you say?"

"It's in me." I start clawing at my right forearm. "I need to get it out."

Juliette says something, but I'm not paying attention to her. The van waves about for a moment, making me hit the bench and wince in pain, but I don't stop scratching my arm. I have to get it out of me. I can't be like them.

I ignore the pain as my nails dig in the skin harder and harder, eventually drawing blood, The wounds close as fast as I cause them.

"no, no, no." I claw harder. I try to rip chunks out, but my skin's too tough. I have to get at it.

"Derick!"

I look up. I realize she's been talking for a while now, and has called my name a few times. She's holding a thermos behind her seat.

"Take this and drink the content."

"What's in it?"

"Just take it. It's going to help you."

"It's going to take it out?"

"Sure. yeah, it will."

I grab the thermos and almost rip the top off and then swallow the content in hungry gulps. It tastes horrible, but I don't care. I'll endure anything to get rid of the demon dust inside me.

I put it down and sigh in relief. "How long will it take to work?" I look at the back of her head. She has her cell phone to her ear.

She becomes fuzzy, and my eyelids are heavy. I try to call to her, but while my mouth opens, the sounds that come out aren't coherent. I try to move, but my limbs are so heavy. I eye the thermos.

She said it would help me.

She lied.

* * * * *

There's a strange scent tickling my nose. My arm throbs. I try to scratch it, but I can't move my other arm. I can't move either arms. It takes a lot of effort, but I manage to open my eyes.

The rags over my wound is gone, as is the duct tape. In its place there's some sort of paste, as does the wound on my shoulder. I'm sitting on a metal chair. My arms are secured to the arm rest with some sort of leathery rope. My legs are restrained too.

I look up and around. I'm in a large room. There isn't much light here, but I can see it's daytime by the window at the far end.

"Good, you're awake."

Of course he's here. I don't know why I didn't realize his scent was in the air until he spoke. "I thought you'd left the city."

He steps in my field of view, twenty feet away. "I did. I went to the woods on the outskirts. I was going to wait for you there, but you found yourself in trouble, so I came back."

"How did you know about that?"

"Someone inside the building called me."

I stare at him. Someone betrayed us? There's someone working with a demon inside? I have to tell Amanda... What am I thinking? "You sent Juliette."

"I did."

Of course he did. I shouldn't be surprised, that's one more person who lied to me, except. "No, that's can't be right. I didn't smell demonic taint on her at any time."

"That's because I've kept my distance from her." He produced a cell phone. "That's how I talk to her, and anything I need to give her goes through enough intermediary to mask my scent."

I didn't realize that could be done, but then again, he's the first really smart demon I've encountered.

"What's this stuff on my shoulder and stomach?"

"It's a healing poultice. It's drawing out the silver in the wound."

Silver? Why did it interfere with my healing? No! I pull at my bound. I need to get out of here.

"You won't break out. That's tendrope. It can't be broken, just cut."

I try to tilt the chair to the side, but it doesn't move at all. It's bolted to the floor I see when I look to the side. I don't know what kind of metal it's made of, but it's solid. I finally give up, panting heavily.

"What did Juliette have me drink?"

"A sleeping draught. I gave it to her in case I needed to insist you meet me, but when she called me saying you were clawing at yourself I told her to get you to drink it. I didn't know how well you could heal."

"I was trying to get it out." I realize how stupid that sound. It isn't an object I can find and take out of me. It's probably spread through my entire body.

"Get what out?"

"The soul stone dust Amanda injected in me."

He watches me for a moment then nods. "That explains the scent."

"What scent?"

"Your scent is similar to ours."

"No it isn't. I can tell Demon scent, and I don't smell like you at all."

A smile crawls on his muzzle. "You probably can't smell your own scent. Most of our youngs can't either. It's the reason I came here. That I came looking for you. One of our young who made it back to us had your scent on him. I needed to confirm you were one of us."

"I am not like you! I'm not a monster!"

He barks laughter. "You're monster alright." He walks toward me. "But make no mistake. It isn't what they put in you that made you a monster." He's in my face. "You were a monster before that. Humans are the monsters. The part of us that is in you only made you a stronger one."

"No! I fought to protect people!"

"You murdered my young!"

I pull at my right arm and it rips free. I grab him by the throat before he can react and I squeeze. "I was protecting my people," I growl.

He's choking. He tries to pull my hand away, but he can't. I'm too strong for him. My hand is clutched tightly on his neck... my black hand.

I let go of him and stare at my hand. The blackness ripples on it, and there's a fin on my forearm. I look at the arm rest, and the leather rope is on the floor, cut.

"Get it off, Get it off! I shake my arm trying to fling it away. My other arm is still tied and by reflex I slash the rope with the fin. The pain is intense as I cut the rope and my flesh, but I don't care. I need to get out of here, I need to find a way to get that thing off me. My legs are still so I bend down to cut the ropes there.

"Stop." He grabs my arm.

"Let go of me! I need to cut myself free."

"You're hurting yourself."

"I don't care!"

"I do." I see concern in his eyes, tenderness. "You need to calm yourself." He brings my hand up so I have no choice to look at it. I notice he's bleeding. There's multiple fins now, cutting into his hand. "This isn't something on you. It is you. You're afraid, so you try to protect yourself. You need to get control of yourself so your flesh will quiet itself."

I can feel calm flowing through where he's holding me. It isn't forcing me calmer, but it's encouraging it. My breathing slows, and after a moment my forearm smooths out. The blackness remains.

He reaches down and cuts my legs free.

"Why is this happening to me now? There's never been and blackness on me before."

"I don't know. Our skin reacts to how we feel. The youths can't control it at all. It flows and sharpens depending on their moods. But you're not like us, so I can't know why now."

"I need you to take it away."

"I can't, and even if I could, I wouldn't. This is you."

"No. You don't get it. I can't have this. I'm not a monster!"

He looks at me and I see disappointment in his eyes.

"You're no more a monster than I am, or that humans are."

I scoff. "For all your talk, I've seen what demons do here. Not just the hunting. They work with humans to do even worse things."

"What do you expect? Not all our youths who manage to stay alive here until the hunger becomes manageable come back to us. Many stay here, with no one to teach them our ways. So they learn from what they see humans do. They see them scheme together, lie, steal and kill for power. That's all they end up knowing."

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

"I was trying to get you angry. I thought you were hiding your skin. I wanted you to show it to me, to confirm my suspicion. I didn't realize you weren't aware of it."

"You can cut off my arm."

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

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

"What? human?"

"I was," I whisper, finding that my anger evaporates.

"If you were, you aren't anymore."

This isn't fair. I didn't ask for any of it.

"What time is it?"

"It's the afternoon. Close to the midpoint between the son's zenith and the sun setting."

I nod. "I have to go."

"Why?"

"I need to go talk to Amanda."

"What could you have to say to her? She tried to kill you."

"I know!" I stand. "I don't care. I have questions for her."

"She will lie to you."

"Maybe. I still have to ask them."

I turn and see a table next to the door. On it is something. A trench coat I discover when I pick it up--my Trench coat. It's dirty and cut in a few places. It's the one I wore three weeks ago. I threw it out because it had been too damaged.

"Where did you get this?"

"Someone found it in the garbage and I took it."

"Why?"

He doesn't say anything, just shrugs. I put it on and put my hand in the pockets. There's a pair of glove in them. I guess I forgot to take them out. I look at my black hand, and put a glove on it.

"Derick, please don't go."

"Go back to where you came from. You don't belong here, and what I do isn't any concern of yours." I leave.

"You're wrong," he whispers as the door closes.