

I feel good. It's been a few days since I killed the last demon, and I've spent my time doing tests and training. Juliette left another message, but I deleted it without listening.

I still feel fear at the idea of confronting the demon again, but I don't let it paralyze me; I make it drive me to train.

I push myself when I fight the robots, setting them to react faster. I increase the weights for exercises. I spend time in the shooting range and practice reloading my revolvers as quickly as I can, both with a loader and bullet by bullet.

I want to be at my best for the next time I meet it.

* * * * *

I am doing a reflex test for Noah, one of the scientists, when the call comes. The test consists of me in a cylinder four feet in diameter, with spikes jutting out at random intervals, speeding up the longer I am here. The goal is to avoid getting something vital pierced for as long as possible. I've been in for an hour. The spikes now come out every second, one out before the previous one has fully retracted. I have dozens of cuts, but they are only skin-deep.

The click comes, the locking mechanism for the spikes. I know why. The only thing that can interrupt a test is a sighting.

"Derick," the old man says, opening the door to the cylinder. "You're needed in the field."

I nod and take the towel. I wipe the blood off, leaving my skin unmarred. The cuts are already healed. I stop by my room to change, then head to the hangar. I arm myself, the revolvers, with extra loaders. Two swords, the hatchet. For a moment I consider taking more weapons. I worry that if I encounter that demon, what I already have won't be enough, that it will be able to tear me apart even with them.

I recognize it as the fear speaking. It tries to send my mind a down spiral of doubt. I force it down. I am a hunter. I can defeat any demon with a sword and my guns. Anyway, over-encumbering myself with weapons would hinder my movements. I put the trench-coat on.

"Where was the sighting?" I ask, sitting down in the chair. The medic places the sensors on me. I don't know him, although I have seen him before. He was one of Jason's poker friends. His blush tells me he realizes I have seen him wearing almost nothing.

The woman in the passenger seat looks over her shoulder as the van starts moving. "Calborn Industrial Sector. The call came from a passerby who saw the demon breaking into one of the warehouses there. It might just have reached the point where it settles down and makes a nest."

"I don't get why they always end up doing that," the driver says. "They eat their victims on the spot, what's the point of having something to go back to?"

"They're demons, they aren't supposed to make sense," the passenger replies.

I tune them out. Demons make nests because when they get smart enough, they no longer kill everyone they encounter. A nest means it's getting ready to taint humans, to get them to work for it. If I don't stop it, it will mean a new focal point for crime in the city. Tainted, the humans will attack other humans. They will steal and kidnap. The demon will no longer need to leave its nest; its agent will bring the food to it.

It could be that demon, I think, and I sense the medics' gaze on me as my heartbeat increases for a moment. I force it back to normal. I will not let the thought of it unnerve me. If this is it, I will fight it, and I will kill it, or it will kill me. I will not give into the fear. I am a hunter.

"We're here," the driver says, bringing the van to a stop and turning in her seat. "The caller didn't say which warehouse it went in, so you'll have to go through all of them."

She's new. I don't need to search them. I will be able to go directly to the one it's hiding in. I step out of the van and walk to the buildings.

I catch the scent at the fourth warehouse, and I freeze for a moment. It's *that* demon's scent. I want to run in the opposite direction, but I don't let myself move. I do not give into the fear, even if it is stronger now that I have confirmed its scent. I will face it. I will fight it with all my might. If I die, it will not be because fear overwhelmed me.

I follow the scent. It did not go into this building. It moved past it, as well as the next two. On the next one, the door is open, the chain that kept it closed ripped off.

I hesitate. This is not an accident. The path it walked kept it out of sight, but here it's exposed. It could have entered from any other location. It wanted to be seen. It wants me here.

I look inside through the open door. It's well-lit due to the large windows letting in the light, in spite of being dirty. The floor is littered with debris and large containers, metal and a few wooden. It could be hiding behind them, but I know it isn't. I look up. It's standing on the scaffolding, staring at me.

I take out a revolver and empty it at it as I enter. I open the cylinder and reload it in one motion. If I've hit it, it shows no signs.

I keep my aim on it as it steps off the beam, landing twenty feet before me. "I do not want to fight you," it growls.

Sure. I fire at it, but it's moving before the hammer goes down. The corner of the wooden crate behind it explodes, adding fragments to the debris on the floor.

I try to follow it, but it is fast, so much quicker than any I've fought before. It's a blur, making its form difficult to target. I empty the revolver, reload it, and pull out the other one.

I stop trying to hit it while it runs. I track it and wait. It stops, and I fire, once with each gun. It's no longer there, the bullets clanging against the metal container.

This isn't working; I'm playing its game, while I need to get it to play mine. I lower my arms and close my eyes. I ignore the fear, still at a low simmer, telling me I'll never win this.

I listen to it move. The claws on its feet click ever so lightly on the concrete floor. It stops thirty feet to my right. I don't move. It takes a step toward me, slowly, tentatively. Then another, and another, more confident.

I start pulling the trigger before my arm moves. I've aimed at it and am firing before it can react. I continue shooting and bring up the other revolver. I can't tell if I am hitting it; its form shifts around it. The last bullet makes a large hole in its side.

It roars, and for a moment I can see through the hole, then it closes. How can it heal this quickly from an irradiated wound?

Something comes at me. I duck, but it hits my hand. The revolver flies out of it. I straighten, but it's before me. It hits me in the chest, and I fly back through a wooden crate. I land and slide until I hit the corrugated wall. Why did it hit me with the palm of its hands and not the claws?

I stand, and it pushes me against the wall, hand around my neck.

"I do not wish to fight you!" Its eyes are bright red. There's the anger that was missing the other day.

"Too bad, I'm going to kill you." I raise my feet and kick it in the stomach with all my strength. It flies back, leaving scratches on my neck from its claws. I fall to my back, and I'm up again, unfolding a sword.

"What are you?" it asks, getting up.

"I'm a hunter. I'm a killer of demons," I growl back.

"No, what are you?" I see it searching for a moment. "What is your name?"

I frown. "What do you care?" Why does it want my name? Can't it just try to kill me, like all demons do?

It straightens. "I am Claws in the Dark."

"Fine." I roll my eyes. "I'm Derick."

Surprise registers in its eyes, then it mouths my name. It isn't happy with it. "It's an ugly human name. You deserve better.

"Like I care what you think. What do you want?"

"I desire to talk, to understand you."

"Right, you want to understand me. I don't believe you."

It tilts its head to the side. "Why do you not believe me?"

I can't help the laughter. "You're kidding, right?"

The question seems to confuse it.

"You're a demon. You wouldn't know how to tell me the truth if your life depended on it."

He ponders that for a moment. "Why do you say that?"

“Because that’s the truth.”

“How do you know it is such?”

“They told me so.”

“They?” It looks around. “Humans?”

“Yes, humans. Demons lie, humans don’t. Demons are bad, humans are good. That’s why your kind keeps trying to kill them.”

“Humans do bad things,” it says.

“Only when they fall under a demon’s influence. When they become tainted by one.”

It nods. “I understand. You believe it is so because humans have told you.”

“Told me? I’ve seen it happen. I’ve had to kill humans who were tainted.” It had been horrible. I’d thought Amanda would replace me after that, but she told me it had been the right thing to do. They were tainted, no longer humans anymore.

It studies me for a moment.

I see it move this time. I know it’s about to rush me, and I ready myself for it. I feel the blade bite into its flesh as it gets close, but it doesn’t hit me, it changes direction, pulling the sword out of my hand and me off balance. I take out the other sword and run after it.

It jumps over a container, and breaking sounds come behind it. I round it to see broken plywood over a hole. I follow it down there. There is no light, and my thermal vision doesn’t do me much good here, but I have its scent. At least for a few hundred feet, then I reach a zone with hundreds of other demons’ scent. I try to pick it out of the others, but I can’t. I curse. I’ve lost it. I didn’t prove myself, I let it escape. I will not be able to find it down here.

My phone has no signal down here, so I head back to the warehouse. I have to tell Amanda and Jason about it. What Amanda will do to me as a consequence no longer matters; they have to know.