

The next few days are uneventful. I don't see Jason during that time, which means that they haven't finished discussing what they want to do about Juliette. Amanda runs me through a few tests to measure my reflexes, strength, and accuracy. In short, how good of a hunter I am.

I'm in the middle of tests run by one of the other doctors when I'm ordered to the hangar. At the urgency in the voice, I rip the sensors off my body and run. I have no idea what tests he was doing, having me run on a treadmill for the hour before the call.

The hangar is a flurry of activity, and the van is being stocked with more medical equipment than usual. There's none of the laughing that is usual between some of the techs, or what Jason calls "small talk." The only conversations happening are about the needs of the situation at hand.

The reason for the urgency becomes apparent when the medic gives me a trench-coat with my weapons and tells me there are already four bodies. There's no telling how many more there will be by the time I get there.

The driver is someone I don't know, and his driving is erratic. He grumbles the entire time, his voice eventually forming actual words.

"This is the third attack under a week. They have to be planning something."

"Demons who are smart enough to make plans act through tainted humans," I reply. I'm in the chair, and Valerie is taking readings.

The driver casts me an angry look over his shoulder before focusing back on the road. I don't understand what about my comment makes him angry. I simply stated what is known from all the previous attacks. Valerie removes the sensors from my chest. She doesn't look away this time. Whatever affected her the other time has passed.

The man in the passenger seat looks up from the tablet he's holding and to me. "We're only a few minutes out. The latest report says there's a fifth body, and that the demon has retreated to an alley with two victims, still alive when they disappeared." That won't last; demons never keep anyone alive for long. The extra medical supplies they added won't help anyone.

Demons like alleys, but we don't know why. It isn't to flee the sun in the darkness, since in the daytime, like now, there are no shadows dark enough to hide them. Some of the scientists have theorized that it's because demons like confined spaces, as demonstrated by the tunnels they have dug all around the city. Others claim it's because it makes it more difficult for their victims to escape.

I wince as we turn a corner and the sound of sirens explode before us. This time I expect it's the noise that forced them back. It gets loud enough it hurts my ears as we drive through the barricade they form. I want to put my hand over my ears to diminish the pain, but Amanda trained me to endure it, so I close my eyes and focus on my breathing.

The sound recedes a little but is much louder than I expect by the time we stop. The medic opens the door, and I step out. The police cars are only two blocks away on either side. This must have happened quickly; normally they block the roads at least a dozen blocks away.

"Tell the officers to turn the sirens off," I tell the driver through the door. "I need to be able to hear the demon move." That, and I want to end the headache that is forming.

The alley where the demon retreated to is easy to find; there are pieces of bodies at its mouth. I look at each end of the street. The police officers are behind their cars, guns out and pointing in this direction. Beyond them, people are gathered and watching. They need to leave. If the demon gets past me, it will kill them in its escape. I tell the medic, then head for the alley.

I take out my guns before going in. I prefer using rooftops, but right now I can only follow it by scent. I'm a few hundred steps in when the sirens fall silent. My ears are still ringing, so I need to stay on the ground.

Its scent is strong, but I can smell two human scents mixed in, although those are becoming weaker. It isn't that they are dead, although that is likely. Demon scent clings to people, and over time can completely mask it. It's how I can tell humans have interacted with demons; the more they interact, the stronger it becomes and the longer it lingers.

I stop worrying about the shadows and blind spots created by the pile of garbage on the sides of the alley, or the dumpster when my hearing comes back, and I hear whimpering ahead of me.

One of them is still alive.

I quicken my pace, turn a corner, and see a dark form ahead, walking away. I shoot it in the back. One bullet hits, then it ducks low, turning to roar at me. It's holding both humans by the neck. They are thrashing, clawing at the large hands holding them.

I empty my revolvers at it. It drops its captives and comes at me; it's much faster than the demons I've fought before. By the time the guns click empty, it's on me. I drop them, jumping out of the way. I can't have missed, but it shows no indications of being hurt.

I land, and it's already close enough to slash. I dodge and take out my sword. I can't make out details about it, other than the rage in its eyes; it moves too fast. I dodge another blow, but the trench-coat ends up with three cuts in its tail. I unfold the sword and slash at it, taking a step back.

It doesn't follow, staying close to the humans. Does it know I want to lead it away? Is it looking to protect its food? It's the first time I've fought one with living captives, but I can't imagine it cares enough about them for that. So why won't it follow me?

I don't have the time to ponder that. The longer it remains alive, the less likely the humans will survive. I need it to stay focused on me, so I rush it, slashing back and forth. Its claws parry my attacks, but when I back away this time, it follows me. I back until I'm at a spot where a dumpster narrows the alley, limiting its maneuverability. I let a few of its slashes get close enough to cut the edge of the trench-coat to ribbons.

Emboldened, it roars.

I cut it short with a slash at its muzzle. It gurgles as its lower jaw falls to the ground. It tries to move to the side as I swing again, but the dumpster is there, and I feel the blade dig in its leg.

It stumbles, and I press my advantage. I get close, but before I can swing again, it grabs a garbage can and hits me with it. I end up on the other side of the alley, no longer holding the sword. It kicks me as I'm scrambling to my feet, and I bounce off the wall, landing in a heap. I barely roll out of the way in time as it throws the can at me. It hits the wall with enough strength to send pieces of brick flying.

In my rush to back up, my hand lands on something metallic. I grab it as I roll out of the way of another kick, and use the momentum to get to my feet. I dodge a blow and glance at what I'm holding: one of the revolvers.

I back away to stay out of its reach as I open the cylinder and let the cartridge fall out. I dig in a pocket for more bullets. In my year of hunting, it's the first time I've had to reload a revolver in the middle of a fight.

I hope it'll stop following me and go back to its captives, as before. I need the respite. It doesn't, and as I pull the loader, it backhands me, and I go flying again.

I hold on to the gun, but the loader isn't in my hand when I get up. I reach in the pocket for the other one, but the bullets have fallen out of it. I close my hand around as many of them as I can, and dodge blow after blow. I have never manually reloaded a revolver before, and not under combat situation. Two bullets go in, and the next one slips through my fingers—I can't worry about it. I put the other two in.

Four bullets to kill it with. I've done it with six, but I have a strong sense luck was involved. Severing the head is the only sure way to kill a demon, but an irradiated bullet in its skull will also work. As long as the brain can talk to the body, it can cause damage.

With it moving like this, and me having to dodge constantly, I doubt I can get even one of my four bullets in its head. It will have to stand still for a moment, or I'll have to get close enough to be point-blank.

I swallow as I realize I can do it, but for as tough as I am, I don't particularly like pain. I look for the sword; that would be a far less painful way to end this.

I can't see it, so it's going to have to be pain.

I continue dodging for a few more moments, then I rush it. I strike at it with my empty hand—I don't want to draw attention to the revolver, even if I doubt it realizes what it is.

It slaps my fist away and grabs my shoulder. I try to avoid it by reflex, but my plan needs this

to happen. I bite back the pain as it pulls me close. It opens its maw, and I wonder for a moment if it can even eat me without its lower jaw.

I have no intention of finding out. I bring the revolver up and place the barrel against the back of its throat. It lets out something that sounds quizzical before I fire the four bullets in its head.

Its eyes grow wide for a moment, then the light in them fades, and it crumples to the ground. The claws wrench out of my shoulder, and I groan as it pulls me down.

When I straighten, there's another demon staring at me.

I bring up the revolver and fire it, just as I remember it's empty. The demon smiles at me. It's a very human gesture, but it exposes sharp teeth. It reaches for me, then stops. Its head bends to an unnatural angle with the sound of breaking bones, and it falls to the ground.

There's someone behind it. I register jeans and a hoodie, and I think he's another hunter. Then I notice that instead of shoes, he had large, clawed feet. I look inside the hoodie and see glowing red eyes.

I back up, bringing up the gun to its face.

It doesn't move. It's a little taller than I am—quite small for a demon—and wearing clothing. Demons don't wear clothing. I look at its eyes again. Where is the rage? No matter what else they feel, there is always rage in them. Where is it?

"You killed it." My voice trembles. It killed one of its own kind. There are a few records of demons killing each other, but always when fighting over food. This was done in...cold blood? It looks at me, and I can't help wondering why it isn't attacking.

Its gaze moves to the form at its feet. "I did."

I back up again. It spoke. Its voice is low and gruff, but it spoke. I didn't expect it to be that intelligent. The very smart ones, those that speak, stay in the background, getting humans to act for them. They don't come out like this, to kill one of their own.

"Why? I can't stop my voice from shaking.

"He was going to kill you."

I stare at it. Its words are so unbelievable it takes me a moment to understand what it said. "What... What do you care if it had killed me?"

It studies me for a moment, and I get a sense of a muzzle under the hoodie. "I don't want you to die." It turns and takes a few steps away. At that moment I realize that with the clothing it's wearing, I can't tell it isn't human. Three leaps off the sides of the alley and it has disappeared to the rooftops.

I stand there, frozen for a moment, trying to understand what just happened. I can't. It makes no sense whatsoever.

I pull out the hatchet and bend down to get its soul stone, but then I freeze again. I can smell the demon who just left on it. I know that scent.

It was the scent clinging to the revolver that was left for me to find the other night.