

The kid is running as fast as he can through the dark alleyways. He's been running for five minutes now. I'm too far away, keeping pace with him from the rooftop, to tell how old he is. At this distance, he's shades of red, the heat of his exhaustion.

He looks over his shoulder before making a turn into a side alley. I jump the twenty feet to the roof on the other side and stay with him. This was a good decision on his part; the lane leads to the street, but I'm not going to let him reach it first.

I speed up, jumping up and down as the roofs change height, not noticing them. He's only halfway to the end of the alley when I reach the last building and skid to a stop. I jump over the side and land from the eight-story drop in a crouch. I stand and step in the middle of the alley's mouth. The kid is a small, red form getting larger. I pull out my revolvers, their weights comfortable in my gloved hands.

He hasn't seen me yet. He can't see me. My gray trench coat blends in with the dark street. None of the street lights are working, and the two moons don't provide enough light to compensate. I raise my hands, pointing my guns down the alley.

I hear a car's tire squeal as it makes a turn. Headlights sweep over my back, and I cast a giant shadow before me. The kid gasps, but he doesn't stop or even slow down. That's odd; normally they throw themselves to the ground. Maybe he hasn't noticed my guns? Okay, then this is what I'm going to work with.

The car has driven past us. It's dark again, but the kid still barrels toward me. I wait for a few heartbeats.

"Kid," I say, my voice even, preparing myself to fire. "Duck." Of course, he doesn't duck. That's fine, I fire over his head.

A scream erupts from the alley's darkness, louder than my guns as I empty them. The kid runs by me, and by the muzzle flash, I can tell he's around sixteen, freckle-faced, and smells like he has lost control of his bodily functions. An understandable reaction when being hunted by a demon.

The creature jumps at me out of the darkness with a roar that shatters windows. I move, but not fast enough; the force of the impact sends me flying back. I land hard and roll to my feet. A revolver flies out of my hand and skids over the sidewalk, quickly being enveloped by darkness. I holster the other one and pull a sword handle off my belt.

I shake it, and with a series of *snicks*, the blade unfolds until it's three-feet long. I do love technology. I'm told the design is based on a katana, but it's made of an irradiated carbon-steel alloy. The radiation levels are safe to use around humans, I'm told, but it hurts demons, about the only way to really hurt them.

The demon glares at me from the other side of the alley's mouth, its eyes glowing red. It's tall, at least seven feet in height, but I can't make out details in this dark. Unlike humans, it doesn't radiate heat, but its stink sticks to my coat. It will have to be destroyed after this.

It roars again, a challenge, and more windows shatter. Lights come on in the apartments, silhouettes appear and peer out. They stay inside. Very few people in the city have seen demons, but everyone has heard about them on the news. The message is always the same: stay out of the way. Let the professionals deal with it.

Still, I have to end this quickly. Someone is going to call the police, not realizing they already know about it at this point. They will stay away, most of them, but there's always a brave, courageous fool who thinks they can help me out. They aren't hunters, so I'll end up having to fight around them, having to keep them safe from the demon.

The light coming from the windows is faint, but it's enough for me to see the demon's oily black fur. I also have to end this before any more cars drive by. It's too early for the police to have cordoned off the area; the initial sighting was blocks away.

I run at it, sword at the ready, but the creature is fast. It dodges my strikes and slashes at me with its long claws. I avoid them easily, but the kick almost gets me. It's a sneaky one, a little older than those who've made their way to the city this last year.

I force it back with a quick series of slashes, looking for an opening it isn't giving me. It uses its steel-hard claws to brush my blade aside. I have to strike flesh to hurt it and cut off its head

to end this.

This close I can see it's foaming at the mouth. Its long muzzle filled with sharp teeth snaps at me. I avoid those teeth, teeth that can rend metal. Demons are good at killing, the only thing they are good for, really. No, one of the two things. Being killed is the other thing they are good for.

I hear a car coming, and I slash faster. I want it dead before the car reaches the corner, but all that happens is that my sword pings off its claws over and over.

The headlights become visible, and a moment later the car turns the corner. The demons' eyes flick in that direction, and it turns, exposing its back to me. I slash at it, but it has already moved out of the way. I run after it as it rushes the car. I can't let it use the vehicle as a weapon; that would kill the occupant.

The car's breaks scream, and the demon comes to an abrupt stop. I can't react in time. It backhands me, and I'm airborne. A building ends my flight, and I drop to the ground amidst a shower of broken bricks, my head ringing from the impact. It's the sneakiest demon I've fought to date.

I shake my head, and it clears in time for me to roll out of the way of the foot that cracks the cement where I had been. I'm up, but my sword is behind the demon. My only other tool isn't useful in a fight; it isn't irradiated.

Nothing to be done about it. It's going to be hand-to-hand until I can reach my sword. I rush the demon. It's smart enough not to expect me to fight it unarmed, and it hesitates. I'm inside its reach and punch it in the stomach as hard as I can. Pulling punches with those is asking for death.

It backs up with a grunt. It probably doesn't realize I'm not a regular human. I'm a hunter, and we're a lot stronger. I hit it with a double fist in the chest, and it takes another step back, stepping over my sword.

I hit it again, forcing it away some more, and bend down to pick it up. It comes at me, but this time I'm the faster one. I slash at it, and a hand falls to the ground. It roars, and I press it; I can't let it recuperate. If it can get over the pain, it will come at me harder. I slash at its chest and stomach. It tries to cut me, but I avoid its good hand. I cut a leg out from under it, and it goes down to a knee.

The rage leaves those glowing red eyes, replaced with fear. It raises its arm to stop my blow, but I cut through it as easily as I slice through its neck.

The body falls to the ground, and the head rolls away for a moment before coming to a stop. Those eyes look at me as the glow fades, and I feel a deep-rooted satisfaction.

I collapse my sword back into the handle and hook it to my belt. From the small of my back, I take out the hatchet and kneel next to the head. It's made from the same carbon-steel alloy as my sword, but it isn't irradiated. It doesn't need it—the demon is dead—but it's thicker than my sword, with an edge that can cut through almost anything.

This is going to be messy, but it has to be done.

I bring the hatchet down with all my strength on the creature's skull. It still takes me three blows before it breaks. I pull the opening apart and reach into the goo, searching with my fingers until I feel something hard. I pull it out and shake the mush off my glove.

I'm holding a black stone. Even if it were daytime, it wouldn't reflect any of the light. It's utter darkness, the demon's soul stone. It needs to go into a containment unit before it can come back to life. I wrap it in a tissue before pocketing it. My gloves are ruined, so I take them off and throw them on the body. Someone is going to be over to dispose of that.

Cell phones are snapping pictures, and I stand there for a moment. Jason says it's good for them to see I can protect them, so I need to give them the time to appreciate it. I give them a minute, then I take out my phone and call headquarters.

"Derick, glad to hear from you. How was the hunt?" It's a man's voice, so it's Gregory. He and Cynthia are the only ones who work nights.

"The demon's dead. I have its soul stone."

"Glad to hear it. I'm dispatching a cleanup crew. What's the collateral damage?"

“Minimal. Broken windows, as usual, damage to a brick wall. A scared civilian, but he’s driven off.” I try to remember him leaving, but I was too focused on the fight.

“It’s nice of them when they keep the damage low.”

“It helps when I make myself the target.”

“I’m sure it does. Your pickup is a few blocks away, so they should be there shortly. And don’t worry about the civilian; if he drove off, he’s fine.”

“Okay.” I disconnect, trusting in his knowledge about humans. I spend the time until the black van arrives looking for my gun, but I don’t find it. Did it bounce further than I thought? I hadn’t heard anyone other than the demon and the car so it couldn’t be that someone picked it up. Still, it’s no longer my problem.

I walk to the van, its side door open. I’m about to step in and stop. Someone is looking at me. I look back and around. It isn’t the watchers taking pictures in the windows; this is more intense, focused, personal.

“Everything okay?” the medic asks, peering out and over my shoulder.

I see nothing out of the ordinary, so I shrug and enter the van. He closes the door behind me and takes a seat as I remove my trench coat. I drop it in the hamper for it. No one wants the goo that is the demon’s blood on the inside of the van.

I sit in my chair, a bulky model bolted to the back with sensors for the doctor’s reports. The medic signals for me to take off my shirt and I comply. I don’t know this one.

Headquarters has a lot of scientists, many of them doctors, and any of them could be assigned to my pickup van. I tried to get to know all of them when I started working in the field a little over a year ago, but they remained distant, so I stopped.

He applies sensors to my chest and head. They take their readings after every hunt. We’re solidly built, us hunters, but they always worry I’ll get damaged.

“No visible cuts,” he says, looking me over. “Any injuries I need to know about?”

“Just a few bruises. They’ll be gone before you can do anything about them.”

“Anything else needs to be reported?”

“I lost a revolver.”

“Broken?” the woman in the passenger seat asks. She wears combat armor and has a high-power machine gun on her lap. She’s there in case I need trained backup. Not that I’ve needed it at this point. I’ve yet to encounter a demon that’s a match for me.

“Dropped in the fight. I looked for it, but I didn’t find it by the time you arrived.”

“I’ll let the cleanup crew know to look for it,” she says, typing on the computer attached to her wrist. “The armory will assign you a new one.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” the driver says. I can’t see much of him, but his voice is deep and his shoulders broad. “It isn’t like civilians can use it; it’s keyed to his bio-print. It’ll just end up in someone’s collection, a hunter’s gun, used in an actual fight.”

“Civilians have no business getting their hands on them,” she replies, the tone harsh.

The driver looks at her for a moment. “Chill.”

Like him, I don’t see the problem. Not only is it keyed so I’m the only one who can use it, but the ammunition also isn’t available to civilians. Even Amanda told me it wasn’t something to worry about. It’s just a piece of metal at this point.

The medic finishes calibrating the sensors. “You have the stone?”

I nod to the trench coat.

“Alright, just sit back and relax. We’re going to be home in twenty minutes.” He rummages through the pockets until he finds the tissue. He unwraps the stone, cleans it, and then places it in the cylindrical containment unit.

I close my eyes once the stone is secured. I finally feel like the hunt is over. There hasn’t been a case of a demon re-manifesting after its death in my year of hunting, but I’ve read reports of it happening, before my time and in other cities. No one knows why or how it happens, but the containment system the scientists created a few years ago seems to work.

It takes me a moment to relax. I still feel like moving. I can run back to headquarters in a fraction of the time; running across the rooftops would let me shorten the distance. Even if I

have to stay to the street, in the city, with the traffic, I could easily keep up with the van, but there are procedures. I'm dropped off at the sighting location and picked up after the hunt.

"I don't believe this," the medic whispers. "His heart rate isn't even elevated." He's moved to the front, and probably doesn't realize I can hear him. "If I'd fought that thing, I'd be sweating, and my heart would be racing."

"No, it wouldn't," the woman says, her tone flat. "You'd be dead."

"You can't know that."

"Why do you think we sent that at them?" she hisses. "It's because we can't stop them ourselves. We tried. You should have seen the damage demons did when—" She stops talking.

She has to be referring to before my time, before hunters were created, decades ago. I know the general history. Demons appearing out of nowhere, ravaging cities for years until a group of scientist was able to create something capable of fighting back. I don't know the details—it doesn't matter to me what the first one had been called, or how much the techniques have been refined since that time.

I am the product of human ingenuity and wonder. I will fight to defend them until I die.