

I have not been to the monitoring center since the first time Amanda showed it to me, not long after I was born. She wanted me to understand what went on there, and how it would affect what I would do.

It was informative, but all I needed to know out of it was that they were the ones taking the calls of sightings, as well as listening in on the city's communications, for clues as to who might be working for demons.

She'd explained how they had a list of trigger words statistically linked to demon-related conversations. Not all of those were from tainted humans—demons were a popular topic of conversation—but when enough trigger words popped up in a conversation, someone would go investigate. If they confirmed the presence of a demon, then I went for it.

It had only happened once in my year of hunting, a few months after I became active. A gang, drawn into human trafficking by a demon, was pinpointed through listening in on their communications. I went in after it, the police capturing the gang members my hunt forced outside.

The demon had been old enough to speak, but not as well as the one who saved my life. Its words were mangled with growls and hisses. It wasn't a hard fight, once I caught up to it. The years of using humans to do its work had made it complacent in its power.

I shake my head slightly. The past isn't going to help me. There is nothing to learn from that hunt that applies here. This demon is different. Despite its small size, it survived to an age where it's able to speak properly. The ability to mix in with humans played a part, that is certain, but it needs to have strength and cunning above that, otherwise stronger demons would have killed it.

The room is filled with a dozen desks, each with monitors and someone watching them for signs of a demon on one of the city's cameras. These aren't as efficient as they were years ago. Demons have learned about them, and it's the rare one that gets caught, but humans don't seem to learn, and it's possible one of the tainted humans will lead back to a demon.

Some are on calls with witnesses. The people here can talk them through how to safely verify the sighting. Most of the calls are false alerts.

Others are going through conversations the computers have flagged as containing trigger words. Again, most of them will not lead to anything. The police are the most reliable source of demon sightings—humans usually call them first—and they have some training on how to verify the information.

One of the humans notices my presence and pauses in surprise. I go to him.

"Have there been any sightings?" I ask before he can say anything.

"N—no," he stutters. "Nothing with a significant chance of being real." He looks around. "What are you doing here?"

I need something to do. Something to hunt. I want *that* demon to show up so I can cut its head off. I want to rip its limbs from its body. What I don't want to do is hide in a corner and hope to never come across it again. I need to prove myself.

I shrug and leave. I'm being unrealistic. I have nothing to prove; I am a hunter, a good one. In the year I've been active, very few demons have escaped me, and all were in my first months. Amanda will not replace me.

I go looking for Jason.

I don't look in his lab; the only time he is there is when he runs tests on me. The usual place to find him is in the cafeteria, talking with one of the cooks, a tall and muscular man, with curly, dark-red hair. They have had sex; I often smell it on them.

I questioned Jason about it, the first time he broached the subject of sex. Why did he do it, if it was for reproduction? I understood humans enough by then to know of the two genders, and he had explained that sex between two different genders led to reproduction.

His explanation took two hours but could have been explained in two phrases. Sex is pleasurable. Humans like to experience pleasure. It was why humans like him, who were attracted to other males, engaged in sex. For the pleasure of it.

I got a sense there was more to it, something in those two hours that I missed. It was an

emotional component that he talked about, but it didn't make sense to me.

I don't find him in the cafeteria. Kevin, the man Jason talks to, is here, so Jason isn't away with him. He has not seen Jason in the last two hours.

I go to the gym, but he isn't there. I walk by Amanda's office, but I don't knock. I only listen. I can hear her breathing, so she is there. No conversation, so Jason is not.

I find Jason in the locker room, playing cards with four other men. They are in various state of undress. Why they are as such, I don't know.

They are playing a game Jason calls "poker." I recognize it from when he taught it to me. The game is based on a combination of five cards, with specific combinations having different values. The goal of the game is to convince the opponents that the cards you hold contain a combination they cannot beat. That is accomplished by putting some of your money at risk. Since each player needs to match what you put in, if they are not confident their combination can defeat yours, they stop playing.

Jason had me play, once, as he taught me. I can notice the smallest facial ticks and slight increases in their heart rates. I won all the rounds.

Some of the men curse when they notice my presence, one of them grabbing his shirt and draping it over his exposed crotch. Most turn redder.

Jason smiles at me. "Hey D, want to join in?"

"No, thank you." At my answer, the other men relax slightly. "I need to talk to you."

Jason looks at the other men; he's the only one still fully dressed. "Looks like it's your lucky day, guys." He pauses a grin appearing. "Or maybe not." He joins me and leads me out.

I can hear curses as we leave. And one of the men talks about going back to his place since they won't go to Jason's.

"What do you want to talk about?" Jason asks.

"Would Amanda replace me because I show fear?"

He stumbles and straightens. "What? No, of course not. Fear is a perfectly normal human thing to feel."

"But I am a hunter."

I see worry cross his features, then he shakes his head. "No, she wouldn't. And even if she wanted to, it takes months to make one of you, and a year to get you to the point where you can go on a hunt. She can't plan on doing that."

His voice quavers slightly. I don't believe he is entirely certain of what he says.

"So, if she decides to replace me, I will know ahead of time." That thought does not comfort me as much as I expected it to.

"Sure. You'd probably help train the next one."

I would train my replacement. The idea is disconcerting. I expected a replacement to come once I am dead, not while I am still here.

He pats my arm. "Look, you don't have to worry about it. It was the first time you encountered a situation completely new. You're going to learn from it, and if they try it again, you'll know how to react." His words say he's confident, but his tone again doesn't match.

"I'm sorry I took you away from the game," I say.

"Don't worry about it. You come first."

I nod. "If you go back now, you can probably continue it. At least one of them was looking forward to going to your place."

Jason smiles. "Really? Just one?"

"Only one said something, but they were all missing clothing, so I expect they were all aiming for it. Is the game how you go about picking sex partners?"

He laughs. "No. Well, maybe." He's silent for a long time. "I mean, I don't love them, I just like seeing them naked. And yeah, sometimes I'll hook up with one of them, but it's nothing serious."

"Just for the pleasure."

"Yeah. We do things that bring us pleasure. Just like you do."

I nod. Hunting brings me satisfaction, makes me feel complete. I look forward to doing it. It

does more or less match some of the things Jason gave me as an explanation for what pleasure is.

“Do you need anything else?” he asks.

I shake my head. “If you hurry back, they may not have ‘gone back to his place’ yet.”

“No, I need to go talk with Manda.” He squeezes my shoulder. “I’ll see you later. And don’t worry, I’ll make sure she doesn’t replace you.” He heads toward her office. I go change then go to the gym.

I spar with one of the training robots but have to stop after I rip one of its arms off. I feel like ripping the rest of it apart, just like I’ll do to that demon the next time I see it.

I have never acted like this, felt like this. It isn’t like in the shower when I experienced fear. This is different. I want to lash out at...everything.

I don’t act on it, but the people in the gym stay farther away from me. I go lift weights. My machine is already set to the level I prefer. I am the only one who uses it, being the only one who can lift close to a thousand pounds.

After a dozen lifts, I increase the weight. I want to feel it. I need to feel that what I’m doing is accomplishing something. I can’t stand not doing anything while the demon is out there, plotting. If I thought I had a way of finding it, I would be out there, running on the rooftops, instead of here, waiting. I go through the machines twice, pushing myself harder than normal.

When the call of a sighting comes my muscles ache, and I run out of the gym. I’ve stopped by my room only long enough to change into my hunting clothes. In the hangar, I put on the gun belt and the hatchet. I hook a sword to my belt, then take another one, hooking it at the back. If I lose it again, I want a backup this time.

I throw on the trench-coat, put two loaders in the pocket, then add two more. I’d rather have more ammo this time than not enough. It’s that demon, I can feel it.

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Once the van has dropped me off, I listen. The sound of humans is gone. The area has been cleared, the sighting confirmed before the demon started hunting down people.

There is no scent here, in the middle of the street, but I can hear gnawing. I follow the sound. I enter an alley and catch a smell. Demon, but not one I recognize. I curse. I don’t want just any demon, I want that demon. I force these emotions down—I will have to talk with Jason about them later—but first I need to kill this demon.

I take out my revolvers as I move deeper in the alley. It’s still gnawing, eating. So it got someone without setting off a panic. It’s going to be smart.

The sound stops. I stop. Rustling. I prepare myself.

It moves, but not closer.

It’s going up.

I grab the first fire escape, and I run up it. Why up? They always attack or defend their meal, or territory. Is this a trap? My stomach tightens, but I force myself to continue.

I reach the roof, and I see it, two buildings away. I’m on the same roof in short time. It’s backing away slowly, screaming at me. It’s small for a demon, only a foot taller than me. Not as bulky as most I’ve fought before.

“So you’re not smart enough to talk, are you?” I aim at its chest. “Are you going to put up a good fight?” The bullets will only hurt it, weaken it a little. I lower them, then put them away. “No, I am taking you down myself. I am stronger than you, better than you.”

With my own scream, I launch myself at it.

I evade its slashes, then grab an arm and throw it over my shoulder. It scrambles to get up. I’m on top of it, punching it in the chest and face. Each impact feels like I’m hitting a brick wall, but it backs up, flailing ineffectually at me.

“Fight me!” I yell, kicking it. It catches itself before it falls over the edge and jumps over me, landing in the middle of the roof again.

It screams. It beats its chest.

I snort. It’s posturing? Is it trying to prolong the fight? Is it coming? I look around, can it

sneak up on me here? I have clear sight over the roofs next to this one. No one on them, and I'll hear if it tries to climb. But if it vanished without a scent, what if it can appear the same way? What will I do if it just materializes before me? It can come from any side. I won't see it until it's too late.

Something strikes me, and I fly back, rolling a few more feet before coming to a stop.

It's here! I try to get up, but my arms tremble. It's going to kill me this time.

I can't let it do that. What can I do? I am afraid.

Fear is a human thing to feel. It's normal, Jason said, but I am not human. No, I am not human.

I am a hunter.

I force my arms steady and push the rising bile down. Humans function in spite of fear. I will not be brought down by that. I force myself up.

The demon stops a few feet away from me as I level my gaze on it. It isn't the one that saved me; it the same one as before. The fear made me think it was. Fear almost made me lose.

I feel something else, something that pushed the remnant of the fear away. A need to strike, a need to hurt. A need to kill this demon for taking part in triggering my fear.

It takes a step away.

I unhook the sword and unfold it.

"I am a hunter," I growl. "I will not be afraid of you." I launch myself at it, slashing left and right.

It raises its arms to protect itself, but all that happens is that I cut off a hand, then the other.

It backs up, but I won't let it get away. It cut it at the elbow, then through the bicep. The sword catches on the bone there and jerks out of my hand. With a vicious smile, I take out the other sword. It won't disarm me that easily.

The rage left its eyes some time ago, replaced with fear, and I like that. Let *it* be afraid now. Let *it* feel what it made me feel. I slash at it, but only to cut flesh. To make it hurt. To show it I am its superior.

I walk around it, keeping it from reaching the edge of the roof. I am not letting it get away. I will hurt it, and it will die.

Its screams are pitiful now, and I scream back at it. I show it what it sounds like to be strong, unafraid. It backs away. It knows I am the strong one. Now it can die.

I rush in, and in one slice take off its head.

As the body crumbles, I feel good. I am calm. This isn't the usual satisfaction I feel after a hunt; this is deeper. I not only defeated it, but I conquered my fear. I know that I will do the same to the other demon.

My breathing comes easier now. I know what I am.

I retrieve its soul stone, clean and wrap it, then jump down to the ground. I land next to a small pile of bones, mostly fleshless and covered in teeth marks. Its scent is strong here. This is where it was hiding. But how did it move about without being seen?

The answer is the hole at the base of the building, leading to its basement. And in there, I can see a hole in the floor. One of the tunnels demons dig to get about. Another one.

I call the van, let them know about the tunnel so it can be blocked, or monitored. Amanda will decide which. By the time it arrives, I'm waiting at the alley's mouth, calm and sure of myself.

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As I step out of the van, the medic goes to the closest scientist to hand over the soul stone in its containment unit. I hand over the weapons, but I am looking across the hangar. Amanda and Jason are talking, looking at a screen.

I focus on them, and all other sounds fall away.

"I told you he was all right," Jason says.

"He killed the demon," Amanda replies and points to something on the screen. "But the readings after the fight are not baseline."

“Of course they aren’t. He’s functioning with fear now, but it isn’t crippling him. I told you he was strong enough to overcome it.”

“He shouldn’t be feeling it to start with.”

Jason sighs. “Manda, he isn’t a machine. He’s flesh and blood, and something more. The flesh and blood part means the emotions are there. All of them, the good and the bad ones. I told you they would pop up at some point, and he’s going to learn how to deal with all of them.”

“If he lives long enough.” She looks up, sees me, and waves me over. They say nothing more until I’m there, and then they debrief me.