

“Okay,” Amanda says, once we reach my apartment. “What happened?” She isn’t happy, that is clear. Jason looks at me with a thoughtful expression. Generally, the debriefing occurs in the hangar, either with them or whichever scientist has been assigned to do it. This time I sought Amanda and Jason out and asked to do it in private.

It probably doesn’t matter who hears the information, but I find I don’t want witnesses to Amanda’s reaction.

“It escaped.” I pull out fruits and vegetable from the fridge and start cutting them.

She sits at the island and steepled her fingers. “How?”

“The warehouse had a new tunnel under it, joining with the junction we found last month. I lost its scent there, among all the others.” What I really want to eat is meat. I want to dig my teeth into a piece and tear it up. I often feel this after a hunt, but I don’t do it. Humans don’t eat that way.

She sighs. “I really wish we could vent the damned thing.” Demon scent sticks to earth and stones, just like it sticks to people. Blowing air in the tunnel would not move the scent.

Jason takes a soda out of the fridge. “I’ll replace it,” he says, sitting at the island. “What we really should do is cave it in.”

She shakes her head. “Too much of the system runs under residential areas.”

“Fine, then we fill it up.”

She looks at him for a moment. “Have you read anything on them? They’d dig around the concrete blockage, if not through it. Those claws of theirs can tear anything.”

“Then what? You just let them run loose through them?”

“We have sensors at every entrance we know of, but those haven’t triggered in months.” She takes one of the pieces of fruit. I keep the growl from forming; that’s mine. “Alright, we have another demon loose in the city. Not great, but it’s going to resurface at some point.” She levels her gaze on me. “Now, how about you tell me the rest of it.”

I tell them about being dropped off, finding the scent, and following it to the warehouse.

“Wait,” she says. “What do you mean, ‘it led you there?’”

“Its scent was too easy to find. As smart as it is, it could have done many things to make it more difficult for me to find it.”

“Did the warehouse give it a tactical advantage?”

I shake my head. “Other than the tunnel having an entrance there, no, but it did not want to fight. It wanted to talk.”

They stiffen.

“Talk?” Jason asks.

“Yes. More specifically, ask me questions.”

They exchange worried expressions.

Amanda looks at me, and when she speaks, her tone is dubious. “Some random demon pops out of nowhere, and it wants to talk with you?”

Here it is. The fear wants me to stay quiet, to lie even, but I push it down. “It wasn’t a random demon. I have met it before.”

She frowns at me. “So a demon that escaped you before came back? The last time one got away from you was months ago, why wait all that time before coming back? And why to talk, and not to kill you?”

I shake my head. “No. It was there the other day, with the two demons working together. It saved my life.”

She stares at me, then narrows her eyes. “How come I haven’t heard about this before?”

I try to tell her, but the fierceness of her gaze makes me look away, and the words won’t come.

“It’s fear, isn’t it?” Jason asks.

I nod.

“Damn it. Jason, I told you we should—”

He raises a hand to stop her. “What are you afraid of, D?”

I force the words out, slowly and calmly, although I can feel them wanting to spill out in a

torrent. "I am afraid you'll replace me. I wanted to tell you, but the thought that you'll make another hunter, that I'll have to help train him, and then..." I look down at the fruit I've been chopping. They're in pieces so small I'll need a spoon to eat them. "I wanted to wait until I killed it to tell you. To show I am not defective."

"And yet, it is still alive." She's angry.

"Come on Manda, give the guy here a break. The demon ran. It's one thing to be able to kill it in a fight, but when it runs, it's another game entirely. And the only reason D lost it is that junction, which it clearly knew about and had planned on using. You can't blame D for that."

She fixes her angry gaze on him, but he shrugs it off.

"That doesn't excuse the fact he withheld vital information. A demon saved his life. There's only one reason it would do that."

Jason shakes his head. "No, we both know there no way it could—" He stops talking. "This is a private discussion, Manda."

She looks at me and growls. "I'm not certain it matters anymore."

"Manda, no. You promised me."

"Fine, we'll finish this in private."

Jason's relief is visible. He drains the can. "Is being afraid you'll be decommissioned why you had a panic attack in the shower?"

I feel my skin growing warm. "No. I was scared of its strength, its power. It killed another demon with the twist of its neck, and it can talk. Not the half-grunt dialog the demons smart enough to taint humans use, but clear language. I feared having to fight it again."

"But you still went out at the next sighting," he says. "It could have been it."

I nod. "I won't let fear dictate my actions. It took me some time, but I have it under my control now."

Amanda doesn't look impressed.

"Manda, it would take a normal person years to overcome something like that, but he did it in a few days. Give him the credit he's due. He's adapting to new situations, just like you wanted him to do."

She throws her hands up. "Fine, he's performing to specs. Derick, you have tests waiting for you."

I nod and head out.

Once I close the door, I hear Amanda say, "It knows."

"It can't."

The fear tells me to stay, to listen to what they have to say—it will certainly be about me—but I walk away. It's a private discussion, one not meant for me. I try not to hear what Amanda says next.

"Then why talk with him? Answer me that. There's only one of..." Then I'm too far.

The doctors run me through the usual tests, and I pass all of them. This lasts until late in the evening. When I go back to my apartment, the island counter is clean. I check in the fridge, and the chopped fruits and vegetables are in a large bowl.

I am finishing eating that when Jason enters, carrying a six-pack of soda. He takes one off before putting the rest in the fridge.

He eyes the two cans before me. "How are you feeling?"

I look at them too. I normally have only one a day. I am not as fine as I think I am. "Concerned, and a little unsettled. I am afraid of what Amanda will do, and I can't work out what the demon wants with me, what it will do next."

"Amanda won't do anything, you have my word. So you think it's going to be back for you?"

I nod and take a soda from the fridge, my hesitation at taking it lasting only a moment. Holding it, drinking from it, calms me.

"What did it ask?" Jason asks, watching me, but not commenting on my third soda.

"It wanted to know my name, then why I didn't believe it when it said it wanted to understand me."

"Understand you?" He sips from his can. He acts normal, relaxed even, but his heart rate is

elevated. "Did it say how? Or why?"

I shake my head and think back on it. "I wasn't listening to it. I believe we sounded like you and Amanda when you argue."

Jason chuckles for a moment. "So no details on what its agenda might be."

I take the bowl to the sink. "Is there more information I should know about demons?" I ask my back to him.

"Why?"

"It can talk clearly. I was shocked when I heard him the first time, yet you and Amanda didn't show any sign of surprise when I told you. Are there reports on demons who can talk like that one that I haven't read?"

Jason doesn't reply immediately, but his heart beats fast. "No, there isn't." He pauses, his heart slowing a little. "You have to remember, we've been at this a lot longer than you have. We've learned not to get thrown off balance when one of them does something new. You'll learn too. In a few years, one of them might belch flames at you, and you won't even blink an eye."

"Can demons do that?"

"Not that we know of."

I nod and sit back down. "I wish I understood why it's after me. Am I unusual among hunters? Is my success rate higher than others?"

"You've read the files on the other hunters. I'd say you're on par with them."

"I haven't read them. I wanted to find my own way of hunting, and I was concerned that if I did, I'd emulate them instead."

Jason stares at me, then covers his surprise by drinking from his can. "Okay, but you've been at this a while; you've found your way of doing things. You can read them now so you can know how they're doing."

I shrug. "I follow the news. It tells me demons are kept in check, even completely removed in some districts. I don't need to know more."

"Are you sure?" he asks, finishing his can. "I mean, I'm sure there's plenty of valuable information in them."

"I am."

He nods, and I see disappointment. His expression clears. "Do you have any thoughts on what you're going to do the demon if it pops up again?"

"It will, I have no doubt of that. It isn't done with me." I think on it for a moment. "It's fast, strong, and cunning. Enough that I'm not certain I can take it down by myself. Since there are no other hunters in the city, I think we could get a team ready for its next move. The best shooters we have. The only way we will kill it is with surprise and extra firepower."

"Sure, that's easy to do, but how are we going to be able to tell from a sighting report that it's that demon and not another? We can't have such a team following everywhere, they are only humans." He smiles. "And you're the one protecting us, not the other way around."

I smile back. "I wouldn't want them with me all the time. I prefer hunting alone. And I'll know when a sighting is it. This was the third time it made itself known; I have an idea of what it looks for."

He frowns. "Third?"

"When the revolver was left for me to find, it was that demon who did it."

"You didn't mention that before."

I go over the previous conversations. "I apologize, I forgot to. I expect it's going to lay low for a while. There have been a few days between each of its appearances. It prefers not to attract civilian attention. I don't understand why it doesn't go after humans, but each time it didn't leave bodies behind. It will want an out of the way location for our next meeting."

Jason drains his can. "So, we can leave the usual mindless and violent ones for you to deal with alone?"

"Yes, those are easy to deal with."