

How is a demon here? Is the military lying about all the demons being removed, or is this a traveler? Is it an accident they're here, or are they here to find out why all demons are gone?

I look at the roofs; they won't be useful. I can't go around the houses to avoid attracting attention. I have to reach the demon and take it away before anyone is hurt.

I run and immediately people look at me, point. It doesn't matter that I am dressed similarly to them; I carry urgency. I cut between two houses, leap the fence, am stared at by the man working in the garden before I'm over the next fence and between other houses.

On a smaller street more people notice me, point from their porches, ask each other questions. I'm between two other houses when I realize I lost the scent. I return to the street, search for it.

How did I lose the scent?

Someone snickers and is pointing at me as I sniff the air.

Demon scents stick to everything and remain for weeks and months. Even carried on the wind, the scent sticks to what it passes. Buildings, the ground, vehicles. It takes longer for it to stick to people—something about how human's own scents cover it up in part, or so Jason explained.

For a demon to walk through a city and not leave a trail, they have to be careful, smarter, older than the demons who usually roam. Claws in the Dark is the only demon I've met who seems to do it with ease, and I don't know how he manages it.

I backtrack, find it again, follow it more carefully to the other side of the street. I lose it again between houses in the still wind. I step to the wall and breathe in deeply, then sneeze and cough. That acrid smell is everywhere. Is it somehow stronger than the demon's scent?

I hurry to the other side, to where I'd last scented the demon, and on the other street I find it again, stronger, closer. They are much deeper in the town than I expected.

I ignore the looks, the calls, the curses as I run.

They aren't equipped to deal with a demon. No one human is. The military uses teams, battalions to take on demons, and even then, they use drugs to enhance their abilities. It's why experiments like me are valuable to them. Why Amanda and Jason lied, why soldiers are still hunting me a year later.

If I don't stop this demon, there will be nothing left of this town by the time the sun rises tomorrow.

I run through more streets, by houses, yards, people. When I jump over them instead of knocking them out of my way, I hear amazement. I stop in a plaza circled by houses; the scent is strong enough I feel it stick to me.

The demon is here.

Children play in a group in the center while adults watch from the edges, or shop, or simply sit and do nothing. I scan the buildings, the shadows next to them. Demons vanish easily in shadows because of their black skin, and if they stand still, their body adjusts to the temperature around them, rendering them difficult even for me to see.

The scent doesn't tell me the age of the demon, but for them to be hidden when so many people are present means they are older, old enough they are no longer driven by their hunger. That's bad. They are smart enough to plan, crafty enough to know better than to launch into a mass of people. They can pick their target, then wait until they are isolated. That is how they made it this deep in the town without being noticed. Without eating everyone they came across.

I walk into the plaza and barely attract attention. I want to yell at everyone to leave, to warn them of the danger, but if I do, I will trigger the demon into action. I can't save everyone before subduing them.

I walk around the plaza, discretely smelling the buildings as I pass them. For the scent to be this thick they have done a circuit around it, but wherever they are hiding will carry the strongest scent. I sneeze at the acrid smell clinging to the walls. Somehow, it seems to keep the demon's scent from sticking to it. How is that possible? If someone had created a product, a cleaner that prevented the scent from sticking, that effectively allowed a demon to hide where they went, I would know about it.

Jason, if not Amanda, would have told me. They would have lied and said humans working with demons had created it to hide their masters. Amanda's first creation, Adam, would have used it. The tactical advantage was too great. Regardless of how insane he had become, his actions had been strategic.

I walk around the plaza and end up where I started without finding a significantly stronger scent. No trace of a scent by the buildings, between them. I scan the roofs, even if I know it's useless. A demon's mass would make it fall through them. They are too low to hide their presence.

Exactly how old is this demon that they can cover the plaza in their smell, and not leave a trace of where they were as the wind pushes their scent into it? I scan the plaza itself. Did I miss a hiding place in it in my assumption they are hiding at the periphery?

It can't be there; humans run at the mere hint of a demon in the area. Some cities have alarms to warn people. Others don't, but the instant someone thinks they see a demon, they run. If a demon was here, among these people, it would be chaos, panic, disaster, dea—

A black form leaps up over a group of children. It's small, its form shifts in the air, spreading limbs to glide the few feet down among the children, screaming as they run away. For a moment that stretches into eternity, I don't understand what I'm seeing. I can't be seeing what this is.

I run, cursing under my breath.

Of all the possibilities, a demon child never occurred to me, and it might be the worst situation in a place like this. The younger they are, Claws explained, the more powerful their hunger is. Demons are nothing more than feeding creatures for the first few years of their existence, barely able to sate themselves long enough to hunt their next meal.

It will decimate everyone in the plaza before they even realize it's there.

"Run!" I yell, finally finding my voice. I ignore the looks from the adults. Instead of running, the children freeze in place, looking at me instead of the demon stalking behind them. I curse humans and their inability to do what they're told. I only have seconds to reach the demon and... I have no idea what I'll do. It's beyond reason, but I have promised myself I am done killing.

The shadow falling on me is the only warning I get of another danger. I throw myself to the side, and now people get out of the way, although not as fast as they should. I'd take screams of terror over this casual clearing of the space for the coming battle.

Have these people been free of demons for so long they forgot the danger they represent? The landing sends a cloud of dust in the air and before it clears I know I'm in trouble.

A demon stands before me, tall, powerful. A rumble comes from it, reverberates through me. Trespasser, it says, leave or die. I swallow and

fight the desire to obey.

Old.

So very old is the sense I get from the message, and I wonder if he's older than Claws. I can't win against a demon this old. My ability to resist his order is because I'm not a demon; I only have some of one in me. But the rumble continues, assaulting me with warning of death if I remain.

I don't want to die.

There is too much of this world I haven't seen. I want to see Claws again. Jason... I want the time to work out how I feel about him. About them. I need more time to figure out who I am and how I feel about that.

I do not move.

I will not sacrifice these people so I can get what I want. I don't like humans, maybe I never will, but they don't deserve to be an elder demon's herd, used to feed themselves and their child.

I'm calm as I contemplate the death standing before me. Massive, implacable, unstoppable. I was made to kill demons. The reason why was a lie. But a demon was always going to be how I died.