

I stare at the empty doorway for a long time—at least that's what it feels like—but it isn't so much time the men come back. The women are barely stirring, except for one, an older woman, who pulls herself close to a younger one.

They need help—their bruises, cuts, and burns make that clear—but I have no idea what to do. I have never needed someone to heal me. Humans don't heal like I do, they require assistance.

I take out my phone and am about to call the van, but I can't call them. Not now; I need to think. What Claws has told me is...too much. I can't think here, but I can't leave them. How do I contact the police? Or an ambulance?

How can I be their protectors and not know how to summon help for them? The police have always been on the scene before me and cleared it as best as time allowed. They summoned the ambulances.

"Please, call help," the older woman croaks while I stare at my phone.

"I don't know how." I look up at her. Her eyes are empty of emotions. I know that isn't normal; humans are emotional, that's why Jason works so hard at getting me to act like them. I am not emotional, or at least I wasn't.

She gives me the number to call, and a bored-sounding man answers, asking what the emergency is.

I tell him about the women, about how they are hurt, and that the men who did it may be coming back soon. I go to tell him where they are and realize I don't know where I am. Before I go outside to look for that information, he tells me he has my position, and that the police and an ambulance will be there soon.

I don't know how long soon will be. I want to leave, but the men could come back. One of the women near a sink tries to pull herself up, only to fall down. I go to help her, but she pulls away from me.

"Water, please."

The sink has dirty dishes in them. I clean a glass, fill it, and hand it to her. She takes a sip and sighs contently. She passes the glass to the woman next to her, who sips from it. All the women look at the glass hungrily. I clean more of them and pass them along too.

I want to do more; I am supposed to protect them. I should have been there for them. Was I not told about them because no demons were involved? Except that everything I have been taught, everything I have read, says that a demon should have taken part in this.

This, this isn't how the world is supposed to work.

Sirens are getting closer, and I recognize police and an ambulance. People will be here within moments to look after the women. I want to stay and help, to take care of them, but I can't. The way I am dressed, the officers will recognize me as a hunter.

I don't know why, but I don't want Jason or Amanda to know I was here. I step outside as a police car turns the corner, and I walk away.

It's night now and has been for a time, based on how high above the rooftops the larger of the two moons is. I don't call the van; I don't want to deal with them. This is the longest I have been out of contact. They will call. I turn the phone off.

I smile wryly as I realize I have a reason available for why I turned it off. I don't want it to ring during the hunt. I put it away and look around. I am walking among humans, and none of them are paying me any attention. Even dressed as a hunter, they ignore me.

Jason mentioned that people tend to make associations based on context. Is this what is happening here? They don't see a hunter because there are no demons around? Could it have something to do with the exhaustion I see on their faces? They ignore even each other.

I hear two men arguing on the steps leading to the entrance of a building. I've heard arguments before, Jason and Amanda argue often, but something in their tone makes me look at them closer. I can read malice in their expressions.

No one pays them attention.

Should I intervene? Before I need to make a decision, one of the men shoves the other out of his way hard enough he bumps against the railing. With a sneer, he enters the building.

The other man stares at the door for a moment and yells expletives at it. He comes down the stairs, pushes me, even though there is space to go around me. He puts enough strength in the shove that had I been human, I would have ended up in the street, where a car could have hit me.

He could have hurt me. He would have hurt, maybe killed, a human, and neither he nor the people walking by seem to care. Is this the goodness Jason told me humans have in them? Is that why I have been tasked to protect them from demons? To keep them from being tainted? Corrupted? I smell no demons here. This act was all human. This indifference I see on their faces, it is human. How can they not care for one another? How can this be what Jason wants me to protect?

I resume walking, to get away from the spot where I saw humans act in such a...non-human way. I want to see the goodness I have been protecting, but all I find are more scenes of harshness.

A woman slaps a man and calls him worthless before dragging him inside. A man makes lewd remarks to a woman. She tells him to leave her alone, but he grabs her and forces her in his car, then drives off with her. Two men grab a third and drag him into the alley. I hear them beating him.

Should I act? Should I protect them from...each other? I hunt demons, not humans. I am not supposed to hurt a human unless they have been tainted. How can I do that here? If I try to protect one, I will hurt the other. I shiver and continue walking, unable to answer the question.

Fortunately, the number of people diminishes, until it's a few block between groups of them. It means I am no longer confronted with scenes of harshness, but the feel of the humans I walk by changes.

I no longer see indifference in their eyes. I see hunger, want, rage. Some look me over, assessing me. I can tell they are armed, and for a moment I sense they will come at me and ready myself.

With the change in my stance, the feel of them also changes, becoming more reticent, and they stay where they are. That is good. I would have defended myself if they had attacked, and they would have been hurt.

I don't want to hurt humans.

I walk many blocks without humans around, then I stop. I breathe in deeply and smile. Yes, it's faint, but there. There is a demon close by. I follow the scent. I need to find it. I need to hit it.

The scent grows stronger, and I have trouble keeping myself from running. My hands are shaking in eagerness. I see myself cutting it, ripping its limbs from its body. Shooting it until it's nothing more than a puddle on the ground.

I don't understand why I am feeling this way. Normally I am calm on a hunt. I know what needs to happen, but I don't envision it, or feel this delight in the coming fight. But right now, I need this. I want the simplicity of a hunt, so I won't have to think about what Claws showed me, about what I saw on the streets.

I follow the scent to an alley, and it permeates all of it. It's here, this is where it returns to eat. I don't see it, and my thermal vision only shows me rodents scurrying about. It also doesn't show me any bodies.

I'm surprised to realize I don't care if it doesn't have any victims. I should be relieved that no one has been hurt, but all I feel is a need to hurt it.

I hear breathing, low and raspy, eager. It isn't a human, no heat signature. Scuffling ahead. There's a low growl, and something impacts me, and I grab at whatever is closest to my face. I'm on my back, and we slide closer to the mouth of the alley, where some light spills in. The demon is on top of me, baring its teeth, then snapping, trying to bite, but I keep it away, then shove it off me.

I reach for a revolver but grab a sword instead. I know it isn't *it*. I've known from the start—the scent is wrong—but knowing that only makes me want to hurt it more. I don't know why, and right now, it doesn't matter.

I scream as I throw myself at it. I swing and the blade bites in deep. It grabs me by the neck and throws me. I lose my grip on the sword while in flight. I crash to the ground and stand, but I don't take out the second one. When I jump on it, I use my fist to beat it.

It claws at me, but I don't let go of my hold. I hit it in the face over and over. It backs off, but it carries me with it, and I keep hitting. It drops to a knee, the rage in its eyes vanishing, replaced by confusion.

I don't care if it doesn't understand that I'm not human, that no one should be able to hurt it this way. I continue hitting it. When those eyes show fear, it doesn't make me stop; it drives me on. I scream now as I hit it, a wordless scream as my fist connects over and over until it stops jerking each time. Until the light leaves its eyes.

I kneel on its lifeless body, its face broken. I pant, exhausted. My hand is in pain, my arm sore. I don't need the hatchet; I have broken its face and its skull.

It isn't *that* demon, I think as I rummage in the goo for the soul stone, and somehow I'm glad I haven't killed Claws. This dead demon still means there's one less of them to hurt humans.

I pull it out, and I find I want another demon to hit. I don't feel the satisfaction I normally do after a hunt. I want to go on killing demons until none of them are left until the humans are as good as Jason told me they are.

I need to get back to headquarters.

I take out the phone, turn it on, and call the van. I wait for it impatiently. When it gets here, I get in the chair and shove Valerie away. She says she need to put the sensors on, and I glare at her. She backs away. Then she talks on her phone, whispering. I can hear what she says, but I don't care. I want to be back in my apartment, away from all of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I get out of the van, Jason is there, waiting for me.

"D? Are you alright?"

I study him, look him in the eyes. Is the concern real? Is it another lie? Is he good like the humans are good?

"I'm fine," I state.

The doubt is clear on his face, but he doesn't comment. He leads me to Amanda's office. I don't want to go, but I know I can't be alone until I have dealt with her.

She glares at me. "What happened?"

Jason opens his mouth, but she turns the glare on him, and he closes it.

"You've been gone for hours."

"I was hunting him."

"Him?" Jason asks.

"The demon who saved me, the one from the warehouse. He set this up too."

"Why didn't you call the team in?" Amanda demands.

"He didn't give me the chance. He said the only way to keep him from killing someone was to catch him."

"It took you this long?" She doesn't believe me.

"Yes. He's smart and fast. He tried to lose me, to sidetrack me."

"And what happened?"

I opened my hand over her desk, and the soul stone drops on it. "He's dead."

Amanda's breath caught. "You killed it?"

"Yes."

It takes her a moment to calm herself and make her face a mask of sternness. "I tried to call you, your phone was off."

"I couldn't afford the distraction. I learned that when Juliette called me. I have been turning it off since."

She tries to remain stern, but her gaze keeps going to the stone. "You did well. Go clean up and then rest."

As I turn, I see Jason studying me.

I close the door, and Amanda starts talking.

“Jason, do you have any idea what this means?”

“Manda, there’s—”

“Imagine the things we’ll learn when its body’s brought in!”

“Manda, D is—”

“Leave him be, Jason. With this kill he’s...”

I’m too far to hear the rest. I could stay and listen, but I want to be alone. I want to be away from them all.