

I'd tuned out the growls and demons moving about, because they were a constant background noise in the building.

"Derick, what is the urgency?" Claws asks as we run.

"Turning on the lights told Adam we're letting the humans out."

"We turned the power on so we could unlock the doors to the cell."

"I don't think Adam will consider that, but lights are only needed by humans. That, he will have noticed."

We enter the stairwell, and I hear new sounds over the constant growls: large fists pounding on glass. I ignore what else Claws says and rush ahead of everyone. I only make it down one floor when I hear one of the windows shatter, and humans scream.

I make it down a second floor and the screams of fear turn to terror and pain, and are interrupted in places with gurgling.

I reach sub-five to the sound of something being wrenched out, and more screaming becomes audible. My hand is a blade and I slash at the demon in the doorway, making him back away. I don't look to see if he's down; I keep running.

The demons are too busy banging on windows or looking for ways to get through them and to the humans inside to pay me any attention. I ignore them, let the others deal with them. I follow the screams.

When Claws and I attacked this place over a year ago, I watched him jump through glass that was supposedly demon-proof. As I jump through this window, I see the glass is much thicker than what Claws broke.

A roar explodes behind me. I feel the undertone of Claws's order: "Stop." I ignore the command, but the demon before me pauses and turns. He has a broken human body in a hand—a man with a bleeding stump where his arm should have been.

With a scream, I jump on him and plunge the blade into his chest. He roars, surprise and defiance. He grabs the back of my trench-coat and throws me across the room. If I'd been human I would have broken on impact. I only see stars for a few seconds.

When I get to my feet, the demon has his back to me. He's reaching for one of the five humans cowering in the corner. They're trying to hide behind one another, shoving each other in front as a sacrifice for their own lives.

They disgust me, but I'm not letting them die. "I'm not done with you," I say through gritted teeth.

The demon stiffens in surprise and looks over his shoulder. His glowing red eyes narrow on me, then look at the wall.

"You are hard food." His voice is deep, gravelly. He's older, but not as old as the demons I encountered on my way here.

"They made me tough. Why don't you come here and I'll give you a proper hunt."

He looks at my hand, the blade stretching a foot and a half from it. "You are like the Adam."

I shrug. "Not really."

The demon turns. "The Adam is strange, thinks strange things."

The humans scamper for the door as soon as his back is to them.

"The Adam says that we rule over food." He pauses, considering something. "The Adam says strange things."

"If he's so strange, why don't you leave?"

The demon cants his head. "The Adam says I stay." He smiles. "Run, food. Give me a hunt."

"Sorry, I lied." I rush him. I duck under his arms as he tries to grab me, and slash at his leg. He roars, an order to stop moving in it.

Not happening. I'm on my feet and ready.

Amanda trained me to take on demons head-on. Overwhelm them with strength and superior weapons. Fighting humans in the ring has taught me different ways. I don't have to throw myself at an opponent with everything I have, and count on having more strength or stamina or better weapons.

I can take my time, weaken him with small strikes, tire him by forcing him to me, or in a demon's case, heal. Robert explained that attrition is often the only way to take down a stronger

opponent.

And this demon is much stronger than I am. I'm given that reminder when I block one of his strikes using my right arm, and I feel the impact even through my hardened skin. He presses his advantage and I back against the wall, having trouble keeping my arm up to take the blows.

"This isn't a good hunt," the demon growls in disdain.

"See if I care." I raise my left hand and fire at his chest. He steps back with each bullet that hits him. Surprise and pain register on his face, the light in his eyes dimming slightly.

Attrition is one thing, but Robert hasn't fought demons. Sometimes, superior firepower is the only way to go.

"Poison." The demon looks at his chest, the black blood flowing out of it. His eyes light up with anger. "You fight with poison."

I put the revolver away and take out a sword, unfolding it. "I do."

He roars and charges me. I slash at him, step aside, and made another gash in his flank. He roars, pain and anger. He turns, takes a step in my direction, then stops. He eyes my sword, eyes narrowing.

I wonder how young he is as he studies me. I can see him calculating. At what age do demons become capable of strategy? He picks a large chunk of glass from the floor and bounces it in his hand before throwing it at me.

I jump out of the way, and there's a hollow thunk behind me. I glance over my shoulder to see it embedded in the wall—the metal wall. How didn't it shatter on impact? I can't ponder the question; I'm too busy dodging projectiles.

I move left and right, keeping an eye on him, watching him bleed. Demons can't heal wounds from irradiated weapons. The radiation makes them lose control of that exposed section, so they can't close them. It's why they were my usual choices, when I was able to choose how I fought them. I've killed demons without those weapons, but they make the job a lot easier.

The demon feels around the ground for his next projectile, and then some more. He glances down to see where they are, and I rush him.

Without looking up he swats me out of the way, and I end up in the corner the humans had been in, my head ringing again. He gives me a demon smile, full of long, pointed teeth.

I get back up. Definitely smarter than my usual demon. My breathing is labored, my body hurts. The problem with attrition is it works both ways. I can't endure this forever, and the effect of the radiation on him isn't as strong as I expected. It's back to the old, tested methods.

I rush him. This time, when he swings, I jump over his arm and plant the sword in his chest, all the way to the hilt. I land, roll, and stand, unfolding the second sword.

When he looks at me, his eyes are filled with rage. He runs at me, arms extended, fingers ending in long claws. I smile at the mindless run; this is something I know.

He rakes at me, and I ignore the sting in my chest. I cut him from hip to elbow in return. With a roar he swats at me, but the aimless blow glances off my shoulder. It still hits hard enough I skid a few feet away.

He fixes his eyes on me and roars—a mindless sound every demon I've hunted has made. When he comes at me, he's slower—not from caution, but from the blood loss. I wait for him, let him do the work, tire himself out.

I move around his strikes with ease now, and I add more cuts. He turns to follow me, attempts to hit me, and I give him a long gash on his arm, then his leg.

He staggers, falls to a knee, and a looks at me. The rage is gone from his eyes, replaced with confusion. "You are food." He puts determination in his voice, as if saying it would make me remember my place.

"Not today." Before he can react, I cut his head off.

His body falls to one side, the head rolling a few feet to the other. I kneel next to it, and reach behind me for the hatchet. I don't find it there, and I'm surprised at how ingrained the reflex is. I haven't beheaded a demon since leaving this city, and the first time I do, I fall right back into the old pattern.

I consider my actions, and decide that I'm not doing this for Amanda. I form a hatchet with

my skin, and with one blow cut the skull open. I reach into it, feeling around for the solid mass. My fingers close around it, the size of my thumb and irregular in shape. I pull my hand out with a slurping sound, and use the dead scientist's lab coat to clean it and the soul stone.

When I stand and turn, I find I have an audience. Soldiers are staring at me through the broken window. I pull my other sword out of his chest and head for them. They get out of my way as I climb through and leave the room.

The corridor is littered with bodies—demons, scientists, and a few soldiers. I was so focused on my own fight I barely heard any of this happening.

Claws stands when I'm close to him, his hand pulling out of a demon's head. I hand him the stone. "I figure you can send him on his way when this is all over."

He takes it, already holding a few in his hand. "I do not know how many I will be able to retrieve and send to the First One."

"Is it your responsibility to get them all?"

"Only those I kill." Claws looks at the bodies around us. "But I know what the humans can do with them now. I do not want to leave any here."

"What the hell is that?" The man is short with skin lighter brown than mine. The voice identifies him as Cline.

"This is what we are once the body dies."

"What does that even mean?"

"All that my people are collects into this on death. I will burn them and send them to the First One."

"Are you telling me you guys have souls, and that they stay stuck inside you?"

Claws looks at me.

"I have no idea what he's talking about. Jason told me they're called soul stones, but I figured it was another one of the things they made up."

Cline rolls his eyes at me. "Souls are what makes you who you are. What God puts in you and takes back when you die."

"All that you are," Claws says, while I just shrug.

"Exactly."

"You don't have one."

Cline looks shocked. "Excuse me?"

"I have looked. There is nothing left when a human dies."

"You've killed humans?"

Claws doesn't say anything.

"You've gone digging in their heads like you did them? That's sick! Why would you do something like that?"

"I would give you the same honor I give my people."

"So do you do that when you kill an animal too?" Cline's skin takes on an ashen color.

"They are animals. There is nothing else to them."

Cline looks like he wants to say something, but words aren't forming.

The captain comes out of a room and looks at them. "Enough standing around, we're on the clock. We're all boosted, and if that runs out when we're still in a fight, we're dead. We need to go deal with Adam."

Claws looks around. "Yes. Adam is responsible for all these death."