

Opening Scene

The kid is running as fast as he can, has been for five minutes now. I can't tell how old he is, keeping pace with him from the rooftop. I can't make out any details about him; he's just shades of red to me. The heat of his exhaustion in the darkened alley. He makes a turn down a side alley, and I jump the twenty feet to the roof on the other side to stay with him.

The alley he is in leads to the street. Good move for him, but I can't let him reach it first. I pick up speed, jumping up and down without slowing as the roofs change heights. He's only halfway there when I reach the last building. I stop and jump over the side. I land from the eight-story drop in a crouch and stand. The kid is a small red form getting larger. I step in the middle of the alley, blocking his way, and pull out both my revolvers. Their weights feel comfortable in my gloved hands.

He's still coming toward me. He can't see me as I raise my arms and point them in his direction. My gray trench coat is making me invisible in the darkness since none of the lights around here are working.

A car drives down the road, and its headlight backlights me as it passes. The kid seems me. I know it from the gasp, but he doesn't stop running. Maybe he hasn't noticed my guns? Usually, when they notice them, they tend to come to a full stop. Oh well, this might actually work for the best.

I wait until he's forty feet away. "Kid," I say, readying myself to fire, "duck." Of course, he doesn't duck; that's why I fire over his head.

The scream erupts from the darkness, louder than my guns as I fire all my bullets in it. The kid runs by me. This close I see he's sixteen, freckled face, and smelling like he's lost control of his bodily function; completely understandable when being hunted by a demon.

The creature jumps out of the darkness with a roar that shatters a few windows. I move out of the way, but not quite fast enough. The force of the impact sends me flying back. I land hard, and roll up, listening to the revolver I lost skid across the sidewalk. I put away the other one and pull out a sword handle from where it was hooked to my belt.

With a shake and a series of 'snicks,' the blade unfolded out of the handle to a three-foot length. I do love technology. The design is based on the katana, but it is a carbon steel alloy coated with silver, the only stuff that really hurts demons.

The demon glares at me from the other side of the alley's mouth, its eyes glowing red. This one is a foot taller than I am, covered in black oily fur. It roars again, more windows shatter. Lights come on in some windows, silhouettes appearing

and peering out. They'll stay inside; people know better than to step out when a demon is around.

Still, I have to end this quickly. Someone is going to call the police, as much as they will try to help, they aren't hunters. They will only get in the way. I also have to take advantage of the fact there is no traffic at the moment.

I run at the demon, ready to strike, but the creature dodges the strikes, slashing at me with its long claws. Those are easy to avoid, but the kick almost gets me. It's a sneaky one. Probably a little older than the ones who usually make their way to the city.

I slash at it in quick succession, forcing it back, looking for an opening it isn't giving me. Its claws brush my blade aside easily, being as hard as steel. I need to strike flesh to hurt it and cut off its head to end this.

This close I can see the rage in its eyes. It's foaming at the mouth; its long muzzle is filled with long teeth and it's snapping them at me. I have to avoid those too. Demons are good for only two things, killing, and being killed.

I hear the car coming before the headlights become visible as it turns the corner. I can tell the demon is aware of it a moment before it turns and rushes the car. I run after it. I can't let it use the vehicle as a weapon; collateral damage is always to be kept to a minimum.

It surprises me by stopping, and before I can adjust it has backhanded me, and I'm airborne. A building breaks my flight, and as I drop to the ground, head ringing, broken bricks rain around me.

I shake my head, and it clears in time for me to roll out of the way of the foot that cracks the cement where I had been. I'm up, but unarmed. My sword is behind the demon.

Oh well, nothing to be done about it. It's going to be hand to hand until I can get it back. I rush the demon. Confusion makes it hesitate, and I'm inside its reach. I punch its stomach as hard as I can. Pulling punches with them is asking for death.

It backs up with grunts. It probably doesn't realize that us hunters are a lot stronger than your average human. I hit it with a double fist in the chest, and it takes another step back.

I bend down and grab my sword. I slash at it, and a hand falls to the ground. It roars, but I don't give it time to recuperate. I slash at its chest and stomach, avoiding its good hand. I manage to cut a leg out from under it, and it goes down to a knee.

The rage finally leaves those eyes and is replaced with fear. It raises an arm to stop my blow, but I cut through it as easily as I slice through its neck.

The body falls to the ground, the head next to it. Those eyes looked at me as the glow fades out of them and I feel a deep rooted satisfaction.

I collapse my sword and hook it back to my belt. I take the hatchet that's at the small of my back and kneel next to the head. This is going to be messy, but it has to be done.

I hack at the skull until it brakes open. I pull it apart and reach in, searching in the goo until my fingers feel something hard. I pull it out and shake the muck off.

It's a black stone, the demon's soul stone. That thing is going to go into containment; that's the only way to keep them from coming back. I wrap it in a tissue before pocketing it. I take off my gloves and throw them on the demon's body. Someone is going to be over to dispose of that.

Cell phones are snapping pictures as I look for my revolver. Their flashes like quick burning stars in the windows. After a few minutes of searching, I give up. I must have missed a by-standard while fighting and he left with it. I take out my phone and call headquarters.

"Derick, glad to hear from you. How was the hunt?" It's a man's voice, so it's Gregory. He and Cynthia are the only ones working nights these days.

"Well. The demon's dead, I have its soul stone."

"Good. I'm dispatching a cleanup crew. What's the collateral damage like?"

"Minimal, damage to a brick wall."

"It's nice of them when they keep the damage to a minimum."

"Helps when I make myself the target."

"Your pickup is a block away, should be there shortly."

"Okay." I disconnect, and a moment later the black van rounds the corner. It stops before me, and the side door opens.

I place a foot on the ledge and stop. I look back. I swear someone is looking at me. Not one of the people in the windows, this feels more intense, directed at me, more personal

"Everything okay?" The medic asks, peering out and over my shoulder.

I don't see anything, so I shrug and enter the van. He closes the door behind me, and I take off my trench coat before sitting in the chair setup for me at the back.

I don't know this medic. Headquarters has a lot of scientists, many of them doctors and any of them might be assigned to my pickup van. When I started working in the field, a little over a year ago, I tried to get to know them, but they were always distant, so I stopped.

I take off my shirt, and he applies sensors to my chest and head. After every hunt they take readings. We're solidly built, but they always worry that we'll get damaged.

"No visible cuts," he says, looking me over. "Any injuries I need to know about?"

I shake my head. "Just some bruises, they'll come and go before you can do anything about them."

"Anything else needs to be reported?"

"I lost a revolver."

"Broken?" the woman in the passenger seat asks. She wears a combat armor and has a high power machine gun on her lap. She's there in case I need backup. Not that I've needed it at this point. I've yet to encounter a demon that's a match for me.

"Lost probably picked up by a by-standard."

"I'll see you're assigned a new one, and I'll get the word out. Whoever got it is going to show it around, maybe try to sell it. A revolver used against a demon, bound to be a collector's item."

Her tone has disdain in it. She doesn't like that someone has one of our weapons. I don't see what the problem is. It can't be used. It needs a caliber that isn't available to the public.

The medic finishes calibrating the sensors. "You have the stone?"

I nod in the trench coat's direction.

"Alright. Just sit back and relax. We're going to be home in twenty minutes." He searches through the pockets until he finds the tissue. He unwraps the stone, wipes it clean and then places it in a cylindrical container.

I close my eyes once the stone is secure. There hasn't been a case of a demon re-manifesting after it's death in my year of hunting, but I've read reports of it happening. No one knows why it happens, but the containment system the scientist have created seems to work.

I could have made it back to headquarter in a fraction of the time on my own. Just running across the roofs would let me shorten the distance, and in the city, I could keep up with the van easily, but it is the procedure. I'm dropped off as close to the Demon as possible and picked up afterward.

"I don't believe this," the medic whispers. "His heart rate isn't even elevated." He's moved to the front, and probably doesn't realize I can hear him. "If I'd fought that thing I'd be sweating and my heart would be racing."

"No, it wouldn't," the woman says flatly. "You'd be dead."

"You can't know that."

"Why do you think we send that at them? It's because we can't take them on ourselves. You should have seen the damage demons did when..." She stops talking.

She's probably referring to decades ago before the first hunter was created. I know the general history, the demons

appearing out of nowhere, ravaging the cities for years until a group of scientists were able to create something able to fight them back. I haven't bothered learning the details; it doesn't matter to me what the first one had been called, or how much the techniques have been refined since those days.

I am the product of human ingenuity and wonder. I will fight to defend them until I die.