

## Chapter 17

I follow him in and immediately I feel pain at my shoulder. I duck the next sword to slice at me and punch the woman holding it. I don't hold back and she goes flying into two others.

I see the gun pointed at me and throw myself to the floor. I roll, stand, punch the man who is next to me and slip behind him, holding him up. He takes the bullets meant for me.

I take the sword at his belt before pushing him away. His vest will have taken the worse of the hits. I unfold the sword and swing for the gunman's hand. It doesn't fall off. The sword is shorter than mine.

I don't have time to think about that, he's aiming at me. I move out of the way, catching Claws out of the corner of my eye fighting four of them. The motion takes me in range of another guard. He swings at me. I block the strike with my sword, but feel pain in my side. The gunman grazed me.

The room's too crowded. I can't use my speed to good effect here, there's always someone within striking distance. I grab the swordsman's arm, pull him at me and send him flying at the gun man.

Someone else pulls out a gun and I throw my sword at her, as hard as I can so it will go through her vest. She goes down grasping her shoulder.

I don't have the time to worry about her getting back up. Three guards run at me sword drawn. I'm faster so I reach the first one before he's ready. I grab his sword out of his hand and punch him in the face. I slice at the other forcing him back, but the third closes in.

He's only human so we exchange a few strikes and then I'm holding his sword. I slice his leg open, turn and slice at the other one, who thought he was going to catch me unaware. He loses his sword before he realizes it, along with a few fingers. I break his knee, he falls down and I kick him across the face. he's out of the fight

I swing at the closest person, but she ducks under, stands and slashes my right arm. The cut isn't deep, but it hurts, the pain makes me drop the sword. She presses her advantage, I dodge and parry, moving back. We're getting closer to where Claws is fighting.

I catch motion out of the corner of my eye and move just in time to avoid being run through. The sword bites in my side instead. I hiss and back hands the man. I feel the darkness shift and harden just before I connect and his jaw breaks.

I punch the woman, but she jumps back. She slashes at me, I parry. I attack, she dodges. She's the one moving back now.

I risk a look around, and she uses the opportunity to come at me. I have no choice but to jump sideways. She saw it coming

and I find myself with a line of red across my stomach. Fortunately, it isn't deep, even if it stings.

It was worth it. It's only her against me, everyone else that's combat ready is focusing on Claws. Without having to worry about an attack from the back I can focus on her fully, and I need it.

She is good. Her movements are precise, she doesn't waste any energy. We circle each other. I don't recognize her. As good as she is, I should have trained with her. Amanda had me train with the best people she had. At least, that's what she told me. Another lie.

We exchange blows and step back, circling again.

We can't be evenly matched. It doesn't matter how good she is, I have better reflexes, more strength. I should be able to take the sword out of her hand, after all she's only human.

We attack, and I feel the sting on my leg before we back off each other. I haven't cut her yet. Something is going on. I've fought demons who didn't hurt me as much as she has. Can it be the silver?

It's only supposed to inhibit demonic healing, not weaken them. At least I don't recall them growing noticeably weaker as I fought them.

Or is this something different? Something specifically for me? Was Amanda prepared for me to turn against her? Did she arm her people accordingly?

I barely parry her attack. Something is definitely wrong with me. She can't be moving faster than me.

I have to do something before she scores a hit that puts me down. I grit my teeth. I hate doing this. I hate having to rely on that part of me.

I attack her, she parries. she strikes back, a swing from the side. Instead of parrying, or dodging, I catch the blade in my right hand. The darkness is as hard as I can make it, but I still feel it cut in my skin. I swing at her with the pummel of my sword and she jumps back.

Unfortunately for her, she lands inside Claws' reach, and he backhands her across the room.

I want to lie down, close my eyes and sleep for a long time. I've never felt this tired in my short life. I force my eyes to stay open. I stumble to the closest person and take his gun.

Claws is still fighting against seven. I aim at the furthest one. I use half the clip before I hit him in the leg. I try to aim at another one, but they all move too fast. They are blurs and the gun is too heavy for me to keep it up. I find a wall and lean against it, just to catch my breath.

The next thing I know someone shakes me. I try to aim the gun, but I'm not holding it anymore. I'm lying on the floor.

"You are alive, good." The voice is deep and too loud.

It takes effort, but I open my eyes. Claws looks down at me. I look around bodies little the floor. For a moment, I worry they're all dead, but I can see they're breathing, and then I hear the moans. And not only mine as I push myself sitting.

I look Claw over, he's cut and bleeding. "How are you fairing?"

"I am hurt, but not so badly that I can't finish what I came here to do." He goes to the center of the room, grab one of the cylinders and pulls it out of the column.

"Wait!"

Claws turns to look at me, cylinder in hand. I stare at him, expecting something to happen, and then remember.

"Never mind. She lied about that."

He studies the cylinder, and then just breaks it in two. He tips the halves and the stone falls out in his hand. He holds it gingerly and then places it in a fold of his darkness.

"What's this?" Claws asks, indicating one of the ends.

"That's the date when the soul stone was collected."

He looks at the column. "Did you collect all of them?"

"No. I only started a little more than a year ago. Forty or so, the rest was collected by the previous hunt.... I don't know where the others are from." There are close to seventy soul stones in the column, and now I do wonder how they got them. How are other cities protected from demons?

"Claws, do demons attack other cities?"

"Of course." He pulls cylinder after cylinder out, breaking then, collecting the stone and dropping the casing to the floor. "Humans are crowding out all the wild, not just the one close to this city."

I nod to myself. How are they protecting themselves then? Large groups of humans? I look at the unconscious bodies littering the room. Could humans really manage it?

I'm shaken awake again.

"We can leave now."

I nod and force myself to standing. I take a step and tip over. Claws catch me before I hit the floor.

"I might need help getting out of here."

He smells me. "You've been poisoned. It isn't silver."

"I'll be okay."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Amanda says.