

The television comes on as soon as I enter my apartment. I shut it off. I don't want to hear about humans. I want to be alone, in the space and in my head.

I lied to them. The lies came easier than I expected. I lied to protect Claws. I lied to strike back at Amanda and Jason for the lie they told me. Why did they lie to me?

I prepare food, cutting vegetables and cooking meat. I drink all the sodas left as I eat. I want to forget what Claws told me, what I saw. I want to go back to before, when things were simple, to when Amanda and Jason told the truth.

Only, did they ever?

My arm throbs. It has never felt like this before, but I have never hit a demon so hard and so often. It will pass, my body heals. I should sleep; I recover faster when I rest. But to do so means I'll have to deal with humans again.

So instead I go to the computer.

Claws told me to question who I am, so I go through the files I have access to. They say the same things as before. Reports on my creation, schematics, and diagram I don't understand, but which Amanda explained represents my biology and the processes used to make me.

Amanda told me that. Did she lie about them? How can I tell? Is there anyone here I can ask? That I can trust would tell me the truth?

I want to scream. I want to hit someone. I want to go out and run, hunt. But to leave means dealing with humans. Talking to them, not knowing if they speak the truth or not.

I do scream.

When I stop, my arm itches. I feel dirty. I shower. I scrub myself hard, but I don't feel any cleaner. Amanda said I was created to protect humans but was that a lie? Jason said I should act like them, but if humans lie, does it mean that I am more like them now that I have lied also? If they lie, do I want to be like them?

I look for historical files about the humans. I find only files on previous hunters, going back fifty years, as well as the hunters from other cities. I am not interested in them.

I access the news sites. I never paid attention to human-related news before, but now I feel a need to inform myself on what they do. I read about the events of the day. Nothing about the women abused by the men. Nothing indicating humans commit violence on each other. I go back days, then weeks, then months.

I read about the financial fluctuation. About changes to the weather, and questions if those are natural or caused by demons. I read about the sports humans play; they write a lot about that. The only time I read about humans fighting humans, it is linked to them being tainted.

I saw humans mistreat each other four times during my walk. Was this an exception? Even if it doesn't happen as often other times, how is it the news does not talk about them? Is it considered normal? Therefore they feel no need to report on it? Could it all be lies?

It's the middle of the night now. Even if I wanted to ask Jason, he isn't here. I know he and Amanda have apartments elsewhere. Jason drives here, and I overheard Amanda talk about getting a tree pruned in her backyard.

Is there anywhere I can go to verify the information? I don't know. This is the only way I know how to access information unless I ask Jason or Amanda. They can give me access to files they feel are relevant to what I am doing.

Where are those files? If I ask for more data on me, will they give them to me? Would they even tell me if there are more? I sigh. How am I supposed to find answers to who I am, if I can't trust the people who have the answers?

I get up and go to the fridge. I want a soda. No, I crave one, but I don't have any left. I look at the empty cans on the counter. How can my control be slipping? It has always been one can per day.

I can go to the grocery store and get more, but do I want to deal with the humans there? There won't be many—they all sleep at this hour—but the time I spend there is time I am not spending finding answers.

Not that I am finding anything at the moment.

I leave my apartment. I don't know where I will go, but I need to move, and the building

should have few people in it; only some of the guards and scientists work during the night.

I cross the floor, then use the stairs to go down one level and walk across that one and down the stairs. I pick up speed as I go, and I'm running by the time I pass a lab with someone in it on the third sub-level.

I stop once I'm past it. She is working at the computer. I come back and knock on the open door.

She pulls an earbud out of her ear as she turns to look at me, and I hear the sounds coming from it. Music. "Yes?" I don't know her. She has blue eyes, blond hair, and silver earrings. She wears the usual lab coat, but I can see a pink shirt where it's opened.

I nod to the computer. "You know how they work?"

She looks at it and then back to me. "Of course."

I hesitate a moment, then remind myself I am not lying. "I need to add more files on mine, but I don't know how, or where to look to find them."

She frowns at me, but her eyes are slightly unfocused. She's distracted by something. The music? "You don't know how to transfer files?"

"No. Jason is the one who does it for me, but he isn't here."

She frowns again, then shrugs. "Do you know your terminal location code?"

I shake my head.

"How about its system ID?"

"No, as I said, Jason handles that."

She thinks for a moment. "If you don't know those, I can't help you transfer the files you need." Something happens on the screen, and she swears, focusing on it and typing. After a moment she seems to remember I am here. "Look, if it's urgent, just go to the servers and check them there."

My heart speeds up, and I have difficulty keeping my breathing steady. "Where is it?"

She stares at me in disbelief. I worry she has realized what I am doing, but the screen reclaims her attention. She waves me away. "It's on sub seven, room 105."

"Thank you." I'm gone before she can reply. I catch her looking up from the screen as I turn, with a puzzled expression on her face. I hear her start a call on her phone, as I hurry away, and then I am out of hearing range.

Once I'm before the door, I realize I know this room. I've walked by it often. Doctor Duros has a lab at the end of the hall, and she does many of my endurance tests. I never knew what this room was before.

I enter it, and it's much colder. Not quite as cold as outside in the winter, but close. The room is filled with shelves and on them are...what? Are those the servers? They are flat, rectangular, black boxes with blinking lights.

I walk through them, realizing I should have asked her how I access the information on them, but I come to a screen and keyboard before the need to open one of them by hand to see if the information is in them becomes too intense.

Like mine, the screen comes on when I press the space bar, but unlike mine, all that appears is a blinking cursor. Mine offers me choices of where I want to go, to my files or some of the news sites, or even the music and porn sites from when Jason was instructing me on them.

Not knowing what else to do, I type *Search for Derick*

A line appears under it. *Search by File Name, File Content, All?*

I type *All*.

A list of what I guess are file names scroll by, a lot of them, moving faster than I can read. It takes two minutes before it stops. The name of the file at the bottom of the screen is a series of letters and numbers, then, *Derick stress test result*, and it's dated yesterday afternoon. It's the report from Doctor Sanderson's test.

The line above it is dated earlier that day. I move up the list, and they go back in time, so I go to the top of the list. Hopefully, the truth starts with my creation.

The earliest file is dated six months before I was created. I tap it on the screen with a finger, and it highlights. I tap it again, and the file opens.

A face appears on the screen. A man's face, light brown in color, short black hair. His eyes are closed, and his face relaxed. He must be sleeping.

No, I am sleeping. It is my face I am looking at.

My eyes open and my face shrinks. No, the camera moves back. The face on the screen looks around fear in my brown eyes. "What the fuck?" I say in the recording. Only I don't sound right. The timber is correct, but the words don't sound like I spoke them.

The camera continues to back away, and I see that I'm— No, that might look like me, but he isn't me. He is naked, and in a chair like the one in the van. He is tied to it by thick leather straps.

He pulls on them. "What the hell is going on? Who the fuck are you people? Where am I?" He struggles and screams obscenities.

The camera moves to another room. A door closes, and the man's screams are no longer audible. I see a wall for a moment, then I am looking at the man again, through a window.

"Well, he's awake," someone says. Jason. "So, this is your fourth, right? That makes him a 'D.' Let's see, David? No, Dominic? Donald? Damian? Oh hell no. I have it. Derick. What do you think, Manda?"

The camera turns to show Amanda, bent over a keyboard, and reading something on the screen. "I don't think you should be naming it. It isn't going to be your pet."

"I know, but once this is done, he's going to need a name. I'm just getting ahead of it."

She rolls her eyes without looking away from the screen. "Why do you keep coming here anyway? You're not needed for this. In fact, until this succeeds, you're not needed at all. Go home."

"I'm documenting the process. There's no telling what could be useful here for shaping his mind afterward." The camera turns to the man on the chair again. "Which reminds me, why aren't you wiping his memory before the process? You've told me it's more difficult afterward."

Amanda's sigh is loud. "Because the goal is to create a soldier with demon abilities, but who keeps his mind. I can't know if I've accomplished that if he's already wiped. And that isn't a 'he.' That's an 'it.'"

"He's a human being, just like you and me."

"Not for long." She presses a button. "Everything is green on this side. Prep him."

The man struggles as doctors secure his head in place. By the trouble they have, I can tell he's strong. I recognize the doctor putting the IV needle in his neck: Sanderson.

"Once this works," Jason says, "we can't treat him like one of them. I've read the other reports, and if you want to avoid ending up with the same problems, he needs to think he's one of us."

"Really? And how are you going to explain that he's so much stronger than the rest of us? Faster? Not to mention what we have no way of predicting."

"We don't have to tell him he's human, but we need to treat him like one of us. Otherwise, you're going to end up with someone feeling alienated again. You've had three failures going that route, isn't that why you brought me in?" Jason is silent for a moment. "So we need to give him a sense of belonging. That's why you need to start using 'he' when referring to him."

"For god's sake, it's a tool, a machine. It doesn't need to be coddled."

"Manda, you requested I come here. You said you wanted my help. You promised me a project the likes of which I'd never seen before, and you've delivered on that, but if you're not going to listen to me, why am I here? I know it isn't because you're hoping to get in bed with me."

Amanda's sigh sounds annoyed and resigned. "Fine, you're right. So we give it a name, refer to it as 'he.' Then what?"

"Then I give him a moral structure. He, Derick, is going to fight demons, but it can't be just because we point him at them and say 'kill.' If we want him to be effective, he needs to believe in what he does. He needs to see them as bad, even evil, and us as good." He pauses. "I'm going to have to come up with something to explain why some humans work with demons."

The doctors move away from the man, and the last one gives the thumbs up. The man in the chair continues to fight against his restraints.

“So you teach that Derick of yours right from wrong. What’s to stop him from going after any humans he sees doing something ‘bad’?”

“That’s easy. We control how he sees us. We make sure he doesn’t venture too far from here. This area is already fairly crime-free, and you can make sure the few bad elements have been removed, right?” A pause, during which a table is rolled next to the man. “While he’s in here, it’s going to be child’s play to control what he sees on the news, as well as what sites he can visit. Hell, considering he probably won’t know anything about the net, he won’t even question the explanations I give him.”

On the table is a machine with a glass bell on top of it. Sanderson connects the IV to the machine. I see needles lining the top of the machine inside the bell. On a small stand, suspended above them, is a soul stone.

“Alright, that’s your department, so I’ll follow your instructions, but I think it’s idiotic to go quite that far.” There’s the click of a button. “Everyone clear the room.”

After a moment, the man is the only one left. He stares at the bell, at its content, confused and afraid.

“Well, here goes.”

“Fourth time’s the charm,” Jason says.

Sparks appear at the tips of the needles. At first, they disappear immediately, but after a moment they arc from one needle to the other, then one of the arcs jumps to the stone.

I don’t understand what is happening at first, but then I notice there’s now dust floating within the bell. Each time one of the arcs hits the stone, there’s a little more dust.

“What is that?” Jason asks.

“We don’t know.”

“Haven’t you been studying those things for a decade?”

“Yes, and we still don’t know what they are. We know they’re sort of organic, and that they form when a demon dies.”

“Sort of organic?”

“Its composition is strange. None of our instruments give us conclusive answers. What we do know is that once it’s injected in a human, the results are startling.”

“I’m going to have to find a name for them,” Jason muses. “They sort of look like stones. Where do they form?” he asks Amanda.

“Inside the skull. Doctor Zacks theorizes that it’s the demons’ essence that coalesces at death.”

“Oh, well then, that’s an easy one.”

They are silent as the rest of the soul stone is vaporized. After five minutes the dust is so thick inside the bell, I can’t see the stone anymore, just the electrical arcs, and a moment later those stop.

“It’s all gone,” Amanda says. “Initiating transfer.”

The dust spirals as it is sucked down, and after a moment the air in the bell is clear. Then a dirty-gray liquid travels along the IV to the man’s neck, and in him. I can’t hear it, but I see the agony on his face. His screams have to be deafening. He fights against the straps, but they hold.

It only takes a minute, and the liquid is gone. His struggle shakes the chair. It has to be bolted down; it would have tipped over otherwise. The veins on his neck bulge and become black. It spreads down to his chest and arms. The darkness spreads to his skin. A ridge appears on his forearm, then moves forward, cutting the leather straps.

I scratch my arm as he pulls free. He grabs the other restraints with his free hand and rips them off the chair.

Amanda curses. “Security, get in there and restrain it.”

A dozen men enter the room and jump him. He throws one of them off with ease, sending him flying into the window, cracking it. In moments he’s the only one standing, the guards sprawled on the floor. I can’t see any of them breathing as Jason pans the camera over them. When Jason raises the camera, the man is looking directing at him.

Amanda curses again. Lightning erupts from the wall and strikes the man. He staggers back, then takes a step forward, and lightning hits him again. He doesn’t back off this time. He steps

forward, another lightning bolt. Another step, lightning again. I can see the strain on his face. I know how much electricity hurts, but like me, he doesn't give into it. He steps again, and this time, multiple bolts strike him.

He falls to his knees and tries to stand. More lightning and he fall to his side, unmoving.

"Damn it!" She slams a fist on the table. "I was really hoping this mix would make this one more manageable. I thought I was going in the right direction. Now he's a corpse."

"The camera moves closer to the window and zooms to the man. "Err, Manda?" Jason says. I notice what he had. "He's still breathing."

\* \* \* \* \*

The screen goes blank, and I notice a finger on one of the keys.

Amanda sighs. "I really wish you hadn't seen that."

"I thought you had gone home." My voice is flat. I am still trying to process what I saw. I don't look at her, I'm frozen in place.

"No, I was in the lab, studying the demon you killed. I'm not sure why I didn't get the warning you were in here. I found out you were accessing the file when I had to get a file from the server to compare data."

I have no idea what she means, and yet I nod. "What did I just watch?"

"Wasn't it obvious?"

Now I find the strength to turn and look at her. "You said you created me!"

"I did."

"Then who was that tied to the chair?" My hands are shaking. How could she hurt another human like that?

She shrugs. "Some guy from the military. Someone with the right set of skills you might retain after his personality was wiped."

"Some guy? Don't you even know who he was? Did he have a family? Do I have a family?"

"Derick, calm down." She places a hand on my shoulder, but I shove it away.

"Calm down? I just found out that not only is everything you've told me about demons and humans a fabrication, but I'm a lie too."

She sighs again, and I hear the sound of metal sliding against metal. "I am so disappointed. I really thought you were our first real success."

It takes me a moment to figure out what the sound is. It's the only moment Amanda needs to stab me in the stomach with the sword.

"You're not a lie, Derick. You're a failure."

She steps away, and I look down at the sword in my gut. I look up, wanting to ask why she did this, wanting to tell her she didn't have to. I wanted to work this out, I just needed to know the truth.

Her back is to me as she leaves the room, and the pain hits me, physical and emotional. Amanda has just abandoned me here to die. I fall to my knees, and I don't even try to get up, before falling on my side.