

# Chapter 3

I stand after a few minutes and look out the window. I see houses across a dirt road from this one. Opening the window, there are houses on each side. Made of wood and stones. Houses line the road, which has no traffic. I can make out roofs behind the houses facing me. In the far distances, I see tall trees. I listen. People in the distance, no sound of vehicles. I breathe in and only get more the cleaner Moores used.

I close the window when Moores approaches and sit on the bed. I don't lie down. I can't. I need to move, go outside. See where I am, who these people are. Evaluate if they pose a threat. Is there a military presence here? They have been in every city I've traveled through.

The door opens and the man stumbles as he backs in, carrying a screen. I catch and steady him. Take the screen from him to ensure it isn't dropped.

"Thank you." He takes it back and places it on the dresser. "But you shouldn't be moving. You still have healing to do."

"I'm feeling better," I reply, doing my best not to pace. "How can I repay you for your generosity before I leave?" He places a hand on my shoulder and I flinch away just before he removes it.

"You need more rest." He studies me, looks at his hand before lowering it. "The best way to repay me is to ensure you don't leave until you are fully healed. And be careful as you travel, next time you might not be so lucky as to be found. I know it can feel daunting, but resting is the best thing you can do." He hands me a remote. "I'm afraid this is an older model. It doesn't have voice controls, but it is connected to the town's net. That is connected to the district, so I'm sure you can find something to keep you entertained."

The buttons on the remote are clearly labeled, symbols instead of words. I turn it on as I sit back on the bed and Moores smiles before leaving me alone.

I attempt to watch what is playing, some show with people going about incomprehensible things in a language I don't understand. I change the channel. A man and woman argue, and before I can try to understand why, they kiss. On another channel, police officers are engaged in a chase through a city. I watch enough for the scene to change to inside the car, where the driver tells the officer in the passenger seat about his love life. Fiction. I don't understand the need for fictional stories. So much already happens that is real. Recording that would fill all the hours of those fictional shows.

Humans confuse me.

Another channel has a show about a demon hundred of feet tall destroying a city. I shake my head. Demons can't grow that tall. They don't destroy cities, it brings them nothing. Young ones cause destruction, but lack control, being driven mainly by their hunger. For one to be that big, it is ancient, has full control of their hunger, probably only needs to eat once a century, although at a certain point demons grow still. Lives Alone explained this to me in one of my visits to him. It's why they eat less. The demon on the screen probably needs to eat an entire city to feel sated.

The next channel is news. Reports of humans committing violence against humans. Demons attacking humans. Soldiers hunting demons. The army winning the fight against demons across the world. Natural disaster.

I stop pacing when the name Anounga shows up in the text crawling under the woman talking.

*Turtine, Anounga capital, identified as epicenter of the sickness.* As I read it, I realize the woman speaks in a language I understand.

"Earlier this week, the medical branch of the Anounga military department, in conjunction with the surrounding districts, confirmed that Turtines is where the sickness originated from. While they haven't been able to determine how it came to be, they have back-traced its spread to the capital.

“Turtine made the news a few years ago as the first city confirmed to be free of demon activity after a push by the military to ensure citizen’s safety. Its success became the template for more military actions, expanding the ring of cities free of demons centered around the capital. The city made the news again a year later as the first cases of the mysterious sickness were reported there.

“Scientists work hard to determine the vector of contagion, but as of yet have not had any success. When it was first identified, they offered the usual recommendations for contagious sicknesses, avoid contact with others, self-isolate if any signs of sickness are noticed, wash your hands with warm water and disinfectant soaps, ensure all food preparation areas are thoroughly cleaned, and cover your mouth and nose with a mask if being around people is unavoidable.

“The military is confident a cure is only days away.”

I turn it off.

The news is much the same as the last time I listened to it. The only change being that the epicenter has been identified. I know it no longer a lie engineered to control my view of the world, but because of my experience, I have to wonder if it is engineered to control the view of the people living in the world.

Adam’s army of demons was never mentioned by the news, even if they took over an entire city. The news never speaks of the experiments the military does to create people like me in their effort to kill demons. The news never talks about demons being more than monsters set on killing every human, or that humans are the cause of that growing aggression as they destroy more of the wilderness that his home to the demons to make space for their growing cities.

I can’t tell if the news is another fiction created by humans to fill their day, instead of acting to resolve what they feel needs fixing, or if they have a morbid need to know that things are going badly elsewhere for some inexplicable reason.

A door in the house closes, and out the window I watch Moores walk along the road, head toward what I think of deeper into the settlement. I wait until he disappears, and open the window.

I pull myself out and climb to the roof. I can’t lie down, sit down, stay still anymore. I was not made for any of those things. The roof is angled and reaching the peak is precarious, but I make it there and encounter an issue I haven’t before.

The houses are further apart than they appeared, and while the roofs spread as far as I watch in three directions, they are all peaked. Some are covered with tiles, others with materials I don’t identify. I can jump to the other roofs, but landing on a peak is not something I have experience with. The cities have mostly flat roofs until you reach the outskirts, and I have never needed to chase demons that far.

I prefer traveling on rooftops. The anonymity it gives me, the better vantage point during a chase, as I can see further than the demon on the street. The easier control, as I can drop on them at a time of my choosing.

In the direction where the town ends, I see trees with the dirt road continuing through them. I can leave that way. Even if someone is watching out for me, I can run faster than anyone here. And then go... where? Moores said we are two weeks inside Anounga. The military didn’t chase me into the district, but they might have entered now. They have ways of tracking me, I am certain of it, although I don’t know what they are. There have been too many times when they showed up after I was certain I’d lost them completely.

A city, even a town, gives me a place to get lost in. Makes it harder for the military to find me. It also means interacting with people. Dealing with their questions, their animosity, toward me and each other. I dislike dealing with them.

But is that a worthwhile trade-off to finally get the military off my trail? Finally give Captain Humbert the slip? He is the reason for too many of the close calls, his obsession for making me pay for his and his man’s capture by Adam’s demons. This will not stop him, but I can use the respite.

I drop to the ground and walk along the road. The houses vary in their construction, wood, and stones are the most common material, but they are used in different ways and shapes. It's as if every person built the house as they wanted. Instead of having a central body decide for them, the way Jason explained the cities were constructed. That information might have been another lie, but enough buildings were identical in the cities. I believe him.

Some have gardens, some have not. So have them in the front of the houses, some in the back, or the side. I can hear people talk and move about inside most of them, but there are more people ahead, outside.

The acrid scent of the cleaner Moores used is in the air. Did everyone clean their houses? Do they wash the outside of them with it? The dirt road? I approach a house, and the scent grows stronger. A curtain is pulled aside and I resume walking.

There are many people outside, despite the recommendations to remain inside, to avoid contact with others. Is that why they clean everything with that acrid cleaner? A belief it will protect them? Humans believe odd things.

I pass streets and alleys, but nothing resembling those of the cities. Only well-traveled path between houses that wouldn't fit a young demon. A cart pulled by an animal I don't recognize turns onto the road I am on, heading in the same direction I am. More houses along the smaller streets. The cart is filled with a mix of vegetables, some I recognize, others I don't.

The houses change, more concrete and the hard plastic sheets the cities prefer. As if the closer to the center of the town, the more like a city they want to be. Still not tall buildings or flat roofs for me to run along.

More people on the road, by the houses. Talking and laughing. Sound of work happening in and outside houses. I miss my trench coat and how it gives me anonymity in crowds. I put my black hand in a pocket and keep my head down, do my best to avoid being noticed, and seem to be succeeding. No one looks in my direction.

The crowds don't get as thick as in the cities, and there is something else different that takes me time to identify. There is a lack of urgency that permeates cities. Even the people who run don't do so with the desperation of someone late.

I watch them around me, looking for shadows to lose myself in. I do not like being this exposed. I know humans are not all the same, but being noticed is often followed by trouble. I like the darkness when I am in a city, the shadows of alleys and tall buildings. Walking in the daylight, among the people feels wrong, vulnerable. Keeping my black skin from bristling and attracting more attention is difficult.

I looked for the animosity I am used to, and I don't see it. I also don't see the studied indifference that is common in the cities. Here, if someone looks to be in trouble, others move to talk to them, help them, offer support. Is the animosity, the indifference a result of so many people packed into small places? If so, why are cities so popular?

I shake my head to clear it. Humans and their actions are not my concern. I didn't ask to be brought here. I am not interested in interacting with them. Only this long among them and I already have enough of them.

I have made my decision. Let the military find me in the wilderness. I can deal with them easier than the people here. I turn to head away from the center of the town. Toward the forest. I am leaving.

The wind shift and I freeze as it carries a scent that shouldn't be here. That can't be here. I turn and sniff the air, sneeze due to the acrid scent that coats it, but faint among that is the distinctive scent.

Somewhere in this town, despite the news saying it is impossible, there is a demon.