

What am I doing?

Amanda isn't abandoning me. For that to happen, she'd have to care about me. The video made it clear she doesn't. I am an "it" to her. To all of them.

I need to get out. She considers me a failure, and she will destroy me, make another hunter. No, another experiment and call him a hunter too. My gut hurts, and I remember the sword in it. I'm surprised at how painful removing it is. I've taken beatings from demons and gotten right up. Pulling it out leaves me curled up.

I need to get up, I need to move. Amanda did not stab me just to cause me pain, she wants me incapacitated until someone comes and removes me. I can hear footsteps coming, two sets, combat boots. I must leave, now.

I haven't even managed to uncurl when they enter the room. They grab my shoulders and pull me up. I almost scream at the pain, but I won't give her that satisfaction. I am a hunter.

My shirt is red with blood. It's now spreading down to my pants. There is so much of it. Why am I not healing? They drag me out, and while the pain spikes every so often, I can feel my limbs responding.

We don't pass anyone. It's the middle of the night. There are only a handful of scientists here, and not many more guards on duty.

We stop before the elevator, and a moment later it dings and the doors open. Inside, the one on my right presses the button for sub ten. What's there? It's the lowest level. There are a few freezers, operations rooms. The generator is there, the controls for the water and other systems. Are there rooms there to hold me captive? The cut in my gut makes it unlikely Amanda wants to keep me alive. The incinerator. They plan on throwing me in it, like another piece of biohazard material.

I pull my feet under me, and with a scream, I throw my handlers against the back of the elevator. The motion has me bent over in pain. I can't let the pain stop me. I am dead if I do.

I put my back against the door and force myself to straighten. One of the guards, a woman I don't recognize, shakes herself and pulls out a baton. The other is crumpled on the floor.

She swings at me, and I block with a raised arm. I punch her in the stomach as hard as I think is safe. I don't want to kill her. She smiles and brings the baton down again. I move enough, so she misses my head, and it impacts my shoulder. My whole arm goes numb.

I throw myself at her, pushing her back until we hit the wall. The impact makes me see stars, but she crumbles to the ground. The doors open.

I consider going back up. I need to leave, and the best way will be the hangar. But I see the large sink, and suddenly I am thirsty. There are also tools and rolls of tape on shelves. I need to do something to stop the bleeding.

I almost fall before reaching them, then I have to hold on to the shelves to stay standing. I realize the sensation is coming back to my arm. It prickles and throbs, but I can move my finger again.

This must be where they store the tools when they need to make changes to the labs. I take off my shirt and look at the wound. Blood slowly flows from it, no indication it's healing.

I have no idea how to stop the flow, other than blocking it. I ball my shirt and grab the widest roll of tape I find. The shirt goes over the wound, and I wind the tape around me until I'm certain it will stay in place. I use half the roll.

I drink water out of a dirty container that had held screws. The water out of the faucet is tepid, but I don't care. I am so thirsty. I stop when I feel my stomach is full, but it takes an effort of will. I still want to drink. I can only think that my body is trying to replace the fluids I've lost.

I lean against the sink, waiting to feel better, for my strength to come back. I don't feel like it does, but the shaking stops. I could stay here a long time, I know, waiting to feel normal. I could stay here until Amanda sends more guards to dispose of me. I look in the distance, to where the incinerator is.

I can't let that happen.

I force myself back to the elevator. The door opens immediately after I call it. I pull the two guards out and then press the button for the second sub-level. I'll leave by the hangar door;

Amanda will expect me to go out the front. Then I'll lose myself in the city and... I have no idea what I'll do then.

I lean against the wall as the elevator moves up; I am exhausted. Sub eight, sub six, sub— The elevator jerks to a stop.

“Really, Derick?” Amanda’s voice comes from the ceiling. “You take the elevator? You’d think the trap the demons have laid for you recently would make you more careful.”

I press the button again, trying to get the elevator moving. I don’t know what she means, but I know I don’t want to stay here.

“That isn’t going to work, but don’t worry. I’ll have people down there in no time at all.”

I am not going to make it that easy on her. I force my fingers in the crack between the doors and pull on them as hard as I can, and I double over in pain. It lances through my gut and up my insides. I have to be careful. If I pass out from it, I won’t be able to resist the guards.

Gently I force the doors apart. The pain flares, but it’s manageable. Opening the door leaves me panting and sweating. Is this what it’s like to be a human? To have every effort take so much out of you?

I’m between floors, but there’s enough of a gap for me to pull myself up on sub five. That effort leaves me lying on the floor. I don’t want to give into the pain, but I convince myself a small rest will help me. I stay there longer than I should have. I would wait longer still, but a door opens in the distance. The way the footsteps echo, I can tell it’s the stairwell. Combat boots again, many of them. Too many for me to be able to discern the number. What is certain is that I can’t be lying on the floor when they get here.

I bite back the pain as I stand. The stairs are my only way up, now that the elevator doesn’t work. Three floors still to go, and they are between me and the closest stairs. I don’t know if I can make it to the other ones, on the other side of this floor. I’m not fast anymore, and they will have guards there too. My only option is to try to out-manuever them. Go around them? Hide in one of the labs? I am not familiar with this floor.

I head for the first intersection, and it’s clear. If I head toward the stairs, there should be a few intersections. Can I use one of them to bypass the guards I hear coming toward me? I have difficulty making out how far they are, and I can’t tell if it’s the way the sound reflects off the walls, or because I have lost so much blood, it’s affecting my hearing.

I head to the other corner, passing empty labs. I peek into the hall as they turn the other corner. They raise their machine guns as I step back. No one fires, but I hear the safeties come off.

Slight motion, not enough for them to be taking position in the hall. They are staying put. Waiting for me to move?

My arm begins throbbing again, and I rub it absently.

Can I take them on? Sure, they are only humans, and even if I’m not at my best, I am stronger, although I don’t know about faster right now. My main concern is that I am not healing. They have guns. I saw four of them when I peeked, but it sounded like there was at least twice that. A hail of bullets will stop me, possibly kill me.

“Jenson,” a woman whispers. “Magingson.” There’s the tone of command in her voice, even in whispers. “Go back. Lab 0532 connects to the corridor on the other side. Use it to get behind him.” Two sets of boots lightly move away.

I smile. It’s good to know there’s a way to get behind them.

“Derick,” she calls out. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I know you’re a good man. Turn yourself in, and we can resolve this.”

Sure, that’s why the safeties are off. “I don’t think so. I’m going to stay right here, where you can’t shoot me.” I take off for the other intersection. I want to run, but my wound doesn’t let me. I have to settle for a fast walk.

“We’re not going to shoot you,” she replies. “My orders are to bring you in, that’s all. Whatever happened, it can’t be that bad.”

I find that I want to believe her. I want to put this behind me and go back to the way things were. My next step jars my stomach and pain shoots up, reminding me of what Amanda did to

me. Yeah, that isn't going to happen.

She continues talking, but I stop listening. I focus on the approaching footsteps. There, much closer than I expected, almost next to me, around the corner. The steps pause and I prepare myself.

The muzzle of the machine gun pokes around the corner. I grab it, lift it, and step in front of the guard holding it. A man, I see, as I hit him as hard as I can. I won't pull my punches anymore; I can't risk one of them getting the upper hand. I hope it won't kill him, but I need to survive.

He goes down, and I'm still holding the machine gun. The other guard hasn't reacted yet, and I club her. I place the machine gun next to them and check for a pulse. I sigh in relief when they both have one. I take their handguns.

I go the way they came, passing the elevator and coming to a lab with an open door. Looking in, there are tables, computers, and equipment I've never seen before. The door on the other side opens to the hall. I cross the room silently.

"Jensen," the woman in charge whispers, "are you in position?"

I peek, and she's holding a radio to her mouth, waiting. There's only four of them. I glance in the other direction, but there isn't anyone there. I was certain there were more of them.

"Jensen? Respond."

A dozen paces separate us. I can't afford to be slow. I ready myself for the pain. I throw one handgun over their head, and when they turn to look where it clattered further down the hall, I run to their exposed backs. Two of them turn toward me as I reach them, but they aren't quick enough. I club them with the other gun, then the other two.

I fall to my knees, holding my gut. My whole body is protesting, wanting me to lie down and let all this end. I consider listening to it.

"Derick?" one of the radios crackles. "Derick, please respond." I don't recognize the voice through the distortion.

I take it off one of the guard's belt. "Amanda, is that you?"

"No." Static makes the word almost unintelligible.

"Who are you?"

There's a pause. "A friend." The sound is clearer, but the voice is still distorted.

I consider dropping the radio, not talking to this person claiming to be a friend, but I'm not going anywhere for the moment. "What do you want?"

Another pause. "She knows you're heading to the hangar. She has two dozen men waiting for you there."

"Why should I believe you? How can she know?"

"The elevator. She saw you were going to the second sub-level." The distortion makes it hard to tell, but I get a sense the person talking is purposely slowing their speech. To make themselves more intelligible over the distortion? "The only way out from there is the hangar. You can't go there. Go to the main floor."

"The entrance is guarded. You're trying to send me into a trap."

"No, Derick, I want you to escape. There's an emergency door at the back of the building, near the cafeteria. It will not be guarded."

I nod, remembering it. "Why are you doing this?"

"I am a friend. Good luck." A loud click, then nothing.

I go over what they said. If Amanda knows where I intend to go, then she would put the guards there. The ground level is five floors up, two extra ones, and steps in my conditions will not be easy, but if it means avoiding a fight I can't win, where is the choice?

I'm about to stand when another radio squawks. "Bratson? Report." I recognize Amanda's voice. The radio is that of the woman who was in charge.

I pick it up. "She can't."

"So you killed them?"

I grunt with the effort to stand, then answer. "No, unconscious. I have no intention of killing anyone you send to stop me, but you hurt me badly, and I am having difficulty focusing. I may

kill some of them by accident.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

I stagger toward the stairs. “Because you should just let me leave.”

She chuckles. “That isn’t going to happen. You’re my property. There’s too much I can learn from dissecting your body. The next one will be much better. I’m sure Jason will come up with a cute name for that one too.”

I check through the window in the stairwell door. No one there. “Don’t you care how many people might die trying to stop me?”

“They’re expendable.”

I consider for a moment. If I enter the stairs, the reverberation will tell Amanda where I am, but she knows where I am going, and the stairs are the only way there. I enter them and start going up.

“You told me I was made to protect humans. Was that a lie?”

She doesn’t answer immediately. “No, but not in the way you care about. I can’t believe you never worked it out. We need to wipe the demons off the face of this planet, and you’re the way we’re going to do it. Well, if you’d been a success, I would have made more using the same method. Now it’ll be number five.”

“If it was only about getting rid of demons, why tell me that humans are good? Why the lies?”

“That was Jason’s idea. And to be honest, you’ve lasted longer than the previous ones, so there has to be something to it. He said that if you have a frame of reference, you’d fight demons of your own free will, not just because you’re programmed to do it. And sending you out also served as an in-the-field test. There’s only so much we can learn in the lab.”

“The socialization?”

“Another one of Jason’s ideas. Get you to bond with us, again, to encourage you to fight of your own free will. I was against it; there was so much that could have gone wrong. People outside of here can’t be controlled. There was no telling if you’d run into someone bad who didn’t have a demon scent on them.” She chuckles. “That would have screwed things up royally.”

One more floor to go. “In the recording, Jason said something about controlling what I see on the news.”

“Yeah. He figured that if you thought you were part of a group, a larger organization, it would give you a sense of belonging. Again, to make you fight harder for us.”

The pain I feel this time isn’t physical. “He was right. I really thought I belonged, that I had a purpose. I would have died to protect humans. To help make the world safer.” I reach the door and place a hand on the bar. “But I wasn’t doing that, was I?”

“Sure you were. Every demon you’ve killed made the world a safer place.”

I look out the window. Like my mysterious friend said, there is no one there. I push the bar and leave the stairwell.

“Wait,” Amanda says, “where are you? You’re not on sub two. Shit.” The radio goes silent, and I hurry to the back of the building. The hangar is on the side of the building. It’s going to take Amanda time to get the guard there up here. Hopefully longer than it will take me to reach the exit.

I smell the cafeteria before I am close to it. Even when no one is working there, the scent of various foods emanates from there. I never enjoyed eating there; the abundance of smells felt cloying.

I turn the corner and see the emergency door, as well as the two guards there. I run for them, hoping the pain won’t take me down before I can incapacitate them. My arm throbs, and after a moment I realize it has its own pain.

The guards have handguns, and that’s what saves me; they have to pull them out of their holsters. I’m on them as they are about to take aim. I knock one out with an elbow, the other with a fist across the jaw. They end up in a heap on the floor. Both of them are women.

I push on the door, but it doesn’t bulge. I put my shoulder to it, but it resists me. With a cry

of frustration, I take a step back and kick it open, and I almost black out from the pain. Panting and staggering, I force myself outside.

I lean against the wall, taking in the cool night air, while I try to decide where to go. My incoherent thoughts are interrupted when a small white van turns the corner and screeches to stop before me. The sliding door opens, and a woman motions me to come in.

“Get in, we have to get you out of here.”

I stare at her for a moment, then who she is registers. “Juliette?”