

EVERY OTHER DAY

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EGMONT
USA
NEW YORK

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First published by Egmont USA, 2012
443 Park Avenue South, Suite 806
New York, NY 10016

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.egmontusa.com

www.jenniferlynnbarnes.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-60684-169-3

eBook ISBN: 978-1-60684-267-6

Printed in the United States of America

CPSIA tracking label information to come

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DEDICATION TO COME

I

The decision to make hellhounds an endangered species was beyond asinine, but I expected nothing less from a government that had bankrolled not one, but *two*, endowed chairs in preternatural biology (one of them my father's) at the University That Shall Not Be Named. The same government that thought you could train a hoard of zombies just as easily as Pavlov's dogs.

When I ring the bell, you will cease tearing the flesh from my bones.

Yeah, right.

I was fairly certain that the world would have been better off if the vast majority of it—and *all* politicians, scientists, and talk show hosts—had remained in the dark about hellhounds, zombies, and everything else that went bump in the night. Sadly, however, that ship had sailed about two hundred years before I was even born.

Thanks, Darwin. Thanks a lot.

Taking my ire out on the blade in my hand, I ran it roughly over the edge of my sharpening stone—diamond with a hint of steel.

Tomorrow, I'd probably see things differently. I might even feel bad for sending the poor, endangered pups to a bloody,

bloody death. But today wasn't tomorrow. It was today, and the power was thrumming through my veins, the need to hunt, to kill, to *win*, building up inside of me, all-consuming and impossible to deny.

I pressed my knife to the stone and leaned forward, waiting for the worst of it to pass. I liked to imagine that in the olden days, before "logic" and "reason" took over, I would have had a trainer to teach me how to keep my head above water, but these days, people didn't believe in meditation or magic or anything other than s-c-i-e-n-c-e.

They didn't even believe in me.

That meant that I was on my own with the hunt-lust. I was on my own in every way that mattered.

"Kali?"

My father always said my name with a question mark, like he couldn't remember for sure how to pronounce it and wouldn't have laid money on whether or not I was actually his. I would have just as soon not been.

"Down here," I called, sheathing my knife under the leg of my boot-cut jeans and pushing the stone back under the workbench, where it belonged.

"Oh, there you are."

My father had a tendency to make statements like that as if they were revelations to everyone in the near vicinity, the object of his reference included. If a tree fell in the woods, and Professor Armand D'Angelo wasn't around to hear it, it most definitely made no sound.

"Here I am," I confirmed. I managed to keep my tone even and cool, but it cost me, and the desire to make something bleed nearly brought me to my knees.

“Was there something you wanted?” I asked, knowing that he wouldn’t have sought me out if there wasn’t.

“There’s a faculty dinner tonight, a small get-together at Paul and Adelaide Davis’s. It would be nice if you would put in an appearance.”

Since my father was single and had been for years, he made a practice of using me as his “plus one.” Suffice it to say I wasn’t the kind of person who enjoyed being used. Still, hunt-lust aside, I wasn’t a monster, and I had a policy against being nasty when I didn’t have to be.

Even with him.

“I can’t make it,” I said, completely straight-faced. “There’s a study group, and it’s my turn to do the section outline.”

I’d never been to a study group in my life, and given my grades, my father had to have known that, but he just inclined his head slightly.

“I’ll pass along your regrets.”

This was our language: half-truths, obvious lies, accusations neither one of us would ever make. It was a system every bit as complicated as Morse code or the dancing of bees. Don’t ask, don’t tell, stay civil.

My burning need to hack some hellspawn to pieces surged anew.

Without another word, my father went back the way he came, and I was relegated to maybe-I-existed, maybe-I-didn’t status for another week.

Most of the time, it felt like my father and I were completely different species. Possibly literally, depending on the day and whether or not I actually qualified as human at the time.

“I’m out of here,” I said, more to prove that I *had* been there and that I *did* matter than to mark my exit. With a practiced motion, I popped the basement window open, pulled myself off the ground, and wormed my way through the tiny opening. The cool air hit my face first, and by the time my torso, legs, and feet had joined it, I’d already acclimated.

People like me didn’t get cold.

We never lost our balance.

We didn’t even have to eat.

That was, of course, assuming that there were others. Like me. Like my mother. And *that* was assuming—as I preferred to—that my condition was hereditary. Unfortunately, since good old mom had hit the road when I was three, I couldn’t exactly ask her if she’d ever had the urge to hunt the way I was hunting now.

I couldn’t ask her anything.

Pushing the fuzzy memory of her face—smiling, soft—out of my mind, I took off running, my feet pounding mercilessly and rhythmically into the pavement, again and again and again.

You have to find them. Hunt them. Kill them.

Kill them now.

The need pounded through my temples. It slithered its way through artery and vein, claiming the tips of my fingers, the small of my back.

Canus daemonae might have been the scientific classification for hellhounds, but the human body has over 60,000 miles of capillaries, and every one of mine was telling me that ‘hounds were just demons, plain and simple. And hunting demons was what I did.

Who I was.

The purpose for which I'd been born.

Besides which, I hadn't exactly made friends at my new high school (yet), so it wasn't like I had anywhere else to be on a Sunday night.

You're getting closer. You have to find them.

Find them now.

The world blurred around me as I ran. Speed was not and had never been a part of the Kali package, so if anyone saw me as I streaked past them, all they would have seen was a normal girl—not quite Indian, not quite white—running at a sprint. What spectators wouldn't realize was that I could have continued running at this pace indefinitely—or at least until the sun came up the next morning.

People like me didn't get tired. We didn't wear out. Once we got a lock on our prey, we just kept coming and coming.

“Here.” The word came out in a whisper, but I could see the way it rippled through the air. The closer I got to my quarry, the sharper my senses became.

I was very, very close.

Taking a deep breath, I slowed to a jog and then slipped effortlessly into an absolute standstill, appraising my surroundings. Grass in severe need of cutting. Broken bottles with edges nearly as jagged as my unnaturally sharp fingernails. Abandoned lots, like this one, were the perfect hunting ground for *Canus daemonae*. My instincts had directed me to the right place.

Now, I just had to wait for the monsters to show.

In lore, hellhounds tracked down the souls of the damned and dragged them back to hell in bloody shreds. In reality,

'hounds were attracted to rotting sores, flesh marinated in dirt and grime, and certain chemical substances that found their way into the human bloodstream from time to time. They preyed on the weak, the degenerate, the homeless.

The kind of people that others ignored and forgot. The kind who weren't missed when a government-protected species mowed them down. If the worst happened here tonight, there might be an article in the paper the next day. There might not. But either way, the rest of the world would just go on living, comfortable in the belief that it couldn't happen to them, certain that the government had the monsters under control.

That they were the kind of thing that we *could* control.

Not tonight.

My heart didn't race. My gaze never wavered. And as the fetid smell of rotting blood filled my nostrils, the unbearable pressure inside my veins fell away like a sand castle under the force of a wave. The entire world went still.

Perfect. Utter. Calm.

I crouched, reaching for my knife, feeling its weight, its balance, its edge. And then I lifted my eyes to stare directly into the blood-red irises of one beast after another as they emerged from the brush.

Three of them. *Endangered, my ass.*

The sound of the hellhound's growl, like a chain saw tearing through rusted metal, was the only warning I got before it leapt for my jugular. A human would have ducked. I leapt for *its* jugular.

Our bodies collided midair, and I buried my knife up to the hilt in one blood-red eye before my opponent's superior

mass and speed sent me flying backward, three hundred pounds of ugly on top of me. As my body slammed into the ground, I twisted my wrist and was rewarded with the sound of steel tearing through the hellhound's thick, sinewy flesh. From this angle, I couldn't get to the beast's heart, but I had bigger problems. Like, for example, the claws digging into my shoulders and the massive jaw that had unhinged itself like a snake's to aid and abet my prey in biting off my head.

Not so fast, Fido.

In a single, fluid motion, I jerked my dagger out of the monster's eye and thrust my other arm into its mouth. Razor-sharp teeth clamped down over the bait, cutting through the flesh of my forearm like butter and snapping the bone.

The crunching sound wasn't exactly pleasant, and the hellhound's breath was killer, but other than that, I wasn't really bothered. People like me?

We didn't feel pain.

My blood splattered everywhere, but messy eater or not, the hellhound managed to get some of my flesh in its mouth, and the moment my blood touched its tar-black tongue, the beast froze, paralyzed. I jerked what was left of my arm out of its mouth and managed to drag myself out from underneath its carcass as it fell.

Game. Set. Match.

My prey wasn't dead, not yet, but it would be soon. Even now, my blood was spreading through the hellhound's nervous system, a toxin every bit as lethal as a serpent's venom. I wasn't planning on waiting for the creature to die from the poison, though. It couldn't move. It couldn't fight back.

Might as well cut off its head.

But first, I had to deal with its friends, who I mentally christened Thing 2 and Thing 3. Having seen their buddy's demise, Things 2 and 3 must have known what I was (which, quite frankly, probably put them several steps up on me, since I had nothing more than a string of educated guesses). But even with the instinctual knowledge that they were about to see the ugly end of the Circle of Life, the 'hounds didn't turn tail and run.

They couldn't.

My blood smelled too, too good.

Since I wasn't keen on the idea of letting either of the remaining beasts take a nibble of Kali-bits, I pressed the flat of my knife against the already-closing wounds on my left arm, coating the blade with my blood.

There was more than one way to skin a cat/decapitate a hellhound.

With my good arm, I flung my blade at Thing 3 in a practiced motion that left it buried in my target's throat. Thing 2 was not amused. With a roar of fury that sent the smell of sulfur, already thick in the air, surging, the 'hound charged. Left with nothing but my own bloody fingertips, I let out a war cry of my own, raked my nails over its face, and fought like a girl.

Breaking the beast's thick, leathery skin wasn't by any stretch of the imagination easy, even with fingernails sharper than most blades, but I managed, because the imperative—*you have to fight, kill it, kill it now*—was that powerful, that insistent.

Flesh gave way under my nails, and my blood mingled with the beast's. The toxin was slower when injected, so

instead of freezing immediately, Thing 2 and Thing 3 both began stumbling, their limbs gummed down by invisible weights.

“Sit,” I said as they staggered and finally went down. “Roll over.”

And then I smiled. “Play dead.”

A quick glance at my watch (which I wore on the hand I *hadn't* fed to the hellhound) told me that I needed to hurry this along. I had three hours until my dad got home and another six before dawn—enough time to heal, but just barely.

“Knife,” I whispered. I felt a twinge, a *ping* in the back of my mind that told me exactly where my knife was, exactly how to retrieve it. Being what I was meant that I had a sixth sense for weapons—once I'd laid hands on a blade, a gun, a garrote, it was mine forever. I knew exactly how to use it. I could feel its presence like eyes staring straight at the back of my head.

I'd never lost a weapon, and I never would.

“Well,” I said, smiling at the blade as I tore it from Thing 3's throat, “let's get this show on the road.” The fact that I was talking to a knife probably said something revealing about my character and/or mental state, but the way I saw it, my weapon and I were in this together.

We had work to do.

Three decapitations later, my own blood wasn't the only decoration on my body. Hellhound bits had splattered everywhere, coating me in gore. Another outfit, down the drain.

Story of my life.

Glancing around to make sure I hadn't been seen, I stripped down to my sports bra and jeans and rolled the

bloody shirt into a small ball. It was dark enough out that stains on denim wouldn't be visible from afar, and I had no intention of letting anyone close enough to me to notice that I'd been Up to No Good.

Luckily, people like me?

We're surprisingly good at fading into the background.