

## The Hoarder

By Kelly Meding

Killing was easy if you had the stomach for it. Killing quickly and efficiently, with only minor cleanup required, took effort and training. Judging by the sixteen countable pieces of goblin strewn around the row home's dilapidated living room, as well as the congealing puddle of fuchsia blood and effluvia, the effort had not been made and training had gone sorely to waste. The Rookie was trouble, she thought. Trouble, plain and simple.

Ash Bedford surveyed the gruesome scene, clucking her tongue against the roof of her mouth as she contemplated the mess. Goblins were small, never taller than five feet and always gangly-thin, making their bodies somewhat simple to dispose of—as long as they remained intact. But if Ash hadn't been certain of their destroyer, she'd have thought several wild dogs had done the damage.

Triad Rookie. Wild dog. She was beginning to lose sight of the difference between the two.

Evangeline Stone had been assigned to their Triad almost two months ago, and she had yet to earn any title other than Rookie. She continued to fight with her heart and her anger instead of her brain, and it was going to get her killed. In the four years she'd Hunted, Ash had seen it happen time and again in other Triads—hot-headed Rookies who succumbed to their own stupidity and lack of self-control.

Ash had just lost a friend of many years. He'd been reliable and steadfast and impossible to replace. She had no interest in attaching herself to a tempestuous blond

waif who had yet to master the finer points of Dreg execution. The trio of goblins had been Stone's first solo assignment. She'd killed them, yes, but Ash still considered it a botched job.

"What the fuck do you mean, I botched it?" Stone asked the moment Ash voiced her thoughts. Ash was not intimidated by the younger, taller girl's snarled query.

"They're dead, aren't they?"

"They're also in pieces," Ash replied, perfectly calm. It took more than cussing and posturing to raise her pique, and she didn't think Stone was up to the task. Too many years of playing doormat to her step-mother's abuse had taught her that steady resolve trumped in-your-face aggression. "Sixteen pieces to be—no, wait." She spotted a detached hand, clawed fingers fisted tight, peeking out from behind an overturned recliner that had seen better days a few decades ago. "Seventeen pieces, not to mention the massive quantities of blood and entrails."

"No one lives in this dump."

"That's hardly the point."

Stone puffed air through clenched teeth. "Then what is the point?"

"We gotta burn it, that's the point," Jesse Morales said. He stepped out of the hall doorway where he'd lurked since they came inside, allowing Ash, as Team Senior, to critique their junior partner's work. Though only twenty, Jesse was built like a professional linebacker and dwarfed both women with his bulk; he was also the reason for the term "gentle giant," as kind and cuddly as he was deadly. With his preferred weapon of a double-bladed ax, Ash had once called him Mexico's Paul Bunyan.

He then called her Babe the Korean Ox, and that was the end of that bit of banter.

"Burn it?" Stone repeated. Her cold blue gaze shifted between them, as though waiting for one of them to crack and reveal the punch line. "No one lives here. Why burn it?"

Ash heaved a deliberately heavy sigh, then said, "Because we can't put the pieces outside in Hefty bags, and the sheer volume of bleach it would take to disguise all this blood would be enough to ignite if someone so much as lit a match on the front stoop."

Stone bit down hard on her lower lip, eyebrows scrunching together. Some of the flush and euphoria of the fight had gone out of her, and the consequences of her rampage were sinking in. She eyed the pile of body parts, then the bloody, serrated knife still clenched in her right hand. When she met Ash's gaze, uncertainty had taken root. "What about the people who live next door? The whole block could go up, these houses are so old."

"It's possible, yes." Ash was proud of the nonchalance in her tone. She hated what had to happen, but Stone needed to learn. Sometimes, given her brash and hasty nature, Ash wondered how the teenager had ever managed to leave Triad Boot Camp. Half of the recruited teens who went in came never back out—except as cremated ash.

Stone turned her attention to Jesse, as though he would offer her an alternative reply. They got along well, often joking with each other as freely as he and Ash did. Stone may have seen in him an ally in the conversation. To his credit, Jesse remained silent, arms folded across his broad chest. Unable to play father off mother, Stone returned to glaring at Ash.

"So this is what we do now?" Stone's voice fluctuated unsteadily between a furious snarl and a dejected whine. "Burn down a city block and hope no one gets hurt or homeless in the process?"

Ash put everything she had into her bellowed reply: "No!" Her target flinched, but Ash didn't relent. "No, what we do is protect this city's innocents from the Dregs. Not just from being attacked by them, but from finding out they exist at all. It's Boot Camp 101, Stone, you know all of this. And we do it by cleaning up our messes. It might be fun for you to carve up a goblin like he's going into a stir fry, but someone still has to make it all disappear. No one else can see this!" She waved her hand over the gore that was growing more odorous as it congealed, increasing the nauseating stink of seawater permeating the small room.

The goblins were only strewn around the living room—a small favor. They could start the blaze there and hope the fire department was dispatched before it spread backward into the grimy, peeling-tiled kitchen, upstairs to the sagging-floored bedrooms, or to one of the equally decrepit homes on each side.

Evangeline broke the stare-off first, letting her gaze drop to the floor. Tension still kept her body rigid, but it was no longer the stance of a cornered predator. Rather, she stood stiff, thrumming with...shame? Regret? She fought a silent battle with herself, and Ash could only imagine the internal dialogue—and she imagined it was as laced with profanity as the girl's daily speech.

"I lost control," Stone said to the mess on the floor. "I knew I was losing it, and I should have reigned it in, but it..."

"But it what?" Jesse asked after she struggled with her words for several seconds. His tone was gentle, curious, undemanding.

She looked up, but it was Ash's eyes she stared into as she answered: "But it felt good to lose it like that. To punish them."

"That's not our job," Ash said. She was stunned and pleased by the open admission. Maybe the blond hellcat could be saved, after all. "We deliver justice to

Dregs, and when our own bloodlust gets in the way of doing our job, when punishment becomes more than a task to accomplish, we start losing ourselves. If we lose ourselves to the darkest side of this job, we become no better than the monsters we execute." She paused, allowing the words time to sink in. It was a speech their team Handler would have been proud of, she thought. "Understand?"

"I understand, I just—" Stone cleared her throat—"I just don't think about that when I'm killing. It's like all the shit I learned about just flies out of my brain, and all I want to do is hurt them."

"Why?"

Stone blinked. "Because they're Dregs. Goblins are nothing but mindless—"

"Not that. I know why we hunt and execute Dregs. But why do you want to hurt them? You, Stone?"

Every Hunter had a story, and most followed a familiar pattern—unloving household growing up, abused by a parent or guardian, runaway, juvenile corrections, and a choice that came down to Boot Camp or adult jail. Ash never asked for another Hunter's story. Sometimes it came up in conversation, over the course of working with them on the Triad. She knew Jesse's because he got very, very chatty after six shots of tequila. He never asked for quid pro quo; she wasn't certain she'd have told him the truth or the lie.

After all, the lie—a father who was a professional martial artist and a free-spirited mother who married a Korean man against her family's wishes, both dead in a tragic car accident when Ash was only twelve—was so much more interesting.

What little Ash knew about Stone came from their Handler, Wyatt Truman. He knew Stone's full story—it was his job to know. She would not have been assigned to their Triad if the trainers at Boot Camp hadn't thought her a good fit with Jesse and Ash.

Trial and error had long ago taught them to compliment existing team members with Rookies. Ash had been around long enough to have seen a dozen Rookies killed within six months of leaving Boot Camp because they just didn't mesh with their partners. Temperament was important.

Stone could mesh if Ash and Jesse made the effort. It wasn't Stone's fault that their partner, Cole Randall, had been captured and incinerated two months ago, perpetrators unknown.

"I did four years in juvenile detention," Stone said after a pregnant pause. "Asshole in charge had his favorites for punishment and I made his shit list my first month. Every time I kill a Dreg, I'm getting back for all the times I got hit and couldn't stop it. I gotta kill them first, because I won't let anyone hurt me like that again."

Ash nodded, understanding. Jesse had stepped a little deeper into the room, and his biceps flexed, as if constantly stopping from unfolding themselves and wrapping Stone into a bear hug. He reigned in the desire to comfort and protect, and Ash gave him a grateful smile.

"We're Hunters, Stone," Ash said. "We serve warrants and do what we're told. This is a job, not a means to revenge, no matter how much we all would like it to be. If you can't control yourself, you're of no use to this Triad. Vengeance leads to carelessness, which leads to one of us getting killed."

"Fuck." If an expletive could stand in for "I'm sorry," then it was the acknowledging apology Ash hoped for. She'd gotten through.

Jesse disappeared into the attached kitchen. Bottles rattled, a cupboard door slammed, then he was back with an ancient bottle of paint stripper. He poured it over the pile of body parts until empty, then wiped the bottle on his pants before dropping it into the mess. Wily and fierce fighters, goblins still had fragile bodies that decomposed

quickly. The fire should turn their remains to useless ash, but they couldn't risk leaving fingerprints on the melted plastic bottle.

Ash fished a lighter out of her jeans pocket, fingertips brushing the nearly empty package of cigarettes. Only one smoked in three days—soon the pack would be nothing more than a security blanket, but she imagined the lighter would always stay nearby. Cole had given it to her last year for Christmas. It was a silver Zippo with an image of her favorite katana engraved on one side, and one of the few items in her life to which she attached sentimental value.

But before she could flip open the lighter and start the fire, her cell phone rang. She checked the display: Truman. Frowning, she flipped it open. "Bedford."

"Situation resolved?" Wyatt Truman asked. The barked question told her this wasn't a "how did it go?" kind of call. He just wanted to know if the goblins were dead.

"Yes, targets are neutralized." She would give a full report later.

"Injuries?"

"No."

"Good, I have a new assignment for you." He rattled off the address and the few details he had on their target. Ash repeated it word-for-word, committing it to memory and for her partners' benefits. It sounded relatively straightforward.

"Got it," Ash said when he finished. "I'll call you when the job is complete."

"Eyes wide open."

"Always."

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The stink of igniting paint stripper and searing goblin flesh stayed with Ash during the drive across town. Their new target lived in a trailer half a mile east of Mercy's Lot, near the city freeway loop, in one of the poorest sections of the city. Single- and

double-wides dotted several blocks in a landscape of poverty and despair. Few Dregs came out this far, preferring the closely-packed bodies of the city. Ash was a little surprised anyone cared enough to bother reporting the strange smells and noises coming from Mrs. Bettina Kearney's trailer at night.

She was less surprised that a patrol car had gotten no answer to their knocks on the door earlier in the day, and had left without bothering to search the place. The Triads had several people in the Metro Police Department who filtered information to the right places and kept the real police oblivious to Triad activities.

Kearney's trailer stood on a small plot of grassless land, surrounded by other, equally old trailers. Lawn flamingos and wire fencing screamed of earlier eras, and few of the nearby homes had been updated in the last thirty years. Rust spots, moss and mildew, dents and faded paint was the norm, as were untended flower gardens, broken lawn furniture, and tire-less cars parked in weedy parking spaces.

Jesse parked their SUV behind a Volvo that desperately needed to be washed of its accumulated bird droppings. Grass stood overgrown around all four wheels. It was still early, only about three a.m., and the homes around them were silent and dark. Kearney's trailer had an addition built onto the rear, giving it the shape of an elongated L.

"Stone and Jesse, go around to the back door," Ash said. "I'll go in the front. If she's a half-Blood, like Wyatt said, don't hesitate."

She received two nods. Everyone tumbled out of the vehicle, weapons ready—Jesse and his ax, Stone and her knives. Ash unsheathed Hex, her katana, and gave the blade a loving smile. More than forty Halfies had seen their cursed lives ended by Hex.

Contrary to popular myth, vampires were not human, and had never been human. They were a species that consumed raw sustenance, not unlike most predatory carnivores, and they had learned long ago to not feed on humans—or if they did, to not leave the



human alive. Vampire saliva possessed a highly-infectious parasite that attacked human physiology, changing their bodies and affecting their minds. Many went insane. Others adapted and, in turn, continued to hunt and infect humans.

Mrs. Bettina Kearney had apparently adapted.

They had no guarantee that Kearney was home, but she would be. Halfies often nested in a familiar, safe place, and their information said she was a widow who lived alone. Ash slipped across the yard to the front door, silent as a shadow, stealth her friend. The vaguest scent of rot met her on the stoop.

She studied the metal door. The small, central window was covered with duct tape from the inside. A quick glance at the windows on both sides of the door showed the same thing. The tape both protected the interior from direct sunlight and sealed the odor inside. Mostly. Kearney had been a Halfie long enough to reinforce her nest, which matched up with one neighbor's statement of having not seen her leave the trailer in two weeks.

Not that she was a social butterfly beforehand, according to the neighbor. After her husband's heart attack five years ago, she'd become something of a recluse. How she'd ever stumbled onto a Halfie in order to get bitten was a mystery.

Ash's phone vibrated; Jesse and Stone were in position. She sent a nonsense text back so his phone vibrated as well, then she was ready to go inside.

She tested the knob. It turned easily without squealing, and she pushed. Inch by inch, checking for a chain that she didn't see. The hinges squeaked. A rush of hot, humid, foul-smelling air stung her nose and made her stomach slosh. It was the smell of rotting things. She paused to listen and heard nothing.

Strike that—she heard the faint scrape of metal on metal. A moment later, she identified it as a sliding glass door, probably the rear door Jesse had been told to enter

through. Ash shouldered the door open, preparing to lunge inside katana-first. The door had other ideas.

It bounced off something behind it and slammed against Ash's left arm. The knob banged into her ribs and nearly knocked her backward. Breathing carefully through her mouth, she pushed the door again. Slowly this time, until it stopped moving again, barely halfway open. Lack of interior light meant her eyes took longer to catch what was blocking the door.

"Blessed father," she whispered.

"Holy shit," came an answering hiss from Stone's direction.

Ash eased past the door and into what she assumed had once been a living room. Shadows blanketed the narrow space, only adding to the sense of closeness and oppression. Produce boxes, plastic bins, shopping bags, baskets, and every other imaginable container created several walls of...stuff. Ash couldn't catalogue everything she saw in the dim light. Books, water bottles, ribbon spools, copy paper, stuffed animals, empty baby food jars, shoes, blankets, a record player, fake flowers—too much.

It looked like a storage unit, not a home. A narrow path cut through the floor-to-ceiling mess, forward a few feet, then branched left and right. Her nose told her the kitchen was somewhere on the right—rotten food and rancid grease were unmistakable—which meant the back door and bedrooms were left. Ash pulled a penlight out of her pocket and flashed the beam down the left corridor.

Jesse held his hand up, covering his eyes from the glare. He was half-hidden by another wall of trash, which continued down the length of what had to be the hallway. Ash pointed with two fingers. Jesse nodded. He and Stone would search the back end of the house, while she went the other way.

Light flared behind her as one of them produced a penlight to share. Ash crept forward, trying to ignore the press of the hoarded items filling Mrs. Kearney's trailer. The hopeless desperation of it made Ash's heart ache. She shoved away the flash of empathy. She couldn't afford to sympathize with the woman who'd lived here. That woman was dead, and a half-Blood remained in her shell. And that half-Blood needed to be neutralized.

The closer Ash got to what she assumed was the kitchen, the heavier the air became. The sweetness of rotting meat collided with the tang of liquefied produce and the nauseating reek of curdled dairy. She didn't want to see what those eye-watering smells were actually attached to and was grateful for the narrow beam of the penlight. Here and there hung an over-burdened curl of flypaper, black with insects drawn by the stink.

Her corridor ended at what appeared to be a table and chairs—all overrun with paper shopping bags of what had once been groceries. The black tops of what had possibly once been bananas peeked out of one, and another had darkened all around the bottom from an oozed liquid. A sack of potatoes had begun to sprout in the middle of it all—the only truly identifiable item in the forest of mold and rot.

The available counter space was overrun with boxed items—pasta, cereal, instant rice, burger helper kits—and canned goods. Some of the cans deepest in the pile seemed swollen, and a few had leaked something brown onto the mottled tile beneath. The refrigerator and sink were partially visible, the latter overfilled with dirty dishes and caked-on scraps of food. The refrigerator door was ajar, and cool air wafted out around Ash's ankles. She left it alone, no desire to see what was currently spoiling in there. She'd seen quite enough.

Perhaps Kearney had planned to eat some of it eventually, but the kitchen had obviously remained untouched since she'd been infected.

A high-pitched yelp of fright—Stone, from the sound of it—was cut short by Jesse's terse, "Ash!"

She spun gracefully on her heel and charged back down the narrow path, her katana at the ready. Jesse and Stone were blocking the hall halfway down, facing an open doorway. Stone was bent double, one hand over her mouth. Jesse was wide-eyed and slack-jawed, staring into the room they'd discovered. Ash smelled it before she eased past Jesse and could see.

The room was no larger than a prison cell, but a more apt description—had the temperature of the room been any lower than a sweaty eighty-something—would have been a meat locker. At the thought, bile rose into Ash's throat.

At least ten bodies had been tossed haphazardly into the small space. A few were stacked on a stained and sagging twin bed, but most took up floor space like abandoned logs. Limbs and torsos were twisted, and flesh had turned varying shades of gray and green. Jagged, mouth-sized wounds dotted body parts—necks, arms, shoulders, legs, all random choices for feeding—the exposed flesh long ago black with rot and age.

The human corpses weren't the only things decomposing in the stuffy bedroom. An inappropriate joke about every missing pet poster in the county came to mind, but Ash could not jumpstart her brain. Speaking was beyond her abilities. Dogs and cats, birds, even a few squirrels and a raccoon, littered the space not taken up by the other bodies. They didn't appear to have been fed upon.

Ash's eyes watered. With the immediate shock wearing off, the noxious odors of the room had crept into her nose, her skin, every inch of her body, and started choking her from the inside out. She'd never smelled anything like it. She'd never *seen* anything like it.

"This is insane."

She jumped at the sound of Jesse's voice, so unexpected after the extended silence. As much as she wanted to slam the accordion door shut and never see the sight again, she couldn't stop looking. Something was off—besides the obvious—and she couldn't figure out... Wait.

Ash stepped into the room, grimacing as the carpet squished beneath her boot. Three bodies were stacked on the bed, with the rest of the people and animals strewn around the floor and what may have been a small dresser. She shined her penlight at the top body. The skin was stretched tight over bone, the flesh beneath almost nonexistent. The two bodies beneath it had the same frail, dried-out appearance, so unlike the fleshy, rotting corpses around them. They were also the only corpses tied up in lengths of chain and nylon rope.

Her light flashed across an open, screaming mouth, and she understood. "Kearney hoarded her food," Ash said. "Just like she hoarded everything else."

Jesse made an indeterminate noise, and she turned to the door. He hadn't moved from the doorway, and his expression was cold, determined. Behind him, Stone had straightened and thrown her shoulders back. Disgust and anger schooled her pale face into a venomous scowl.

"She even hoarded her own mistakes," Ash continued, jacking her thumb at the bodies on the bed. "She made three Halfies, probably before she realized she had to drain them dead or they'd turn."

"So she killed them and kept them?" Jesse asked, astonished.

"Or let them starve to death." She couldn't stop the shudder that tore down her spine. "Four years and I've never seen anything like this."

"Doesn't make sense," Stone said. Her voice was high-pitched, yet barely above a whisper. "Even Halfies don't drink from the dead. Why the fuck would she keep the bodies here?"

"Because she's a hoarder, or hadn't you noticed the signs?" Ash replied. Stone shrugged her shoulders and shook her head in a gesture Ash had learned meant Stone didn't have a clue what she was talking about. "Hoarding is...well, not really a disease, but it's like a mental illness. She's hoarded stuff for a long time. I saw the kitchen. Nothing in there is newer than several weeks before she was turned, I'll bet money on it. But hoarding food is instinctual for her, even more so as a Halfie."

"She drinks blood now, so she kills people and hoards their blood," Stone finished.

"Yeah."

"That's twisted."

"Yeah."

Jesse checked his wristwatch. "We've about ninety minutes until sunrise, so if Kearney's coming home, it's soon."

"It's too close quarters to try and kill her inside," Ash said, working through the logistics of the fight in her mind. No real maneuvering room existed in the narrow, box-lined halls. All it took was one bite and a bit of saliva to kill one of them. "Jesse, go move our vehicle two trailers down. Stone and I will take positions in shrubs around this trailer. Unless Kearney has a second car, she's probably on foot—"

It was soft, barely noticeable, but Ash heard the squeal of a hinge from the direction of the living room. All three Hunters froze. Then a rasping hiss from behind her sent goose flesh rippling across Ash's neck and shoulders. She didn't want to look, but she did.

The Halfie on top of the pile drew papery, cracked lips back from blackened gums, showing off its barely-developed fangs. The thing hissed, a reedy sound like a breeze across dried leaves. Its eyelids were open and murky white orbs tried to see and couldn't. The starved-nearly-to-death half-Blood woman was a nightmare Ash would see for a long time to come.

And it knew its maker was home.

"Go," Ash barked at her partners, not even bothering to whisper. Kearney knew someone was in her house. Silence was a waste of energy.

Footsteps pounded down the narrow hall, away. Ash angled her body and raised her katana, bracing the grip with both hands. With practiced precision, she sliced in a downward arc, chopping off the rotting woman's head in a single, clean stroke. It rolled off the mattress and hit the soggy carpet with a splat. She lopped the heads off the other two corpses for good measure, then raced after her teammates.

The stink of the house clung to her even as she burst into the yard. It was dark, difficult to see, but not impossible. Five distinct shadows told her something else that shouldn't have surprised her, but did—Kearney wasn't alone.

A pair of teenaged girls had Jesse cornered near the side of the trailer. His ax lay on the ground just out of reach, and he stood in a half-crouch, sizing up his opponents. They were thin and bony, one dark-skinned and the other light. Yin and Yang, Ash thought with a mental snort. Five-foot-five was generous in estimation of height, but size meant little when dealing with newly infected half-Bloods—which she guessed from the still-fresh wounds in their necks—because they were controlled by bloodlust. Many fell into it and went insane. Some learned to control it, as Kearney apparently had.

These girls wouldn't get the chance.

Ash lunged off the stoop, intending to introduce the nearest Halfie to Hex's blade. Then Stone cried out, and Ash altered course instinctively. Kearney had tossed the smaller blonde against the windshield of the bird waste-covered car, cracking the glass and denting the hood. Stone flopped on her back, stunned. Kearney charged. Ash dropped her shoulder and rammed into the half-Blood's gut.

Kearney wasn't a small woman. Nearly as tall as Jesse and bulky without being obese; it was like tackling a rooted tree. Ash didn't bounce off, but Kearney went down slower than expected. Clawed fingernails dug into Ash's shoulders, shredding fabric and breaking skin. Ash didn't have the momentum she was expecting in order to turn the tackle into a roll, and she landed somewhat awkwardly on top of Kearney. The angle put Hex flush against the ground, at an impossible angle.

Kearney's grip on her shoulders tightened, digging in, drawing blood. She dragged Ash up, bringing Ash's neck too close to fangs for her comfort. She drove her forehead into Kearney's nose, snapping cartilage and drawing blood of her own. Kearney snarled without loosening her grip. She'd apparently set her sights on Ash as her next hoarded snack.

Hoping the skin on her back forgave her, Ash braced her hands on the ground, dug her knees into Kearney's soft belly and pushed. She ignored the pain as flesh ripped, more concerned with getting out of the Halfies' personal space—close-quarter combat with a half-Blood was a good way to get infected. Kearney came up with her. Ash tried another head-butt that left her forehead stinging. Kearney let go.

Ash dove sideways, tucking into a roll, and came up on her knees a few feet away. Adrenaline numbed the wounds that were sending hot blood tricking down her back. Kearney scrambled to her feet, only to land on her ass from a high-kick to the chin, courtesy of Stone.



Jesse came sailing over their heads—how those two teenage Halfies found the strength or shot-put expertise to literally throw him into the air like that, Ash would never know—only to land in almost exactly the same spot on the old car Stone had occupied moments ago. A tire popped and more glass shattered in a side window. He didn't get up, and Ash's heart tripped.

A body slammed into Ash and sent them both sprawling into the grass. She kept rolling, only to get tackled by Yang. Ash twisted hard and slammed her elbow into an ear. The girl shrieked. Her grip loosened. Ash wriggled away, spotted the shadow about to descend, and lashed her foot out. Yin caught it in the throat and stumbled backward.

In the periphery of her vision, Ash spotted Stone and Kearney engaging in an awkward dance. Kearney lunged with a punch, which Stone easily dodged, only to land one of her own. But Kearney was larger, with a Halfie's higher tolerance to pain. Stone was skinny as a sheet of paper and fast as a bantam-weight boxer. All things considered, it was a matched pairing.

Hex still lay in the grass, undisturbed. As much as Ash craved the comfort of her favorite weapon, she was too far away. She plucked a small, curved-blade knife from its ankle sheath, turning it so that the blade rested down, against her forearm. She had to get to Jesse and make sure he was okay, but she had mismatched obstacles in her path.

Yin and Yang rose up together, their trendy clothes stained with blood and dirt, lipsticked mouths curled back over barely-there fangs. Ash stood, drawing up to her full five-foot-two, and fixed the teens with her best "come and get me" grin.

Yin took the bait first, a dark blur in the early morning's darkness. Ash twisted into the tackle, her right arm arcing sideways. She drew the blade across Yin's throat and felt a splash of warmth against her arm. Yang didn't wait for her pal to fall, or give Ash a

chance to change angles. All three of them hit the ground in a tangle of snapping teeth, slicing blade, and clawing nails. Yin's blood slicked Ash's hand and she lost her grip on the knife. It tumbled away.

Yang tried to bite her and got a mouthful of hair. Inspired, Ash grabbed a hank of dark-blond hair and pulled hard. She despised dirty fighting, but held back nothing if it meant living; dying with honor still meant you were dead. Yang shrieked like a high school princess, her bloodlust momentarily forgotten in favor of saving her hair from being removed by the roots.

A blond blur crashed into them. Yang toppled sideways. Someone's foot connected with Ash's jaw in a glancing blow. Positive Stone had just been used as a projectile weapon, Ash lunged across the scraggly lawn. Hex gleamed in the pale light. Ash's hands closed around the katana's custom hilt just as a shadow fell over her.

She ducked Kearney's kick, swinging upward with Hex in the same moment. The katana caught the underside of Kearney's meaty thigh and sliced through to the bone. Kearney screeched and yanked away, tangling over her own ankles to slam back to the ground. Ash didn't wait. She hacked away, good sense and training screaming at her to stop, to consider her position, to go straight for the kill shot.

It wasn't just adrenaline from the fight or worry for the still-immobile Jesse—they were not new things—that had her killing on instinct. It was a gut-deep revulsion for the monster beneath her, wearing the likeness of a human woman, who'd stored dead bodies in a backroom like a squirrel stores nuts for the winter. It was the smell of death and decomposition that had stained her inside and out.

Kearney had long ago stopped moving, and Ash finally froze, Hex poised for another strike. Blood dripped from the katana in a steady plink-plink. Her former target was...unrecognizable. Ash stared, mesmerized by the gore at her feet.

"Little help?" Stone shouted.

Ash turned. Her junior partner was on her back, grappling for control of a serrated knife with Yang. Ash was on them in moments, a single slice of her katana lopping off Yang's head in a gout of blood. She kicked the body so it landed sideways, instead of on top of Stone, who was soaked in blood.

"You bitten?" Ash asked. Her voice sounded hoarse, as if she'd spent the last half-hour screaming. Or perhaps it was her ears, still muffled by the heavy thwap of Hex cleaving into Kearney. She didn't know.

"No, you?" Stone replied.

"No."

Small favors for both of them. They'd live to fight another day.

Ash bolted across the lawn to where Jesse lay on the car hood. His pulse pattered steadily beneath her fingertips, and she exhaled a sharp breath. She explored gently and found a kiwi-sized knot on the back of his head, and no apparent Halfie bites.

"Who gets to tell him he got beat up by two little girls?" Stone asked.

"Be my guest," Ash replied. "He'll be pissed enough that he missed the end of the fight, so make sure you rub it in hard."

"He's a big boy, he can take it."

Crickets sang distantly in the ensuing few minutes of silence. Somehow, the neighbors had slept through the ruckus—or if they hadn't, they weren't making themselves known. She didn't blame them. Ash watched Jesse's face, as though she could revive him through sheer will alone. Concentrating on him meant not facing her own screw up, soaking into the ground behind her.

Stone remained silent longer than Ash expected, and then said, "Shouldn't we call Truman and tell him the target is neutralized?"

"Yeah." Ash placed Hex on the hood near Jesse's feet, then reached for her phone. Fingers closed around the slick plastic, but she didn't pull. "Aren't you going to say it?"

"Say what?" The question wasn't sarcastic or feigned. It was genuine.

"That I'm a hypocrite."

"A hippo-what?"

Ash gave the younger girl an assessing stare, unsure if she was being made fun of or if Stone was serious.

Stone, for her part, just looked frustrated. "Look, the schools at Juvie sucked ass, and I failed as many classes as I tried to take. Throw me a fucking bone here."

"Hypocrite," Ash said. "Someone who contradicts themselves? Do as I say, not as I do?"

"Okay, but what does that have to do with you?"

Ash stared, feeling a bit like the punch line in a practical joke setup. She waved her hand over her shoulder. "That, right there, Evy. I crawled up your ass earlier tonight about those goblins, and then I go and take this target apart piece by piece. I lost it."

A flicker of understanding brightened Stone's blue eyes. "Okay, so you lost it. Doesn't make you a hypochondriac."

"Hypocrite."

"Whatever. It doesn't make you a hypocrite, Ash, it makes you one of us. Makes you a fucking human being."

Ash blushed. Was that the impression Stone had of her? A cold, inhuman robot who spouted off Triad codes and rules and didn't feel? Ash acknowledged her humanity every time she killed a goblin or Halfie, every time she risked her life to protect the innocents of the city. And why did she care what Stone thought of her? She didn't.

Except she did.

"And 'crawled up my ass'?" Stone said, her lips quirking. "You've been hanging around me too long. Your language skills are devolving."

Ash smiled. "You know devolving, but you don't know hypocrite?"

Stone shrugged. "Like I said, I sucked at school. But I learned a lot at Boot Camp, including devolving, atrophied, exsanguinations, and anthropomorphic."

"At least you paid attention to something."

"Just not the self-control part, right?" she asked, with a hint of challenge.

Ash glanced over her shoulder, catching an eyeful of the kibbled remains of Mrs. Bettina Kearney, and shook her head. Training was one thing, and rah-rah speeches were another, but neither of them amounted to the quick learning done in the field. The kind of learning that graduated them from Rookie to Triad Hunter. After four years of Hunting, Ash had been separated from her anger for so long, she hadn't understood Stone's when it got the better of her and she julienned those goblins.

"No, self-control in the field is something I think you figure out for yourself," Ash said. "And I think it's something we're both still learning."

"People get pissed and they lose their minds for a little bit. But that's why we work as Triads, right? So there's always someone who's got our back and can tell us when we've fucked up."

Ash blinked. "Exactly." Who was this intelligent young woman disguised as her trigger-tempered, hellcat partner? And would she stay around a while? She had the makings of a damned fine Hunter.

As she fished her cell phone out of her pocket, Ash wondered what Evy Stone would think of being tutored—enough to get her GED, or at least to be able to hold a

passable adult conversation without resorting to profanity as a defense mechanism. She made a mental note to bring it up.

Later. Maybe when she had Jesse to act as a human shield, just in case Stone actively disliked the idea. She smiled at the thought, then auto-dialed their Handler to report another threat successfully neutralized.



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