

## Chapter 1

Hunter Stephanie Dawn's fight with the Diathelon demon in Seattle took more than six days. In fact, there had been five of them and twenty days later, she was still pursuing the last. It wasn't the kind of demon that you walked away from. It reproduced asexually and if she left one alive – there would be fifty more in a year. The first two were slow and stupid, so she had avoided their five-inch claws and six-foot tails with spikes and lopped off their three heads with the eighteen-inch blade she kept strapped to her left thigh. The third and fourth went underground and Stephanie tracked them from Seattle to Bend, Oregon. There she cornered them and using a special shield Jack Stanton developed, avoided the poison they spit at her and blasted them with the Glock she kept slid into the back waistband of her blue jeans.

In 2020, Jack Stanton had been one of the original scientists present when Eric Gate had theorized a new energy source and built a machine to harness it. When he threw the switch on his device, his theory proved correct but it also caused a circular portal between two dimensions. Those attending the event—five presidents, three prime ministers, a czar, four sheiks, several scientists and techs and an assortment of soldiers—were sucked into the void, and interdimensional life forms, now commonly called demons, escaped into ours. Jack had been thrown into the alternative dimension, a place called Lartheria, where he had met Stephanie's parents. When their world was attacked and her parents killed, he had escaped through the portal back to this dimension, bringing her with him. Thinking about Jack confused her. On one hand, he had lied for twenty-five years about her heritage. She wasn't genetically engineered by Jack's company, the Hunter Program, to fight demons – she was from Lartheria. But on the other hand, he was the closest thing she had to a father. All of her earliest memories were of Jack – from her first step to the day she, bare-handedly, conquered the hundred-foot climbing wall in the Hunters Compound gym. And now, she was out doing her job – locating and eliminating demons.

The fifth demon in the pack turned out to be the alpha creature and was smart as hell. He let her chase the other two away and Stephanie figured he would double back to settle in Seattle. The damp cool temperature of Washington was perfect for Diathelon egg gestation.

It was late in the afternoon and she still hadn't seen the sun today. Had she even seen it in the last week? Stephanie wondered. She could feel her energy level draining away with each hour and knew couldn't live permanently in this climate. Jack finally shared with her that she needed

the sunlight for energy so she carried an ultraviolet light. But since she had been on the road the last two days, she hadn't used it.

They gave her a Hummer when she arrived in the city, but she found it too ostentatious and impossible to maneuver in some of the narrower residential streets. Two days after arriving she returned the tank and picked up a Ducati. It was a beautiful red bike, a few shades darker than her short cropped hair. Not as fast as her jetcycle at home, but it handled the corners easily and would do 0-60 in less than three seconds. She had maxed out its speed of 180 mph chasing the two demons to Bend.

Her phone rang, so she slowed and pulled toward the side of the road. All the modern technology of 2063 and they still hadn't developed a Bluetooth device that could be used while driving a motorcycle over a hundred miles an hour.

When she glanced down and saw the display, her stomach tumbled like butterflies taking flight and the pull she felt to him intensified. Stephanie drove the bike further off the road, sat on the ground and leaned against the bike.

"Hello, Todd," she said.

"Hey, Stephanie," Todd replied. "How's the demon hunting going?"

"Four down, one to go. I am searching for the last one as I make my way back to Seattle," she told him.

"Where'd you find the two you were chasing?"

"Just outside of Bend."

"You still think the last one has gone all the way back to Seattle?" Inspector Todd Rainer frowned, leaned back in his desk chair and put his feet up on his desk. The six days she told him it would take to eliminate the Diathelon demons had stretched to twenty and he wanted her home. They had unfinished business, like dinner, a movie – and a few more intimate niceties.

"Oh yeah, the Seattle climate is perfect for the Diathelons – cool, overcast, and lots of rain."

"Not your favorite kind of weather." Todd knew that Stephanie drew energy from the sun and going without it for so many days would be tiring. He doubted she'd admit it, but he asked anyway, "How's your energy level?"

"I'm doing great," Stephanie said.

Todd smiled. His girl was true to form.

"Yeah, Jack's shield worked really well. The poison couldn't penetrate the metal."

Todd shivered. Demons that spit poison – that was new to him. As an inspector in San Francisco, he'd only dealt with a couple of lizard types.

“I was able to get close enough to shoot them with my Glock,” Stephanie continued her story. “Although I could have used my sword since Diathelons that young have thin skin. But since I was out in the open I just double-shot each of their heads so I could get back on the road and after the last one.”

“Why didn't you use your multi-blaster? Wouldn't that have been easier?” Todd remembered the kick and the firepower of the weapon he had used when Stephanie had been kidnapped by the lunatic from her own dimension. It was an efficient weapon against the demons and she wouldn't need to get as close to the damn things as with her smaller weapons.

“Yeah, but it would have made a mess of the road.” Stephanie frowned. Why would she use her blaster when a close-in kill was more efficient?

Todd didn't care about the road, he only cared about her safety but telling her that wouldn't bring her back quicker, they'd just get into a disagreement about her choice of firepower. He changed the subject. “Any luck finding the last one?”

“I only just got back into the area, so I'm not sure. The original nest was buried under the pitcher's mound in Safeco field. I had to level the structure to destroy the eggs.”

Todd chuckled just thinking about Seattle's response. “I guess the Mariners will be looking for a new ball park.”

“It was either that or feed the demons their fans,” Stephanie replied. She remembered the mayor's fit when she insisted that the entire structure be leveled to destroy the nest and the eggs. He wanted to dig up the eggs, move them a safe distance away and then obliterate them. They even went behind her back and tried it. As soon as they tilted the first egg, the Diathelon demons returned, ate all the workers, threw the equipment into the stands, and then destroyed most of the seats in a tantrum Stephanie had never seen from any demon.

“Is there any chance of you finding the creature and getting home tomorrow?” Todd asked.

“I'm trying, Todd. It's just this demon is smarter than the rest. I think he actually lured me into chasing the other two into Oregon.”

“I thought demons were just animals from your dimension that got big and hungry. The Smelter demons weren't bright; they just had a handler training them. Do you think that's what is happening now? Is there another Sonite in town?”

“I don’t think so, Todd, but I don’t really know. The Sonites were able to manipulate a rip and send Coronel Blake through, so maybe they have done it again.”

“I’m coming up there.” Todd put his feet down and started gathering up files. Just thinking about the Sonites and how they had killed Stephanie’s parents and destroyed Lartheria made chills run up Todd’s spine.

“No, I’m fine.”

“I’ve got lots of vacation days and Diane down in Human Resources keeps sending me daily emails about taking some.”

“Don’t you have homicides to investigate?” Stephanie asked.

“Of course. The idiots of the world have not stopped killing each other but someone else can handle my caseload for a few days.”

“Carlos isn’t back yet?” Stephanie asked.

“Nope. The chief wanted to assign me another partner but I told him, I’d just wait for Carlos. I will not break in a new partner, just to have Carlos come back and have to do it all over again with him.”

Stephanie thought about Inspector Carlos Ramirez, Todd’s partner. He was so different from Todd. Besides their physical differences, Todd tall and lean, Carlos short and stocky, they looked at the world differently. Todd saw the best in everything and everyone and was from the “half full” thinking; Carlos looked at life a bit more realistically, in Stephanie’s mind, and was more “people suck”, and the “half empty” guy.

“The other inspectors would not love you dumping your open cases on them, Todd. Don’t worry about it. I will be able to find the demon in a day or so and then I’ll be back. I don’t need you to come up here.”

With Stephanie’s heightened sense of hearing, she heard Todd slam his body into his chair. He’s upset? Why? She was so new at this relationship stuff. But she really didn’t need his help. He’d probably just get in her way or get hurt.

“Fine,” he huffed out. “We do have a string of homicides we’re working on right now.”

“Todd, you know I can take care of myself.”

“I know. Stephanie Dawn – Hunter. She only needs four things: her Glock, an eighteen inch sword, a multi-phasic blaster, and a black backpack full of explosives, detonators, and tear gas.”

“Don’t forget the hypodermic needle,” Stephanie said, then wished she hadn’t.

“Oh yeah, let’s not forget the shot filled with a fast acting poison,” Todd’s voice and heart rate elevated on the last three words. “The fatal medication you need to inject into yourself in case you’re captured by a demon.”

“Death is better than being slowly devoured!” Stephanie retorted. Who the hell did he think he was? She was the Hunter. Her job description, if she had one, would have said just one thing – eliminate demons.

“Easy, Stephanie. I didn’t mean anything by it,” Todd said, back-pedaling. He knew he had upset her. She had a quick temper to go along with her fast reflexes. He had seen that when she took out twenty of Quan’s men when they searched Chinatown for the Smelter demon’s nest. There was never a need to discuss anything with a demon, so conversation wasn’t something in her first line of offense. It was time to get her on a happier subject, thought Todd, so he asked, “How’s Jack?”

Stephanie settled back against the bike. “He’s out of the hospital and back to work. Dr. Santana says that he should have rested a few more weeks, but you know Jack.”

“Yes, he’s not the sit at home and mope type. A lot like his daughter.”

Stephanie smiled. “Yep, I’m just a chip off the old block, aren’t I?”

“Did you just use a metaphor?” Todd laughed. He knew that, even with her IQ of 175, metaphors, idioms, and acronyms were something that she didn’t quite understand.

“Yes, I’ve been studying them. Jack gave me a book of the most commonly used metaphors and idioms. Some still don’t make any sense like, apple of my eye, rolling in dough and piece of cake.”

Todd laughed again, it was rich and full. Leave it to Jack Stanton to teach Stephanie metaphors and idioms. He had been doing that since the first day he waltzed through the interdimensional rip carrying Stephanie away from her dead parents and the war that engulfed her home dimension.

Stephanie wasn’t sure, but she laughed too. It seemed that the idioms or metaphors that dealt with food, she just didn’t understand. Maybe it was because she didn’t have much experience with food except for the chamomile tea she drank. It was supposed to make her fit in better with humans. Usually she just took the pills that Jack Stanton manufactured to sustain her since she couldn’t synthesize the nutrients from food grown on Earth. Not until Todd. She enjoyed eating

dinner with him. Of course that was right before Colonel Blake blasted Todd's SUV with a missile, she was kidnapped, and Todd, Jack and Carlos rescued her.

The ground rumbled under her feet. She jumped up.

Todd was still laughing.

Stephanie put her hand on the ground, then her ear. The Diathelon demon was digging its way back to Seattle. She'd gotten in front of it, after all. Todd was still laughing as she walked out into the road and followed the sound. She was on a deserted back road, so there was no chance of collateral damage.

The sound stopped, Stephanie tilted her head to listen.

The ground under her exploded into the air; Stephanie went flying and hit her head against a tree.

Stephanie's last thought was, "Where is that damn needle?"

The world went black.