

1. THE ONE-TWO PUNCH

If this were any other weeknight, Ethan would liked driving a *katana* through a Wraith's forehead.

Everyone knew what a Wraith was, but not where these man-eating demons had come from. Maybe they were always there, lurking in plain sight. All the general public knew was that anyone could *be* one of them; a creature that twisted and deformed its own body to consume its unsuspecting prey.

A Wraith was a proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing, if that sheep looked like Bill from Accounting or your mother. They always needed to be put down, no questions asked. Any Wraith was a problem.

Ethan was well aware that these demons needed to be slain, but if he could be doing anything else right now, he would not be on a night patrol. All he could think about was the dreaded Economics test tomorrow morning.

"Wish I wasn't here," he muttered too loudly.

Someone on his earpiece heard him. "Keep the coms clear!" hissed his field leader. "Don't make me tell you again, Ethan!"

"Sorry, ma'am," Ethan replied as politely as possible, despite his antsy mood.

They were NYC's finest since 1699. The Anti-Xenospecies Extermination League, or AXEL, was very selective about who they let into their ranks. Your task was to contain and kill monsters, or be an expert in slaying a specific kind of monster. Anyone who enlisted up knew they were in for a rough ride.

Was it his luck that he signed up too early, and that his Precinct had the strictest field leader?

Yes. And it sucked.

Maybe if I joined up earlier...

No. He shook that thought from his head. Ethan needed to focus on the job at hand.

He did what he could to get in as soon as he did this year. The only way to get into AXEL was by getting that high school diploma first and showcasing his skills. God knew that he could barely describe his life story on a piece of paper. Ethan was just glad that he was a better fighter than he was a talker.

Getting accepted into AXEL's ranks was hard enough with the vetting process being so rigid. Prospecting recruiters always wanted to see "desirable talents." Be that talent in combat, sorcery, exorcism, or the rare case of exceptional phone manners when taking 911 emergency calls, you might have had a chance.

Unfortunately, Ethan's telephone etiquette left a lot to be desired. Instead got his talent in the form of a pesky Sol. Gabriel would nto let him forget that little fact.

Ethan recalled at least spotting other kids from the North or East Precincts, and at least they *acted* like average college kids. Ethan knew he wasn't alone among all the scary grown-ups already in the ranks of AXEL. Some faces he met when his father still took him to meet-and-greet parties, and he recognized other rookies from last summer's fiesta.

That memory was a far cry from the chilly night he was having. And now his closest mentor was his Precinct's notorious leader: Iris the All-Seeing.

Her nickname was not an exaggeration. Nothing escaped her eye or her scrutiny. The higher-ups knew her secret, and Ethan was entirely aware of *how* she could keep tabs on him and the rest of the Precinct at the

same time. She was only two years older than him, but already acted like the hard-as-nails leader she aimed to be.

Speaking of which, she expected Ethan to be on his toes at all times. Best not to get distracted now.

He kept an open ear to the radio and listened in. Ethan sat perched at his post, almost begging for something to happen. He kept his sights on the narrow alley below him. A Wraith was coming sooner or later, right?

At least these patrols were more tolerable when conducted with his teammates. Liam always loved blasting Metallica to get the adrenaline going, or Nora would have something good to talk about.

But alas, Ethan would be out in the cold tonight.

As usual.

Where was his team now? The radio clipped to his ballistic vest remained silent for a few terse minutes.

I have a goddamn Econ test to study for tomorrow, Ethan begrudgingly ruminated in the safe part of his brain. *That's going to be fun.*

"Where are they?" Iris inquired. Her question broke the air with the grace of a pick against ice.

"Intel says we have a herd on Main Street," said a deep baritone voice, none other than Liam at the driver's wheel. His no-nonsense tone carried the weight of being a high rank and second only to their field leader. "Ethan? Where are you?"

Ethan pressed the piece closer to his ear. A *katana*, the curved steel blade Japanese samurai used, was ready in his other hand.

"I'm in position. Watching from above an alley."

"Let's go," his field leader replied. Echoing over the radio was the distinct roar of an engine revving at full gear.

Finally, they could begin.

Ethan remained in position atop the roof with his eyes to the ground. His jet-black hair was cut short and gelled back. He wore the gray/blue uniform all EU trainees had to wear and a Kevlar vest with the label AXEL painted on his back. The NYPD patch was pinned to his chest, just to show he was one of the good guys-in-training. Just in case he was mistaken for a common cop, which was a common mistake.

They're almost here.

Ethan took a sharp breath. He really did not want to fight tonight with his mind wandering too often, but he might have to suck it up and get to work in a minute. His orders were to keep watch while his supervisors engaged first.

Typical. They wouldn't want the kid swinging his sword yet.

"How many are we looking at?"

"Pack of three," his field leader replied.

A single star and moon dangled in the otherwise vacant horizon. Vast emptiness stretched across the sky, but this was the clearest time as any. With these lighting conditions, this was the best time to track down Wraiths emerging from the woodwork of Manhattan's underbelly.

"You're clear," said Ethan.

"Engaging."

Tires screeched. Their engine revved up to maximum speed. A low rumble shook the ground like the march of large animals rushing away from danger.

While he couldn't see it, Ethan knew a chase was underway.

"Four more!"

"Yeah, I see 'em!" Liam confirmed. The metallic pump of his shotgun was loud and clear.

Bang!

The sound of thunder shot through the night. Gunshots in the distance. Ethan kept his eyes on the area where he knew the car was driving.

"We have a straggler coming your way," the woman in charge yelled over her roaring car.

The alley below Ethan's nesting spot was open except for a dumpster. If the straggler was coming, this was a good place for it to hide. Plenty of shadows covered this alley. Anything could slither between the cracks and into the pale moonlight.

Ethan could feel that distinct shiver of watching a predator in the dark run up his spine before he saw the creature. It was as though a snake coiled its tail around his spine to tingle his nerves. But this Wraith was far worse than any rattling serpentine.

Ethan spotted it coming his way. "I see it."

The Wraith was on ground level. That ungodly creature had hidden as a human before, but now its extra scorpion appendages protruded like cancerous new limbs.

There was no mistaking a beast, born of human flesh and sin, revealing its true form. The torso remained "human," but this Scorpion Wraith grew new claws and a barbed tail to become the ugliest variety of 8-legged bugs on Earth. And it looked hungry.

Ethan braced himself, readying his *katana* so he could do away with the monster.

The Scorpion Wraith clicked its teeth together to find prey. It sniffed the ground and turned its eyes to a dumpster across the alley. Maybe it caught the scent of half-finished fries and a burger?

Weren't people supposed to be the top of the food chain? *Homo sapien*, the smartest animal on planet Earth. Considering the vast number of cattle, chickens, corn, and cookies they had to consume at a moment's notice, they were omnivorous consumers of all of nature's resources. Humans should have been Earth's apex predator.

Every foolish predator believes that before getting eaten themselves. The real monster was down in the alley right now.

Ethan peered over the roof to look at the Wraith. He could ambush it from his position. Ethan reached for the *tsuka*, or hilt, of his weapon.

He glanced away from the monster to check his landing spot, but then he saw someone who wasn't there before.

A girl was hiding behind a dumpster. On the older side, but too lithe to be middle-aged, and too unwise as to break the citywide curfew. Ethan could hardly speculate why she would be out here.

She was a free meal for the Wraith. From the looks of it, she was rushing home after an emergency run to the pharmacy. A plastic bag of medicine was in her hands.

A single exit was blocked by the beast. She wouldn't make it.

Ethan took a deep breath before wrapping his hands around the *tsuka*. He unsheathed his sword and

closed his eyes. Reaching into the deepest part of his mind, he summoned his inner spirit. His Sol.

A biting chill took over Ethan's body. Colder than the East Coast cold front. With the drop in temperature came a new wave of power.

Few people had the talent for summoning one in the first place, and possessing a Sol was no laughing matter. Ethan's guardian was ready to kill.

He quickly condensed the water in the air to freeze a needle projectile.

THWACK. A shard of ice formed at Ethan's eye level and shot out like a bullet. The new projectile planted itself close to the Scorpion Wraith's face.

This was a warning shot, but part of AXEL procedure: get the enemy's attention away from civvies. And it worked when the Scorpion Wraith looked up.

Ethan rose and stood above the Wraith. Behind him was Gabriel, his guardian spirit, ready to fight alongside its host.

His Sol was clad in metal armor and a full chrome helmet. Blue streaks of energy lined Gabriel's body. Black rime stuck to his face and breastplate like ash from a bonfire. Gabriel mimicked Ethan's pose and brandished a straight sword that thirsted for fresh blood.

"Looking for someone?" asked Ethan.

The Scorpion Wraith shrieked. The sound not quite human, but shrill enough to be furious. It used its barbed feet to scurry up the side of the building. Pebbles of mortar and brick broke with each of its vertical steps toward the roof.

Ethan conjured more magic projectiles. Shards of ice materialized and fired at the Wraith. Some hit their

mark, while the rest either bounced off the hard shell or missed.

The Wraith closed the gap and swung for Ethan's legs. A barbed claw aimed to nick at his skin as violently as it broke the brick mere seconds earlier.

Ethan darted back and countered with his *katana*. Gabriel whipped out his own short sword and they attacked in unison. If the Wraith stabbed at Gabriel, Ethan attacked, and vice versa.

But the monster wised up and made a wide swipe to hit both his targets. This time it caught its prey off-guard. Ethan tripped over the rigid appendage and hit the ground with a thud. The Wraith wasted no time to raise its barbed tail and brought it down.

Another perk of a Sol was that it could protect its master. Gabriel reacted well before Ethan could watch his own demise and threw up his free hand. An ice barrier fortified Ethan from the attack and the Wraith's tail was wedged by the tip in freshly conjured ice.

Ethan rolled back onto his feet. He vaulted over the protective wall and brought his blade down on the Wraith. Time for the decisive strike.

The Scorpion Wraith shrieked even louder, but it was too late. Ethan pulled out a small piece of paper with archaic etchings from his pocket and brought it down on the Wraith's forehead.

A flash of light filled the entire rooftop. Ethan looked away. The light faded as the holy fire burned the wicked creature away from the inside out.

He had won.

All that remained of the Wraith was its host, a man with his sleeves and trousers destroyed by transforming into such a horrid creature. His body had

returned to its natural state, but a vacant, glassy-eyed expression remained on his face.

Was the man still alive?

Ethan checked for a pulse. Nothing.

That was the tragedy of Wraith possession: the hosts most likely died if not exorcised in time.

“Did you get it?” his field leader demanded.

Ethan dismissed Gabriel, and his Sol faded into dust.

“Yeah, he’s down.” He rubbed his hands together to put some heat back into his fingers.

“The rest of the herd has been dealt with. I’m afraid we lost two hosts.”

Ethan took one last look at the Wraith victim’s face. He opened the eyelids. Both eyeballs rolled back into their sockets and showed no sign of rolling back into position. Not even an errant twitch of a recovering victim.

“The Wraith ate this one too,” Ethan replied.

“Three hosts,” the woman muttered. “But it could’ve been worse. Now get some rest. You have a game tomorrow, don’t you?”

Ethan slid his sword back in its sheath and checked down the alleyway. The foolish bystander who was hiding before was gone, evidently running from the monster that chased her.

It wasn’t exactly Ethan’s priority to find her, but at least she wasn’t dead. Knowing she was safe at least eased his mind. There were more than monsters to keep him up at night.

Like that Econ test.

“Why does the game day and test day have to be tomorrow?” he muttered carelessly.

“Comms!”