

I hear their footsteps as I'm putting the meat in the fridge—Amanda's heels clicking on the hard floor, and Jason's sneakers squeaking. They're six doors down. They're talking, but at this distance, I can't make out the words. Three doors closer I can tell they're discussing the results of last night's tests. The door opens as I close the fridge.

"Good morning, Derick," Amanda greets me, sounding severe, as she always does.

"Morning, D," Jason says, his tone jovial, also as usual. He takes a seat at the island. I can smell the soda he's drinking before I turn to face them. It makes me crave one, but I have water boiling for the tea."

"Jason, Amanda, good morning. So, nothing new then?"

They're silent for a moment, studying me. Even they forget how good my hearing is. They look at one another with concern.

"I don't think I heard anything I wasn't supposed to," I say in the silence. "All I heard is that you didn't learn anything new from the demon I killed, then you talked about my results, which you were still doing as you entered."

Their features relax. I know they don't tell me everything; I don't need to know everything. If I have questions, they answer them. If I need information for a hunt, they give it to me.

"That's good," Amanda says with a reproachful look at Jason.

He shrugs. "We're going to have to make sure not to talk about work in the hall."

They're both wearing their lab coat. Amanda's is over a brown suit, a design Jason refers to as a "power suit." Jason wears an old t-shirt with a faded lightning bolt and the word "Deafeners" almost entirely worn off under his, with black jeans and his usual sneakers.

The Deafeners is a group of musicians Jason likes and has had me listen to. Another of his attempts to get me to find something I like, but like the pictures, I don't understand the point of music. It's sound at different frequencies and amplitudes. How is it supposed to engender a reaction out of me?

Jason doesn't understand how it is that I don't find anything he's had me look at, or listen to, beautiful or ugly. My complete lack of emotional response to what he calls art baffles him greatly.

I take the kettle off the heater just before the whistling becomes audible. I know it's hot enough from the sound of the bubbling water. I pour it in the large mug with the two tea bags in it.

"Is two-hundred fifty-six dollars and eighteen cents a lot of money?" I ask while I let the tea steep.

"Why are you asking that?" Amanda studies me. Jason's expression is one of surprised curiosity.

"That's how much my food cost. I'm curious if it's a normal amount for it."

"You've never asked about that," Jason comments.

I nod. "I never thought about it before, but Juliette's reaction seemed to indicate it's a lot of money."

"Who's Juliette?" Amanda asks before Jason can say anything.

"She's a woman I talked with at the grocery store. She has invited me to have a drink with her tonight."

"Well, God damn, D. My man's getting lucky!"

"No, absolutely not." Amanda's voice is firm.

"Come on Manda, let the man live a little."

I take my mug and lean against the counter, sipping my tea. I hadn't considered Amanda might oppose the meeting; she hasn't gotten involved in Jason's work in socializing me before. I watch them, but I'm not needed for this discussion.

"Live? Do you have any concept of the trouble this can cause? What if he..." She looks at me.

Jason rolls his eyes. "He can't get drunk, so what's the harm?"

I can tell Amanda wants to say more on this subject. Her face is red, her mouth opens and closes. She takes a moment to calm herself. "We can't have him go out in an uncontrolled environment."

“Of course we can,” Jason scoffs. “That’s what life’s about. We can’t keep him cooped up in here all the time, just letting him out to kill demons.”

“And why not?”

Jason sighs. “Because he needs to interact with people. That’s why I insisted he does his own grocery shopping.”

“And now you see where that leads. I knew it was a bad idea. Soon he’s going to want to go out on dates.”

“What’s the harm in that? Plenty of people go on dates.”

“He isn’t like everyone else. What if they sleep together?”

“That’s jumping the gun, don’t you think, Manda? They’re just going out for a drink. D,” he asks, turning to me. “How do you feel about going out for a drink with her? Juliette, you said her name was?”

The question surprises me. They don’t normally involve me in discussions about what I can or should do. “I’m...curious about it. The people here only interact with me for tests or as a part of hunts. You’ve said I need to get to know humans, and I think this would be a way to get to know one of them.”

“Are you planning on having sex with her?” he asks.

I stare at him for a moment. Sex? I know what it is—Jason has shown me videos—but I haven’t felt any desire to attempt it. “No. I don’t see the point to it.”

“Come on man, it’s about—”

Amanda silences Jason with a glare. “And what happens if there’s an attack while he’s at that bar?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “D, where’s the bar?”

“Five blocks south of here. It’s called the Golden Pint.”

Jason nods. “I know it. I’ll make sure the van has his equipment in it. There, that’s resolved.” He has a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

Amanda sighs and rubs her eyes. “I swear Jason, you’re doing your best to undermine this project.”

“Nothing of the sort. I just think my man D can be a well-rounded person instead of just a demon-killing machine. Isn’t that right, D?”

I have no idea how to answer. This is twice I’m asked for input. It’s never happened before.

“Derick,” Amanda says, “you remember you can’t tell her you’re a hunter.”

“I do. Jason has already told me what to say.”

She glares at Jason. “You’ve been planning for this.”

He raises his hands to placate her. “No, I haven’t. I did it because he is interacting with people at the grocery store. It was just a matter of time before someone asked him about his job.”

The glare doesn’t diminish. She adds a finger to it that she points at his face. “We are going to discuss this further, in private.” She turns and stalks out.

Jason watches her back and whistles once the door closes behind her. “I am in for it now. You better make sure your date is worth it because she is going to tear me a new one. Is Juliette pretty?”

I shrug. I have no idea how to answer the question. How is someone pretty?

He drains the last of his can and throws it in the garbage chute. “Anyway, you can finish your tea on the way. I want to run more tests on you.” With that, he leads me to his lab, where he tests my strength, endurance, and spends the rest of the day asking me questions about how I feel about things.