

Shopping for my food is something else Jason insists I do myself, to help me stay in touch with the people I am saving. He had me start it a couple of months ago. Amanda doesn't like it. After all, it's simple enough for the food to be delivered, if I won't eat at the cafeteria. They discussed it, and in the end, Amanda relented.

The grocery store is ten blocks away, along the main street. I walk there, among the humans. Jason wants me to look at them, to watch how they interact, sometimes smiling to one another, sometimes talking, or holding hands. He hasn't told me why he wants me to do that yet.

The first time I went out like this, I was worried the people on the street would recognize me for the hunter who keeps them safe, and that they would... I didn't know what they might do. They couldn't want to hurt me; I keep them safe, and they would know I am faster and stronger than they are, but something about being this exposed made me ill at ease.

When no one even glanced at me, I wondered how it could be. I asked Jason, and he said that the people on the street don't think of hunters as ordinary people. Because they don't expect one to walk among them in jeans and a t-shirt, they don't even look for it. It was a surprising revelation. I expected them to always be looking for things out of place; how else could they catch a demon hiding in the shadows?

The sunglasses are to blend in. Even if the sun is bright on this cloudless day, I don't need them for protection. Short of directly looking at it, my eyes can adapt to extreme light conditions. At night, my thermal vision compensates for the lack of light.

I do my grocery shopping on a weekday, in the morning, because there are fewer people. It makes it easier to pick up on the scent of a tainted human when there aren't too many of them. Demon scent sticks and transfers easily, so in crowds, it's almost impossible to tell where it originates from.

I haven't told my reasoning to Jason; he'd be annoyed that I am thinking tactically when I'm supposed to be doing something he considers normal. I don't know how he expects me to stop keeping in mind that a demon, or one of their human servants, could attack at any time.

The grocery store is large, and I expect it gets quite busy on the weekends when almost no one works. I grab the cart and start at the fruit and produce section. I get plenty of both, then I get the meat. My cart is more than half filled when I move on to get multi-grain bread, for the carbs.

I'm walking down the tea aisle when I pass another cart. It's overfilled, and the woman next to it reaches up for a box on the top shelf. She bumps her cart and the bottle of ketchup on the top of the pile tips over and out.

I catch it without thinking and put it back in her cart without slowing. I grab a box of chamomile tea and move on to my next item. Amanda is to blame for the tea. She always drinks it, so it was only a question of time until I tried it, and I found I liked it. She doesn't like that I drink it, so to appease her I only buy one box per week. Ten cups, since I like it strong.

I grab a six-pack of cola. Amanda hates that Jason got me to try that. She screamed at him about sugar and empty carbohydrates the first time I bought it. He did it in his attempt to get me to find something I liked the taste of. It isn't the taste I like, it's the fizziness. It feels interesting on my tongue and nose. I limit my intake to six a week.

Then it's the last item, six gallons of milk.

"Excuse me," a woman says, putting a hand on my arm.

For a moment I think it's an attack, but there's no demon scent, not even a hint of it, so I check my reaction. I turn and recognize the overfilled cart. The woman standing next to it is five-eight, no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. Her eyes are brown, her straight hair is the same shade and goes down to the middle of her shoulder-blades. She's wearing loose jeans and a t-shirt with a few tears at the edges.

"I've been trying to catch your attention since the coffee aisle."

I nod.

"Didn't you hear me calling after you? I guess you were lost in thoughts," she adds before I can say anything. "I wanted to thank you."

It takes me a moment to remember the bottle. "You're welcome." I turn to my cart and push it

along.

She falls in step next to me, her cart's contents dwarfing mine. "Wow, your family really eats healthy. I don't think I've ever seen someone with so many fruits and vegetables."

I almost tell her it's just for me, but then remember that humans don't eat as much as I do. They have a slower metabolism and less demanding occupations. "Fruits are the best thing to eat before going to bed." Her cart contains mostly processed foods. Amanda threw a fit when Jason suggested I try them. I agreed with her; they don't have enough nutrients and protein to make them worthwhile.

"I guess they are," she says. "I wish I could afford to buy some, but with the prices, as they are, and three kids to feed, I have to go with what's affordable."

I nod. I have no idea how much what I have costs. Jason gave me a card to pay with, and I never pay attention to the total.

She smiles. "Although I see someone does indulge a little." She points to my soda.

"Jason says it's good for the soul to indulge once in a while."

She chuckles. "I don't know about that, but a little indulgence is all I can afford myself. I have a box of peanut butter cookies somewhere in there." She extends her hand. "My name is Juliette."

I shake it gently. Jason showed me how another supposedly ordinary thing to do. "Mine is Derick."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I've seen you here a few times before. Do you live nearby?" She looks me over, her smile widening, some hunger in her gaze. The only time I've seen an expression close to this was when a demon tried to take a bite out of me, but none of the desperation in their eyes were in hers.

"Yes, a few blocks from here."

"That's good. I was hoping I could take you out for a drink. As a way of saying thank you."

"A drink?"

"Yes, there's a bar further north of here, called the Golden Pint."

"You don't have to." A bar is a place where they serve alcohol. Jason explained the concept to me and even had me try a few different drinks. Like most things humans consume, there's nothing appealing about it.

"I know, but I want to." She smiles again, and her eyes narrow, but not in a frowning way. "I don't think you realize the hassle it would have been if the bottle had broken. I'd have to find someone, tell them about it, then the humiliation of being responsible for it."

Somehow I doubt it would have been quite that involved. They have people here who clean messes, so it can't be that uncommon for something like it to happen. I consider saying no, but Jason has been insisting I socialize more. With someone who isn't him, he keeps adding. Going out for a drink with her, Juliette, that is socializing, right? "Very well. When should I be there?" I reach the milk and put the gallons in my cart.

"Just how many people are there in your family?" she asks, eying the six jugs.

I hesitate. I don't lie—I don't see the point to it—but Jason insists that I don't tell people outside headquarters I'm a hunter. They won't react to me in a normal way if they know that, and that defeats the point of having me interact with them as a normal person.

"A few," I finally say with a shrug.

She gives me a knowing smile. "Are you available tonight? Let's say eight?"

"I should be." There aren't any tests planned for tonight. Unless there's an attack underway, the scientists like shutting down everything by dinner time. I head for the registers.

"That's great. I'll see you there at eight. It's a casual place, so no need to dress up." She turns her cart in the opposite direction. "I still need more things. See you tonight, Derick." She heads away with a spring in her step I've never seen on anyone before.

The cashier scans my food and puts them in the bags I brought. They are reinforced, so they won't break like the first time I shopped. This time, when I hand him the card, I look at the total: two-hundred fifty-six and eighteen cents. Is that a lot? From Juliette's reaction, it has to be, but I have no idea. I pay and walk back to headquarters, ignoring the usual stares I from the

other pedestrians.