

The street is empty as I leave headquarters. It's my first time leaving through the main entrance, on foot, and unarmed, once the sun has gone down. I peer between the buildings as I walk, checking for movement, and I smell the breeze, looking for the scent of a demon. I do it because I feel watched again. The sensation vanishes two blocks away from the Golden Pint. I look around again, trying to understand why I am feeling this.

Because of this, I arrive a few minutes late. I hadn't planned on it, although Jason says it's a good idea to have her wait on me a little. I don't know why I'd want her to do that.

I wear the blue jeans Jason bought for the occasion, though they are a little tight at the hips. He insisted I wear them, so I would advertise. I have no idea what I am advertising. With them he had me wear a white shirt and a black leather jacket.

The Golden Pint is one room, with a bar at the back, tables set randomly on the floor and booths along the two walls. The air smells of alcohol, salt, and humans. No trace of demonic scent.

Looking the room over, my gaze stops at the televisions over the bar, at each end. One shows what must be an entertainment show, by the bright colors and quick camera movements. The other is on the news, and the text under the announcer reads, *'District of Anounga now demon-free.'* I already read about that, so I continue looking for Juliette.

I pause when I see someone wearing a tan trench coat at the bar, and for a moment I wonder if another hunter has traveled here, but he turns and laughs with his blond-haired companion. Hunters don't waste time with such frivolities, no matter how much Jason tries to get me to do it.

I find her as she waves to me from a booth at the back, and I cross the room, casting another glance at the trench-coat-wearing man. Copper hair and beard. He leans in close to his companion and whispers that they should just leave and go home for some fun. Definitely not a hunter.

"You came!" She beams as I sit down.

"I said I would."

"I know, but you have no idea how many times guys have been no-shows." She quickly puts her hand over her mouth and blushes. She's embarrassed—I recognize the emotion from videos Jason showed me—but I don't know why she feels this way.

A woman steps to our table, saving me from having to attempt a reaction.

"What can I get you?" she asks. She's wearing a red dress with yellow flowers and sneakers.

"I'll have anything on tap," Juliette answers.

"I'll have an Amber beer." It's the least horrible-tasting one from the list Jason had me try.

"You want it bottled, or from the tap?"

I look at her. What's the tap? Jason never mentioned that when he guided me through the beer tasting. "What's the difference?"

The server hesitates. "Well, it's a little cheaper from the tap."

Juliette puts a hand over mine. "Don't worry about the price, I'm paying for it tonight." She doesn't remove her hand.

I ask for one from the tap. At the grocery store, Juliette indicated she doesn't have much money. I won't have her spend the little she has on my beer.

"I'm really happy you came." She squeezes my hand.

I smile. "A coworker indicated I need to get out more."

"Really? And what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a construction worker." The words come easily; Jason has had me practice them often since I have been shopping for food. He felt it explains my physique, without inviting too many other questions.

She studies me, and I study her in return. There are colors on her face that weren't there at the grocery store. Makeup, which Jason has explained women will use to make themselves more attractive. He went on about courtships and the choosing of a mate. It all sounded odd to me. She wears a yellow shirt, with white frills at her neck. Over that she has a brown jacket.

She leans back, finally taking her hand off mine when the server puts our beers on the table.

She pays her and fixes her gaze on me again.

“Okay. I’d never have guessed that’s your job.”

“Why not?” I ask, surprised. What did Jason miss?

“I’m not sure. I guess you’re a little more clean-cut than I’d expect from a guy in the construction business. Those I’ve seen before were a little rough around the edges, you know?”

I don’t know. How is someone rough around the edges? Old clothing? I begin to suspect Jason hasn’t prepared me as well as he thought for this evening.

I nod if only to acknowledge her questions. “What about you? Where do you work?” Jason made it clear I should ask questions about her.

She blushes, but not as much as before. “Oh, I’m just a waitress at the Hot Soup Diner, by Clark Street. I serve the lunch and early afternoon crowd before my kids get home from school.”

“You said you have three of them.”

She nods after sipping from her glass. “Two girls and a boy. Elizabeth is nine, Garrison ten, and Julie eleven. How about you? How many do you have?”

I don’t respond. I don’t know what to say. When I asked Jason, he said to just make something up. I look down to avoid looking her in the eyes as I try to decide what to do. Why wouldn’t Jason help me with this? Is lying another human thing he wants me to learn how to do? If so, why didn’t he tell me what the lie should be, like with my occupation? How many children are normal for a family? She has three, should I match that? What names should I give them, if she asks?

She pats my hand, and I look up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I take it you only see them occasionally?”

I nod, but I don’t know what I’m nodding to. At least it seems to mean I don’t need to come up with details.

“How often do you see them? Once a week? Once a month?”

“Once a month.” I pay attention to her reaction, trying to determine if it’s a reasonable answer. She smiles, so I expect it is.

“They’re coming over soon then?”

I nod and take a swallow of the beer to give myself time to think. She looks like she’s expecting something. Does she want to know when they are to come visit? “This weekend,” I risk. People don’t work on the weekend, and I remember Jason mentioning that his family often gets together on the weekends. And how he misses those times.

“Are you going to have a barbecue? I’ve got to say, I’m amazed your kids are okay with all those fruits and vegetables. When I throw mine a party, all they want is cake and ice cream.”

“Eating healthy is important.” Somehow that sounds odd as I say it like it isn’t the right thing to say. Socializing is more complicated than Jason indicated it would be. Why does he insist I do this? How is getting to know one of them helping me keep them safe?

“Yes, it is. Unfortunately, it’s easier to do when you have the money for it.” She blushes again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for that to sound like an accusation.” She gives me a small smile. “It’s not your fault I’ve had bad luck with my jobs.”

“It’s alright.” I pat her hand. She did it when she thought I needed comforting. Is this what Jason wanted me to see? That people aren’t only threatened by demons? But what I am supposed to do about this? “I’ll be happy to help if I can.”

Her smile widens for a moment, then falters. “No, I shouldn’t burden you with my troubles.” She pauses. “I’ve already taken a side job anyway. It’s going to help the money flow.”

Before I can figure a response to this, my phone buzzes. I read the message. *Sighting, pickup on its way.* I put it away and stand. “I’m sorry, that was work. I need to go.”

“At this hour?”

I nod, turning to the door, but she grabs my hand.

“Wait.”

I turn back. She takes out a pen and writes a number on a napkin and hands it to me. “It’s my number, call me at some point. I’m hoping we can do this again.”

What am I expected to do? Jason never discussed being given phone numbers. I don't have the time to deal with this; I hear the van coming. I take her pen and write my number down on my napkin.

I smile at her. "How about we discuss it at a later time? I'm sorry, but I really need to go." Jason insisted on politeness. The social lubricant, he explained it was like he expected me to understand what that meant.

She smiles. "I look forward to it."

I hurry to the door, attracting glances. The van comes to a stop as I open it. The side door on it opens and closes behind me.

"I didn't know you were going out on a date," the medic says. A woman this time, and after a moment I recognize her. Her name is Valerie.

"Jason said I should go. What do we have?" I take off the leather jacket and shirt, putting on a black t-shirt. I take off the jeans, and Valerie gasps and looks away. I notice her peeking in my direction before I put on the black pants.

"There's been a sighting on Henron Street," the driver replies when Valerie doesn't. "By the reports, it's a big one, but it seems to be stationary. The police are in the process of cordoning off the area and evacuating it.

The gun belt goes on, the hatchet lies at my back, and the collapsible sword is clipped to the belt before putting on the deep gray trench coat and gloves. I sit in the chair. "Do you want to take the readings now?" I ask Valerie, who still has an awed expression.

She shakes herself and takes the box of sensors out of the small locker. She blushes again as she lifts my shirt to apply them. She didn't blush the previous times she had to do this.

"How long until we get there?" I ask.

"Fifteen minutes. I need to make a detour around the construction on Jasper."

I lean back in the chair and close my eyes. I don't quite fall asleep—I still hear what goes on around me—but this lets me recharge, not that I need it right now. I simply don't want to have to deal with the odd looks Valerie gives me.