

ETERNALLY MATED

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AUDRA

One hand on the wheel, my head resting in the other, I stared at the long expanse of road ahead and wondered if this path would lead me *anywhere*. The trees crowded the roads, making the twist of every turn a surprise...but there were only more trees on the other side.

Life had become monotonous like these tree-lined roads. No matter what I did, no matter how I weaved or planned, everything seemed the same. It was the curse of immortality. I wondered how some vampires dealt with it, but they had mere centuries under their belts.

I'd been around for thousands of years...and it was all the *same*.

Sighing, I wondered if this would be the metaphorical end of the road for me. I wouldn't mind packing in for the big nap. It seemed cozy and mildly relieving. Life dragged on and on for a thousand years, give or take a few. The world had long since drained of color and excitement, leading to a kind of ennui that I'd struggled to stave off.

Back in Lakesedge, I'd kept myself busy with a bit of meddling. A murderous pair had been at the top of the supernatural power structure.

I'd taken it upon myself to seek out the good hearts, those with enough power to topple the power structures and rebuild them with better intentions in mind. The meddling had kept me busy for a time.

They didn't need me anymore.

Lakesedge was a safe haven for the supernatural. I trusted it in their capable hands, but that also left me in a peculiar position. With power far greater than anyone else in Lakesedge, greater even than our little demi-gods, I posed a threat for the new power structure I'd put in place.

The ladies trusted me, but I knew that my presence would cause issues in the future. Instead of sticking around until that happened, I closed the doors of Bad Moon Café and moved on.

A part of me desperately missed the smell of coffee in the air. On the road, I knew only the smell of motor exhaust and gasoline. Neither were something I wanted to smell regularly. My nose was singed, and my stomach churned unhappily.

So, when the road opened up and a small town appeared in the tiny valley ahead, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had no idea where I was, but the town said enough. It had quiet New England written all over it, from the little shop-lined streets to the tall steeple of the old churches.

I let the car coast down the road into the valley and ventured around until I found a stretch of pay-by-the-minute parking. There were no quarters in the cracks between my car seats, so I glanced around to make sure no one was looking before I tapped the parking meter with a bit of magic.

The numbers on the front of the meter spun wildly before settling into the max allotment of time. A slight smile reached my lips before I suppressed it. I didn't indulge in magic very often. For me, it came from a place that I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to. Life without magic was...different, and that was enough to keep me entertained.

On the street, I took in the selection of shops. There was a little ice-cream parlor next to an old pharmacy with the shadow of the mom-and-pop name hidden behind the new, big-box name. Across the street was a hardware shop with snowblower models parked on the sidewalk, since it was that time of year.

I pulled my coat tighter around myself and followed the warm smell of coffee and pastries floating on the air. My stomach growled in hungry anticipation. I could even feel the sleepy demon inside me stir and sniff the air.

She caught the scent of something else that perked her up. I paused and took note. It wasn't often that she stirred. The demon inside me had been prone to sleeping a lot these days. She slept more than my sister Tamamo locked inside that silly rock—though, I'd heard she'd managed to free herself from the spiritual imprisonment recently.

Good for her.

At least, I'd been smart enough not to get caught by the shrine keepers. When the faith died and the people saw us as what we truly were, demons, they turned on us. I missed the days of luxury and worship, but it wasn't worth risking an eternity trapped in a *rock*.

Ahead, I spotted a small, hole-in-the-wall café. There was no name over the shop, just a welcome sign and the inviting smell of scones. A bell chimed overhead when I stepped inside. It sent a shiver down my spine, as did all cleansing items—intentional or not.

I shook it off, since no simple bell could hold back the likes of an ancient kitsune like myself.

The girls back in Lakesedge had been so close to figuring out what I was.

A man behind the counter, with a wrinkled apron wrapped around his lean waist, lifted his head and locked eyes with me. He offered a lopsided smile as he tossed his hair out of his face. Golden brown curls fell away from his dark eyes. He had a fine layer of hair growing along his jaw, defining the perfect cut of it.

He, too, studied me like he'd never seen anyone quite like myself before. I understood the sentiment; small towns in New England weren't all that diverse. I stood out like a sore thumb in a lot of small towns.

With one foot poised ready to run, I waited for him to reveal his true colors. Would he scowl at me and ask me to leave?

But that lopsided grin widened, revealing wolf-like canines in his smile. The spark in his eye warmed as he welcomed me inside. My heart pattered at the invitation.

Why did this mess of a man make me feel so unsteady? Was it the unexpected warmth? Was it the devilish way he watched me, like he had some wild intentions?

I stepped into the narrow café. It wasn't nearly as large as the one I'd owned back in Lakesedge, but it smelled so much better. The counter ran all the way to the back of the narrow café, and every inch of the counter space was covered in different pastries and treats. Behind him, on the counter against the wall, was the familiar espresso machine and the rack of assorted syrups that people now wanted in their coffees.

While I could remember the days when a simple espresso was the height of coffee culture, I didn't shy away from the sweet new delicacy of sugary lattes. They were

indulgent, and I wanted to experience everything good in this world if I had to be stuck here.

“What can I get for you today?” the man asked with a surprisingly bright voice.

I’d expected some sort of husky allure, but his tone was more jovial, more...playful. My heart sputtered unexpectedly again. All of a sudden, my tongue was too thick for my mouth. I stumbled over even the most basic of words.

“I’d like a c-c-croissant and a la-latte.”

What had I become? A fawning woman infatuated with a man she barely knew? I wasn’t a princess from a kid’s movie. This wasn’t like me. What had this man done to turn me so completely upside down?

“A plain latte?” he asked. “Not very often than someone wants an unflavored drink. Would you like a suggestion? I’ve been playing with flavors lately, and I have something new you might want to try.”

He perked up excitedly as he spoke. A new light filled his eyes, like he truly loved what he did. Rapt, I watched him explain his peanut butter cup latte with excited fervor.

I wasn’t the biggest lover of peanut butter, but I couldn’t deny the man’s enthusiasm. When I agreed to the drink, he spun and began throwing everything together for it. The espresso machine roared its siren song while the man chatted about his day.

“You wouldn’t believe the morning I’ve had. Picked up a bag of flour only to rip it on the giant mixer. Flour. *Everywhere*. I’m finding it in orifices I didn’t even know I had. At this point, I’m kind of afraid I’m going to go home, wash my ass, and find it in the cracks.”

I snorted at the unexpected story. The world became a little brighter. The colors around me saturated, deepening as I breathed in. I hadn’t realized just how gray the world had become of late until color returned. Stunned, I found myself staring in renewed awe at the assortment of pastries all across the covered counter.

When I followed the man to the check out portion of the counter, the pastry bag was a heavier than I expected. I tilted my head curiously, but he just grinned. The total on the register seemed less than it should have been, if I’d done my math correctly.

“What’s going on here? Do...do you not think I can afford it?” I locked eyes with him.

When a light flared in them, I realized I was talking to a shifter. Why I hadn’t noticed it before, I had no idea. The hairy, muscle bound arms should have been enough, not to mention the sharper than usual canines.

Still, I held his gaze. I wasn’t a pushover shifter ready to be submissive for the first male with a big cock. Though... I admit, I did glance down to see what kind of package he offered, but it was hidden behind his work apron.

“Whoa, whoa!” He held his hands up. A jovial smile still upturned the corners of his mouth. “I just thought you were pretty, and a pretty woman deserves an extra treat.”

His words slammed into the side of my head rather unexpectedly. It wasn’t something I’d expected.

Hunter

The woman seemed stunned. Her hooded eyes went wide, and her perfect pink lips parted into the shape of a small O. I couldn’t help but stare. She was almost my height, but I liked that in a woman. I didn’t have to fold myself in half to wrap around her.

Though, I shouldn’t have been thinking of anything like that. I barely knew this lady. She probably thought I was a weirdo at this point. I’d tried to slip her a heart-shaped cookie because I wanted to do something nice for her...but it’d backfired in the weirdest way.

“Trust me,” I fumbled through my words. Why should she trust me? I was a stranger. Nothing I said made a lick of sense, but I forged forward anyway. “I’m not the kind of guy to just offer up charity...I mean, that’s not what I meant. It’s just that I wasn’t going to assume anything.”

Her lips curled into a soft heart-shape that melted my thoughts once again. I couldn’t keep it together around her. I knew a pretty woman could destroy me, but I didn’t know it could happen this fast.

Licking my lips, I decided to shoot my shot. “Would you like to meet me for dinner later?”

Her smile fell. “Actually, I’m just passing through town.”

My heart fell to the floor where it lay in a pathetic heap. I gave a solemn nod like it was all good even though I could feel my beast thrashing inside me. It'd been so excited for the chance to feed this woman.

Already, my beast wanted to take care of her. It wanted to do everything in its power to make her happy.

I had to remind the creature that we were out of time anyway. There was no point.

I glanced down at the old watch on my wrist. It didn't tell the time, or I should say: it didn't match the clock on the wall. Instead, the watch ticked down the time I had left. The long hand of the hour slowly inched towards my inevitable doom.

It was my own fault, really. I'd made a decision, and now I had to live with it. Though, when I stole a glance at the tall, elegant woman leaving my café, I couldn't help but yearn for a little more time.

Giselle had warned me. She'd made it very clear that I would meet my fated mate before the end. When I sold my years to her in the form of a fate thread, she'd promised many great things. So far, they'd all come true. I lived without a Pack all up in my business. I had my own café, even.

Now, I got to meet someone who could possibly be my fated mate. It was a shame we couldn't spend the rest of our days together, but a deal was a deal. Giselle owned my fate thread. Whoever this tall, elegant woman was, I hoped she could find someone else to love her as much as she deserved.

Of course, my beast snarled and gnashed its teeth at the idea of anyone else's hands on the woman. That's how I knew she had to be the one. My beast was feral, but it wasn't always like this.

Curious, I stepped outside. Though I looked up and down the street, I saw no signs of the elegant woman. She'd vanished without so much as a hint...no, that wasn't right. I could still smell her on the air. The scent of her coffee lingered, but beneath that I caught the wild, almost floral scent of the supernatural creature inside her.

My heart picked up pace. I inhaled deep and fought my beast's urge to run off in search of her. Though the beast's claws dug into my soul, I managed to hold my core firm and keep the thing locked inside me.

A quick glance at the sky told me that I was pushing my luck. The moon hovered in the soft blue daytime sky. A halo of red circled the nearly full planet. The sight of it sent a shiver down my spine.

Of course, another red moon was on the rise. I couldn't catch a break.