

HUNTER

I threw the picnic basket against the side of my truck and watched the contents fly through the air. Sliced meats splattered on the asphalt. Bread shattered and crumbled against the ground. Fruits were reduced to pieces.

This was what I got for making a deal with a witch. I'd craved just a little bit of happiness before my fateful end. With a life so damned full of pain and suffering, I'd thought that I was making the right choice. I would get a taste of what it meant to live before I had the chance to hurt anyone.

As it was, Thor thought he needed to make regular visits to keep me in check. My beast was going off the rails, and I had no real way of containing it.

Right now, all it wanted was to hunt down Audra and stay by her side. She clearly wanted a moment alone. We hadn't known each other long enough for our lives to be so entangled. I couldn't help but wonder why she'd reacted this way to Giselle's presence.

Was it because Giselle threatened to expose what Audra really was? She and Thor seemed to know one another. Could I call him and ask? Probably not, as he'd warned me to stay away from her as well.

Giselle's warning I could understand. The witch feared that I was seeking help to escape my contract since I'd been avoiding her calls. However, Thor's warnings had been unprompted. He had no real stake in my life. The man only wanted to help, and so his words came from a place of honesty.

I stared at the splattered remains of what could have been a picnic and mourned the ruined afternoon. Rage pumping through my body, I yanked on the truck's doorhandle and snapped it off completely. A curse slipped out from between my lips.

I would have to get that fixed. Again.

In the meantime, I ran my hands over my face as I went to the passenger side of the truck and crawled over to the driver's seat. It wasn't the first time I'd had to clamber through my truck like that, but perhaps it would be the last.

My head fell back. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine a life that didn't have to end so soon. In this daydream, I'd never been born under a bad moon. I'd had parents who cared and a fated mate I could do right by. The dream devolved little by little until Audra was the face that I woke up next to.

I could see her hair splayed out over the pillows so clearly, as if she were right next to me. If I reached out to touch her cheek, I would be able to feel the silken softness of her skin. In my daydream, the world was still dark. Audra and I had a few moments together before the sun rose, before I had to get to work at a café that wasn't just a nameless hole in the wall.

A beleaguered sigh punched its way out of me. I dragged my head up and forced myself out of the impossible dream. What was the point in lingering if it would never come true? There was no undoing the circumstances of my birth. I knew there could be no fated mate out there for a beast like me.

I turned the key in the ignition and ambled out of the little parking lot. I barely made it out of the park before a glow in the woods caught my attention. Since there was no one else here on this mild winter day, I slowed to a halt on the side of the narrow road and peered between the naked trees.

There, in the distance, stood a beast unlike any I'd ever laid eyes on before. It bore the shape of a fox, but it was almost as large as my wolf. The beast's body glowed from the inside, shedding light on everything dismal and gray around it. Nine tails flicked the air, letting me know that this wasn't just any fox—as if the light didn't already say that.

I'd never seen anything like it in my life before. It was so hard to tell if this was a spirit crossing over from one plane of existence to another, a fae beast I should run from, or an omen of things to come. If it were an omen, what did it mean? I couldn't tell with the way things had been going.

Since I had no intention of upsetting such a beautiful creature, I put the truck into drive once more and rolled away from the park, leaving everything that'd happened there in the rearview mirror.

As shameful as it was to admit, I was halfway home with dad-rock music blasting away my thoughts when the realization struck me. The epiphany hit me so hard that I had to pull over on the highway. For a moment, I sat there staring into the distance with my hands still stuck to the wheel.

The beast in the woods was Audra.

I slapped my hand to my forehead and grimaced. I was painfully slow at times. There was no excuse for how long it'd taken for me to put one and one together. The equation didn't take much brain power.

Audra claimed she needed time alone and that she would be able to get back to town just fine without me. Then I'd come upon a magical beast glowing the same color as her eyes had been back at the café. Was I really this slow?

With a groan, I let my head fall against the steering wheel.

She was beautiful in every form. The woman had me captivated. If I had to guess, I'd say she was a kitsune, a fox demon from Japan. That was about all I knew of them, and I didn't really have anyone to call to ask for more information.

I wished there was time to learn. If I could wake beside her every morning, kiss her forehead, bring her pastries and coffee...but I couldn't, so there was no point in letting myself imagine.

This was the end. Giselle was using every available opportunity to remind me. I'd made the deal to give her the rest of my fate thread, and there was no backing out on it now. I couldn't rewind time and warn myself to never sign the contract. Feats like that just didn't exist.

"You always were a dumbass," I said to myself.

I put the truck back into drive once again only to find Baba waiting on the front steps once I got home.

"What did you do to that poor woman?" Baba whacked my knee with her cane once I was within reach.

I hissed and jumped back as pain flared hot across my knee. "What are you talking about, you old hag?"

She flung her hand up towards the apartments on the second floor. "Ms. Miura came home looking *devastated*! I know you had something to do with it because the two of you have been dancing around one another. So, what did you do? Did she find out you're an accursed idiot who sold his soul to a grimy, grubby little bitch?"

"Don't you mean witch?"

“I would never associate my kind with the likes of *Giselle*.” Baba spit on the ground like Giselle’s name left a bad taste in her mouth.

My shoulders sank. Baba wasn’t wrong. At the same time, I was a little surprised Audra made it home before I did. When she said she had a way to get back, she really meant it.

“I…” Though I was about to say *I didn’t do shit*, I knew it was a lie. Instead, I went with: “I fucked up.”

Baba snorted. “No shit. You really are a lost cause.”

I bristled. “Then why are you trying to interfere in my life? If I’m such a problem, you can save yourself the trouble and go bother someone else for a change. I don’t need you poking and prodding all the time if you’re just going to treat me the same way my father did.”

For a brief instant, a bit of sanity returned to Baba’s face. She seemed stricken, a wealth of consciousness in her eyes revealing the depths of guilt she felt until her sanity vanished like a wisp of smoke in the air.

Her nose wrinkled. “I don’t do things the easy way, boy. You’re going to learn that. Every step forward is going to feel like nails on your soles, but that’s the only way anyone ever gets out.”

“Gets out?” I raised a brow.

She huffed and hawed, but I got the sense that she didn’t have anything else to say. Her thoughts had been shared, and she would not elaborate even if those thoughts made no damn sense.

I shook my head, spun around, and ambled away from the house. My beast paced inside me. It wanted me to go upstairs and check on Audra, but I had a feeling she didn’t want to see me yet. I didn’t know why, if our lives meant nothing to one another.