

AUDRA

Hunter never came home that night. I knew because I stayed up and listened for the sounds of his return. Anxiety crackled in my chest until I finally passed out from exhaustion. It'd been so long since I'd last let my demon out that it'd taken more energy than I'd expected.

In the morning I learned that Hunter still wasn't home. I refused to wait around for him, so I dressed and set out to find him. There was no way that I was going to let him simply walk away from me after this.

It wasn't that I loved him. I barely knew him. Love was a concept I'd never experienced before, but I knew that this feeling tingling in my chest couldn't be it.

The door to the café was unlocked once again. This time, Thor was nowhere to be seen. I let out a sigh and realized just how tense I'd been. Thor had reminded me of all the ways I struggled to connect in this world.

In my eyes, I'd been doing good for the community back in Lakesedge. The girls had rough paths, but I'd done everything in my power to ease that for them without making myself the center of their stories. I didn't want to lead anyone ever again. I was not a Pack Alpha or a fae queen.

I was just a woman looking for a reason to live.

The smell of butter and yeast floated out of the kitchen in the back of the café. It pulled me deeper until I found Hunter working at the counter. He had his sleeves rolled up and his hands deep in some sort of dough that clung to his fingers.

He didn't look up when I stepped into the kitchen. "Morning."

His terse greeting made me want to backpedal. The single word threatened to shove me out of the room and back onto the street. I half-turned, ready to leave.

He stopped kneading the sticky dough and sighed. "Don't leave."

Now his words confused me. The mixed messages between his lips and the rest of his body were not helping. He still seemed distraught. Perhaps it had something to do with the limited number of days he had left, though I didn't know how to bring that up just yet.

There was still a witch somewhere in town that I could easily take a bite out of. I had a feeling she would taste worse than Baba Yaga, but it would be worth it just to save Hunter from this fate.

But first, I wanted a bit of time in his presence. If he wanted me, that is.

Why was I being so meek? It was like my heart really was on the line. I cradled it and protected it from any possible rejection as if I expected something more than friendship from Hunter.

“Come here,” he said, waving me over with sticky hands.

“If you touch me with that dough on your fingers...” I warned, though I didn't finish my statement.

Hunter laughed. His face finally lit up. He tilted his head in my direction as a lopsided grin took over his lips. With a renewed skip in his step, he turned, washed his hands, and rifled through a stack of hats before passing one to me.

“Put that on and wash your hands. I'm going to teach you to fold and cut biscuits today.”

I did as he ordered and went to stand beside him. Hunter rolled out the dough he'd been working on and proceeded to fold it in half like a piece of paper.

“Why are we layering it like this?” I asked.

“This is how you get those flaky layers. Not only will the butter melt and leave pockets, but folding it like this helps make the pockets bigger. We need to work quickly, though. If our hands melt the butter, then we lose everything we worked for.” Hunter's hand grazed my hip as he moved around me to grab a massive baking sheet.

He handed me a knife and asked me to cut the biscuits into squares. I asked him if he trusted me with a knife.

“With my life.” Then, as if he moved without thinking, he kissed the top of my head before heading off to the parchment paper roll on the wall.

I stood there, stunned. Several thundering heartbeats passed before I made myself move once again. My breath turned shallow, and my heart never quite recovered. With shaking hands, I managed to cut shapes that somewhat resembled squares.

Hunter returned and quickly placed the uncooked biscuits onto the baking tray. “These will have to go into the fridge for a little while. We want to make sure that butter is nice and cold.”

I cocked my head. Perhaps it was the way his gentle kiss had scrambled my thoughts, but that didn’t make any sense to me. And I voiced it.

Hutner gave a half shrug. “A lot of people call baking a science, but I still think it’s a kind of witchcraft, too. I’m sure if we got online and looked into the reason behind it, then we’d understand. But I don’t know if I want to ruin the magic of it yet.”

There was just enough whimsy in his statement to make me smile. I shook my head and asked if there was anything else for me to do. Even if I wasn’t the best cook, I could definitely clean.

Hunter grabbed a messy notebook from the shelf and slapped it down onto a clean spot on the counter. “I want to teach you all of my recipes. That way at least someone has them for after...”

After he’s gone.

He didn’t have to say it. The words still managed to hang in the air like a bad omen about to ruin our lives. I couldn’t stop thinking of the soft kiss he’d planted on my head, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

An ache pierced my heart with a pain I’d never felt before in my thousand years on this plane. It stole my breath and made my knees tremble in fear.

I didn’t want a world without this wolf man in it.

I cursed under my breath because I knew this was the beginning of the end for me, as well. Perhaps we could go down in a glorious blaze together.

Or, I could head out, find that witch, and devour her before she got the chance to lay a single finger on Hunter. Even then, though, I would have to come to terms with his eventual death.

He wasn’t immortal. Not as far as I knew.

This wasn't love. It couldn't be. Though I'd never experienced it before, I couldn't imagine I would fall in love with a man I'd known for all of three days. It should take far more time and effort than that. While Hunter was sweet and gentle and the kind of person that I wanted to learn more about, he wasn't my true love.

I wanted to ask him why he wanted me to learn his recipes, but we both knew. It wasn't like I could ask him why he'd sold his soul to a witch when I, too, wanted my time on this earth to end.

Instead, I wandered away as Hunter flipped through his notebook for another recipe. While meandering, I found a stack of ripped envelopes, their contents sitting haphazardly on the counter. I noticed, through nothing more than a cursory glance, the bars of red ink on almost every letter.

These were warnings.

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Hunter was still distracted. He seemed to be mumbling to himself, which I waved off as a conversation with his wolf. Why? I wasn't about to ask.

With him distracted, I flipped through the stack of letters and found that they were all overdue notices. Almost every bill associated with the café was overdue: electricity, rent, heat. I bit the inside of my cheek. It shouldn't have surprised me with how few customers I'd seen throughout the days I'd been here.

The café didn't even make enough income to pay for the most basic of bills. And yet, Hunter was here every day, toiling in flour and sugar and coffee grounds. To him, this must have been a labor of love.

Or, I thought, as I looked back to see his eyes glowing with the light of his untamed wolf, this was a way for him to calm the beast. Busy hands led to the calmest of minds.

I could help him. In my thousand-year life, I'd learned to be good with finances. I had a number of bank accounts across the world, each accruing their own interest as I slowly added to them. It would be a drop in the bucket to pay off these bills.

A shadow passed over me. I assumed it was Hunter, so I quickly came up with an excuse to be in this corner. But the chill that raced up my spine warned me that the shadow wasn't right.

The darkness on the wall pulled together into a fleshed-out shape. Long, pointed fingers pulled free of the wall and rushed towards me. I yelped in surprise and jumped back. Spirit fire rushed from me and climbed over the shadow's clawed hands.

It howled in pain and reared back. Now fully free of the wall, the spindly goblin-faced creature danced in pain and tried to put out the spirit flames.

“What the hell?” Hunter appeared at my side.

He stepped in front of me and put an arm out to push me back. I didn't argue with him when more of the creatures started to step out of the dark shadow clinging to the wall. Their clawed, chicken-like feet scrabbled against the stainless-steel counters. They dug their claws into the walls and climbed like bugs scurrying away from the light.

I spun and put my back to Hunter's. He leaned into me as if he needed to feel me to know I was still there. With my spirit flame coursing along my skin, I pointed a finger at the nearest shadow and flicked my thumb like the hammer of a gun.

Flame shot out and slammed into the creature. The shadow thing screamed in terror and clawed at its own face in an attempt to put the flames out. The others ran away from my view after seeing what I could do to their friend.

I realized, too late, that they didn't run away from me. They were running *towards* Hunter. They leapt onto him. Shadow creatures grabbed at his arms and legs. He snarled and kicked them off, but more rushed from the shadows.

They wanted him for some reason.

What were these things? Where did they come from?

I knew the answer, but there were more pressing matters at the moment.

Hunter growled, his mouth filling with sharp wolf's teeth. He grabbed at a shadow with his half-shifted hand and crushed the thing's head in his grasp. It crumbled into wisps of shadow and vanished from sight.

“What do I do?” I asked Hunter.

He wasn't really in the best position to answer. He kicked out his leg and shook off a number of shadow goblins. More clambered onto him. They rose in a wave and tried to lift him off his feet. They were going to take him if I didn't do something.

Hunter

This was just my luck. Honestly, I should have seen this coming.

The creatures dug their claws into my skin and filled my body with a white-noise sensation where they pierced me. I kept moving, though. Even as my limbs started to fall asleep and go numb, I knew that if I stopped, then they would win and carry me off.

I couldn't let that happen. Audra was right here, and I wanted to make the most of my time with her.

She stood, eyes wide and hand curled into the shape of a gun. She bit her lower lip. Her gaze darted from creature to creature.

I grabbed one by the top of its head and tossed it into the air. Audra saw her chance and raised her finger-gun. A burst of ethereal pink flames shot from her fingertip and decimated the little creature in the air. It almost made me laugh, so I grabbed another and did it again.

We kept shot-putting the shadows until their number dwindled. Audra's shoulders sagged, her breath almost ragged. I took the last of the creatures and dashed them against the wall. Though their numbers had been many, they'd been too small to really be a problem.

Finally, there was only one standing on the counter. It hunched its shoulders and lowered its head. The creature's lips split apart, and Giselle's voice came out of it.

"You can't keep running, Hunter."

My mouth was too full of teeth never meant for a human jaw. I couldn't speak even if I wanted to. Rage burst inside my chest like the last fuck I had left to give. I snarled and reared back. My fist crashed through the thing like it was made of nothing but air.

"I'm really tired of hearing her voice," Audra said, a little too winded for my taste.

The beast inside me clawed at my skin. It wanted out. It wanted to go destroy everything Giselle held dear if only because she'd put Audra in harm's way. Giselle had no right to keep pestering me like this, especially when it put others at risk.

I was the only one Giselle had any right to. And if she kept this up, then I would make sure she got nothing.

That meant living, though. And the way the beast tore at my insides in a rabid attempt to escape and cause destruction, I wasn't sure if that was a good thing. I staggered out of the kitchen without a word. The frigid air of the walk-in cooler slapped me in the face. I pulled the door shut behind me and fell to my knees.

The beast in me howled to be free. We couldn't let Giselle keep this up. She had no right. My life didn't belong to her yet. If she got Audra hurt...there would be hell to pay.

The beast stopped listening to reason. It saw only red. The taste of blood coursed along my tongue. My stomach clenched. There was no winning this fight anymore.