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AUDRA

I quietly stepped up to the walk-in cooler and pressed my ear to the door. I didn't have to. These things weren't exactly soundproof. When Hunter howled, his wolf in his voice, I jumped back.

That fight had brought him too close to the edge with his beast. That's why the woman kept bothering him. She wanted him to remember his struggle so that he didn't turn back on his deal. I felt a bit of kinship with Hunter.

Maybe we weren't the same, but our paths had led us places that we didn't exactly like.

"Hunter?" I asked at the door.

I heard the growl of a wolf inside. With a sigh, I pulled the walk-in cooler door open and found a massive wolf hunkered in the small space.

"Get out of there," I said without hesitation. "You keep making a mess of this place."

The café had to be Hunter's favorite space. This was where he went whenever his mind was a mess or whenever his beast put up a fight. So, I had a better chance dealing with him here than anywhere else.

An idea struck me.

I went to the fridge and pulled out the sheet of biscuits we'd made earlier. I was grateful they hadn't been kept in the cooler, because Hunter would have knocked them over for sure.

Locking eyes with the beast, I said, "I need you to give Hunter back so I know how long to bake these for."

Was I holding the biscuits hostage? Yes. Was I also praying the beast knew enough to not let me burn them? Yes.

The wolf stared at me with the least amount of amusement in its eyes. It thumped its tail against the floor in annoyance as it glared at me. I went to the oven and cranked the heat to see if I could push it a little more.

The whine that it let out as it flattened its body against the floor was almost laughable. It was like the beast actually cared about Hunter. That wasn't the way Hunter made it sound. He'd described his beast as a massive, destructive monster with no thoughts of anyone other than itself.

The creature watching me was different. It arched its brows in soft frustration, pleading me to stop my madness. Again, it whimpered a wordless plea for me to stop.

I shook my head. "Give Hunter back, or I burn the biscuits. I mean...*oh, no. I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm so helpless. I need a big strong shifter man to help me.*"

The wolf huffed a breath out of its nose. I laughed.

"If you thought I would let you have your way, you really don't know me all that well yet. Thor warned you to stay away from me for a reason." I had to set the tray down because my hands were still shaking.

Honestly, I wanted to bake the biscuits because I desperately needed something to soothe my nerves. I doubted Hunter had a bottle of bourbon on the premises. Carbs would be the next best thing.

There was no way that the café would open its doors to the public today. We would have to spend another day cleaning now that Hunter had lost control to his beast once again. I didn't mind. It meant that I would have him all to myself, as selfish as that was.

I glanced at the pile of unpaid bills on the counter. He needed as much business as he could get, though. If the café stayed closed several days in a row, he would lose out on the income he needed to keep the lights on.

My lips twisted to the side. I turned to the wolf and put my hands on my hips. The demon aura slipped out of me even though I had no intention of turning it on. It wouldn't affect the wolf. I was just frustrated and unable to hide it anymore.

I wanted Hunter, but he kept giving me the beast.

“Why won’t you help him? You have to share the same body. There’s no escaping each other. If you make his life worse, then you’ve only succeeded in making your own life worse.”

The wolf narrowed its eyes at me. It wouldn’t growl, but it was obvious that the creature wasn’t happy with my bold statement. I didn’t care anymore.

“Give him back. We’re not in danger anymore. Honestly, I doubt we ever were. I might have panicked for a moment, but we’re both more than capable of dispatching a few uninvited guests,” I said. “Now, we need to bake these biscuits and get the kitchen cleaned up. Are you going to help me? Or are you going to let me burn everything Hunter worked so hard on?”

Did the beast even understand me? It was huge and otherworldly. If I didn’t know better, I would have said he had a touch of the divine in him. No creature grew to be this large all on its own. I’d lived next to a wolf pack for quite a while. I knew just how large they could get.

The red moon curse made me wonder if he had a bit of the old Norse berserker gene in his shifter line. If I’d been on better terms with Hel, I would have been able to go back to Lakesedge and ask.

The wolf sat back on its haunches and looked down its nose at me. I wanted to flick it in the snout, but I kept my cool. There had to be some way to get the creature to give Hunter back.

I stared down at the tray of biscuits in my hand. I really didn’t want to burn them. My stomach growled greedily, reminding me that I’d expended some energy without bothering to eat today. As a near divine creature myself, I wouldn’t wither away from starvation, but eating to keep up my energy would be nice right about now.

Sighing, I said, “I can’t believe you’re getting me to do this.”

I shoved the biscuits back into the fridge and locked the front door before coming back through the kitchen. I shot the beast a glance over my shoulder. The pink

glow of my demon side peeked through my eyes. The beast perked up at the sight of it.

“Catch me if you can,” I said before shoving through the back exit.

Spirit fire devoured my mortal form in a blaze of pink light. Four paws touched the ground. My kitsune form was smaller this time. Glowing pink petals rained down over my head. When the beast stepped out the café's back exit and set his gaze on me, there was a moment of stunned silence.

I used his awe to turn and run. Darting between brick buildings, I quickly found my way into the woods around town. The spirit fire seared my lungs and turned my muscles hot. It was invigorating, a sensation I hadn't felt since my days back in ancient Japan.

An excited yip left my muzzle. I leapt into the air, coasting over several fallen trees. When I landed, I made a sharp left turn with the hopes that I would be able to shake the beast—not because I wanted to lose him, but because I wanted to exhaust him.

There were other ways to exhaust a man. My demon reminded me that men gave in to the pleasures of the body. They let women suck out their souls and leave them drained for days. The thought brought desire to the front of my mind. Even as my fox form used all of its energy to run, a part of me considered what else we could be doing.

That's not what this was about.

Nothing could happen until the beast gave Hunter back, and I doubted the prospect of sex would be enough to sway the beast's mind. The creature likely had other thoughts, ones that didn't involve me. Right now, it only chased because it craved the hunt.

At least, that's what I told myself.

I realized, as I ran in my kitsune form, that I was getting far more attached to Hunter than I should have been. This was the time that I should have reconsidered my connection to him. There was a deep ache waiting ahead of me if I didn't leave town with my rearview mirror completely detached so I couldn't look back at what I was leaving behind.

Baba wanted me to save him. I saw now why she asked, but I didn't understand why she asked me.

The beast leapt in front of me. It skidded to a halt, its tongue lolling out the side of its massive mouth like it was having a blast. I didn't slow down. The beast's eyes widened. It expected me to stop or turn. By all rights, any other beast would have run away.

Instead, I let my spirit fire burn my form away. My fire coalesced behind him so that I appeared in a burst of flames. I heard the wolf perk up and turn. It was clumsy in the woods. The trees were too cramped, the ground too dry so that every dropped twig and leaf crackled as it moved.

I was letting the beast see far more than I should have. No one on this mortal plane knew this much about me. Everyone who knew me as a kitsune demon was dead and gone save for my remaining kitsune sisters.

Now, Hunter knew what I really was. That was if the beast allowed him to remember any of this. Later, I would ask what he could recall of this situation. For now, I continued to run as if I were escaping the hurt that sat ahead of me.

I didn't leave town like I should have. My feet led me back around to the café's back exit that we'd left unlocked. I changed shape and stepped inside on mortal feet once again.

Hunter

She was stunning.

The little fox glowed with magic.

The beast wanted a taste of her, but not like she was prey. Instead, my mind filled with images of her hips in my hands, the taste of her on my tongue. There, between her legs, I would find peace. I would find the meaning of the world.

The beast pulled back now that it knew she was well and truly safe. The feeling of being unable to protect her had been somewhat misplaced. I yearned for it to be my duty so that I could stand beside her at all times, but Audra was the kind of woman who could handle her own.

She didn't need me as much as I needed her—and I meant that in more ways than one. The craving still sat in the pit of my stomach, holding my core tight, as I walked into the café on two feet once again.

There'd been a few minutes between her return and mine. I grabbed the bag of extra clothes from the storage room, and by the time I dressed and stepped out, Audra sat at a table with a pastry in hand and my stack of bills in front of her. I paused, perplexed and embarrassed.

She took a bite from the pastry in one hand and looked to the phone in her other hand. Where had she kept that? There was no way it'd been on her person while we'd been running in the woods. Or did she have magical pockets in that glowing fox form?

I scratched the back of my head as I approached. Shame heated my cheeks. So many of those bills hadn't been paid in months. I did my best to keep the lights and heat on, but even rent was inching towards an eviction notice.

"You don't have to worry about any of that," I told her as I reached to pull the red-marked stack away from her.

Audra turned a demure smile in my direction. She said nothing as I shoved the bills into my back pocket, never to be seen again.

In a few days, none of it would matter. There was a reason I didn't bother trying. I didn't want to make this café a success then have everyone question where I'd gone after Giselle claimed what was left of my fate thread. I wanted everyone to forget about me so that there was no one left behind to ache for me after I'd gone.

Which meant that I should have left Audra alone. I should have walked away from her. Instead, I went to make her a coffee and sat down opposite her after offering the drink as a thanks for what she'd done earlier.

Audra locked her phone screen, set the phone down, and spun it like she couldn't sit still. The way her lips pursed made me think she had a bit to say but she didn't

know how to say it.

Instead, she shook herself, lifted her head, and smiled reassuringly. I didn't know how to read her. Women were so far outside my realm of experience that her gestures were almost alien to me. I could have asked what was on her mind, but I knew that I needed to distance myself from her, so I left it alone.

Sighing, I leaned back in my seat and let my legs spread wide so that a booted foot was on either side of Audra like a fence warning others to stay away. The café wasn't even open, but I found myself posturing to protect her like the instinct wouldn't entirely go away.

I cocked my head and peered out the front window, almost expecting Giselle to have her face plastered against the glass. She was nowhere to be seen. It would have been easy to blame all of this on her, but my beast had always been hard to control. This

was nothing new; I was just lucky Audra had been here to help this time or I might have trashed my own café again.

Before I could think of anything to break the silence, the café's front door swung open. The sound of a cane clinking against the floor marked Baba's arrival.

"I swore I locked that door," Audra muttered as she glared at Baba's entrance.

I shook my head. There was little anyone could do to hamper Baba's determination. If that old hag wanted something, then she was going to get it.

"I need a Black Forest turnover!" Baba yelled, punctuating her statement with a crack of her cane against the floor.

Audra flung her hand towards the empty pastry case on the counter. "What makes you think there are any pastries at all today?"

Baba's raised a brow and slowly craned her neck to peer at the case. When she lifted her cane to tap it against the glass, I lurched out of my seat and snatched the stick from her hands. She glared at me with the upmost offense, but I had no reason to fear Baba right now.

I was going to die soon. What did it matter if Baba wiped me from the face of the earth right here and now?

My beast snarled and gnashed its teeth.

Audra.

Though I desperately wanted to look back at the woman behind me, I kept my anger pointed at Baba. The beast wanted Audra, but I couldn't build a relationship with her only to leave. It would be cruel, at best.

"I still want a turnover," Baba said, slapping her cane into her palm.

I glanced at my own hand, where the cane should have been. When had she taken it from me? I hadn't even noticed until now.

"If you can't make me a turnover, then you can do something else for me." Baba wiggled her brows—not suggestively, more like she wanted a favor.

"You're no better than the fae," Audra grumbled before burying her face in her hands.

Baba giggled, a sound that turned into a gleeful cackle.

Just like that, the mood in the air changed. It was no longer charged with the omens of things to come and what we couldn't have. Baba's madness had swept in and lightened the mood.

Still, I didn't want to know what else she would ask of me. I had a feeling that if I couldn't make the pastries for her, then she would place a larger-than-life task upon my shoulders, and I didn't have it in me today.

"I'll make you turnovers if you can clean the café," I said to the short woman.

Her lips curled into a devious grin. "Deal."

She tapped her cane on the floor. This time, a burst of magic swept out in all directions. The cleaning supplies picked themselves up like a scene from a kid's movie and started wiping down every surface. A broom swept by and smacked at my ankles until I jumped out of the way.

"It will be done soon enough. Then will I get a Black Forest turnover?" Baba asked.

"Turnovers don't come in Black Forest flavor!" Audra seemed to be on her last straw.

She slapped the table, stood, and marched into the kitchen where she pulled out everything to make a matcha latte. She worked the sifted green tea powder into a frothy grass-colored liquid as if she had a ton of pent-up aggression to get out.

For a moment, I imagined letting her ride that frustration out on top of me. My cheeks warmed. I shook my head, sighed, and ducked back into the kitchen so I could start writing a recipe for Black Forest turnovers.