

# 13

## AUDRA

“He’s not going to be happy when he finds out,” Baba said once we were alone.

I pretended that I couldn’t hear her over the roar of the milk steamer. Instead, I kept my gaze focused on the foaming milk inside the metal container. It’d been ages since I’d had anything matcha, and the craving for a home I hadn’t seen in centuries ran deep in this moment.

It shouldn’t have surprised me that Baba knew what I’d done, even though it’d happened only in the last few minutes.

“He’s going to die,” Baba went on. “You and I both know that. Why invest so much money into someone with no future?”

I paused, stricken by the truth. Over the past few hours, I’d willfully forgotten that Giselle was coming for Hunter’s life. My shoulders slumped. I placed my hands on the counter and considered what I wanted to do next.

“Is this what I’ll become if I live much longer?” I asked Baba.

She snorted. “This is my own, well-woven madness. You can’t just steal my style from me. Go get your own.”

Still, I couldn’t help but fear what would happen to me if I let myself care too much. The taste of flesh and blood sat on the back of my tongue when I considered devouring Giselle.

“She would taste like old mushrooms growing inside an even older boot,” Baba said.

The ancient hag clambered up onto a chair on the other side of the room. She wiggled her booty until she was comfortable and leaned forward on her cane so she could watch me with her oddly bright hawkish eyes.

“Stop staring at me like that,” I snapped.

“Like what?” A Cheshire smile curled over her lips.

“Like you have me under your thumb. I still don’t get what you think you’re up to.”

She laughed. “I’m a fate-weaver. The threads are mine to do as I please with.”

My nose curled. “I’ve met fate-weavers before. It’s a messy hobby. Maybe you should leave that to the gods.”

“Do you really think I haven’t learned how to weave in all the years I’ve been alive? I might be younger than you, but it’s only by a handful of years. The fate-weaver you met barely knew how to tie her own shoes. Little Adeline had no idea what she was doing.” Baba’s voice rose sharply.

“How did you know her name? You know what, I shouldn’t ask.” I poured the matcha tea into the cup of steamed milk and ice and watched the two colors swirl together.

“You let me do what I do best,” Baba said with a nod. “It’s not like you have anything you know how to do best, so I get that you don’t quite understand.”

My eye twitched. Fist clenched around my iced matcha latte, I barely resisted the urge to throw it at her head.

She was right, though. I’d spent so much of my time severing threads and wandering that I had nothing to claim as my own. I had no skills other than manipulation, which should have been dubbed a flaw and not a skill.

I stole a glance at the door to the kitchen. Through the narrow window, I could see Hunter and the smile curling over his face as he worked. He had a smear of flour on his cheek and the front of his shirt.

“You still have a chance to love him,” Baba said quietly.

I recoiled. “No.”

Instead of staying to argue with the old hag, I shoved through the unlocked front door and marched as far away as I could get.

*Hunter*

I knew I’d gotten lost in the process when I emerged from the kitchen only to discover that Audra had disappeared while I’d been gone. Of course, I turned to Baba and asked her what she’d done.

The old woman raised her shoulders in an innocent shrug, though I knew there was nothing innocent about her at all.

“I wanted to spend time with Audra before Giselle comes to skin me,” I grumbled.

“Well, you shouldn’t have signed a contract with Giselle then.” Baba preached like there was a lesson to be learned in this.

There wasn’t. Lessons were only for the living. I’d be gone from this world soon.

Shaking my head, I stepped away. The problem was that I had nowhere to go. I could have gone back to the kitchen to keep working, but there was no point in opening for the day. As it was, most of what I made got donated to local food pantries. While I didn’t mind keeping people fed, it felt pointless when I already donated more than they probably needed.

I wanted to go find Audra, but I got the sense that she needed time on her own. She’d spent the morning taking care of me. I was quickly becoming a burden for her. If she wasn’t battling off Giselle’s shadow servants, then she was bringing me back from the brink of my beast.

I yanked off my apron and threw it to the ground.

“Oh?” Baba asked over her turnover. “Where are you going? I haven’t even placed my coffee order yet.”

“I have a witch to visit. Lock up after yourself when you leave. You’re clearly capable of lock manipulation.” I shoved through the front door.

Did I trust Baba to lock up? Not at all. What was there to steal in my café, though? There hadn’t been time to load the register this morning, so that was blessedly empty still. No one would be able to walk out the door with the espresso machine by themselves; the thing weighed too much. Thieves could take the *Give a Penny, Take a Penny* cup for all I cared.

I needed to tell Giselle to lay off.

She lived on the other side of town in another old manor. This one remained a single household unlike Baba’s renovated manor that’d been broken up into apartments. Here a white quartz driveway was flanked by rose bushes that shouldn’t have been in bloom this time of year. I wondered, as I drove past them, what she’d buried under them to keep them alive all year round.

The truck was barely in park by the time I kicked the door open and got out. The white quartz gravel crunched under my feet as I stomped up to punch the doorbell. I didn't even get that far. The dark door opened before I even made it to the top step of the shallow porch.

Darkness obscured the inside of the foyer. I waited for my eyes to adjust, but the darkness seemed to swallow every source of light. I could only just make out the shape of a rug and a side table inside the door. Everything else was lost in the deep void.

There was no reason to hesitate. What's the worst that could happen? I almost fantasized about losing control to the beast just so I could wreck the inside of Giselle's clearly expensive home. These old manors were pricey, and the upkeep cost more than my café did at start-up.

Inside, the shadows wrapped me in an unexpected chill. I shook it off, but it kept tracing frigid fingers up and down my spine.

"Giselle!" The one word bounced off the walls and scattered between the various curios on the shelves.

She stepped out of the shadows in the middle of a wince. "You don't have to be so loud, puppy."

Bile hit the back of my throat. I fought back the urge to spit out the bad taste her horrible pet name left in my mouth.

Giselle closed the distance between us. She put a hand to my cheek, not like a lover but like an owner come to claim their lost dog. I jerked back, away from her touch. Her eyes narrowed with delight.

While Giselle looked like a cheerleader fresh out of college, she had the eyes of a monster waiting to devour its next victim.

"I'm so glad you've finally decided to pay me a visit," she purred.

I swatted her hand away. "Why would I need to visit you? You already have the contract to my fate thread. My life is yours, no matter what I do."

"Then why are you hanging around the kitsune woman all of a sudden? I can't fathom why you would seek out powers such as Baba Yaga and a demi-goddess if you weren't trying to get out of your contract." She lifted a challenging brow.

“They found me,” I said. And it was true. I hadn’t sought either of them out.

Baba found me and invited me under her roof so I could be her handyman and guard dog. Audra...she stumbled into my life almost by accident.

“I’m exhausted,” I went on. “Do you really think I’d try to find my way out of this? I came to you for a reason, and that hasn’t changed yet.”

*Has it?*

My own thoughts betrayed me. Visions of a future alongside Audra came rushing to mind. I could see her sitting in a slice of sunlight at the front of my café every morning. I could envision her hair on my pillow at night, and how it would smell of blossoms. There was a future that I would give up if I followed Giselle into the dark.

My beast shook itself and dug its claws into my core. For a moment, I was reminded of why I’d signed the contract. But the beast didn’t riot. There was no thrashing, no demand to be let out. The beast simply glared at Giselle and turned its nose up at the rot floating in the air.

Now, with my beast this close to the surface, my eyes sharpened. I could see more lines on Giselle’s face. They lingered at the corners of her mouth, deepened by the concerned scowl overcoming her features. She was aging rather rapidly.

Giselle wanted my fate thread so she could have the years still attached to it for herself. I wondered how many she would reap from my unspent life. Was it five or ten? From the way she acted, it seemed like a whole lot more.

I’d never been all that suspicious of Giselle until now. It seemed rather stupid of me not to look too closely at Giselle’s intentions considering the fact that she bought fate threads. Now I couldn’t help but wonder why she was so desperate to claim mine when it was clear that I was tired of the life I’d been living.

Perhaps she knew that Audra had the ability to sway me towards a life worth living, but it seemed more than that. If I backed out on our contract and found a way to break it, then Giselle would be losing quite a bit. She reeked of desperation.

“Is there no one else that you can prey on?” I asked bitterly. “Just wait until the contract runs out, then you’ll have what you want. It’s only a matter of days. I doubt you’ll fall apart in that time.”

Giselle was aging quickly, but not so fast that she would be gone in a few days.

Her nose wrinkled for a moment, then the frustration vanished, and a smile overcame her face. “I only send reminders so that you don’t forget what you’ve agreed to.”

She ignored my original question. Perhaps there really was no one else for her to feed upon. The town was small, but times were desperate. I felt like now more than ever, people would be fighting to get in line for Giselle’s twisted magic.

Giselle could grant anyone their deepest desire so long as they promised her a portion of their fate thread. That meant men could regrow their lost hair and win a sports car raffle. Women could find their dream job and make enough money to fill their children’s college funds. Giselle could make it happen if you gave her just a little bit.

For whatever reason, Giselle hunted me, instead.

If I asked her what she really gained from my contract, she wouldn’t tell me. I hesitated to give in to her. Even if my unruly beast posed a threat to those around me, I didn’t know if giving in to Giselle would make anything better.

With my luck, she’d resummon me as one of her shadow creatures. I wondered how many of the goblin-like fiends had once been unlucky souls looking for a break in life. Were they all just poor victims of Giselle’s contracts?

She placed a hand on my chest, right over my heart. When she locked eyes with me, hers were narrowed and sharp. “Don’t back out on me now. It’s going to take a lot more than an old witch and a demi-goddess to get you out of this. Besides…”

Giselle paused for a moment. The silence made my heart thump wildly under her hand.

“You risk the lives of everyone around you just by living.” She raised a brow. “If you break my contract, you’re endangering that kitsune lady you’ve been romancing. You’re endangering the town you love so dearly.”

My stomach sank to the floor like she’d taken it in her cruel hand and yanked it out of me. I staggered back. Visions of my wolf’s gnashing teeth ran through my mind. The beast tried to shove through my racing thoughts, but it was drowned out by my father’s cruel words.

*You’re always going to be a problem.*

*Did you think I wanted you after you ripped your mother apart?*

*You came into this world bathed in the blood of the innocent; I know that's how you'll leave, too.*

My throat closed. Like a robot, I turned and walked outside. My muscles refused to give too much, making my body jerky and stiff. It wasn't until I reached the truck that everything gave out all at once.

I put my forearm to the cold truck body and let my head rest against it while I tried to catch my breath. Nothing seemed to work. Dad's voice still rang in my ears. There was no escape, nothing I could do to make it stop.

Only the blessed end would grant me the peace that I desperately craved. This was why I had to go through with it. I'd already killed my own mother. Dad was right. If I lived any longer, the wild beast in me would hurt someone else, perhaps someone I cared about.

I couldn't let that happen. I had to let go of this world and wish it one final goodbye.