

## AUDRA

The floor outside my apartment door creaked with the weight of a full-grown man. I knew it couldn't be Baba. The woman walked as light as a mouse unless she wanted someone to hear her coming—then she slammed her cane with every step.

No, this had to be Hunter. My heart tightened at the thought of him. As I listened, his steps seemed slow and dragging. Before I knew it, I was out of my seat and halfway across the room. I stopped myself at the door and wondered if this was something I should even do.

Fingertips on the doorknob, my breath shuddered uncertainly.

I swallowed and threw the door open. Hunter didn't even raise his head. His keys dangled from his fingers as he slowly raised them to unlock his own door.

For a moment, I held my breath. What if he wasn't in the mood to see me? What if he didn't feel the same way about me that I felt about him? It hurt to see the light drained from his face, to see him so sluggish and empty. If only there was a way that I could help.

Hand clutched to my chest, I finally managed to force out a word. "Hi."

Really? That was it? I'd spent a thousand years on this world, and the sight of one man managed to render me a bumbling fool? I knew several languages, many dead and gone. I could converse with aristocrats and commoners alike, but I couldn't say the right thing to my neighbor.

Despite my obvious lack of charisma, Hunter's lips started to turn upwards in a smile. It didn't get quite as big as I would have liked, but it was a start. Anything was better than the despondency in his eyes before that.

"Would you like to share a drink with me?" I asked hopefully.

When Hunter hung his head, I knew the answer. I'd taken his smile as a sign of change in his mood, as if the sight of me alone could fix everything in his life. I

should have known better. A person's existence couldn't change anything. It was about the effort they put in.

"Not tonight," Hunter said, his voice oddly hollow.

Before he could slip away once and for all, I called out. "Where did you go?"

He paused, door half open so that he could escape if the need arose. "I had to pay someone a visit."

I clenched my jaw. That told me little. Was he saying goodbye to a lover? Was there a family member he hadn't told me about? In that moment, I realized just how little I knew about Hunter and his life. I'd been acting as if we were close, but he and I had only just met.

What did that say about the chemistry between us? If the few days we'd had together felt like a lifetime, then that had to mean something. But Hunter didn't have another lifetime left. He refused to tell me what was left, but I couldn't imagine it was much.

And that meant I wanted to spend every moment with him. Even if it meant destroying my heart in the process.

"My door is open if you change your mind," I said so that I wouldn't press the clear boundary he'd set up.

The man's lips flattened into a grim line. His gaze remained distant as he nodded.

The end of everything was hot on our heels. Each of us thought about the blessed silence of the end, but perhaps there was more that we should have been looking for.

As I stepped back into my own apartment, and the light through the stained-glass windows took on a vibrant hue, I realized that I wasn't quite done here. I had a renewed interest in the world. I wanted to wake every morning to the smell of bacon and pastries. I wanted to sink into a hot drink while I watched Hunter roll up his sleeves and bury his meaty hands in dough.

"Fuck," I said under my breath, even though I knew I wasn't going to be able to any time soon. "Is it too late?"

A knock on the door behind me snapped me out of the reverent thoughts swirling through my mind. I jumped, but there was little reason to answer right away. Hunter clearly wanted alone time, so that meant the person at the door had to be Baba.

Who else could it be?

I opened the door to Hunter's disgruntled countenance. He had a forearm braced against the door frame and a wrinkle in his nose that told me he was absolutely frustrated.

Of course, I stood my ground. It wasn't like I'd done anything to deserve this contempt. So, I figured it was meant for someone else.

"Why did you waste your money on my bills?" he asked.

Okay, so it *was* meant for me.

Straightening my spine, I lifted my chin. "Why not?"

He shoved away from the doorframe with a ragged sigh and flung his hand in the air. "Because they're not going to matter in a few days! That's why. I don't need you wasting money on me that you could have used to keep yourself safe."

"Why would I need it to keep myself safe?" I cocked a brow because I wasn't quite following.

"Money is safety these days. It means you can afford food, shelter, medical care."

A smile reached my lips. I shouldn't have grinned like this, but I couldn't help it when my chest turned warm and the wings of butterflies grazed the inside of my stomach.

"So, what you're telling me is that you care about me? That's so sweet of you." I bit my lip and waited for his flustered response.

Instead, Hunter pushed through the doorway and closed the space between us. I backed up, but an end table bumped the backs of my knees and drew me to a stop. The warmth in my chest turned to a fire when Hunter looked down at me with the light of his beast in his eyes.

He cupped my cheek as our breaths mingled. With a growl in his voice, he said, "Of course, I care about you."

When Hunter tilted his head in one direction, I mirrored him and tilted mine in the other direction. He was so close I could almost feel the heat of his lips on mine.

All this? Over a few paid bills?

I fisted my hands in the front of his shirt. I would pay as many as I could if it meant that I could see this reaction each time. I wanted him to run to me, to shove me against a wall so that I could feel nothing other than his body against mine.

A growl rumbled in my own chest. The fox demon part of me greedily anticipated what would come next.

“I can’t do this to you,” Hunter said, his breath one with mine.

I gripped his shirt tighter. “My days have been long and utterly empty. For once in my life, color has returned. I’ve lived without it for so long that I completely forgot how beautiful it could be.”

A slight smile curled across his lips as his gaze dropped down to mine. “How can you forget beauty when you see it in the mirror every day?”

*Fuck this. Fuck it. Fuckhim.*

I yanked him close and claimed his mouth for my own.

Hunter’s hands flew to my waist. He yanked me close so that our bodies melded together even though there were frustrating layers of clothing in the way. I yearned for more of his heat, more of his desire.

Was this lust? Or was it the beginning of love?

I had to remind myself I barely knew him, but there was a deep hunger that begged me to learn everything there was to know about him. If I didn’t crawl inside him and turn over every stone until I understood every glittering facet of this man, then my life was not one well lived.

That had to be love, right?

I’d never known anything like this feeling before.

When Hunter’s tongue flicked my lips, a trill of delight sparked in my chest. I opened for him as my hand slid around to the back of his neck. Then, suddenly, he gasped and pulled back.

His chest heaved. Eyes alight with his beast, he stared down at me in what could only be described as shock. The way his lips trembled raised so many questions in my mind. I wasn’t ready to pull away, but I knew that if he moved then I would have to stand my ground when I desperately wanted to give chase.

I wasn't ready to let go. The yearning for more nearly devoured me. This could be it, all I ever tasted of him.

Hunter didn't run away. He sighed and let his forehead fall gently against mine.

"Stop helping me," he said.

I growled and almost dug my nails into his skin. The demon in me came dangerously close to consuming my every thought. Even now, my magic flowed through my veins like crackling fireworks in the night sky. The magic popped with a low and bright fury that threatened to set everything ablaze.

How could he tell me that after experiencing the chemistry that we could have?

"I'm not worth saving. I need you to understand that. I came into this world bathed in innocent blood, and I'm determined to go out before I find myself in innocent blood again."

Hunter stepped away, vanishing through the still-open door before I could even think to argue. My breath shuddered at the words that haunted my living space. They hung in the air and turned it heavy like hot humidity.

I swallowed and fought the urge to run after him. Everything in me screamed. I could save him. I could help him.

But there was no helping those who didn't want to be saved.

Unless, I paid Giselle a visit.

I licked my sharpened kitsune teeth and considered devouring a witch tonight. It'd been centuries since anyone witnessed the sheer size of my true form. Did I have it in me anymore? Tonight was a good night to find out.

*Hunter*

I bit back a scream that tried to rip out of my throat. Need and hunger and lust raged inside me. It was more than the beast could handle. I could feel it, too large under my skin. Fur and claws threatened to break free. The pressure on my skin was too much.

Had I stayed in there a moment longer, I wasn't sure what would have happened. I didn't want to hurt her. It was the last thing I wanted. This was just a reminder that I couldn't be trusted. My control was too slippery.

Jaw trembling, my teeth elongated. The pain burned its way from my chin and up into my skull. I winced and tried to fight it back, but my knees buckled anyway.

I clutched the sides of my head and begged for freedom. The beast did, too. It shoved its way out of my body for a second time today. This was more than usual. I could feel everything I'd worked so hard for crumbling in my grasp. My life, my control, what little bit of time I had left...it all fell apart as the beast took it from me.

I cursed the horrid creature. There were shifters out there who never had to worry about such things. There were shifters with simple lives and fated mates. Here I was, crouched on the floor in a heaving mess because I could not keep this monster inside me any longer.