

AUDRA

The witch was easy to track down. She left a particular scent in the air, and I had just enough animal spirit in me to be able to sniff her out. So, approximately twenty minutes later, I stood outside the wrought iron fence surrounding a moderately nice Victorian manor. The crushed white quartz leading up to the drive seemed to glow in the dim light of dusk.

I glanced back at the setting sun and glimpsed the heavy moon lingering in the sky. My power sparked under my skin again. There was a demon in me. I was that demon.

Some days, I pushed that part of myself so far away that I felt like two entities. Today, I let the power flow unhindered. I felt whole for the first time in a long while. My hair swept down to my ankles. I pulled an old hair stick from my coat pocket and swept part of my hair up and pinned it in place to keep it out of my face before entering.

I didn't bother knocking. I wasn't here to play nice. This witch and her machinations would get devoured today, once and for all.

But she was waiting for me. I stepped one foot past the threshold and froze. Not because I didn't want to move forward, but because I *couldn't*. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the seal paper with black ink brush strokes.

Giselle had done her homework. And now, I was stuck in her trap.

My lips curled. Fury simmered in my veins. A roar of rage filled my chest. Spirit fire brightened the air until I could see Giselle's conniving grin the corner of the room. She thought she'd won, but I had news for her.

The spirit fire in the air grew hotter and brighter until the wavering heat burned away the seal attached to the door. As the ashes of it fell to the floor, I straightened and brushed myself off. With the flick of my hand, I pushed my hair back and raised my chin so I could look Giselle in the eye.

She didn't seem afraid, though. I thought there was a moment of wary fright in the lines of her face, but it was gone in an instant. She gave me an appreciative nod.

“I applaud the attempt,” I said.

“There’s plenty more where that came from.” Giselle waved another paper seal between her fingers.

With a roll of my eyes, I snapped my fingers and the seal went up in pink flames. Giselle’s brows furrowed. Other than that, her expression remained impassive. I had a feeling that I would not get what I came for tonight.

There was a strong possibility that my upper hand had been lost when we met at the beach and she clocked what I was. She’d done her research since then. Devouring her would be difficult without knowing exactly what the witch had up her sleeves.

The seals were a nuisance, at best. But if she’d found the seals, that meant she might know more. I glanced around for binding ropes. When I sniffed the air, I sought the telltale sign of incense mixed with ink. I found neither rope nor incense, which boded well for my endeavors.

“So, Hunter really does want to escape his contract?” Giselle clicked her tongue disapprovingly. “I’m going to have to expedite that one, it seems. You see, there’s a segment in the contract that states if you seek to escape, I can claim the remaining fate thread at any time.”

“I see you were careful with the fine print of your deals,” I said. “He didn’t ask me to come here. There is nothing that proves my presence here tonight was his doing. I simply do not like knowing that you walk this earth. In fact, I find it rather repulsive to know you exist.”

The shadows in the room rippled and pulled away from the walls. Creatures with long, thin limbs stepped out of the dark. Their spindly hands dragged along the floor because their limbs were too much to be contained in the manor’s foyer.

Tonight, I held nothing back. My teeth sharpened when I grinned. Pink light glowed from my eyes and illuminated the inhuman creatures slowly stalking towards me. In a flash, pink spirit fire erupted throughout the room. The creatures howled. They scabbled at their skin as the spirit fire tore them apart.

I shook my head. “I thought you learned that your tricks will not work here tonight. You claim to be a quick learner, and yet you fumble with every step. There is a reason you will never achieve power even close to mine.”

Giselle's eyes widened like she was trying to keep her jaw dropping on the floor. The sheer weight of my audacity should have been enough to level her, but it seemed she had the resolve to keep herself upright.

I could change that.

The pink spirit fire grew brighter until there was no room for shadows in the foyer. Giselle staggered back from the force of it. The lines on her face were darker now. It was as if she aged every time she used her magic.

That made me wonder if she'd used her magic to peer into my history at the beach. Now, she needed a fate thread to make sure that her years remained long and youthful. That's why she hounded Hunter so desperately.

What would he have given her, though? Did the shifter have another fifty years left in him? Or was it more than that?

Giselle cocked her head and bit her lower lip. With one brow raised in thought, she said, "What if I could promise you an end to the restless boredom that's consumed you? Would you give up Hunter, then? If you could see color every day of your life, hear the gentle song of the spring birds again, and revel in the rain of blossoms in the air; would you sign everything away to feel again?"

I laughed.

She clearly hadn't been expecting it. Her expression dropped. Her lips twisted and a dark glare filled her eyes. If she thought she could tempt me with her promises, then she was a fool.

I approached her, took her chin in my hand, and forced her to look up at me. "There is one thing I want, and you are trying to take it from me. You cannot dangle promises that are bound to break and expect me to snap at them like a blind fish."

Her nose wrinkled. I half expected her to spit in my face. Giselle had a little more poise than that. When a cruel smile split her lips, I knew I'd come too close. I was about to be burned.

Giselle slapped a large spirit seal to my chest. It hung between my breasts and sucked the air from my lungs. My hand fell away from her chin while I tried to tear the paper off my body. My hands went right through the paper as if it wasn't real. She'd somehow written a rule into the seal that I could not touch it.

My chest burned with the lack of oxygen. If I could not grab it with my hands, then I would burn it away. But the fire in the room could not get hot enough to singe the paper. It refused to curl and burn.

Giselle laughed. She thought she'd won.

When she bent and cupped my chin while I gasped for air, I cursed the turn of events.

Instead of lingering in this position, I turned the fire on my own body and let it turn to ash. The seal could not hold my body if there was no body to hold.

Coalescing, my fox feet hit the ground. Massive paws slapped the wood floor while claws dug gouges into the rugs and planks. I spun and lowered my head so I could bare my teeth in a snarl.

The witch windmilled her arms and staggered back. Her wide eyes traced my form as if in search of my back end. Since I didn't fit in here, I let the back end of my body fade. It was proof that I was not a shifter. I was a kitsune, a demon.

"So, this is what you've been running from," Giselle said as she continued to size me up.

A devious smile curled her lips. She had one more trick up her sleeves. I wasn't about to be duped another time, though.

I leapt and snapped at her. My teeth closed around rancid air where she'd been.

"I have my entire house covered in seals. Now that you've taken your fox form, you're trapped in here." Giselle laughed as she stepped out of a nearby shadow. She dusted off the front of her dress. "Hunter will have no choice but give the rest of his fate thread to me if he wants to keep you safe."

That was a problem I would have to deal with later. Giselle was in reach. I lunged to bite at her again, but she kept using magic to step out of the way. It was almost like she wasn't really there.

The realization hit me in the gut. This wasn't Giselle. It was another of her shadow creatures molded to look like her. That's why I kept getting this awful taste on my tongue whenever I bit at her. I was able to get her each time, but whenever one shadow creature fell, she raised another look-alike in its place.

I'd walked right into her trap.

Seething at my own foolishness—*weren't immortal creatures supposed to be wise from their long years?*—I shrank to a suitable size that fit in the room and sat back on my haunches. The front door sat wide open in front of me, but I could see the wavering wall of magic over it that blocked my exit. I wasn't sure if I could burn my way through it the way I'd done with everything else.

I couldn't destroy my body and reform on the other side of an impassable barrier. I would reappear here, on this side once again. Spiteful, I had another idea. If Giselle wanted to keep me here as a prisoner, I would make sure that her life was a living hell until she released me.

I laid down, folded my paws over each other, and let the heat of my spirit fire lick at the walls. The wood and plaster singed. It filled the air with an awful smell and made me wonder what she'd hidden in her walls.

No matter how hot the house became, no matter how the walls peeled and crumbled, I couldn't burn all the way through it. The walls never seemed to vanish even though I watched my flames tear them apart. It was like they kept replenishing themselves.

Lip curling, I set my head atop my paws and glared at the room I found myself trapped in. As a thousand-year-old demon, I felt like a fool for getting trapped. There had to be a way out. I would find it, eventually. And when I did, I would hunt Giselle down and tear her apart.

Your hours are limited, Giselle.

Hunter

I could still taste Audra on my lips. No other flavor could quite compare. I couldn't even bring myself to eat for fear of losing the taste that I still wanted to savor.

It wasn't like I could get up and go to the fridge right now. I came to, sprawled on the dusty ground in the middle of the local woods. The sky churned with clouds that couldn't quite figure out what they wanted to do. Did they want to rain? Snow?

They were just as conflicted as I was.

My beast slumbered deep inside me, but I could see the wreckage all around me that spoke of the destruction it'd wrought before vanishing. The trees were all snapped in half. Raw wood was bright against the drab gray of the winter landscape. Claw marks carved through many of the broken trees.

The beast had a full meltdown while I'd been trapped inside myself. I loathed the creature for stealing my control again. I should have been back in Baba's house, staying close to Audra so that she was safe.

Licking my lips so that I could taste her one more time, I picked myself up off the ground and began the trek back home. I knew these woods like the back of my hand. Even with much of it destroyed as if a micro-burst had ripped through, I could still pick my way back towards town.

I hadn't been all that bothered by the path of destruction in the forest because it harmed no one save for a few small creatures. However, I reached the edge of town and saw what I'd done. There were gouges in cars. Mailboxes had been ripped out of the ground and thrown across the street.

There was a chance that a human had seen me. What would they have made of the larger-than-life wolf terrorizing their street? There was a strong possibility that someone recorded it. Videos of me would go online, and then Thor would have to come back to make sure I didn't endanger anyone ever again.

Joke's on him; I would be gone by then.

I ran my hands over my face. Keeping out of sight because I was naked and I didn't want a ticket for indecency, I managed to sneak into Baba's back door without getting caught. Inside, I slumped onto a stool and let my head fall back against the wall behind me.

The air held the faint scent of Audra. It made my heart hammer. My beast perked its head up again.

No, I thought.

The creature snarled and lashed out at me. I cringed and hissed at the pain slicing through my abdomen. The creature knew what it wanted. The woman belonged to the wolf, and it wouldn't hear otherwise.

This is why I'm having you put down, I thought at the creature.

It slashed at me again. This time, I flinched and the leg of the stool broke underneath me. I crashed to the floor in a heap of limbs and broken plastic.

It was at that time that Baba appeared in the nearest doorway. She lifted a brow at the mess that I was. Not only were there shards of plastic everywhere, but I was sure I had twigs and dead leaves in my hair and smudges of mud all over my body.

Belatedly, I remembered that I was butt naked. I quickly covered my extremities with both hands.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I snapped. “It’s cold in here.”

She cackled and turned to amble away once more. It seemed that she only wanted to show me the shameful mess that I was right now because she disappeared without another word.

I was left alone with the broken stool and my hot cheeks. It wasn’t really all that cold in here. I was just embarrassed.

While Baba brewed a cup of Earl Grey in the kitchen, making the whole house smell like musty underwear, I performed the ritual walk-of-shame back up to my apartment. I paused outside Audra’s door and considered knocking, but I was still undressed.

I needed a shower. It would wash away the evidence of my beast’s rampage and allow me to hide my shame. Maybe it would even loosen the knots in my stomach from the beast’s rage earlier. The muscles were still so tight, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep anything down even if I tried to eat.

The water wasn’t warm enough to make me linger too long. I finished my shower in record time and threw on clothes while my skin was still damp. Stepping out into the hall, I rolled my shoulders to get the fabric to unstick from my skin.

The sight of Audra’s door gave me pause. What time was it? I’d lost track. Was now even a good time to knock? She likely didn’t even want to see me after I’d run away from her so quickly earlier.

This was asinine. I couldn’t allow myself to love her the way I wanted. The end of my contract was coming up. And while I wanted to revel in all things good, I knew that I had to make sure that I didn’t leave any harm behind.

On the other hand, I could burst through that door and sweep her up in my arms. I could hear the gentle bell-like sound of her laughter before capturing her mouth with mine. The desire swept through me and tightened my core, turning it molten hot. I wanted to bury myself deep inside her and know the touch of someone who truly loved me before I had to leave this world.

Instead, I backed away.

She deserved better than me.

My heart clenched tight with yearning that I knew I couldn't fulfil. It made me want to scream. This was what'd led to my beast taking over earlier. If I gave in to it again, the beast would try to fight its way out.

I needed to stay distracted. Yet, no matter how much flour and butter I buried myself in, nothing could keep my mind off Audra. I tried laminating thin folds of dough to create flaky croissants, but my hands turned warm while I dreamed about a life with Audra.

The dough turned into a slippery mess that I couldn't salvage. In the end, I dumped it in the trash and clenched my fist. My emotions ran out of control in ways I'd never experienced before.

I'd kept to myself. The only person in my life had been Baba, and it wasn't like I had the strongest emotional connection to her. She was a rat in my walls, at best.

Audra's slim waist and fiery eyes captivated my thoughts once more. If she wasn't right next door, I would have bent and howled my frustration—Baba be damned. She could deal with the volume.

I perked up, realizing that I hadn't caught Audra's scent for a while now. While she hadn't visited my apartment, she shouldn't have been too far away if she was home. I should have been able to scent her from here, but I couldn't pick up anything.

My beast rose in a wave of terror and rage. It nearly shoved its way out of me. I barely hung on to it by a tenuous and fraying thread. Breath caught in my throat, I rushed to the door. Perhaps that was the only reason the beast let me remain in the pilot's seat. It knew that I would also do anything for her.

Downstairs, I grabbed the banister and slid over the hardwood floor. Baba looked up at me with wide, surprised eyes. She pulled back but kept an eye on me.

“What's with the hurry?” she asked.

“Audra. Have you seen her?” Breathless, I could feel my heart trying to burst behind my ribs.

Baba tilted her head in thought. “No, but I’ve stopped paying attention to the two of you since you keep running in opposite directions. Your fate is doomed because you’re both the biggest fools I’ve ever met.”

She turned and started to wobble away. I grabbed the old hag’s shoulders and turned her back around so that she had to look at me.

The old woman scowled and tried to jerk away from me, but I was stronger than her with my fear and rage coursing through my muscles. I made sure to keep my claws contained and my grip as loose as I possibly could because women like her were fragile.

At least, that’s what I assumed until the old hag started to grow under my hands. She became taller and taller until her rotund form pushed me back. She slouched forward to keep her gray bun from being squashed against the ceiling. When she opened her mouth, sharp iron teeth glinted in the light.

“Don’t go getting handsy with me, child.” There was a brightness in her eyes that I had never seen before. Her gaze was clear, no hint of insanity clouding the way she saw the world anymore. Her wizened lips twisted in a scowl as she folded both hands atop her cane. “I am not the immortal counterpart you seek. My tits are saggy, floor-grazing old bags. If you want to find your fox lady, I suggest you take it up with another witch.”

The skull sconces flickered and flared. For a moment, they weren’t metal and glass. Instead, I saw human skulls filled with melted wax and a steady candle flame inside them. The house shifted around me as if it were an animal settling on new legs.

But there was something that I didn’t quite understand, a piece of information that was nagging at me.

Immortal counterpart?

The woman wasn’t lost in the haze of her insanity right now. If there was any time to ask questions, now was it. But the glint of her iron teeth and the twist of her brows made me hesitate. The question gnawed on the edges of my mind like my irritable beast eager for its next meal.

“Well,” I said, scratching the back of my head nervously. “It’s nice to meet the…”

I couldn't say the *real* you. That felt offensive. What could I say? The other part of you? The bigger part of you? There weren't really any good options that didn't feel kind of empty.

She made a *hrmph* noise. Wrapping her claw-shaped yellow nails around the cane, she lifted her chin. "I'm doing my best to help you, but you're too much of a fool to be saved. I've brought plenty of other dumb souls around in my time. I've taught them true wisdom. You...you seem to be immune to wisdom, and it's rather infuriating."

I opened my mouth to argue. She wasn't wrong though. And I felt as though I had to be elsewhere, right now. If I stood here and argued semantics, I would be wasting valuable time.

"Where is Audra?" I asked again.

The old witch knew everything. She had to have some clue as to where Audra had gone.

Baba Yaga—I felt the need to use her whole name because this seemed to be a fuller version of her—pinched the bridge of her nose.

"What?" I threw my hands in the air, exasperated.

"I already told you." She shook her head and turned away.

With every step, she shrank until she finally returned to the size that I'd originally met. The woman paused in the doorway and glanced back. The haze of insanity had returned to her eyes, but there was still a spark of fury behind it that betrayed her frustration with me.

"You'll have to excuse me. A lot just happened here," I said.

Baba didn't reply. She went about her business as if I were no longer here. I didn't blame her for ignoring me, but the cold shoulder did sting a little.

My beast clawed at me. It urged me to go outside, to run. I had nowhere to go yet. If I let it out, the beast would go on another rampage for no reason. I had to find the right direction to point its wrath.

Immortal companion.

Did Baba say that because Audra was immortal? Or was that a hint that I could be immortal, too? It made no sense to me. I was just a wolf born under a bad moon.

Nothing in my lineage suggested otherwise. My father wasn't anything special. He'd always told me that my mother had been mortal. So, I didn't think there was something lurking in her blood that I didn't know about.

Baba likely meant it as a way to describe Audra. That had to be it.

The wolf rioted inside me. It slammed into my skeleton until every bone ached from its tantrum. I could feel its teeth chewing, chewing on my bones. It seemed to beg me to go, but I had no idea where I was going.

Outside, I looked up at the red moon and shuddered. The beast snarled. It growled so loud that the entire earth seemed to shake from the sound, but I knew it was only me.

I've already told you where to go, Baba had said.

"Aw, shit." I cursed under my breath and lurched forward as if pulled along a drawstring.

Baba had asked me to take my complaints to another witch. I had overlooked that statement until now.

"I'm coming, Audra."