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AUDRA

Giselle crossed her legs and leaned back in the ornate Victorian chair. She brandished a nail file from nowhere and started shaping her nails. I wondered if this was another shadow duplicate.

If I bit her, would I taste the rancid bitterness of a shadow goblin? Or would my teeth sink into flesh?

Already, Giselle's hair had lost its lustrous sheen. It'd turned a sallow shade of yellow while I'd been trapped with her. I couldn't help but look and laugh. My fox snicker echoed through the halls.

Giselle pointed her nail file at me and scowled. "I'm going to trap you in a bottle and use you like a djinn."

I let my tongue loll out of the side of my mouth because I was just too happy to have a front row seat to her demise. So long as Hunter stayed away, Giselle would continue to rot and crumble at an alarming rate. With one paw folded over the other, I watched as it happened right before my eyes.

Giselle's threats left me unsettled. It seemed that she had access to quite a bit of information. If she knew how to trap me in her accursed house, then she likely knew how to trap me in a bottle like a djinn as well. And I wouldn't put it past her to do so if she got tired of my presence.

The idea that Hunter might return and rub my bottle to set me free sounded like a naughty romance novel that I wouldn't mind reading. However, I didn't want to risk being trapped while Hunter dealt with Giselle by himself.

He was already bound to a contract with her. Knowing Giselle, there would be some magic in the paper that would take his fate thread the moment the time ran out. He would need help putting Giselle in her place.

That was...if he wanted to live.

I wouldn't put it past him to trade his life for mine, and I was sure that's what Giselle was banking on, too. She knew how to hit someone in their soft spots. It was how she'd lived so long on contracts.

Bored and hungry for information, I let my fox form dissolve. I reappeared, fully dressed in my mortal form, on a small floor cushion of my own summoning. I could feel Giselle's eyes on me. Her curiosity had been caught. So long as I had her intrigued, there was a chance that I would be able to squeeze some information out of her.

"You don't have any other contracts lined up at the moment, do you?" I asked rather pointedly.

Giselle's eyes narrowed as she licked her lips. The nail file paused mid-motion.

I took that as a correct statement and kept going. "Ah, so that means whatever you stand to gain from Hunter must be well worth waiting for."

This woman never anticipated the full scope of what I could do. My magic was only one facet of who I was. Over the years, I'd learned much more than how to be powerful. I learned how to manipulate a game until every piece on the board belonged to me. Lakesedge was proof of that.

"I wondered what Hunter really was. It seems that you know. That is rather impressive of you. I've lived on this plane of existence for over a thousand years, and not even I had the wisdom to figure out what Hunter has been hiding from me." I gave her an appreciative nod.

She went back to shaping her nail. For a moment, I thought she would ignore me. It would have been the smart thing to do, honestly. Then her lips parted in a grin that told me she couldn't help but brag.

"It was easy if you know what to look for," Giselle said with that shit-eating grin. "I'm surprised you couldn't see it yourself with all of that so called wisdom under your belt. The man has Berserker genes. Normally, they aren't immortal, but he's been blessed by Thor himself."

For a moment, I forgot about the god and thought only of the man I knew. I couldn't comprehend why Thor the shifter meant anything to this conversation. Then I remembered that he was named after a god, and everything made sense again.

One would think that my close association to gods in the past would have prepared me for this. Addie, a young lady under my protection back in Lakesedge, had been blessed by two goddesses in the past.

“What makes you think it was Thor?” I asked because that didn’t add up.

There were no thunderstorms here. I’d hardly heard a crack of thunder since leaving Ness back in Lakesedge. If anyone had been blessed by Thor, it would have been her. It seemed to me that Giselle saw what she wanted to see.

While she’d confirmed my suspicion that Hunter was, in fact, of the berserker subtype among shifters, I could glean nothing else from this witch. She’d reached too far, making her information rather inconclusive.

Hunter had been blessed, but by who?

Who would look upon that man and give him the grace of immortality? I knew that gods sometimes liked to cross-pollinate. Persephone had been haunting Addie for years before revealing her true identity, even though Addie had blood of the Norse...*persuasion*.

I’d learned something important today. This small tidbit of information, though yet unproven, could change the course of my future forever.

“I think I owe you my gratitude,” I said.

It caught Giselle’s attention. She raised a graying brow in my direction. It was still so satisfying watching her perish right before my eyes. Any moment now, she would become as old and grisly as Baba.

“I have you trapped in here with me. Are you really that bored with living? Is this some sort of thrill ride for you now that you’re this old?” Giselle shook her head. “I really need to watch out as I start to approach your age. You and that ugly witch across town have shown me that I need to hold onto my sanity as well as my beauty.”

I cackled with delight. If only because I knew it would drive her wild. I let all the years flow out of me, every bit of sorrow and joy and frustration. It filled my laughter like a tapestry depicting the sheer length of my life.

Hunter

I knew that sound anywhere. Audra's laughter warmed my insides and tugged me forward. My beast licked its chops hungrily. We both knew who would be behind Giselle's door. I should have known that Audra would come here.

She'd paid the late bills at the café. The woman liked to fix problems any way she could.

I couldn't help but grin as I kicked the door open. Sauntering into the room with my hands spread wide open, I announced my presence as loudly as I could.

Audra didn't even flinch. She turned that demure smile on me. The fire in her eyes warned me that I should have stayed away, but I saw a hint of something else when her attention flicked to the open door behind me.

I knew it had to mean something, but I was woefully bad at putting puzzles together. I could workshop a recipe to perfection, but I couldn't get past certain parts in video games. This was Audra's area of expertise.

Right now, I had to buy her time to figure out whatever was going on behind her pretty eyes.

I almost recoiled when I turned to Giselle. She looked nothing like I remembered. There were fine lines on every part of her face. Some were so dark, they were almost voids that fell into the infinite nothing.

She smiled sweetly at me. "Have you come to break your contract with me?"

I glanced at Audra. There was a chance that if I lived, I would go on to hurt her and others around me. I recalled the gouges I'd left in cars around town and the broken trees all through the woods. No matter where I looked, I couldn't find one good thing I'd left behind.

It was all destruction.

"No," I said. "I've come to make a trade."

Audra made a pained sound. She stood, but I held out a hand to keep her back. This was something that only I could do. Even I could tell from the way Giselle smiled that if I did anything to her contract, then she'd have me right where she wanted me.

No, I could make this easier on everyone.

It would all end right here, today.

“Don’t you dare,” Audra hissed in my ear.

I tried to keep a straight face since she was still several feet away from me. How the hell had she thrown her voice like that? It made my cheeks warm with a soft blush when I thought of her standing right beside me, so close that her breasts would graze my arm if I so much as breathed.

Like a damned fool, I’d gone and fallen head over heels for her. Giselle had promised love before my contract ended. It almost made me wonder if she’d known who would come into my life. There was no way that Giselle could have anticipated my appreciation for strong-minded older women.

No, I will not admit to having mommy issues. That’s just weird.

I wished I could have kissed her one last time. If I could go back, I would have done more. I would have been at her door with breakfast every morning then had *her* as my own breakfast. She probably tasted sweeter than icing.

But that was all in the past now. I couldn’t go back any more than I could go back and fix my mother. Fate had an order that I would never understand, but I had to accept it all the same.

My knees hit the floor. “Take me now.”