

AUDRA

My stomach dropped. It took everything in me to keep my face impassive when I wanted to howl and scream. I couldn't believe him.

Hunter, I wanted to hiss. Hunter, you damned fool. Your heart is in the right place, but your head never is.

My heart fluttered at the thought that he would be willing to sacrifice himself for me, but it meant little when we were both so willing to die. We were two fools, a match made in heaven.

Giselle nearly purred with delight. The sound she made as she snapped her fingers and produced the contract in question made my spine shudder. It was such an unsettling experience.

"I'm so glad you've come to reason," Giselle said.

I could take the contract and burn it. It would have been so easy to snatch it from her hand. Though, I had to imagine that she had safeguards in place. There was no way the contract could be so easily destroyed. She would have the same guard on it that she did on the house.

Neither would burn under the heat of my spirit flames.

But I knew that Hunter could step in and out of the house now. No seal barred his entry or exit. If I could use that to my advantage, I might be able to get out of here before Giselle decided to turn me into a damned lamp.

"I need you to sign here, indicating that you are well aware that you are forfeiting your remaining days ahead of time." Giselle produced a pen filled with something red and ominous.

Before Hunter could take the pen, I grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him to me. He spun, his hands immediately going to my waist. I sucked in a startled breath now that my body warmed with his heat.

I couldn't give this up yet. Everything in me wanted to ask if he thought he could truly walk away from this, too. The look in his eyes said it all, though. That was all I needed.

He didn't want to be apart either.

"Save him," I said.

Not to Hunter. No, this was to the beast, the Berserker.

His eyes filled with a sudden intense glow. The smile that reached his lips didn't belong to the fluffy-haired man I loved. It belonged to a beast ready to tear the world apart for me.

I stepped back and let the beast rip its way out of Hunter. The sight was painful to watch, but I tried to witness it all the same. That's the least of what I owed him.

If this worked, Hunter's rampage would tear a hole through the seals around the house. I hated calling on his beast like that, but the two of them needed to find common ground. He could not have a life until he found a way to live at peace with the wild beast inside him.

Giselle shouted for him to stop. She backed up until her shoulders hit the wall of a nearby corridor. I lifted my chin in amusement. The witch thought she'd won, but there was little that could hold a Berserker shifter out for blood.

Hunter's beast crashed through everything. A Victorian hutch crumbled to a pile of porcelain dust and splinters. The walls burst into clouds of plaster dust. Strips of old wallpaper fell to the floor like confetti ribbons.

When there was little left to the foyer, Hunter turned his sight on Giselle. A violent hunger pinched my throat and made my teeth sharp as needles on my tongue.

"No," I called out.

The beast gave me a confused glance.

I wanted her for myself. Instead, I warned Hunter that this was not the real Giselle. It was a mirror image slapped onto a shadow goblin. Destroying the image wouldn't kill Giselle. If we wanted to find her, then we would need to get out of her house first.

Pointing towards the wall, I asked Hunter to make an exit. Once again, the beast didn't understand. He followed direction, albeit rather hesitantly.

The beast wasn't an unreasonable creature. It was a wolf with thoughts and desires and motivations that were all its own. I had a mind to tell Hunter that his beast deserved much more recognition than he gave it. That might level the playing field between the two.

He ripped a hole into the night. Old wood fell to pitiful splinters that I was able to step over. Now that the seal had been broken, I could inhale the sweet air of the gentle night. The tension in my chest that I'd been ignoring melted away. There was still much to do, but we were free for a night.

"Thank you, wolf. Would it be too much to ask you to give the man back? I like him, and after a day like this, I want nothing more than to spend an evening with him."

The wolf gave me a dubious look. I conceded no ground and instead kept my chin high as I looked the beast dead in the eye. As something other than a shifter, I was not bound to the rules of dominance and submission within a pack system—in other words, *eat my ass, wolf*.

It took quite a while for the beast to give Hunter back. The beast only gave in when we were closer to Baba's house. One moment, there was a four-legged creature beside me, and the next a man appeared.

Hunter sighed and ran both hands over his face. "What happened this time? I'm so sorry if I did anything to cause you harm."

I put a hand on his shoulder.

He pulled away from me before pausing. Lower lip between his teeth, his brows furrowed in thought.

I swallowed, uncertain of what would come next. Was he going to tell me to leave? Was he angry with how I'd used him? I knew that I deserved whatever came next, but my heart threatened to break at the thought of leaving.

Hunter lifted his gaze to mine. His eyes were wide and filled with tender curiosity. "Why don't you fear my beast like...everyone else?"

I heard what was left unspoken, the little bit that'd faded on his tongue when he paused: *Like you should*.

The thought twisted my gut. I leaned in and asked, "Why should I fear you?"

He rocked back. “Because I’m uncontrollable. There’s no knowing what’s going to happen. One minute I’m drinking my morning coffee, and the next minute I wake up surrounded by destruction in the woods. I’m a threat to absolutely everyone around me.”

I looked at my hands, my arms, my legs. I patted my cheeks. At this point, I was being a smart-ass, and I knew it. “I’m in one piece. You’ve done no harm to me at all, sir.”

Hunter’s sigh was deep and rumbled with a frustrated growl but there was no way that I was going to let him get away with treating himself like this.

I cupped his face and pulled his attention towards me. The memory of his lips on mine flitted through my body like delicate wings of fire. “You are amazing and brilliant and sweeter than any pastry I’ve ever tasted. I’m done letting you be this hard on yourself. I see no reason to let this behavior persist any longer.”

“You can’t just tell me to stop. You haven’t seen everything I’ve done.”

I tightened my grip on his cheek and tugged him towards me. “Name one person you’ve hurt.”

“My mother. She died when I was born.” His voice sagged low with grief and guilt.

“Women die in childbirth all the time. That is the fault of the medical caretakers, not you. A child who hasn’t even laid eyes on the world yet cannot be blamed for the failures of adults incapable of doing their jobs.” I didn’t want to belittle his pain, but the man blamed himself for something he couldn’t have done on purpose. Softer, I said, “Name someone else.”

Hunter opened his mouth only to hesitate. He looked off to the side like he was rifling through every single memory one by one only to come up empty handed.

“I can’t,” he said. His eyes snapped to mine. The light of his beast glowed deep within his irises. “I-I-I can’t name anyone else. Not because I didn’t know their names, but...because there’s no one else.”

I smiled triumphantly. “Your concern for everyone in the world around you is so noble, my darling, but it cannot come at the cost of your own strength.”

His jaw tightened. At first, I thought that he was upset with me. Then I caught the sheen in his eyes right before he looked away. He pulled me closer and wrapped his arms around me so that he could bury his face in my shoulder.

I held him in return, letting my fingers slip through his hair. Was this where he found the will to live? A little spark flickered inside my own soul before becoming a raging fire ready to take on the world all over again—if only by his side.

That reminded me.

“You can’t fight your way out of her contract,” I warned him.

He reared back. His nose wrinkled and his eyes flared bright with the light of his beast. I could tell that the one statement had his berserker wolf ready to come out fighting all over again.

I pressed my hands flat to his chest. “What I mean is that there’s a stipulation in the contract you already signed that says if you try to get out of it, you forfeit your fate thread immediately.”

His face fell. Lips twisting in a feral snarl, his teeth sharpened until it resembled his wolf’s teeth again. Yet, his hands ran up my body until he could cup my face like I’d done with him only moments ago.

“Then I will spend whatever time I have left by your side.”

That wasn’t enough for me. I couldn’t outright say that. Instead, I clung to his shirt and held him close because I couldn’t bear the thought of letting him get too far away.

If I’d been maybe a few years earlier, I could have caught him before he signed the contract with Giselle. I could have brought a light to his life that would make him want to live. I’d been too busy pulling strings in Lakesedge to realize that my own fateful future had been waiting for me all along.

Was it too late? Was there no way out of this?

I could still devour the witch. One bite was all it would take. All I had to do was catch her unaware. She was ready for a fight, if the duplicates were any indication. Finding her would be difficult.

“Audra,” Hunter warned with a low tone. “I can tell what you’re thinking. Giselle tricked you once.”

I grinned, teeth still sharp. The pink glow in my own eyes illuminated his face. “That means I know not to let her do it again.”

He growled and yanked me into his body. “I will not let you near her ever again. I need you to stay safe, Audra.”

The way he said my name made my blood warm. I wound my arms around his neck because I couldn't get enough of his heat. There was a hunger in me that I couldn't satisfy with bloodshed. Even the demon lurking deep down knew that there were things far more satisfying than a fight.

He tilted his head so that our breaths mingled. When he spoke, his voice was low and rumbling with a growl of warning. “You can't leave me.”

“I'm not going—”

He cut me off, his hands nearly trembling against my skin. “I cannot lose you to Giselle. Don't go back there again.”

His desire to protect me warmed my core, but it offended the demon. I straightened, but I didn't pull away no matter how badly the demon in me wanted to. I could take on a lowly witch so long as I could find her. That was the only reason she'd succeeded in trapping me earlier.

“Would you take a look at that!” Baba shouted from her backyard. “I've got two lovebirds canoodling back here!”

Hunter twisted to hiss at her to be quiet. It was early in the night now, around a time when many mortals would be settling down at day's end.

However, that meant nothing to the insane witch. She cackled and slapped her knee in raucous joy. “I've never seen anything so sweet in my life! Going to have to call the dentist in the morning because you're going to rot the teeth right out of my head with all that sugar you've got going on.”

Oh, she was worse than me, I realized. Baba had set us up. It was why she pestered me, why she sabotaged my sink, why she'd given me such a good deal on a yearlong lease.

“Crazy old woman,” Hunter muttered. “I pissed her off earlier and got a glimpse of the real Yaga underneath. Whole damn house moved like she'd woken it up.”

“Welcome to the wild world of immortals,” I told him. “You'll get just as crazy as the rest of us someday.”

Hunter did a doubletake when he processed what I'd said.

Hunter

Had I heard Audra correctly?

Lounging across her daybed while she showered, I stared at the ceiling and tried to figure out what she'd meant earlier. The insinuation behind her words meant that I was like her, but I couldn't fathom how that could be.

"I'm not like you."

"Should I take offense to that statement?" Audra asked as she passed by, towel drying her ridiculously long wet hair.

I shot upright. "No. No..."

My words failed me.

How could I be immortal?

Watching Audra, I could see the power surrounding her like a haze of pink light. Every so often, a glowing pink petal would drift away from her. I don't think she even noticed how much she'd changed since coming to town. The woman I'd first met had been nothing like this. I could have mistaken her for a mortal at first glance, but not anymore.

My wolf growled greedily. I watched her bend and pull a top from her suitcase. The curve of her ass captivated my attention and dashed all existential thoughts until I shook myself.

"Now isn't the time to objectify someone," I grumbled at my beast.

Audra turned with a small smile on her lips. "Maybe it is time."

My blood rushed south, immediately. I sat upright, my deep-seated desire nearly throwing me headlong in her direction. When she sashayed towards me, I couldn't take my eyes off the rhythm of her curves gliding back and forth. I ran my hand up her bare thigh as she parted my knees so she could step between them.

Though my beast growled hungrily as it stared at the beauty between my legs, the creature never tried to take control. It sat back and licked its lips as it waited for what

was to come next. For the first time in my life, I wasn't afraid that the beast would fight me.

I was in control.

The revelation took ahold of me. I shot to my feet, slung my arm around Audra's back, and spun so that I could press her into the daybed's mattress. She giggled with delight as I settled my weight over her, most of my body carefully hovering over hers so that I didn't overwhelm her.

Audra had other ideas. She locked her legs behind my back and yanked me close so that our bodies nearly melded together. Only the fabric of my clothing stood in the way, and I was all too eager to rip it away so that I could feel her warm body against mine.

For her, I would take it slow. Perhaps she'd had lovers in the past. Perhaps she knew all the ways to delight a body in the bedroom. But tonight would be different. I would show her what it meant to be loved.