

AUDRA

My heart thumped wildly out of control. Though I'd tried to take lead, I suddenly felt like a schoolgirl, nervous to say hello to her first crush. The feeling was so unfamiliar that it threw me for several heartbeats. I couldn't help but giggle beneath the full weight of Hunter's warm, muscle-bound body.

He lowered his head and pressed kisses all the way from my collarbone to my neck and up to my chin. There, he paused. I held my breath until it tightened my chest with a longing-filled ache. I raked my claws over his back because I could barely contain how badly I wanted *more*.

This man had become a beacon in my life. Around him, the world was bright and full of color that I hadn't seen in nearly a century. Nothing else could compare to the way I felt when I was around him. He'd been so worried that I would see his beast and know only fear, but since meeting him, I'd known only joy.

No one else in my thousand years held a candle to the way he made me feel.

He bit my earlobe and gave a gentle tug that brought a moan from my lips. The spark of pleasure that rocketed from my ear to my core turned into a flame that threatened to burn my whole body to cinders. I welcomed it. There was no other fire I'd rather burn in.

He ran his massive hand down my waist and over my stomach, his thumb dipping into the dimple of my belly button. The hot trail that he left behind burned like a wildfire across my skin. I arched into him and found a plea for more waiting on my tongue.

"You smell so sweet," he growled into the skin of my throat.

I leaned my head back and gave him access so he could bite. His teeth grazed my exposed throat but never broke the skin. The sensation sent shudders down my spine and made me writhe beneath him because I could not get him inside me where I wanted him.

A wave of spirit fire was all it took to burn away his clothes and leave his skin bare to my own touch. I returned the favor by cupping his chin. I tilted his head to the side so

that I could bite back. My own affection was not as gentle as his. I broke the skin and savored the full taste of him on my tongue.

There was more of him that I wanted to taste by night's end, but that could wait. For now, I licked the small wounds on his neck and grinned deviously. Shifters often bit their mates to mark them as theirs. I couldn't help but tell the world that this one, Hunter, was now mine. No one else in this world was allowed to touch him.

I ran my claws down his exposed stomach. He shuddered under my touch. I could already feel his exposed shaft pressing against the inside of my thigh. Just being this close to him had me wet enough that he would slide in with ease.

At least, that's what I thought until he backed away and I saw the girth of his enlarged shaft. I'd seen the man naked several times now, but I'd never caught a glimpse of what he looked like fully erect. Now that I knew the full...*extent* of what he had to offer, I bit my lip nervously.

"I know you might look at me and think *surely, an immortal has seen and done it all*. I want to let you know that it has been a very long time since I've done anything at all." I watched his features carefully for any hint of what he might be thinking.

Relief flashed across his face. "Don't get me wrong, I love an older more experienced woman. It's very sexy to me that you might show me things I've never even thought of...but I was a bit afraid of what I might have to live up to."

I couldn't help but laugh and pull him close to me once again. His lips were soft against mine. They whispered over my own lips like a question. I opened and pressed into him in response.

My own relief fluttered through me. While this couldn't be the first time for either of us, it certainly had the charm of it. The chemistry in the air was fresh and new, something I hadn't tasted in centuries.

As I ran my knuckles along his cheek, I prayed this would never change. I knew that, in time, this chemistry would fade. However, I still held onto hope that we would be able to find ways to conjure this kind of energy once again.

"I think..." The words danced in my chest as I whispered against his skin.

He paused. I dug my nails into him and savored the soft groan he tried to hold back.

"I think I love you."

His snarl was the only response I needed. He didn't hesitate to part my legs and position the head of his cock at my opening. Just a single flick of it against the slickest part of me made me throw my head back in a deep moan. I gripped the sheets beneath me and tried to raise my hips so that I could get even the smallest bit of him inside me.

I needed him. Now.

Hunter's eyes glowed, lighting along my body. I could see the pink of my own light painting the nearby walls. I never stopped to wonder what might happen if two immortals made love.

Surely, if any house could handle it, Baba's could. If not, then that's what she got for meddling with our lives...and smacking me with that cane.

Now wasn't the time to worry about such things. Hunter palmed my thighs, sparking soul-burning flames beneath his touch. He held me in place while thrusting so that he filled me in one smooth motion.

The sensation in my core exploded like tiny fireworks in the night. My body spasmed to adjust to him, and each throb set off another string of fireworks that bounced through my entire being. It left me shuddering and gasping on the sheets while Hunter watched with those intense eyes.

I wanted to scream out but swallowed it for fear of scaring away the neighbors.

Hunter bent, one hand against the mattress for stability while the other still cupped my thigh. He bucked into me, every thrust hitting places that had never been touched by anyone else before. It was as if we'd been molded for one another.

The world shook with every thrust. My vision blurred as the pleasure built in my core. I could hear his frantic breathing, his low grunts. They slowly calmed as he pulled himself together and steadied his strokes.

"I will not rush this. I want to make sure you know just how much I love you, too." He punctuated the sentence with a thrust that grazed a bundle of nerves deep inside me.

I groaned and arched into him. When his fingers slid between my folds to draw slow circles over the more sensitive exposed parts of me, I couldn't help but gasp. It was all at once too much and not enough. I wanted more. I wanted to writhe out from under him.

I needed to escape. I needed more.

No one else in my life ever made me feel like this, like I might shoot into the stars and burst into a million fragments of stardust. I knew that when I reached climax, I might never come down. I would hang in the sky as my own constellation, a tribute to the ways Hunter was able to please a woman.

Over and over, he teased. Each time my breath hitched too high, he would pause and let the sensation fade ever so slightly before stoking the flames once again. I heard his own breathing become frantic, like he was holding back his own climax, too.

Just as the dam holding back the well of pleasure inside me threatened to burst, I sat up. I looped my arm around his neck and tightened my legs behind him to hold him as deep in me as he could go. Lips locked against his, I opened to let his tongue delve past my own.

When my climax burst, I rocked into him and milked it for all it was worth. Each small rock of my hips made every ripple of pleasure more intense. Each throb of my pussy also brought him closer and closer until finally, he gripped my hips and bucked one last time. His claws bit into my skin, but the pain was sweet. It was welcome.

His warmth filled me and made me shiver with delight. I broke the kiss and shuddered in his arms. Hunter saw the opening and clamped his teeth around the nape of my neck. This time, he bit down and marked me as his.

Satisfaction mingled with the echoes of my climax. My body turned limp. I slouched in his arms because I knew he would cradle me gently. Together, we fell back onto the mattress and savored the warmth of each other's bodies for several heartbeats.

We lay there, catching our breath in near silence until Hunter decided to speak.

“Can...can I have my clothes back? Or are they gone forever?”

My cheeks warmed. “They’re not coming back. I might have destroyed them for good.”

He nuzzled my neck and grazed the mating mark he’d left. I inhaled sharply and moaned. I would never get used to that sensation and the knowledge behind it.

For the first time in my life, I was loved for me.

This wasn't about my god-like power. This wasn't about my inhuman beauty. Nothing about my otherworldly birth played a role in this. Hunter loved me for me.

Hot tears dripped down my cheeks. I didn't even realize I was crying until he wiped away the tears with his thumb.

"I'm sorry to ruin the moment," I said as a sob threatened to choke my words.

He gently cupped the back of my head and pulled me in so he could place a kiss on my forehead. "You didn't ruin anything."

I never realized that this was what I'd been missing. I'd needed someone who could see past what I was, past the glow of semi-divine magic. All those years, I'd buried my own magic so that no one would see it first when they looked at me. Now, I could let it out, and Hunter still saw me first.

That's what brought color back to my world.

Sighing contentedly, I buried my face in his chest.

Hunter

Time was running out. I couldn't break out of this contract myself. Now that I had Audra, I wanted to stay. Funny how that worked. I'd been so ready to give up everything for a bit of peace, and now I had my peace right here in my arms.

This woman didn't shy away from the beast in me. She didn't treat it like a feral monster...not the way I did.

My beast stirred and huffed at me. It called me out for the ways I'd been shoving it back as if it might be the reason for everything bad in the entire world. I wasn't saving millions of lives by giving myself over to Giselle.

In fact, I was dooming lives.

I realized this belatedly. The epiphany hit me at the top of my head and rocketed down to my toes like a lightning bolt sent from the gods above.

If I was immortal, and I gave the rest of my fate thread to Giselle, then she would become immortal. Somehow, I doubted that would stop her from taking on more contracts. The rest of her magic was tied up in them, meaning that she had to keep taking on more to keep her magic fresh.

Essentially, if I followed through on this contract, I'd be leaving the world a worse place. I had to stop Giselle, but she'd already added a caveat to her contracts to stop me from trying to get out of it.

I wasn't the brightest man. Like I'd said before, puzzles weren't my forte. However, Thor had warned that Audra reveled in manipulations. My mate was much smarter than myself. I had brawn, and she had brains.

I pulled back and glanced down at the woman cuddled against my chest. A bit of a flush reached my cheeks when I recalled what we'd done. I had to shake it off because we needed to have a bit of a brainstorm session.

“Do you think there's a way to get around the wording of Giselle's contract? I know it says that if I try to get out of the contract, then I forfeit my fate thread immediately. There has to be a way to get around that. Any good lawyer would be able to turn those words on their head.”

Audra pulled back. She stared into my chest—hair and all—while the gears in her head worked. “Then we don't try to break the contract. We try to *kill* her.”

I scowled. “Wouldn't that break the contract?”

She looked up at me with that devilish grin and pink light in her eyes. “That's the thing, though. Our intentions are not to break the contract. Our intentions are very different. The fact that her death will, inevitably, break the contract is inconsequential in this matter. What we're after is her death.”

I sucked my teeth. My thoughts wandered back to that girl I'd taken into the woods, Nicole. I hadn't brought up her name when Audra asked me if I'd hurt anyone because I didn't actually know what happened that night.

No matter what happened to her, her life was on my mind. I didn't know if I could live with someone else's life on my mind, even if that someone was an evil witch brokering contracts. In order for me to go on living, I needed to know that I could be a good person.

There was no point in sticking around if all I was good at was hurting others.

Audra sat up, shoved me flat into the bed, and straddled my waist. She still had the devilish pink glow in her eyes. It must have been the fox in her, though I'd never seen them as two different entities—not the way my wolf and I were separate.

She leaned in, her breasts dangling over my chest, and cupped my cheek roughly. “You are not evil. I can see the conflict all over your face. You’re really bad at hiding it.”

My laugh was hollow. Though I ran my hands up Audra’s thighs and tried to let her presence comfort me, there was still a writhing knot in my chest. I couldn’t help but worry that living for love would be a selfish act. Audra would be selfish and save me, too.

“Are we making the right decision?” I asked. “Do I get to live when my mother and Nicole don’t? It doesn’t seem right to me.”

Even as I spoke, I sank my fingers into Audra’s thighs like I was holding on for dear life. It was my beast, begging me to stay with her. There was a right thing to do in this situation, though. And I needed to figure it out.

Audra didn’t ask about Nicole like I’d hoped. I wanted to explore how awful I could possibly be, but Audra turned the tables.

“You have the most delicate hands. Instead of turning to fighting or axe throwing or something else aggressive in order to hold back your beast, you turned to baking. Would a horrible person make flaky croissants? Would an evil being steam milk for sweet lattes?”

“My love, you’ve turned your face so that all you can see is the shadow behind you. Why not turn and let the light of the sun warm you. It has shed light on everything good you’ve done, if only you would *look*.”

My throat tightened. A growl rumbled in my chest. I grabbed my mate and turned the tables, pinning her to the mattress beneath me. Her dark hair splayed out across the pillows as she smiled up at me. I caught a glimpse of the mating mark on her neck and felt a burst of warmth in my core.

She was *mine*. My lover. My mate.

Don’t leave her. Stay. Keep her alive.

That’s when I saw it. The warmth in my core that drove my deepest hungers faded just enough so that I could see the shadows in Audra’s eyes. I saw the tightness at the corners of her mouth. I reached to rub it away with my thumb, but it stayed.

Her concern for me wasn't just about me. It wasn't a plea to save me. It was a plea to save *herself*.

"The world has been so incredibly lonely," she whispered.

The words hung between us. I swallowed, trying to hold back the wave of emotions rushing through me. Now wasn't the time. It was her turn to feel, and I could make space for that.

I could make a life for her, one worth living. It would be quiet and simple, filled with sugar and flour and milk moustaches that I could gently wipe away. There would be no room for tears or the ache of long years. Not so long as we were together.

For Audra, I would stay.

And that was that. It didn't matter what my father had said. It didn't matter what I could have done.

My beast rose up and tossed its head in agreement.

I never, the beast said.

It fed me flashes in the forest at night. I saw visions of the evening that haunted me. A red moon had been in the sky that night. Nicole and I had gone into the woods, but her father caught us. I could remember the bright glare of the headlights on his truck now. The blinding flash had caught me off guard and brought my beast out.

But the beast didn't stick around. It'd turned and rushed off into the woods, leaving Nicole with someone who should have protected her. That's why I couldn't remember anything about what happened to Nicole.

I hadn't been there when she died.

The beast raised its head as if to say *I told you so*—which it'd earned at this point. I spent so much time shoving it back and ignoring it that I no longer listened when it spoke the truth.

That will change, I promised the beast.

So lost in my own unveiled memories, I didn't notice the gathering of shadows in the corners of the room until the bulb in the ceiling burst.

Audra cried out in surprise. I bent and covered her body with my own. The beast shoved forward, pouring unlimited power into my muscles. My breath hitched as an energy unlike any other slammed into my heart and sent it racing.