

AUDRA

That *witch*!

“Absolutely not,” I said with a snap of my fingers.

Pink spirit flame brightened the black room. Shadow goblins reared back and hissed in anger. The shadows thickened and pressed in on my flame until was an orb of light in the darkness.

“I think the hell not,” I muttered. Turning to Hunter, I said, “Darling, please close your eyes for a moment.”

Demonic power burgeoned inside me. It’d been untapped for so long that the well seemed infinite. I reached into the depths of the fires inside me and pulled out as much as I could grasp with one hand.

Flames poured out of me in all directions. It didn’t burn the house or singe the carpet. My spirit flames were looking for something else as they rushed across every surface in a hungry race towards the shadows. Glowing Sakura blossoms rained through the air like we were in a spring breeze.

Hunter never once closed his eyes like I asked. The man stared into the light with such open awe on his face that my heart thumped double-time.

“That was so hot of you,” Hunter said before pressing a kiss to my forehead.

I smiled with satisfaction. I couldn’t help but preen just a little bit. There was a beauty to my power that I wanted to revel in for once. The Sakura blossoms touched my cheek before flickering out of existence.

Though my own power distracted me.

I should have been watching the shadows to make sure that they’d been destroyed. The corners of the room were now bright and shining, but I’d missed one very silly spot: under the bed.

Long, black arms with massive, clawed hands slowly reached out from under the bed and descended upon Hunter. They snatched him and dragged him into the air. I bolted upright and directed my flames at the hands, but both the hands and Hunter vanished before I could strike.

The warmth fled from the room. The shadows vanished, leaving me alone with only my flames and the sheets that still smelled of Hunter. I snatched the sheets and pulled them close to cover my naked body.

“How the hell did those pests get in?” Baba asked, suddenly standing in the middle of my apartment.

I shrieked and pulled the sheets all the way up to my chin. “How did *you* get in here?”

Baba clicked her tongue and waved a key in the air. “That’s a dumb question.”

I scowled at her. My teeth were sharp and my tongue craved blood. If I couldn’t devour one witch, I would gladly rid the world of another.

“Don’t get mad at me...” Baba paused, glanced around, and then said, “Okay, this one might be my fault. You can get mad at me.”

Eyes narrowed, I asked, “How is this your fault?”

“The wards on the house must have slipped. I don’t know how they would have gotten in otherwise.” Though Baba shook her head in denial, like she still wasn’t buying it.

She and I were ancient. There were folktales that spoke of us and our power. I, too, doubted that someone like Giselle could bypass Baba’s wards so easily.

“Something isn’t adding up here,” Baba said as she tapped her temple.

I scowled, deeply frustrated with this turn of events. Giselle knew that I wanted nothing more than to be the cause of her demise—that was a lie because I wanted to become Hunter’s wife more than that, but I couldn’t get there without defeating Giselle first.

“We need to buy ourselves some time,” I said.

Baba shook her head. “Giselle knew what she was doing. Hunter’s contract will run out before she does. I know you think that if you can just stall long enough, Giselle will fall to dust on her own, but she’s lived this long on her smarts. It’s not going to fail her now.”

“Then I overpower her.” I threw my feet to the floor.

Sheet wrapped around my body, I marched over to my suitcase and plucked some clothes from the pile. I paid no attention to what I’d chosen, only that anything would be suitable so long as it covered my body.

Baba went over and took my spot on the bed. She sat on the edge, her hands folded over the top of her cane as she watched me. There was a bit of a condescending twist to her lips and a crease in her nose that told me I was in the wrong.

Straightening, I stared her down. “What? Do you not think I’m capable of such a feat? I’m older than you, hag.”

When her eyes snapped to mine, I saw the ageless depths of them. Sanity sparked like ancient stars in the dark of her irises. Her form seemed larger than ever for once. This was the true Baba Yaga, not just the Baba that lived downstairs.

“You need to think clearly.” She tapped her cane against my chest, over where my heart would be. “Your emotions are getting the best of you. You’re not a young kit. You have a thousand years under your belt. Why not use that arsenal you’ve acquired?”

To punctuate her sentence, she tapped my head with her cane, too. When she pulled it back, I realized that she’d altered the reality of the room to make the cane seem closer. She sat across the room, out of reach. That cane never should have been able to touch me from there.

Baba Yaga was making a point. Here was a taste of her power. It was infinite and unknowable, and it’d still failed in the face of Giselle’s wits. I had to tap into something else, another facet of my demonic blood: the cunning of a fox.

Hunter

The shadow clawsspread my arms apart and shoved so that I fell to my knees in the middle of Giselle’s crafting room. This wasn’t the kind of crafting room that was eternally plagued by glitter and lost beads. The walls were lined with books that smelled of human flesh and blood. Some of them seemed to wriggle between their counterparts. Jars wobbled around, too, as their contents tried to escape.

This must have been where she turned souls into shades and bound them to the shadows in her home. Were I anyone else, the sight of it all might have sent a shiver

up my spine. Instead, my beast hunched low, hackles raised, and bared its teeth in a snarl.

The beast didn't fear what might happen here because it knew I had a reason to live. Now, I needed to remember Audra's words. Trying to escape the contract would forfeit my fate thread.

I turned my gaze upon the ageing witch approaching me with a heavy iron collar in her hands. Wrenching my arms from the shadow's hands didn't work. My shoulder screamed in agony as the bone nearly popped from the socket in my attempt to escape.

Giselle clicked her tongue disapprovingly. "Be still. There's no way out of this, so there's no point in fighting. You're only going to hurt yourself."

The beast pressed so close to the surface of my body that I could feel the two start to mingle. My teeth elongated until they no longer fit in my mouth. The tips of my fingers sharpened into claws while my legs and feet bent to become wolf-like.

Giselle raised a brow. She shook her head and clamped the iron collar around my neck. The heavy weight of it didn't hit my human form, but it sent my wolf crashing back into the depths of my soul. The fall made my stomach hit the floor like I'd gone over the edge of a nasty roller coaster. Just like that, my body returned to a human shape as if the beast had never been there at all.

"W-what is this?" My voice broke.

Giselle waved her hand in the air. "It's nothing. Just a little bit of extra insurance."

My beast had been shoved so far down, its growl was nothing more than an idea in the very recesses of my mind. If I'd known about this earlier, I would have worn one every day of my life.

Now, though, it felt like a prison. Right when the beast and I found common ground and trust, this collar drove a wedge into everything we'd built. My breath shuddered at the loss of a part of myself I'd come to love.

Funny how that worked. It took a woman falling into my lap to show me that I could be not only loved, but *trusted*. That's what scared me so much. I hardly trusted myself and the blackouts that the beast left scattered through my memories.

When Audra looked at me with unafraid eyes, I realized that I'd been unfairly cruel to myself.

Too bad it had to happen now, when the contract with Giselle was about to run out.

Could I kill her with human hands? Tugging at the shadow hands still holding me tight revealed that my strength had dwindled a bit without my beast. If I was going to escape, it would be through determination.

And love.