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AUDRA

This small town...intrigued me. I could say that it had nothing to do with the charming man at the coffee shop, but I would be lying. I couldn't stop thinking about the man who'd tripped over his words trying *not* to insult me.

A smile even reached my lips before I could think to tuck it away. He took up so much space in my mind that I didn't realize how far I'd wandered until I came face to face with a *For Lease* sign.

The neighborhood had stretched out into grandiose homes, their architecture old and crumbling, their gardens growing wild. A grand tower looked out over the street. An iron weathervane with a running fox spun idly in the cool breeze. The wood paneling had been a desaturated purple, once upon a time, but it was a chipped shade of gray now. I put my hand on the iron gate at the front and took in the old house.

All at once, the urge to lay down roots and stay overcame me. The unspent magic curled up inside me tried to reach out and touch the nearby landscape. I yanked it back and shoved it deep. The creature that was my magic tried to protest, but it finally yawned and settled back down.

Everything about this place kept trying to wake the sleeping demon. I nervously chewed on the inside of my cheek and wondered if this was a good idea. If I wanted the demon to stay dormant, then leaving would be the smartest option.

Instead, I pushed the gate open while keeping my gaze fixed on the round stained-glass window above the front door. The colors transfixed me with the way light bounced off the imperfect glass. I didn't even realize that I'd knocked on the door until after I'd done it.

At first, I wondered why I'd bothered to knock on the door of a house that was clearly empty. It was a massive house, perhaps what one might have called a mansion back in the day that it'd been constructed. Even if anyone was inside, there was a chance that they wouldn't have heard my soft knock.

But before I could even turn away, the door whipped open, and a crooked old woman appeared. I took a step back when her magic wafted out and slammed into me. Her aura smelled of herbs and roasted meat, which was mildly unsettling to say the least.

“Ahhhhhhh,” the crone said as she pointed a crooked finger at me. “You’re here to rent my attic apartment. Aren’t you?”

“Apartment?” I was stunned.

I’d thought that this would be a house, not an apartment. I stepped back and looked up at the old mansion and realized that there was clearly enough space for it to be split into several different abodes. The economy certainly required it these days.

The old woman spun and motioned for me to follow. I stepped into the dusty front hall and found myself enveloped by the smell of the woman’s magic. Sconces dully illuminated the hall. Upon closer inspection, I noticed small bronze skulls at the base of each one.

When we passed the kitchen, I saw a cauldron upon the counter that reminded me of sweet Cerridwen, though I was certain this vessel didn’t hold the magic of life like hers had. This crone had a magic a bit wilder.

This was an old witch from the deep forests of Eastern Europe, though I hesitated to use the name that I’d come to know just in case this particular crone wasn’t one and the same. Perhaps there were many. Over the years I’d gathered information on a little bit of everything, becoming a bit of a Jack-of-all-Trades when it came to the supernatural community. However, I didn’t know about the intricacies of each and every subset.

Just enough to guide my girls into their fated futures.

I wondered how Cerridwen was taking to being a new mother. Would her daughter someday return the leaf of the Yggdrasil tree to its rightful home? Would Addie ask that of them?

I shook myself. That part of my life was over. Right now, I was in an ancient witch’s abode. I needed to focus.

The old crone waved a hand over her shoulder. “Ye don’t need to worry, little beastie. I have no interest in eating something older than myself. You’d take hours to soften, and I think your bones would be too hollow to make a good broth. I can tell you’re here searching for something to fill those empty bones.”

She paused at the base of the staircase and glanced back at me with a knowing grin. “Or, perhaps, you’re looking to get filled with a bone?”

My face warmed with an embarrassed flush for what had to be the first time in centuries. I wasn't sure if I took offense at her age-shaming or the insinuation that I was staying in town for sex. Of course, my thoughts wandered to the sweet man at the coffee shop.

I could still taste his pastries on my tongue. Another part of my wandering mind craved the taste of something else, which only made the flush on my cheeks hotter.

The old crone cackled as she climbed the stairs like a spry child. I huffed under my breath and followed her up to the most beautiful apartment I'd ever laid eyes on. First, she plucked a set of ancient keys from her apron and rattled them, searching for the right one as I stood in a hall with a number of doors.

Once she found the right key, she turned it in the lock and pushed the door open. It revealed an open studio apartment already furnished with simple chairs and a day bed. A skylight looked out into the clouds above. In the corner was a small kitchenette that housed antique appliances—and I couldn't help but worry if they would work or not.

“Since I can't take your firstborn anymore,” the old woman said as she slapped down a piece of paper. “Here's my bank account number. Wire me the money whenever you're ready. I don't mind a bit of noise, but the trade of souls isn't allowed on the premises.”

I raised a brow.

The crone sneered. “No one ever finds that funny. What is wrong with your sense of humor? It was just a joke!”

My brow never went down.

The old woman grumbled that it wasn't always a joke, but souls just weren't worth what they used to be. This had to be *the* Baba Yaga. There was no way it wasn't. She was just too...*unhinged*.

“So, you recognize that I am far older than you?” I asked as I picked up the little slip of paper she'd set down. “And you recognize that with my age comes far greater power than you have? If you were to double cross me and—”

“Your bark is weak, darling.” The old woman waved her crooked hand in the air as if my breath smelled. “I do not fear you, just as you don't fear me. What do either of us have left to fear in this world? The great void of nothingness could take us tomorrow,

and we might welcome it. That or the great zombie apocalypse could happen and shake things up with a bit of excitement for once. Who knows?”

I was renting an apartment from a madwoman.

I showered in the gorgeously black and white antique bathroom. Even the shower door had been made of stained glass. The charm of it all wore off when I turned on the sink faucet and it sputtered, spraying ice-cold water everywhere. The horrid thing would not stop sputtering no matter how I slapped or twisted it.

Finally conceding defeat, I wrapped myself in an available towel and threw myself from the apartment to go find the unhinged old witch running the place. Of course, that’s when I ran into a familiar face—quite literally.

I slammed into an immovable wall of flesh. Soft hands caught my elbows to keep me from falling, but my towel slipped, nonetheless.

The man, the very same one from the café, jerked his chin up so fast I thought he would snap his own neck. He stared at the ceiling, making a pointed effort to avoid looking down at my bare skin.

Modesty was rather lost on me. It was the entire reason I’d been brave enough to step out of my apartment in nothing but a damp towel in the first place. However, in his presence, I couldn’t help but warm with embarrassment.

Why did I feel like a teenager all over again? Those years were far behind me. They shouldn’t have been on my mind in the least, yet here I was. I blushed and gripped the towel tighter in an effort to cover my small breasts.

“I barely even have anything to hide,” I muttered to myself. “I don’t know why I’m bothering.”

“I mean...you’re a very pretty...you have plenty of...I’m not saying any of this right...” He stammered though several thoughts without completing any of them.

It made me smile up at him in amusement. His own cheeks were redder than my own, which made me chuckle softly. I tucked a bit of my loose black hair behind my ear and asked:

“Where is that old Baba Yaga wench? I need her to fix my sink.”

The man scratched the back of his head. “Oh, ah...I can do that for you. If you’re comfortable with me in your...apartment? Didn’t you say you were just passing through?”

His gaze flitted over to me again before quickly snapping away once he remembered the damp towel covering my naked body. I straightened and fought back a satisfied grin. With a wave of my hand, I gestured for him to enter.

He blinked several times in rapid succession like his brain was rebooting from one glance at me. Finally, he gave a quick nod and rushed into the apartment. I followed after him.

“I wasn’t going to stay, but I like the atmosphere,” I explained.

He chuckled. “This town is really quiet most days. There’s something nice about that. The supernatural community is pretty—oh God! What happened in here?” The man came to an abrupt halt, both in the bathroom doorway and in the conversation.

“That witch cursed me for being sassy with her.” I wrinkled my nose in annoyance.

I would go upstairs and eat her myself if I wanted to wake the demon inside me. That old crone would go down in one bite, but I doubted she tasted good. From the looks of her, I could tell that she would be grisly and bitter. No one needed to experience that.

The man braved the spray of water and knelt under the sink. With a few twists of his wrist and a quick smack on the plumbing, the spray succumbed to his smooth ways and ceased its outlandish behavior. Stunned, I stood in the bathroom doorway.

“You didn’t use a single tool,” I said.

He grinned and pushed back his damp hair. With a wide grin across his face, he said, “No need when you have superhuman strength. These hands can do a lot.”

“I bet they can,” escaped my mouth before I could even think to close it.

A red flush spread over his cheeks. He laughed nervously and sidestepped around me.

Of course, he wasn’t interested in me. I’d cornered this man in my bathroom and hit on him. He probably had a fated mate somewhere. All shifters did. There would be a woman in his apartment who was waiting for his return so he could show her all the ways he loved her.

I was a fool to stay in this town.

“You know,” the man said. “I was wondering...if you’re not doing anything later...would you like to come over to my place for dinner?”

Did that mean there was no woman? No fated mate? I couldn’t tell from the context. My demon moved inside me. She wanted out. She wanted to sniff this wolfman and see what he was really all about.

I shoved her back down and shook my head. If I let myself linger around him, there’s no telling what that she-demon would do. Last time I’d let her rule, she’d amassed a cult following and called herself a goddess...well, I obviously let mortals worship me as such, but it’d gotten a sister trapped forever.

Things were different these days. I wasn’t even sure the demon would know what to do or how to function in this new world. I hadn’t really let her out since the French Revolution when I danced with Lucifer on the banks of the Seine.

Meeting his daughter years down the line had come as quite the surprise, but not an unwelcome one.

“You’re taking quite a long time to answer,” the man said. “I’m going to take that as a no. I promise you, I’m an excellent cook. And I won’t spring any other guests on you if you’re not up for that. I know that there are a lot of people in this world who don’t much like interacting with big groups. It can be just you and me if you’d like...I’d like that, but only if you’d like that.”

My thoughts were dragged away from my demon. The man went on and on, filling the empty space that my silence had left. I bit my lip and thought about quieting him with a kiss. Would he growl and embrace it? Or would it be an invasion of his space?

It was hard to tell with shifters. There were some who wanted the touch of another at all times. Then there were others who preferred to live without a Pack so they could stay alone.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” I said once I realized it.

No, I hadn’t answered his question yet. I warred with myself over what I wanted and what I thought would be best for the both of us. As adorable and sweet as the man was, I didn’t know if his beast and my demon would work well together.

Perhaps I could indulge in a night with him, if he wanted, but then that might make for awkward neighbors. I knew that I was thinking too hard. There were too many potential outcomes, but I knew that this would likely end quickly and without drama.

He would find his fated mate, I would succumb to the boredom of a thousand years alive, and the world would continue to spin. Why move forward if I already knew how it would end? There was no point, really.

“My name is Hunter Fassbender,” he said, his voice pouring color back into the world again. “What can I call you?”

The beam of light coming in from the stained-glass window rippled with a rainbow of color that nearly mesmerized me now that I could see it. I wasn't sure how this man had the ability to breathe life into such a dead and cold world, but I was afraid I would become addicted to it. If he didn't stay...

Instead of responding to his question, I thanked him and ducked into the bathroom to hide until he eventually left.

I couldn't risk letting him in only to lose him. If I did, I would lose what little patience I had left with this world.