

AUDRA

As badly as I wanted to roll up to Giselle's front doorstep in my largest kitsune form so I could take a bite out of her, I stayed in my mortal form. Checking my lipstick in the glass of her door, I wiped a stray bit of pink off my skin so that my pretty pout stayed perfect. I'd also kept my hair long and shining because I wanted to rub my immortality in Giselle's face.

Not because I gained any kind of satisfaction out of it, but because I knew it would irk her. We needed any advantage we could get. Giselle was smart and had a plan for everything. If plan A didn't work, she had everything from B to Z lined up.

I wouldn't put it past her to have a boulder or a genie lamp waiting for me. Boulder sounded rather dumb, but it trapped Tamamo back home in Japan. That meant I needed to be on the lookout for any seals or spells.

My skin crawled this time. I could feel the seals in Giselle's walls. But I could also feel an invisible thread tugging me towards Hunter inside. I'd gotten out of Giselle's sealed house with Hunter's help before. The magic she used to trap me wouldn't fade when she died—a facet of spirit rituals that were ingenious so long as they weren't directed at me. So long as Hunter remained, then I would be able to escape.

At least...that's what I hoped.

I didn't want to have to live out the rest of my immortality in this house, waiting for Giselle's seals to fall apart. Though I could have called Tamamo now that I knew she was out of the boulder.

Baba whacked my knee with her cane. "You're stalling."

Lip curling, I sneered at the old witch. It'd taken some mild convincing, but she'd agreed to come along. When I'd asked for her help, her refusal had come off as an act. She'd been more than happy to put in a little elbow grease; she just wanted me to beg for it.

I wasn't all that bothered. Being around another immortal, as crazy as she was, had a comforting effect. For once, I wasn't alone.

We didn't bother knocking. I invited myself inside, shoving Giselle's door open so that I could follow that invisible thread pulling me upstairs...until it vanished. I reeled from the recoil of the unbound thread.

My stomach hit the floor. I feared the worst. Hunter had fought back and violated the terms of the contract. Giselle had taken my lover from me before I could do anything.

The world slowly turned red. A howl of rage squeezed my lungs. I dashed for the stairs while Baba stayed behind in the living room. Behind me, I could hear her smacking her lips like she was tasting the air.

"Iron and silver," Baba muttered distantly. "Smart, but that's my handiwork, witch."

I could have stuck around to see what the old witch was mumbling about, but rage propelled me forward. If Giselle had taken Hunter from me already, I was going to make sure there was hell to pay.

The air burned with the heat of my anger. At the top of the stairs, I paused and took in my surroundings. The hall up here seemed to stretch infinitely. Shadows at the far ends gave hints of corners that vanished into dark corridors.

Giselle had a labyrinth tucked into her second story. I knew the shadows likely held more of those goblin creatures. If I ventured too close, they would jump out and delay me. I didn't fear them, but I wanted to be smart because I wasn't going to waste even a single moment getting to that witch.

I prowled the hall, one by one kicking open doors. Most of them led nowhere, proving that this was some sort of pocket dimension. I had no time to waste, so I brought out as much spirit fire as I could and let it eat away at the walls, doors, the wood floors, and the shitty runner rug under my feet.

This time, my magic devoured the pocket dimension and dropped me at the top of the staircase all over again.

Shaking my head, I muttered, "Is that really all you have?"

As if to answer my unheard question, I dropped again. My feet hit the floor as the world settled back into place. This time, it was crooked. I leaned back on my heels, deciding how I would destroy this pocket dimension, when I plummeted once more.

Over and over, I fell. No sooner would my toes touch ground before the falling sensation took over again. I dropped through infinite dimensions, the halls blurring past me until they were nothing more than the suggestion of what could be a house.

I crossed my arms over my chest. Now wasn't the time. I wasn't going to play Giselle's games.

The power of my inner demon burned under my skin. I gnashed my teeth as my human form dissolved into glowing Sakura petals that scattered in the infinite descent. Massive fox paws clawed through the magic holding onto me until they found purchase in something real.

In my giant fox form, I clawed my way out of Giselle's magic. Flames clinging to my fur burned away the spell Giselle had wrought over her house. Her silly goofy spells couldn't stand up to the sheer power of my presence.

It would have felt nice to stretch my form again. My joints were a little stiff, and I had to flex my jaw a bit because I knew I'd need it to swallow that witch.

You cannot keep me from him.

He is mine.

I am his.

Nothing shall stand in our way.

I didn't know if a kitsune had ever fallen in love before. My sisters scattered to the far ends of the earth, and our paths never quite crossed. There was no one I could ask now, but I recalled my sisters being dismissive of love and how weak it made mortals.

This wasn't weakness. Not in my eyes.

The world was more beautiful than ever. No shadows scared me. There was so much color in the world now that I could see every threat clearly.

So long as I could return to him, all would be right again.

Hunter

The house trembled. The smell of a spring breeze floated on the air. Giselle's head snapped up. She winced, not once but twice, as if consecutive blows slapped her across the face. Each time, she seemed to wither ever more.

Audra was here, and whatever she was doing was making Giselle weaker. Which opened a path for me. The weight of the iron collar around my neck had shoved my beast back, but the smell of my mate on the air brought him rushing back to the surface.

While Giselle staggered from the blow of Audra's fight elsewhere, the witch didn't notice the way my fingers twisted into claws or the teeth pressing against the inside of my lips.

I grinned wide. Digging my wolf feet into the wood floor, I lowered my head and prepared to rush. The shadow hands still clung onto my arms, but there was nothing in this world that could hold me back from my mate.

The smell of Audra freed me from everything that possibly stood in my way.

"When was the last time you took a look at your own fate thread?" I asked, my words messy from the teeth that didn't quite fit in my mouth.

Giselle looked up, perplexed. "Why are you talking fun—"

Her words trailed off when she saw my transformation. Her eyes went wide, and she took a half-step back.

A wicked and unhinged cackle rang out through the room.

"You really shouldn't have tapped into my magic!" Baba Yaga appeared, seated on Giselle's worktable. The old witch kicked her feet with delighted glee.

Giselle spun, alarmed.

I took that moment to charge. Baba snapped her fingers, and the shadow hands vanished. I rushed forward, faster than ever without the hands digging into my arms now. Rage and love and adrenaline hit my heart, creating a firestorm that fed the beast inside me.

The sensation felt a lot like losing control to my beast, but the creature and I were on the same level. Neither was quite pushing the other back anymore. This was what it was like to experience what I was truly meant to be.

Berserker.

It'd only taken two immortals to show me my true potential.

I crashed into Giselle. Her bones were so brittle that I felt them shatter under the impact. Baba vanished when I shoved Giselle into the worktable. The evil witch bent and crumpled to the floor, but that wasn't the last of her.

Giselle looked up at me with eyes that flickered a cruel shade of green. Magic flashed in the air like a spark before lightning. She extended a hand towards me, her fingers hooked like she meant to claw my soul from my body. I braced myself for what she was about to throw at me. If I could survive it, then I'd be free.

I wouldn't have to worry about the end of my fate thread. A whole new life would open before me.

But that was my undoing, I realized too late. I'd hit Giselle with the intention of breaking free of my contract. I should have tried to kill her just to rid the world of her. Instead, I'd done the one thing I shouldn't have done.

The wall burst inward before Giselle could even flash a triumphant grin. An open maw clamped down around Giselle's form. The witch disappeared into a black and red void behind white teeth the size of my leg. I heard one scream of terror before she vanished once and for all.

Baba clapped her hands together and destroyed the lingering magic Giselle left in the air.

The head of a white fox with pink stripes beneath the eyes peered into the room. She let out a burp, filling the space with a rancid smell that I swatted away.

Pink flames washed over the fox's body, turning it to pink cinders. From the swirl of glowing petals stepped out Audra. She held a fist to her mouth like she might throw up.

I rushed to her and held out my arms so that she could lean on me.

"That was *disgusting*," Audra said.

I pushed a lock of her black hair away from her face. "Does that mean she's gone forever? I might have broken the contract, so we could be in trouble if she breaks free from...wherever she's gone."

Baba laughed in the background while she pawed through the myriad of nasty things on Giselle's shelves.

Audra shook her head. Her skin was still pale and held a tinge of green that warned of incoming sickness. “No. She’s gone for good. This isn’t the first time I’ve used my biggest form to eat an annoyance. The only way she’s coming back is in the form of indigestion.”

Cupping Audra’s cheek, I pressed my forehead to hers. I was grateful that she’d arrived just in time to save me from my own foolish thoughts. While I could fight and protect her, I needed her to keep my idiocy in check.

Turning to Baba, I said, “I’m willing to pay for a contractor to remodel the upstairs apartments into one living space if you’re willing to let us.”

The old hag couldn’t stop cackling. She held two jars, one with a writhing mass of tentacles pressing against the inside of the glass. The other held a small fae creature with a void of teeth for a mouth. “I wouldn’t worry about paying for anything. This treasure trove is more than enough.”

Audra wrinkled her nose. “I would trust you with my life, but I’m starting to second-guess my own sanity while I watch you raid this workshop.”

Though my father had turned his back on me years ago, I found an odd kinship with this old witch. She was the grandmother I’d never had. And I needed her to take this damn collar off.

It was an easy feat for the old hag. She snapped her fingers and it fell to the floor to become a pair of sharp-toothed iron dentures that waddled up to her like a chihuahua going to its master.

Audra and I shared a look of dismay before silently slipping out of the room. I kept her hand in mine because I wasn’t going to let her out of my sight ever again—yes, that was an over-exaggeration, but the beast in me fully believed the sentiment.

This was my mate, the lover I thought I’d never have.

And we had all the time in the world now.