

AUDRA

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Smug, I held my chin high. Hunter couldn't stop gaping at the line that ran through the café and down the block. The man hadn't believed me when I said his pastries were worth it. Now, he had to take the word of the entire town as they gushed over his work and jammed the tip jar so full that I had to put a lid on it to keep others from adding more.

"We're going to need some employees," I said. "There's no way that we can do this on our own. I would like to spend *some* time alone together, but if we try to run this all by ourselves, we're never going to leave the café premises."

Hunter, eyes still wide with awe and gratitude, hooked an arm around my waist and pulled me close. He buried his face in the crook of my neck to hide the tears that'd been gathering in those eyes. I cupped the back of his head and laughed if only to hide the sob and snuffle that left him.

"I never thought it could be like this," he said into my shoulder.

Neither did I, I thought as I took in my sweet lover.

Though he had the spirit of a Berserker, he was the softest man I'd ever met. Goofy and filled with charm, I cherished him. Nothing would ever tear us apart.

The bell over the door chimed. I glanced up to see who'd skipped the line and felt my blood turn to ice.

Thor locked eyes with me. A tightness constricted his jaw. I could see the muscles flexing from here. His attention flicked to Hunter, who had pulled back to press a kiss to my forehead.

At the sight of Hunter, Thor's shoulders relaxed. The giant man tilted his head like he couldn't quite process what he was seeing. Once the reality of the situation finally dawned on him, he shook his head in disbelief.

Beside me, Hunter stiffened. He growled at Thor's presence.

A customer at the counter coughed. We'd slowed down the line with our sentimental moment. I launched back into my customer service persona to keep things moving while Hunter and Thor slipped into the back.

I couldn't help but eye the kitchen door while I tried to eavesdrop on the conversation happening out of sight.

Life was good. Thor couldn't change that now. Nothing he said would sway Hunter, my mate, away from me. I grinned at the swell of warmth in my heart.

Hunter

I folded my arms over my chest. For the first time ever, business was booming. I had more than enough income to pay the rent and utilities. Most of my product didn't go to local shelters anymore—though, I made a mental note to start making more so that I could still donate now that we were in the black.

"I'm doing fine," I said to Thor.

He huffed a soft laugh. "I can see that."

The man had insulted Audra last time he'd visited. I wasn't about to let him do it again, especially now that I knew she was my mate. Everything Thor had said turned out to be nothing more than an exaggeration.

"She told me about everything. I know about Alvin and Beryl, about how awful they were. Audra didn't do that to manipulate people. She did it because she knew she couldn't be the leader the community needed." I spread my feet apart, prepared to argue with him.

Thor nodded, but his lips were tight. Maybe he didn't believe it, but when he looked at me, I knew he could see the change in me.

"Audra helped me discover what I really am," I continued. "I have a divine gift. My beast is a Berserker. She's been helping me get more accustomed to my shifts."

I didn't have to fear hurting someone who could eat a witch in one bite. Audra and I were equals. When I shifted, there was nothing I had to worry about anymore. She would be there to watch over me, just like I was there to protect her.

Thor scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “As much as I hate to stay it, the two of you are good for one another. Who would have thought? If I’d known that, I would have shipped the woman off to you years ago.”

Audra pushed through the swinging kitchen door and laughed at Thor’s statement. “Like you can make me do anything.”

She came up to me and nestled into the crook of my arm where she belonged. I pressed a kiss to the top of her head while she stared daggers at Thor.

The man held up both hands in surrender. “You have a point, ma’am. Now, if you don’t mind, I have other shifters to go check up on. I’m going to go about my business and leave the two of you to yourselves from now on.”

Thor left without another word. My beast lifted its head in triumph, though I wasn’t sure this was really the victory the wolf thought it was. I would miss Thor’s visits.

Glancing down at Audra, I asked, “You said we needed employees, right?”

She gave a curious nod.

An idea flitted through my head and drove me to chase down Thor. I found him outside, at his truck. This time, our truck-side meeting had a lighter tone though he still gave me a wary look.

“Should you have any shifters that need a good home, I’d be glad to help them get their start here. You helped me, even if I fought you the entire way. I’m more than glad to help pass on the favor.”

Thor studied me for a long moment.

I held my breath, waiting.

Audra

I wanted to sink my teeth into that sweet, sweet mate of mine—in the most loving way, of course. Watching from a distance after leaving Baba at the register, I heard him offer to help others the same way that Thor had helped him.

Hunter had a heart of gold, even if the world had tried to leave a dark patina over it. The man still kept it polished so that he could always see the best in everything and everyone.

After Thor gave a nod and told Hunter that he'd take him up on that, Hunter came back to me.

I put my hands on his chest and welcomed him back with a deep kiss that stole my breath and made my head spin. I almost forgot to tell him how much I loved him.

"I love you, too," he said low, his whisper grazing my cheek. "The found family is about to get bigger. Are you ready?"

"I can't wait." My heart thumped in giddy anticipation.

The future seemed so bright for the first time in centuries. Maybe it had something to do with the light of my life right in front of me.

"We should get back inside before Baba starts accepting first-borns as forms of payment," I said.

Hunter's eyes went wide with alarmed shock. Voice low, he asked, "Would she really do that?"

I shrugged. "She's insane. Who knows? Distract her while I get the café in order again."

Life wasn't so boring anymore.