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HUNTER

I stood outside the woman's apartment door and wondered what I'd done wrong. She'd run away from me so quickly that one would have thought I'd farted. I raised my arm and sniffed my armpit. It didn't smell that bad, though I could use a shower after a day of work.

Baba ambled down the hall with a smug smile. It was then that I realized she'd tampered with the woman's sink to make it spray like that.

Scowling, I said, "Are you trying to play matchmaker? Because you've always been awful at games."

"Pish posh, I am amazing at games. You just don't like it when I cheat."

"If you have to cheat, then you're bad at a game! How many times do I have to teach you this lesson, old woman?" I shook my head teasingly.

She grinned and tapped her temple. "Cheating is all a part of the game. It's for the best that you never learn how to do it, though. For men, cheating can break everything."

I straightened my spine. "Are you insinuating that I would cheat on a partner? I'd never, not in my entire life."

There wasn't much left of it anyway.

"I would endorse it to get you out of that damned contract, but we can't teach an old dog new habits when there's a good owner coming to adopt."

I cocked my head. "Baba, none of that made any sense."

The old woman waved me off. I knew she was older than the concept of dirt, but that didn't excuse the jumbled nonsense coming out of her mouth.

"Go suck a moon," she grumbled, turning to amble away from me.

What did this old woman want from me?

Instead of lingering to wonder what was going on with these women, I made my way into my own apartment so I could take care of the stench under my arms. I swear it wasn't that bad, but now that I was aware of it, there was no ignoring it.

Inside, I caught sight of the crooked calendar on the wall. The days had been marked off with a black marker. Each X grew more ominous than the last.

As if my thoughts summoned her, my phone began buzzing in my pocket. I knew who it would be. Giselle was coming to collect her debt, but I needed a few days to myself before I answered her. I was...surprisingly unready to meet my maker.

In the kitchen, I filled a glass of water and downed it while trying not to look at the calendar on the wall. Instead, my eyes touched on the red moon outside. The water turned to ice in my gut. I swallowed hard, and a crack filled the air.

At first, I didn't know what happened. Then I realized I'd clenched my fist and shattered the glass in my hand.

"Not another one," I grumbled.

Blood trailed down my clenched fist and over the bound muscles of my forearm. It ran in rivulets between the bulging veins beneath my skin. The beast hunkered within me growled with a hunger that made me sick.

I retched into the sink, though there was nothing to throw up. I'd hardly been able to eat all day. Knowing that a red moon hovered in the sky had put a hamper on my appetite.

The beast warned me that I was running from the inevitable. The taste of flesh and blood danced across my tongue like an enticing memory. I wiped at my mouth with the back of my unharmed hand and glared at the red orb in the sky.

Could anyone else see it? Was I the only one haunted by the laughing moon? It seemed to cackle at my misfortune whenever it reared its ugly head. Yet, no one else saw it. There were no photos on local social media. No one pointed out the red haze around the moon.

It hung in the sky just for me, a horrible reminder of my birth.

This was why I'd sold the last of my fate thread. Born under a bad moon, I doubted there was much good in my future. I'd already suffered twenty-five years on this forsaken planet. Any more, and there was a chance that I could do actual harm.

For the most part, I lived alone so that I wouldn't hurt anyone else. Baba had opened a spot for me in her apartments so I could keep to myself when the red moon rose. It wasn't like she had to fear me. I was a danger to mortals and other shifters, though. I couldn't be around anyone who wasn't an ancient immortal burdened with damn near divine levels of power.

I ran my bloodied hand under a stream of cold water and watched the blood run into the drain. By the time it cleared, my wounds had healed. The beast growled happily. It sank its claws into my lungs, into my stomach. It tried to seize control without warning.

"You...can't..." I dropped to my knees.

Hands on the counter above me, I heard it groan and shatter as I gripped it in my desperation. The beast tried to fight its way out. It took everything from me, even my breath. I'd grown used to this, though.

The end was near enough; I didn't need to breathe.

But I still wanted to learn more about the woman across the hall. I thought of her sleek black hair and her discerning dark eyes. She held herself in a regal way that said she was used to being worshipped. Though I'd tried to look away, I had caught a glimpse of her body, and I could say she deserved to be worshipped.

She was stunning.

She was captivating.

"Leave me alone, you mutt," I growled.

The relentless creature dug its claws deeper into my core and made me hiss in pain. This was nothing new. I could handle it. At least, that's what I told myself over and over. No matter how much it thrashed and bit, I could keep it contained.

It would not best me.

On shaky knees, I rose and set about doing the only thing that'd ever distracted me from the beast: baking. There was something about the science of it that pulled my mind away from the magical beast in my core. Though, at first, I clanked the bowls and measuring cups together, I soon found my rhythm.

I stayed up, late into the red-moon night. I braided dough into pretty, chocolate-studded loaves and filled turnovers with sweetly cooked apple filling. There were moments when the red rim of the moon distracted me, but it could not captivate me the way it wanted.

My father had been the Alpha of his own shifter pack. From what I'd heard, he'd been a good leader. The Pack had thrived, and Dad met the love of his life, his fated mate. Everything had been peaceful and bright, or so I was told.

I wouldn't know.

The rise of the red moon cursed my birth. I killed my mother that day. Her body couldn't bear the burden of a cursed child like me. She died in the hospital, and my father blamed me. I didn't resent him for it, though it did sting.

Dad abandoned me after that. He turned his back on me and became a bitter man. The brave and proud Pack leader that everyone knew died along with my mother. Though Dad didn't give me up entirely, he made sure to never be around.

He wasn't there for my first day at school. He wasn't there for my first playground fight. He wasn't there for my first girlfriend.

I stole a glance at the red moon. It'd been there the night Nicole and I slipped away into the woods, too. They'd found her body in the lake a few days later. Anxiety and guilt churned in the pit of my stomach.

The beast assured me that it hadn't been my fault, but I couldn't trust the creature. I had no memories of that night, only flashes. I could recall Nicole's soft hand in mine. I could see her running between the thin Eastern trees.

Everything beyond that was dark.

Sucking in a quick breath, I returned to the moment. I had to shake myself free of the rising guilt trying to take over my mind. The oven screamed that it was ready, and I launched into action. It was all I could do.

Maybe I should stay away from the pretty woman across the hall, too. She deserved better than a busted wolf like myself. There was no telling where this would lead.

Giselle would take me from this world, and all would be safe again.