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AUDRA

My stomach growled ravenously the next morning, though the cupboards were woefully empty. I cursed myself for not bothering to fill them the day before. There was a café in town that I knew I could rely on, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to run into Hunter just yet.

My demon raised her head curiously, and my hunger deepened. It turned into something I hadn't felt in years...decades even: *lust*.

"Well, that's new," I grumbled as I rolled out of bed.

As I passed by the bathroom, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. A few steps past it, I paused and digested what I'd just seen. It hadn't been that long ago that I'd gotten a haircut. These days, I liked to keep my hair close to my chin.

I backed up and looked again. My reflection betrayed what I thought I knew. My hair swung low, almost down to my feet again. For a heartbeat, I thought maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me. There was no way that my hair had grown because that could mean only one thing...

I looked down to see the tendrils of black hair curled at my feet.

"You bitch!" I hissed.

The demon chuckled and settled back down. She was dangerously close to regaining power. My hair always returned to its original state whenever she appeared. No matter how many times I cut it, my hair grew back out to its full length when the demon was in full power.

But I'd been careful to keep her at bay. I couldn't let her have her own way in this day and age. She would start a cult and get us all in trouble if I wasn't careful.

The demon disagreed. She filled my mind with images of one man. She didn't want the worship of many anymore. The demon wanted Hunter to worship her with his hands, his tongue, his body.

"Whore," I said even though I was relieved.

I ran a hand through my long hair and got tangled in the locks. There was a reason I kept this mess short. Instead of going to a professional salon, I marched into the kitchen and found a pair of shears. My demon was vain enough that she evened my choppy cuts as I made them.

Though I had a hefty bank account after years and years of being alive, there was no way that I was going to waste money just because the kitsune demon in me got a little horny.

Instead of lingering in the demon's desires, I threw on a sweater so I could go out for some breakfast. The local grocery store would have a donut bakery, even if I knew their pastries would never match Hunter's.

His croissant had been life changing. One bite had transported me back in time to France all over again. His hands knew their way around a supple dough.

My thoughts wandered into places I'd left alone for years. I almost missed the basket sitting outside my front door. Thankfully, I didn't trip over it because I would have been devastated once I realized what was hidden beneath the tea towel covering the basket's contents.

Crouching, I gently lifted the tea towel and found myself greeted by the pleasant aroma of apple turnovers and a babka loaf. The loaf had been expertly braided and bits of chocolate had melted over the top of it. Just the sight made my stomach growl greedily.

A thermos was tucked into the corner, nestled in by the turnovers and wrapped loaf. A little note had been squeezed between the thermos and pastries.

I couldn't sleep last night, so you're welcome to reap the benefits of my insomnia. The thermos contains vanilla bean coffee because I don't know your favorite order yet.

Hunter

I licked my lips as my heart clenched with the kind of emotions I'd been avoiding all my life. Love had never lasted. This was nothing more than an infatuation brought on by my stomach's desires. It wasn't the kind of lasting love that could keep me satisfied through the achingly long years.

I was trying to convince myself not to pursue Hunter, but I wasn't sure if it was working. A smile spread across my face. I brought the basket into the apartment

before Baba could creep her way upstairs. My heart danced delightedly, and that old hag would definitely ruin everything.

Though, once I was inside, the apartment felt oddly lonely. The spirit of Hunter's gift sat on the empty table. It was a reminder of the silence sitting in the corners of the room, the shadows in the cupboards, and the leaky drip in the bathroom. I couldn't sit here by myself or else the ennui would drain every ounce of satisfaction from the pastries, and I couldn't allow that after Hunter had worked so hard to make them.

I dressed in a pair of sleek leggings and an oversized sweater. In my experience, men preferred their women to look comfortable. A woman could put on the skimpiest lingerie and they wouldn't bat an eye. An unbound kimono or oversized sweater would make them go feral, though.

I should have asked myself why I was dressing to lure Hunter in, but I ignored that part of my thought process. It was easy to shove aside as I sipped from the thermos. The taste of vanilla beans—real ones, not the jarred extract—overcame all thoughts on my way downtown.

Hunter's little hole-in-the-wall café appeared ahead. A skip found its way into my step. I should have turned and ignored this rising feeling, but there was so little to look forward to in this life that I latched onto every ounce of serotonin I could get my hands on.

There would be hell to pay later. I couldn't ignore my own fears. Outside the door, I collected myself. I slowly inhaled and felt the expanse of my ribs even though my heart still danced wildly. This could end horribly...yet, I couldn't stop myself from pushing the door open.

A couple seemed to be on a date in the far corner. A man leaned back in his chair as he boldly talked about himself. The woman seemed bored and disinterested. Her gaze kept flicking to the exit. The man shrugged it off when she looked to me. I saw the twist of anger that reached his features for an instant before he realized I was a woman.

To him, I couldn't possibly be a threat. As a woman, his date wouldn't want me over him. I'd spent plenty of time with women over my years. I knew how to make them smile and how to make them moan. While I could absolutely steal his date out from under him, I'd come to the café for a different reason.

Hunter stood behind the counter, his sleeves rolled up and flour all over his apron. He fixed the cap over his unruly brown hair and turned to me. His face lit up when he saw me. Folding his arms on top of the glass counter case, he grinned in greeting.

I raised the basket. "I couldn't bear to enjoy this all by my lonesome, so I thought I would come share it with good company."

His smile faltered. "That sounds suspiciously like *I don't want to eat this.*"

"No! No, that's not what I meant. I'm excited to taste your pastries, I just..."

I what? Wanted his attention because it was the only thing that put color back into this drab world? Needed to be around him to be reminded that I'm real after a thousand years of wandering alone? Nothing I said would sound right, especially with two mortals having a bad date in the corner of the café.

I sighed.

"I'm sorry," Hunter said. "I didn't mean to be rude. My words are as clumsy as my hands."

"You cannot possibly have clumsy hands," I said, gesturing to the case full of immaculate pastries.

He laughed sheepishly and adjusted his hat again. The man was not used to being complimented. I wondered why that was. His café had the best pastries I'd tasted outside of France. His business should have been booming, even in this little town.

Yet, the two times I'd been here, the establishment seemed almost empty. Sure, it was a small café, but the case seemed almost untouched. It was as if no one could smell the amazing treats he made in here every morning.

Lips twisted to the side, I asked, "Is it always this empty in here?"

Of course, I threw a glance back at the bad date. The man was leaning into the table now. He spoke with his hands like he had something to prove. The woman had pushed her chair away from the table and wrapped her arms around herself.

My demon snarled. She wanted to eat him. The man would go down in one bite and no one would have to deal with him ever again.

Hunter pulled the babka loaf from the basket, unwrapped it, and snatched a knife from the back counter to slice it. When he placed a piece of the loaf in front of me, I turned

away from the couple in the corner, though my demon still wanted a taste of that man—and not in a kind way.

How long had it been since I let her run rampant? The massive nine-tailed kitsune demon had not seen the light of day since the fall of Tamamo's cult. I'd hidden my own beast away and ran, too afraid to fall prey to my sister's demise.

The demon had thrown a fit here and there until finally falling into a decent slumber. Now, the man grinning at me from across the counter woke her and turned her into a ravenous demon all over again.

"I would have knocked on your door, but I didn't know if you were awake or not," Hunter confessed.

He lifted a piece of his loaf and presented it for me. Without thinking, I leaned in and let him feed it to me. My cheeks warmed when I looked up at him. Surprise widened his eyes and turned his mouth into a small O, but only for a second. Then his face blossomed with excited warmth that pinched the corners of his eyes. He looked away, but only to grab another piece of food.

I felt the woman's eyes on the back of my head. I heard her sit up in her chair. She'd seen this little moment between Hunter and myself, and she wanted a taste. At first, my demon snarled possessively. This was *my* shifter.

But she didn't want to be hand fed by Hunter. She asked her date to do it, and the man grew aggressively uncomfortable.

"I'm not a morning person." Though I spoke to Hunter, I kept my attention on the table behind me. "There are goddesses who flourish in the light of a rising sun, but I am not one of them."

Hunter dragged his attention away from the horrible date in the corner. He raised both brows. "Goddesses, huh?"

I hadn't been a goddess for a very long time. No one worshipped me as such anymore. I wasn't like Hel or Persephone, their divine domains granting them worlds of power to help mortals. I was just a demon.

Sheepishly, I waved him off so we could move to another topic. Hunter's eyes flashed and the corner of his mouth lifted. He had his teeth in something, and he wasn't going to let go.

Thankfully, the man behind me shouted and pulled the attention away from me.

“I can’t believe you’re just going to go home by yourself!” He stood and hounded the woman all the way to the front door. “I bought your food. The least you could do is go home with me.”

My back went ramrod straight, but before I could do anything, Hunter vaulted over the counter.

“I’m going to ask you to leave,” Hunter growled.

The man spun and pointed a finger in Hunter’s face. “You’re not a part of this conversation. Leave us alone.”

Hunter pushed into the man’s finger. He was absolutely unafraid of some mortal man with an overly large ego, but I felt something else stir in the air. There was a charge like ozone, but it reeked of bad omens. My demon stirred and whispered that it was coming from Hunter.

I saw him in a new light. He wasn’t just a cute wolf boy oozing charm. There was more to him than that, a presence under his skin that craved the violence that the other man had invited into the café. If I didn’t do something, this could end poorly for everyone. Even the woman across the café looked to me with pleading eyes.

All right, demon. I guess I can let you have fun for a moment.

I hadn’t unleashed my full aura since the night Alvin Combs, the murderous Alpha shifter in Lakesedge, thought it would be wise to hunt an employee in my café. They’d all gotten a taste of my true power that night.

The demon flickered like a spirit flame growing bolder and brighter. I heard her manic cackle echo through my ears like a fox’s delighted yip deep in the darkest woods. She filled my body and flowed outwards, overtaking the small café with an overpowering presence.

“I have every right to her—” The awful man’s words cut off with a strangled whimper.

The thud of his knees hitting the ground echoed inside the café. The man looked up at me with wide, terrified eyes, but Hunter seemed rather unaffected. The wolfman slowly turned and looked back at me with one brow curiously raised.

Just like that, the ominous feeling in the air faded and vanished altogether. Hunter and I locked eyes. I could tell he had a million questions, but there was no time. He bent and picked the kneeling man up by the waist, threw his limp body over his shoulder, and marched outside.

I could feel the woman's stare on my skin, but I paid her no mind. There was no way to explain what she'd just experienced, and I wasn't going to try. Right now, I had to focus on getting my demon back under control.

She raged inside me like a wildfire that cackled with mad delight. The taste of power had invigorated her, and I needed to get her back down or else she would overtake every part of my life.

Why do you fear me? I am you, after all. We are not separate like the wolves and dragons. Our minds are not two.

We are one.

I am you.

My lip curled at the unbidden thoughts. If I let her have any more power, she would make my life a suffering mess, and no amount of boredom would ever make me crave that kind of instability again.

If we could find a balance between safety and indulgence...maybe then I could be one with myself. In all my years, I'd never been able to find the perfect point between the two ideas. I doubted that it would magically appear now.

Hunter

I dropped the man onto the street and walked away without any more fanfare. He really didn't deserve it. Inside, I offered his date a free coffee and a bag of pastries to take home—it wasn't like I would sell them all by day's end anyway. She declined and kept apologizing on her date's behalf.

“That wasn't your fault,” I said with a wave of my hand. “No real man would ever behave like that.”

I caught the way the woman stared at me. There was just a little bit too much white around her irises. Fear radiated off her as she edged her way towards the exit. I'd been a little too aggressive, and it'd given rise to my accursed beast.

The scared woman turned and ducked through the door. Outside, she stole a glance at her dazed date before sprinting in the other direction, as far as she could get from both him and me.

I sighed and yanked the hat off my head so I could run a hand through my hair.

“If it weren’t for you,” I said to my new neighbor who still hadn’t shared her name with me, “I would be in a world of trouble. I guess I have to make it up to you.”

She was still stiff and refused to meet my gaze, but I knew it wasn’t because of my accursed beast. A woman like herself wouldn’t cower in the face of my wolf. I’d felt the scale of her power, and it was damn near divine. The way she curled in around herself made me think that she didn’t want anyone to know what she was.

The fact that she’d let it out to help me in a pinch there meant everything to me. I wasn’t going to push her to tell me her secret. Sometimes, there were things that were better left alone. If she wanted to keep this to herself, then that was her choice.

Though, I had to admit, I was more curious than ever. I caught myself stealing glances at her. Was I mistaken, or had her hair grown? It’d been at her chin the day before and at her shoulders earlier. Now it hung past her shoulder blades.

“Your hair,” I said before I could catch myself. In an attempt to save it, I said, “It’s pretty.”

Her lips parted as she tilted her head in mild confusion. When she looked to me and gave me the most puzzled smile, my heart did a flip in my chest. Everything about her captivated me. I didn’t mind letting her linger here, even if she had no plans to buy anything.

Her company was just...nice.

“You never did tell me your name,” I said as a way to fill the silence.

I peeked up at her to see if she was any more comfortable. It seemed like her shoulders had loosened a bit. Her gaze still danced across the room like she couldn’t organize her thoughts enough to look at one thing.

It was a familiar feeling. When my beast fought to escape, focus seemed out of grasp. When I was in the same kind of place, I had to make a mess of my kitchen before focus settled back in. I didn’t quite know what to do to help her, though. Conversation didn’t seem to be the thing.

Or, maybe, I wasn't talking about the right thing.

"I'm not exactly the best shifter, if you haven't noticed." It wasn't often that I got to talk about myself with someone who I didn't think would judge me. There was a chance the woman would up and leave, but my days were so limited that if she did, I wouldn't have long to linger in my pain.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I continued. "I was born under a bad moon, and it's made my life a living hell."

Her head snapped up. Another curious look crossed her face. Her lips pursed like she might ask a question, though it never left the tip of her tongue. Nonetheless, a bit of a smile reached the corner of her lips. She leaned onto the open counter near the register and put her chin in her hand to listen.

I regaled her with the depressing story of my birth, skipping some parts that could be a bit much. When I reached the part where my contract with Giselle should have been, I skipped over it. She didn't need to know there was a witch waiting to collect my fate thread.

Nah.

As if thoughts of the witch had summoned her, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I cursed under my breath when it made me trip over a part of my story.

"You can answer the call if you have to," the still-nameless woman said as if that was some sort of kind gesture and not the first step into doom.

She didn't know.

No one other than Baba did, and Baba still hated the decision I'd made. Sometimes, I wondered if Baba would talk to Giselle on my behalf, but there was no way that Baba would ever be that charitable, even if it meant saving my life. The old hag would rather let me pay the price for my actions than intervene.

I gave a half shrug. "Don't worry about it."

The still-nameless woman ran a long finger around the rim of the thermos. "You can call me Audra. That's what I've been going by for the last fifty years."

I did a double-take. She didn't look fifty, that was for sure. If anything, Audra looked as though perhaps she was closing in on her thirties with a handful of years yet to

go—I'm not sure if that made any sense. There was an agelessness about her that was hard to pin down.

And she knew, if the smile on her lips said anything.

I wanted to ask so badly, but I knew that could potentially push her away, and my beast would be pissed if she left. Hell, I'd be upset if she left. She smelled of fresh blossoms and old forests, and I couldn't get enough of it.

What are you? Will you let me in and tell me before my end comes? I can't tell you that I'm living on borrowed days, or you might feel like I'm manipulating you.

Interactions were difficult. I understood the intricacies of them, but knowing which way to navigate always baffled me. I saw too many paths forward, and they all led to places I didn't necessarily want to go.

Thankfully, Audra picked up the conversation for me.

“Why don't you have more customers? I know that might seem like an underhanded insult, but I'm truly perplexed. Your pastries rival that of master chefs in France.” She tucked a lock of black hair behind her ear. “One would think that you'd have a line down the block every morning. This should be the go-to place for everyone on their morning commute.”

I gave a half-shrug. “No one knows I'm here. That girl probably found a cute café with no reviews on the internet and thought she would be the first one to explore it. Other than that, this really is just a hole in the wall.”

Her lips twisted to the side as she straightened, clearly dissatisfied with my answer. “That's not right. You have everything you need to succeed. How's your marketing campaign?”

“My what now?”

Flabbergasted, she gaped at me as if I'd just dropped a baby off a balcony. I looked around for the real horror before finally accepting that I'd just said something awful.

“You're not marketing?” she whispered, astonished.

“I'm just a baker who wants to spend his time alone in a kitchen. I don't know a damn thing about marketing.” And I never will.

It's far too late to start trying now.

“I could help you,” Audra offered. “I owned and operated a successful café in Lake—Syracuse before closing the doors.”

She gave me a window to change the subject and I pounced on it. “Why did you shut down your business?”

Audra’s lips flattened into a firm line. I missed the sight of her perfect, pink, heart-shaped lips with an aching twang that took me by surprise.

“I wasn’t needed there anymore,” Audra said, low and sad.

Well, shit. I’d stumbled onto the wrong topic. That happened more often than not. Any time I wanted to shift attention away from myself, I jumped into openings that were better left alone.

This was why I couldn’t keep any good company around. Baba didn’t count. The spider-eating witch wasn’t exactly good company.

“But I’m proud of what I did while I was there,” Audra continued.

The sound of her voice pulled my attention back to her. She wore a soft smile that glowed with the pride in her voice. I couldn’t help but stare at the demure beauty of her. If I didn’t know better, I would have called her a goddess.

Of course, the beast filled my head with lustful thoughts. I inhaled sharply and spun around as visions of her bare skin filled my mind. In my panic, I hit a tray and tipped it dangerously. I caught it at the last second, but the sudden motion sent a pastry flying through the air.

With one hand, I snatched it and gently set it back onto the tray. It would have been a glorious display of reflexes, but I just stared forlornly at the tray that I’d just manhandled with my unwashed hands.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

“Born under a bad moon, my ass.” Audra laughed. “You’re gifted, and you don’t even realize it. That was impressive.”

My beast slithered just beneath my skin. I could feel the pinpricks of its claws in my organs and its teeth gnawing on my mind. I could only give an unconvincing half-smile as I tossed the groped pastry into the trash and dumped the others onto a clean tray since I hadn’t touched them.

The other tray went into the sink in the back. When I came back out, Audra was gone.

“You say I don’t have bad luck and then you go and disappear on me,” I grumbled.

Were my conversation skills really that bad?