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## AUDRA

I needed some fresh air to clear my head. The inside of the café wasn't exactly stuffy, but every sensation reminded me of the man I was trying so hard not to touch. It'd grown overwhelming, especially with a greedy demon whispering illicit thoughts in my ear.

Outside, I picked my way along the sidewalk as I tore at an apple turnover from Hunter's morning basket.

Was there a supernatural community in this sleepy town? I saw almost no one else outside, though it was the time of year when many stayed inside. The thaw would arrive soon, but there was still slush in the gutters and chunks of dirty snow at the ends of the roads.

Perhaps when Spring finally sprang, the town would awaken from its hibernation and the other supernaturals would come crawling back to the world. The town was too beautiful to be only inhabited by humans—though I knew I thought that only because of my past interactions with humans.

They could be...vindictive and selfish. But there were many who were capable of kindness and beauty—they were just harder to find.

A sharp pain seared my backend and nearly made me yelp. Startled, I spun and found Baba staring up at me with a cruel twist on her face.

Lip curled, I sneered down at the old hag. "Why are you stabbing me in the ass with your cane?"

I swatted it away, but the old hag whipped it back and snapped me across the rump. I howled and leapt in pain.

"What was that for?" I rubbed at the growing welt on my backside.

"You're a horrible tenant," she grumbled.

"And you're a reeking wench who never should have left the swamp, yet here we are."

*Eat her*, the demon whispered.

I stepped back and pulled my spine straight. It meant I could sneer down at Baba, at the very least.

“You invited my tenant into your apartment and did not fall in love with him. I am disappointed. Why else would I have tampered with your sink?” Baba threw both hands in the air in anguish.

“You intentionally broke my sink?” My voice hitched higher. I was almost certain Hunter would be able to hear us even though I’d wandered a few blocks away from the café. “Your idea of a meet-cute is pathetic, to say the least.”

“Bah,” the old hag said as she waved me off with her cane.

“You can’t just go around trying to force people together like that.”

“He needs love,” the hag said. “If he cannot find an iota of affection in this world, then he is not long for it.”

I tilted my head. “What does that mean? Are you threatening Hunter?”

Baba waddled up to me in what could have been called a charge. She reared back with the cane in an attempt to smack me again, but I caught it this time. My fingers burned from the impact, though I held back my hiss of pain.

“I would never. The boy might be a monster, but I take kindly to such creatures. Monsters are just misunderstood.”

I took another step back because I needed to get out of this conversation. Baba dropped a lot of information, but not in any way that was digestible. In fact, nothing she’d said made any sense. I knew that she wanted to try to push Hunter and me together, though I could not understand why if she hated me enough to beat me with her cane.

“Disgusting girl,” Baba muttered.

“Watch your tongue, I am your senior.” A growl vibrated my throat.

Baba cackled. “Do you want me to call you a hag then? It would only be fair.”

“Why are you so infuriating?”

She grinned, her iron teeth gleaming in the winter sunlight. “It is how I keep things lively in this day and age. You should know that the world can get quite boring at our age. A bit of insanity keeps every minute fresh.”

I stared in disgust and awe. If this is what it meant to live too long, then I wanted a one-way ticket off the mortal plane right this instant.

“You find me revolting. It is fine. Many do, yet I still know how to twist threads to create my own weave. Can you do such things? Can you control your own future? I didn’t think so.” Baba turned and waddled away with her cane.

I stared at the back of the woman’s wild bun and wondered if those were stray locks or twigs poking out at odd angles. She confused me more than anyone else, but that was her prerogative. I couldn’t let her linger on my mind too long or I would go just as mad as her.

There was one thing I’d learned, at the very least: Baba wanted me to save Hunter.

While I thought that I was the one who needed saving, I recalled the ominous feeling in the air when Hunter had stared the unruly man down. Hunter hadn’t really beaten around the bush. He’d been honest about being born under a bad moon and how it affected his life.

I wrestled with the idea that I was here to save someone else when I clearly needed help, too. Was it fair to put this on my shoulders? Baba didn’t care about fair. None of her tales included anything about fairness, only the harsh truth of the world and how to work through it.

Pouting, I made my way to the nearest bench and dropped onto it. I shoved the last of my apple turnover into my mouth and savored the blessed flavor of it.

She was right.

I touched my lips while the flavor lingered on the tip of my tongue. I couldn’t let a man capable of such beauty leave this world. However, I wasn’t going to do it the way Baba wanted me to. I wasn’t going to make him love me and become his reason for living.

I’d already done that once before, and it was an empty love. The only kind of love worth having was reciprocated love. If I did as Baba asked and made him love me more than anything, I wasn’t sure I could return the favor, and that would destroy us both.

No, I had to try to save him another way. Perhaps, I could help save his café and give him another reason to keep going. Everyone deserved to know what he was capable of. Even if he had something dark lurking deep inside him, it was outshined by the love he had for his craft.

I couldn't help but smile thinking about him working in the kitchen. Perhaps we could set up a window so everyone could watch his muscles flex while he kneaded dough. The world would be entranced by his meaty hands creating such delicate and fine work.

My cheeks heated once I realized that *I* was the one entranced.

*Hunter*

Baba shookher cane at me when I pushed past the iron fence at the front of the house.

“Go take a shower! You smell like wet dog all the way from over here!”

I gave her a quick salute and promised I'd do just that before I paused. Had she tampered with my shower? Baba had messed with Audra's bathroom sink the day before.

Scratching my head, I decided I had nothing to lose. Turning, I went back to the front garden and found Baba deep in a thorny bush. She plucked thorns from the branches and put them into a tiny jar clutched in her crooked fingers.

“I knew you would reek,” Baba said, her nose wrinkling.

“Why do you want me to take a shower so badly?” I leaned on the nearby fence and crossed my ankles to show her I was ready to stay for a conversation.

“You can attract a lot more with honey than vinegar. Maybe if you smelled a little nicer, your apartment wouldn't be so empty all the time. When's the last time your bed was already warm when you crawled into it?” She tapped her temple like she knew the meaning of the universe.

I rolled my eyes where she couldn't see. “I'm a shifter. I don't need a warm bed. It's actually a lot nicer when my pillow is cold.”

Baba grumbled something under her breath. I caught her mumbling about how I was ungrateful. I even heard her mention a fate thread.

A shiver raced down my spine. It settled like a thunderstorm in my stomach. I uncrossed my ankles and pushed away from the fence.

“You can’t change the choices I’ve made,” I said.

I didn’t let her argue any further. Instead, I shoved through the door and disappeared into my apartment.

As if summoned by the thought of my contract, Giselle’s number flashed on my phone screen again. A glance at the calendar made me question why she wanted to make my last few days miserable. She could collect the rest of my years when the contract ran out, and not a moment before.

My wolf growled angrily, though it wasn’t particularly clear why. Something left the beast on edge, but it didn’t have the words to tell me what. Did it hate me for selling the last of my days to a witch? Or was it frustrated with Baba for tampering with the apartment?

The thing clawed under my skin and left searing hot pain across all of my limbs. It tried to crush my bones so that it could reform them in its own shape. I clenched my teeth and accidentally bit down on the inside of my own cheek.

I didn’t know if I could hold the creature back this time, not when the taste of blood flowed across my tongue. My eyes almost rolled back at the delightful sensation. It’d been too long since I’d hunted. I wanted to feel something die between my teeth. I wanted to tear into its flesh and savor the prize of my efforts.

Sucking in a breath through my nose, I pushed back the beast’s urges. There was no winning this time.

And there would be no shower, either.

My fingers curled, the bone shoving its way out of my skin to become sharp claws that bit into the kitchen linoleum. My jaw popped and canted, hanging loose while my teeth rearranged themselves.

The shift never hurt this bad. This was the price I paid for fighting the beast so many times. It would rip its way out of me one way or another. There was no holding back the inevitable.