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AUDRA

The next morning was oddly quiet. Perhaps I was too used to the wailing sirens of Syracuse, but the air seemed empty in a way that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I flopped onto my back, spread my arms wide, and stared at the ceiling in an attempt to organize my thoughts.

Something nagged at the edges of my mind. It was an idea I couldn't quite grasp. It buzzed around like that mosquito that I couldn't catch.

Finally, I threw myself out of bed and into the shower. Once more, my hair had grown long over the night. I glared at my reflection in the mirror. Was this what'd been bothering me? I turned to the demon inside my core, but her attention was elsewhere. She, too, seemed distracted by that slippery thought.

Was I going senile? I didn't know demons, immortal or not, could lose their minds to old age. The demon scoffed at the thought, which let me know that she was paying enough attention to catch the slight worry.

He's missing.

My back straightened like someone had pulled a cord at the top of my spine. Chest suddenly tight, I raced to the front door and threw it open. There was no basket in the hall. Instead, an old woman glared up at me.

I clutched the front of my unbuttoned shirt and cursed myself for not dressing properly.

"Looking to give the world a show?" Baba asked. "Too bad the seats will be empty. You don't have much to reveal."

My jaw dropped. "Did you just call me flat chested?"

Baba cackled and toddled off towards the staircase. Her laugh bounced off the walls until it finally disappeared downstairs. I sneered at where she'd been. I should have been more concerned with what she'd been doing outside my apartment, but instead I rushed across the hall to knock on Hunter's door.

My heart sank when I heard no movement inside. Panic crackled across my thoughts, searing everything in its path. Then I remembered that it was already late morning. Hunter would be at the café by now. Bakers often worked insanely early hours.

I breathed a sigh, though it didn't have as much relief as I would have liked. There was still a nervous tingle in my chest. The tight knot around my heart wouldn't ease until I knew that Hunter was safe.

Why was I so concerned for a shifter who could clearly take care of himself? He'd lived an entire life without me. He didn't need me to look out for him.

Nonetheless, I dressed and threw a coat over my shoulders so I could head to Hunter's café. I needed to set my mind at ease. Until I knew that he was safe and sound, I wouldn't be able to relax. Besides, I needed a coffee and something to nibble on for breakfast.

The café's doors were locked when I got there. The sign behind the glass was still turned to Closed. I spied a schedule behind the front window said that the café should have been open by now. Stepping back, I bit my lip as I looked up and down for any sight of Hunter.

The witch had been outside my apartment door for a reason today. The meddling little hag wanted me to know something was wrong.

A bit of movement in the dark at the back of the café drew my attention. A familiar face appeared, but it didn't belong to Hunter.

Thor raised a pair of bushy blond brows in my direction. A lopsided grin lifted the corner of his mouth, but there was no warmth behind it. Instead, I saw confusion and a bit of apprehension.

Thor operated a shifter sanctuary in the Tennessee mountains where he could rehabilitate tired and scared shifters so that they could move on to live a happy life again. He'd visited Syracuse to offer Ness a place to go since Alvin would not leave her alone. I'd been happy when Ness chose to stay and fight her horrid Pack Alpha. She hadn't needed someone like Thor to help her control her beast.

Hunter, on the other hand, apparently needed more help than I'd anticipated.

Thor unlocked the door and blocked entry with his body. "Audra Miura, I didn't expect to see you here."

“I could say the same of you,” I said with my chin high.

Thor hung his head and gave a hefty sigh. Shaking his head, he lifted his gaze to mine. “Every so often I have to head out to give a friend a bit of a pep talk.”

I swallowed. Attention drifting past Thor, I scanned the café for signs of blood. When I found none, I almost let out a sigh of relief. I still didn’t have all the facts, though. There was no telling what happened to bring Thor all the way up north.

“I’m familiar with your *friend* in question. I doubt he would mind if you let me inside.”

Thor made no move to get out of the way. Instead, his massive frame continued to fill the entire doorway to keep me out.

“Hunter and I are...” Could I say friends? Were we anything more than neighbors? Maybe acquaintances?

Thor eyed me. He knew that I liked to fiddle with supernatural power structures. He’d been frustrated when I put Ness in Alvin’s path, but Thor and I both knew that Alvin had to go down. I couldn’t have done it myself. What was I going to do with an entire pack of shifters?

They deserved better, and that certainly wasn’t going to be me. I didn’t need another group of followers.

“I can’t do that,” Thor said, his voice dropping with warning.

My shoulders slumped with disappointment. Thor didn’t seem like the kind of man I could use my aura on. He had a firmer constitution than the mortal man from yesterday, yet I was still tempted to try because my heart was hammering a frightful note in my chest.

I needed to know what was happening with Hunter.

Swallowing, I locked eyes with Thor. I wasn’t a shifter. Eye contact wasn’t going to make me shrivel inside, but it would make him squirm. No, I wasn’t above using the deep well of immortal demon power inside me if it meant getting my way.

Thor’s upper lip curled. “Audra,” he warned, though his voice wavered this time.

His bear must have been squirming. Foxes were smaller than bears, but kitsunes weren't just little woodland creatures. I ruled the wild and everything under the moon, including fuzzy little teddy bears like himself.

"Tell me if he's all right," I demanded.

Thor jerked his head to the side. "No, he's not. Why else would I be here?"

"Fuck this," I said.

Fine. I give in.

Spirit fire rushed over my skin. The demon inside me cackled with glee. The fire consumed my body in one quick rush, and I reappeared on the other side of Thor. I stormed into the café before he could even turn to stop me.

"What the—" Thor fumbled at the door and rushed after me.

I shoved my way through the swinging kitchen door and came face to face with a massive wolf that took up almost the entire room. Hunter's shaggy brown wolf had paws the size of serving platters. His giant claws scratched the tile floor and screeched when they dragged over the metal drains.

He rose and snarled at me, his muzzle wrinkling in distaste.

"Damn it, woman! You can't control everything. There are some things..."

Hunter shoved his head into my chest. I staggered back. Only my grip on the wolf kept me from falling backwards. The wolf inhaled and let out a deep sigh as it pressed its fur into my body.

"Well," Thor mumbled. "I'll be damned."

Hunter shoved me over and climbed on top of my body like he needed to protect me. With his head on my shoulder—not that there was much space since his head was the size of my torso, and I wasn't a small woman—Hunter relaxed and let his weight sink into me.

Thor scratched the back of his head. "I've been trying to get him to calm down all damn morning. Not a damn thing I did made a difference, and you just walked in here like you owned the place. Will you ever stop meddling?"

"Are you complaining right now?" I asked as I scratched behind Hunter's ear.

The wolf purred and leaned into my fingers. I had no idea wolves were capable of purring, but he was a shifter. They were a different creature altogether. Hunter, seemingly lost to his beast, set his head on my shoulder and huffed in my ear.

I had the sense that he was watching Thor like a hawk. Thor's open annoyance with me hadn't helped. Now Hunter's beast wanted to protect me from the big bear shifter, though I questioned who was the larger shifter.

Bear shifters could get massive, and Thor was no exception. There was a reason he led a pack of uncontrollable shifters. He was one of the few men who had the strength to. However, Hunter's beast somehow outclassed even Thor. When Hunter explained that he'd been born under a bad moon, I'd written it off.

It wasn't something that I'd ever heard of, and I'd lived a very long life. I'd met so many different people and never come across anyone quite like Hunter. The idea that the moon could influence his beast wasn't unheard of, I just assumed that he'd been exaggerating.

This was...something else. It wasn't a sign from the fates like I'd wondered—my café back in Syracuse had been named Bad Moon Café, and I'd wondered for a short while if that meant something when I met Hunter. The thought had been selfish in the face of what Hunter had really been going through.

I ran my hand along his pelt. "Can you let me up?"

Hunter growled and huffed into my hair. His claws scratched the tile floor.

"What did you do to get his loyalty so quickly?" Thor asked, his southern twang peeking through a bit.

"We're neighbors," I said, as if that explained anything.

Even I was still confused in this moment. Hunter's sudden dedication to protecting me made no sense. I wasn't the kind of woman who really needed protection. Thor might have been a big man capable of corralling unruly shifters, but I was ancient and powerful.

I could have dissolved in a burst of spirit fire like earlier and reappeared next to Hunter, but I had a feeling that would make matters worse. Hunter wanted to feel like he was protecting me and running would make that difficult.

"You're a lot more than just neighbors," Thor said.

I knew what he was suggesting. With anyone else, I would have brushed off the sentiment without a problem. Now, my face warmed. I had to turn into Hunter's fur to hide the creeping blush suddenly overtaking my cheeks.

Why was I suddenly a schoolgirl all over again? This was ridiculous. I had no embarrassment or shame, but I couldn't help being shy when it involved Hunter.

This was ridiculous.

I grabbed Hunter by the ear and gave it a sharp yank. Shifters responded to dominance, so I would show him what that meant. "Get off me, wolf. If I need your help, I will ask. Right now, I would like to stand on my own two feet."

The wolf growled softly. At the sound of his frustration, I grabbed his muzzle and forced him to look me in the eye. I could hold his gaze all day; I wasn't a submissive shifter.

I was a demon who had no reason to fear even the most monstrous shifter.

Hunter's eyes widened, but not in fear or submission. The look in his eyes was recognition. His expression softened almost as if in relief. He finally lifted himself and moved away to give me room. I inhaled, my ribs finally free of the weight of a massive shifter.

"Ah, if you don't mind me asking..." Thor's southern twang grew stronger, telling me that he was growing a bit nervous.

I cut him off before he could go any further. "I do mind you asking."

The stainless-steel kitchen countertops showed me exactly what Thor wanted to ask about. Though my reflection as warped, I could plainly see the pink light glowing in my eyes. What had once been nearly black irises were now as pink as a Sakura blossoms.

With every minute I spent in this town, the demon and I came another step closer to becoming one again. I didn't feel her self-righteous ego overtaking mine yet, but I was afraid it would only be a matter of time. If I stayed here any longer, I would become the kind of woman I'd been running from this whole time.

When Hunter looked to me, I couldn't help but wonder if that would be a bad thing after all? He showed no fear of me. There was no empty adoration in his eyes. Instead, I could see the growing foundation of trust that helped him return to his human form.

A naked Hunter slumped against the wall. He let his head fall back, and his gaze lingered on the ceiling.

“Feeling any better, bucko?” Thor asked.

Hunter squinted like he had a hangover, and the sound of Thor’s voice had sent an ice pick through his frontal lobe. I quietly stood and stepped out into the front of house. After washing my hands, I set about making Hunter a latte to fill his stomach until we could get him some food. I made sure to add plenty of the peanut butter powder for extra protein.

My time starting up Bad Moon Café in Syracuse had paid off. I moved through Hunter’s café with trained ease. He seemed surprised when I returned with a to-go cup just for him.

But he didn’t mention the cup.

“Your hair,” he said.

Instinctively, I reached for my hair only to find that it’d grown again. When had it done that? When I slipped past Thor using my spirit fire? Or when I grabbed Hunter by the ear to assert my dominance?

Hunter didn’t press, though. He must have seen something on my face because he accepted the cup and gave me a quiet thanks. The latte lasted all of thirty seconds because he chugged it down so quickly it was as if it’d never existed at all.

Hunter turned to Thor. “What happened while I was gone?”

So, *this* was the truth behind the man. This is what it means to be born under a bad moon.

Hunter

Though I tried to keep my focus on Thor, I couldn’t help but steal small glances at Audra. She kept busy, tidying and disinfecting the kitchen surfaces while I spoke to Thor. She moved through the kitchen like she owned it. The latte she’d made had been delicious, which reminded me that she’d run her own café before.

“I don’t think much happened, truth be told.” Thor came over to offer me a hand.

Still butt naked, I hesitated to accept Thor’s help up. Had it just been the two of us, I would have stood without thinking twice about it. With Audra actively trying not to

look in my direction, I couldn't help but think about everything I'd laid bare today—from my beast to my dick.

I'm a grower, not a shower...it's also cold as fuck in here. I promise...

Nothing that came to mind seemed appropriate for the situation, so I kept my mouth shut and let Thor help me to my feet. Even though I had my back to Audra, I could feel her prying gaze slide up my spine.

If I didn't move soon, something else would. And I wasn't about to sport an erection in front of my new neighbor.

Not yet, the beast whispered.

“Shut up, you cretin. You should be sleeping.”

Everyone in the kitchen paused. Silence fell into the cracks between us all.

“Oops?” I said to cut the tension.

Laugh. Please laugh. Just let this blow over so I can move on and get some damned pants.

“That beast of yours seems awful active lately,” Thor said.

I expected to find him scrutinizing me, but his attention slid in Audra's direction. The furrow of his brow made me instinctively slide between them. A growl rumbled in my chest though I tried to keep it down.

“You can go back to Tennessee, Thor. I have everything handled here.” Audra spoke to the bear shifter like the two of them knew one another.

Even though I was still very much naked and standing between a hot woman and the guy who'd come to pick up my mess, I still pulled attention to myself because I needed to ask what was going on.

“The two of you know each other?” I looked between them both.

Audra gave a demure yet empty smile. “We've met on occasion.”

“You should have let me take Ness back to Tennessee,” Thor grumbled.

“She’s doing perfectly fine now! She even has a baby on the way. That wonderful dragon man who swept into town turned out to be her fated mate. She’s never been happier.”

Thor pointed a finger at Audra. “I know for a fact that she died several times after I left.”

Audra stiffened, her eyes darkening as a scowl slipped over her lips. “As did several of her packmates. The rest would have died had she not stayed.”

“You can’t play the world like it’s a chess game,” Thor rumbled, the pans shaking on the shelves. “You think you’re doing the world a favor, but you’re just putting innocent people in the line of fire when you could have taken care of it yourself. I don’t know what you are, but I know you could have stopped every horrible thing from happening in Lakesedge if you’d just lifted a finger yourself.”

Audra went still. Her gaze fell to her reflection in the stainless-steel counter.

I stepped in and put a hand on Thor’s chest. “I think you’re done here.”

He gave me an imploring look, his blond moustache twisting with derision.

Swallowing back my angered beast, I held my ground. The creature inside me loathed the way Thor addressed Audra. I could see the anguish it’d caused her. Maybe I didn’t know a thing about her past, but there wasn’t an innocent person in this room. He wasn’t one to be talking, and I was no one to judge.

Thor’s lips curled into a deep scowl. He stiffened. “I see that I’m not wanted here.”

I nearly rolled my eyes. The man was being dramatic. But that also told me that I didn’t quite understand the extent of what’d happened or what she was hiding from me.

Was I anyone to judge? I’d just come back from a shifter black-out when I had only a handful of days left until a witch took the rest of my years from me. I was going to use these last few days to protect this woman who’d shown me only kindness so far.

“Then leave.” I stood my ground and kept my voice firm.

“Hunter,” Audra said, a crack forcing its way into the single word. “You don’t have to.”

Did it matter if I had to or not? I wanted to. Thor clearly made her uncomfortable.

When the big man bowed his head and shoved through the swinging door, I fought the urge to follow. Silence hung in the air until I heard Thor exit the café premises. A part of me wanted to exhale and shrink, but I couldn't rest just yet.

“Mind waiting for me to get some clothes? Then we can talk?” I asked Audra.

Her brows lowered into a flat line. “Talk about what?”

Did I push? I had so little time left, and I wanted to listen to her talk out whatever was eating at her. We didn't have time to play the waiting game, and I wasn't about to pull teeth to get her to talk.

I could have been honest and told her that I didn't have more than a week left to live, but I got the feeling that Audra would have fought for my life. Truthfully, I didn't want it. She'd seen what my life had been like.

Hell, I'd been cornered like a wild dog in my own café kitchen. If she couldn't open up to me now, then she never would.

And I would just have to deal with it. Pushing wasn't going to change anything; not when I wasn't even going to be here next week.

Once I pulled my bug-out bag out of the corner of the storeroom and got dressed, I came back to an immaculate kitchen. There was no sign a wild creature ever made its way in here. Audra had disinfected and polished every surface. Yet, I couldn't imagine starting up for the day.

It was already a bust. There was no time to get the yeasted doughs to rise, and the morning crowd—what there was of it—had already moved on. I didn't see any point in even trying today.

Instead, I had another idea.

“Would you want to go see the ocean with me?” I asked.

Audra paused suddenly, as if stricken by the sudden change in topic. It was obvious she'd been bracing herself for the onslaught of questions I must have. But we all had skeletons in our closets. I wasn't going to judge.

“That sounds...” She paused. A slow smile appeared on her face. “That sounds nice.”

I nodded. “It's settled then. Wait here, I'm going to go get a few things and warm up the truck.”

I should have waited longer. On my way out to the truck, Thor intercepted me.

The sight of him almost made me growl. My feet slid apart in a fighting stance before I could stop myself. The beast lurking inside me watched Thor with an apprehension I'd never held for him before.

He'd always been a friend, if a bit tiresome in his encouragement. The way he'd made Audra uncomfortable had me on guard now. It seemed that wasn't about to end.

Thor put out an arm, palm flat against my truck to block my way. "We need to talk about that woman in your kitchen right now."

I licked my lips and fought the urge to bite him. The beast shoved its way into my thoughts and almost took over, but I managed to hold it back, if only barely.

"She's a menace. She doesn't care who gets hurt so long as she can play her little games. I've watched her tear entire communities apart just to get what she wanted."

This time, I slid a curious look in Thor's direction. These words didn't match the woman I'd met at all, but there was still so little that I knew about her. Was I turning a blind eye to her faults? Did I even want to bother acknowledging them at all when my end was so close at hand?

What would it hurt? Me? I was already doomed.

"I don't care," I said, my voice low but firm.

Thor's jaw tightened. He tilted his head to the side like he, too, had to hold back an upset beast. "Don't trust her."

"Why?" I pressed, leaning in. "Tell me what she did that's so awful. Right now, you're being too vague to make me give a flying fuck."

"I get that you're interested in a hot lady—"

"Is that all you think this is?" My voice rose until I caught myself. A growl rumbled in my throat as my teeth pressed against my tongue.

Thor bowed his head. "No. But I know it might come to that, and I'm not sure if I want to see her get her claws into someone like yourself. She's used other powerful shifters to get what she wanted. I wouldn't put it past her to do it again."

I had to control my breathing as my chest heaved with rage and frustration. Were I a dragon, flames would have flown from my nose. “Tell me what she did. What did she want?”

“She used an at-risk shifter to dethrone an Alpha. The girl died. Several times. She’s better now, but that was a lot of strife—”

“If Audra wanted to remove that man from power, then why didn’t she stick around? What stake did she have in the matter?” I stepped into Thor’s space.

He might have been a massive bear shifter, but he didn’t look that big right now. Not when I wanted to lay him flat on the ground for what he said.

“The guy was a murderer, but Audra had no right—”

I shoved past Thor. I was done listening to him today.

He scowled in my rearview mirror as I pulled out of my parking spot. The store awaited. I had a picnic to prepare for.