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AUDRA

I hadn't expected Thor's accusations. Every word had physically stung because, deep down, I knew he was right. If I'd intervened, then no one in Lakesedge would have gotten hurt. Caitriona would still be alive. Taliesin never would have been used as an example to make others bend the knee.

Had I stopped Alvin and Beryl on my own, though, then the girls wouldn't have become who they are now. I hated the idea that their pain was necessary, because it wasn't. The path to who they'd become had taught them valuable lessons, though.

Both Ness and Cerridwen knew the value of a life now. They knew how to lead and what their people needed because they'd been there through every step.

I couldn't do that. I wasn't a leader. If anything, I was a farce.

My thoughts roiled as I climbed into the passenger seat of Hunter's truck. My sweater still smelled like his wolf, and I oddly enjoyed it. The scent comforted me as if I were a shifter in desperate need of packmates.

My fox demon had never much liked the idea of packs. There was too much hierarchy. The creatures either fought to be at the top or begged to be protected by those all too willing to spill blood on those below them.

Kitsunes were meant to be worshipped—which was something else I'd been avoiding.

Hunter led us out of town. The streets turned into winding roads with glimpses of rivers past the thin trees. The beauty of it wasn't anything new to me, but the company inside the car brought color back to the world and made me realize just how drab it'd been this whole time.

Every little burst of color made me gasp. I almost pressed my face to the glass just to get a better view. Beside me, Hunter chuckled sweetly.

"You act like you've never seen the New England countryside before. It's in every single cheap romance movie these days. I can't imagine this is new to you."

I gave a wry smile. "It's not. I'm just...experiencing it in a new light, is all."

Not even Thor's accusations could dampen the gentle sweetness in the truck cab. I shoved the bear shifter out of my mind and turned my attention to Hunter. Yet, when I tried to strike up conversation, I couldn't come up with anything that wasn't about his café or the unruly beast.

This was the price I paid for staying away from people for so long. If I didn't brush up on my social skills soon, I would become like Baba.

"How did you come to meet Baba Yaga? It's not like there are many who can say they've met an ancient witch." There, that was something.

Hunter laughed. "Do you know how long it took me to realize what she was? Let's just say I'm not the brightest bulb in the shed."

"English isn't my first language, but I'm pretty sure the idiom is *the sharpest tool in the shed*."

"See?" Hunter raised a playful brow. "You get it. I can't even idiom right."

"That's also not...you know what, you're totally right. I get it now." I shook my head.

He was playing with me in an attempt to lighten the mood. The man must have caught on that I had quite a bit on my mind, too. Neither of us were in the best state at the moment. Were we helping each other? Or were we simply throwing a blanket over our problems?

"I was broke and homeless when Baba found me. She offered me a place to stay while I renovated the old house into apartments for her. When she found out that I could bake, she smacked me with her cane until I opened my own bakery." The corner of his mouth lifted in a smile as he reminisced. "Sweet old woman, even if she is off her damn rocker."

"I wouldn't call her sweet," I said, recalling how she kept whacking me with her cane. "And she has no excuse for her madness."

Hunter sputtered. "She's as old as dirt! I would think anyone might go a little insane after living that many years."

The color faded from the world again. "Maybe you have a point."

I could feel his eyes on me, prying for answers since my tone had shifted suddenly. The urge to change the topic rose, but it was already too late. Hunter had sniffed out that there was a problem.

He didn't say anything, though. The man watched me with a renewed interest, if it could be called that, since he hardly ever took his eyes off me in the first place. I could tell that he wanted to pry but at least knew better than to press about a woman's age.

The long years were lonely. At first, I'd had followers. Then I'd realized just how empty their adoration had been. Though I often found myself craving worship, I knew it would be a hollow satisfaction that would fade quickly.

I'd never taken a chance on love. There weren't many immortals in this world. Many of them stuck to their own realms, courts in far flung worlds that I knew little about. The chance of falling in love with someone who could live as long as I could was very low.

Even now, I pushed back the rising infatuation for the wolf man beside me because I knew that there would come a day when he no longer existed in this world. I could venture into the afterlife to find him, but bringing him back would forever change him in ways that I wasn't sure I wanted to put anyone through.

The whole issue with Maddox had been wildly unplanned. I'd placed Adeline, the demi-goddess of the undead, under my watch because I'd known that she had a piece of the world tree inside of her, and someone would eventually want to take it from her. I hadn't expected her to meet a man riding the fine line between life and death.

Maddox had been forever changed and now that was something he had to struggle with every day of his life. As a stout and determined man, he seemed to handle it, but I knew that it had to be taxing. I wouldn't ask that of anyone else, not even to save my own sanity.

"Where did you go there?" Hunter asked. "You look like your thoughts hijacked you and took you on a wild adventure. Not a good adventure, though. Your expression is sad, like your quest was difficult and the ending melancholy."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me. "That's an apt description of what just happened."

"Was it...was it my fault? I'm really sorry about what I said. Though, I'm not sure I understand what I did wrong."

Eyes closed, I let out the breath that'd been making my chest tight. With fresh air in my lungs, I said, "You didn't do anything wrong."

Hunter's demeanor visibly changed. His expression brightened as he lifted his chin and nodded happily. The man had that coveted *golden retriever boyfriend energy*, and I wanted to bask in it.

The shore approached faster than I would have liked. I wanted to stay in this truck and watch the trees fly past forever, as long as it meant staying in this little world just for the two of us.

That was my loneliness speaking. I could feel it creeping up and taking hold of my spine. The moment Hunter parked, I slid out of the truck and onto my own two feet again. If I got a taste of companionship and lost it, then there was a chance I would become as mad as Baba. If anyone found me eating spiders in the corner, then I would have no choice but to leave this mortal plane out of embarrassment alone.

Hunter appeared at my side. He touched my elbow and brought my attention up so that I had no choice but to look in his concerned eyes. The way they pinched at the corners, the vault of his brows in the center, and the lingering touch of his warm fingers on my skin all stole my breath at once.

"Audra," he said.

My name on his lips ignited a spark in my core that I hadn't felt in centuries. My breath hitched. I leaned into him without thinking.

The moment I realized what I was doing, that I wanted a taste of his lips more than anything we'd brought in the picnic basket, I pushed away from him. I strode across the shifting sand of the Atlantic coast beach.

The sound of the churning waters wasn't enough to drown out the thump of my treacherous heart, though.

Hunter

Well, I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong *that* time.

I wasn't all that smart, but it was pretty obvious that I'd called her old and senile by accident earlier. I'd had no idea that she was older than Baba. It wasn't really something that'd crossed my mind since Audra didn't look a day over twenty-seven.

She stood at the edge of the wet sand, where the ocean met the earth, and stared out into the empty distance. The wind tousled her hair—it'd definitely gotten longer again. The whole scene had a feeling of loneliness to it, like she was a widow waiting for her husband to return after getting lost at sea.

Was there someone in particular that she was waiting for? I wanted to know if I could court her, even though I should have kept my distance. My wolf yearned for her in a way that was almost wholesome.

While I remembered little of my blackout earlier, I could clearly recall the moment Audra stepped into the kitchen. Something about her presence changed me. When she was around, I was more myself. It was as if the wolf couldn't help but obey her, even if she wasn't giving orders. I still wanted to heel at her side.

To any other shifter, the thought would have been abominable. No dominant shifter worth their place in the Pack would have wanted to be submissive. It wasn't even that I wanted to submit since I was still a dominant wolf at heart. Instead, I yearned for the balance that her presence offered. I wasn't a Pack shifter, anyway. I didn't abide by their hierarchy and rules.

Thor meant well every time he offered to take me back to Tennessee with him, but that kind of life just wasn't for me. I didn't want to play games or climb a social ladder. Life was already too damned difficult for that shit.

I wanted this, the solitude of the ocean with only Audra in sight. My beast urged me to step up behind her and slide my hand over her hip. A hunger tightened my stomach and sent my blood rushing south as I thought about pulling her into my body and burying my face in the crook of her neck so I could breathe in her scent.

The wolf growled and shoved me forward. I stumbled a few steps before clenching my fist. Straightening myself, I dug my heels into the sand.

Audra looked back over her shoulder. A gentle crease lowered her brows in concern.

My heart flipped at the sight of it. I wanted to run to her, sweep her off her feet, and twirl her in the air until the trouble faded from her eyes. Was that too much? Was I inching closer and closer to breaking her heart?

My own strained for something I knew I couldn't have.

The phone in my pocket buzzed. It was either Thor or Giselle, and I wanted to deal with neither. One wanted to save me from myself without actually getting to know me, and the other wanted to doom me before I even got a chance to know happiness.

Without looking, I reached into my pocket and held the button to turn the device off. Now was not the time for calls from either. This moment was about Audra and me.

I went back to the truck and claimed the picnic basket as well as a blanket that probably needed to be shaken out. Heading back to Audra, I lifted my face to the bright sun overhead. While the air sweeping over the ocean was still chill, the sun was high and bright.

“Do you need help?” Audra asked, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

I stole a heartbeat to study the curve of her ear like it might tell me the secrets of her life. There was no point to the tip of it. Her ear had the same roundness as mine, telling me she wasn't a fae or elf. I was no closer to solving the mystery of her identity.

“I got it.” I tossed her a wink and snapped out the blanket.

A bit of debris from being trapped in the cab of my truck flew out of the blanket, but it was otherwise clean as I laid it out over the sand. I patted a spot for Audra. A part of me expected the neat and elegant woman to scoff, but she sat on the blanket and removed her shoes so that she could bury her feet in the sand.

Was she a kind of shifter? Was that why the winter air didn't bother her?

I wanted to slide my hand over the blanket and graze my fingers against hers, but I opened the picnic basket instead. We had all the ingredients for sandwiches, and I'd packed some assorted fruit to slice for her. I secretly hoped to feed it to her by hand like a lowly mortal worshipping his goddess, but I doubted that would happen.

“Wait,” I said.

Audra's head popped up and tilted like a curious cat. My heart stuttered at the sight. I had to press my lips together to hide my smile.

“Are you not hungry after last night?” Audra asked.

I was, but it wasn't the kind of hunger I could satisfy. My days were numbered. Sitting on a blanket on the beach was nice if only because I was next to her, but there was so much else I wanted to do.

"I've always been told that you can't swim on a full stomach." I closed the basket. "Would you mind if we did a bit of exploration first?"

She snuck her hand into the basket and snatched an apple before I could do anything. Eyes locked on mine, she bit into it. A bit of juice dribbled down her chin. Everything in me wanted to lean forward and lick it off her smooth skin if only for a taste of her. My breath even shuddered out of me.

Audra laughed and wiped at her chin with the back of her hand. "Alright, now I can."

I leapt to my feet and took her free hand to help her up, too. She never put her shoes back on. Instead, she opted to explore the beach barefoot. She also never mentioned the fact that I wanted to swim in the middle of winter. None of this seemed all that new to her. I watched her expression to see what would spark curiosity or surprise, but nothing seemed to catch her off guard.

What kind of shifter was immortal? I'd heard of dragons who could outlive their mammalian counterparts, but they almost always went mad with the Treasure Sickness. They were still mortal, and our minds weren't meant to live that long.

My beast growled. *Speak for yourself.*

Not for the first time, I wondered if there was something that my mother had passed down. Was it really just a bad moon that made me what I was? If my mother had given me this impossible creature, then shouldn't she have survived? My birth shouldn't have killed her.

I shook myself and forced a smile to my lips. Stealing a glance at Audra, I grinned and let a wild laugh escape me. Her lips parted in pleasant confusion. With her attention on me, I ran forward and leapt onto a pile of driftwood.