

# 8

## AUDRA

Hunter windmilled his arms and cackled with mad delight as he nearly fell backwards off a pile of driftwood. He quickly leapt off the crumbling wood and onto a jagged rock. From one rock to the next, he continued.

I bit into my apple and picked my way around the rocks while Hunter enjoyed himself. His joy was a sight to behold. It seemed unbridled, as if nothing could stop him from enjoying everything about this afternoon, which was so odd right after the night he'd had. I wondered if this was a kind of defiance.

I watched him in open awe. Not because he was doing gravity defying feats—if anything, the man slipped and tumbled a few times. I watched because I yearned for that kind of defiance. If I could be more like him and not let the long years hinder me, then maybe there would be more color in my life.

It was just a theory, though. I didn't have the energy to test it. Instead, I basked in Hunter's laughter until he found a small cave in the rocky cliffside. When he perked up and beckoned me with him, I almost wanted to say I was not Amaterasu.

I had no desire to hide in a cave, yet I put my shoes back on and followed him anyway. I didn't want to let this man out of my sight. The light of the sun faded as we stepped further and further into the cave.

"I didn't think this through," Hunter said.

He reached into his pocket and drew out his phone. For a moment, he scowled at it like it might betray him at any moment. Finally, he turned it on and used the flashlight to guide our way. There wasn't anything of real importance in the cave. We saw some graffiti and signs of teenage parties, and that was about it.

"Well, that was disappointing," Hunter said, lips twisting to the side.

"What did you expect? There was no boulder outside, so it's not like we would find Jesus waiting to be let out." I wasn't sure if my brand of humor reached Hunter.

The darkness inside the cave brought out the beast in his eyes. When he looked to me, the golden glow of his gaze flowed over my skin. His attention dipped, following the curve of my throat and the rise of my chest.

I knew where his thoughts had gone. It made my cheeks warm, even here in the damp cave.

“Is this really the best you have to show me?” I challenged, hoping that he would get distracted.

I was not going to kiss him in a cave. Though I expect many had enjoyed their first kiss here. It seemed like the perfect youthful hideaway. Yet, neither Hunter nor I were particularly youthful. Not like that. The years had aged our souls more than they should have.

He sighed dramatically and slumped his shoulders. Suddenly, he perked up. If the man had puppy ears and a tail, both would have wiggled with glee.

“Want to watch me swim? Or, you could join me. A little skinny dip should get us ready for lunch.”

When I laughed, the sound bounced off the walls around us. Hunter’s lips parted and his eyes went soft. A gentleness swept over him. I watched him savor this moment, not in the way that someone might gawk at the gloriousness of a god but in the way one would look at a lover they desperately hungered for.

I turned away and strode towards the light at the end of the tunnel—what a metaphor that I really didn’t plan to make. Outside, the sun kissed my cheeks and welcomed me back to the world. When I looked out over the ocean, I expected bright blue sparkles. Instead, the world was a slate of steel gray.

A sigh climbed its way up my throat, but I swallowed it back down and waited for Hunter to follow me. His growl echoed in the depths of the cavern before he appeared, like he needed a moment to collect himself.

I almost wanted to tell him that we couldn’t do this. If I drew a line in the sand, I knew he would respect it. That’s why I kept my mouth shut. A part of me wanted him to climb over that line and tell me it would be worth it. I wanted someone to challenge the walls I put up around myself.

Maybe then I’d feel something.

Hunter said nothing. He ripped his shirt over his head and tossed it to the ground. His pants and underwear went next. He cast off everything that could get wet, left it on the beach, and ran for the water like a dog let off the leash.

He crashed through the rolling waves and howled with delight once more. The sound shook with every incoming wave as the waters reminded him of their chilly depths. Still, he pressed forward.

There were myths that shifters and vampires couldn't swim. I was pretty sure a shifter or a vampire had made that up to make their mortal neighbor feel a bit safer about the wolves in the woods or the bite marks on their wives' throats. Water did nothing to stop the supernatural community.

If anything, we embraced it. At least, Hunter did.

A soft buzz distracted me from his joy. I knelt and tugged his phone free of the crumpled pocket of his pants. A name with three X's next to it flashed across the screen.

*Giselle.*

That wasn't the first time I'd heard that name, though I couldn't recall if Hunter or Baba had brought it up. My mind had grown fuzzy from basking in Hunter's presence. Everything that didn't involve him directly was tossed out to make room for the sound of his laugh or the glow in his eyes.

If this was his girlfriend, she deserved to know that he was here with me.

I didn't have a chance to answer the phone. Hunter climbed out of the water and snatched it from my hand. He glowered at the screen, turned the phone off, and chucked the device back onto the sand.

I said nothing. No prying would get any kind of answer from him right now. The sudden gloom hanging over his head left me unsettled, though. His unstoppable cheer vanished right before my eyes. When he glanced back at his phone in the sand, a shadow passed over his face.

"You smell like wet dog," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

A subtle smile crossed his lips, but it couldn't quite reach his eyes.

I was at a loss for what to do. Was this an old lover from his past? Was it someone hounding him? I could take care of her.

*It would be so easy. It didn't matter what she was, I could devour her in one bite.*

For once, I couldn't disagree with my inner demon. She and I were of one mind. The sight of Hunter's displeasure was enough to make me turn violent once more. I wouldn't think twice about doing anything just to make sure that silly smile returned to his face.

This infatuation was going too far, and I could see that now. If I stayed here much longer, then I would find myself on a path towards devastation. Was that so bad, though? I knew my time here was running out. The thousand years I'd walked this plane had been more than enough.

Perhaps...perhaps I could perish by his side and call that a life well lived.

"You aren't answering my messages," a woman whined.

A chill raced up my spine. I spun and found a girlish blonde standing in the sand about ten feet away. Her eyes flickered with a green light, the only hint that she was anything other than a young mortal woman. Her sweater was so large that it nearly hung past the hem of her short skirt. Arms crossed over her chest, she pouted at Hunter.

He stiffened. A growl rose from him that made the hair on my arms stand on end. Then, without warning, his shoulders slumped. He turned away from the mysterious woman.

"You'll get your end of our deal in a few days. I don't know why you have to keep calling me." His voice seemed to sag with grief.

I looked back to the woman. The loose ends of her messy updo were dancing in a wind that didn't exist.

My demon rose. This must be Giselle. She was so slight and young that she would go down easy. I could feel my demon trying to escape. If I let the nine-tailed fox loose, she would dig her claws into the sand and lunge for Giselle.

One bite was all it would take.

"A deal is a deal," she said. "Do you really think you can escape me?"

Hunter shook his head. "I'm not trying to escape. I'm just trying to enjoy my last few days."

*Last few days?*

My heart skipped several beats. I nearly tumbled forward when those words hit me. I'd been preparing myself to spend several decades beside Hunter, and now I learned he only had a few days?

I spun on the woman. Spine straight, I stared down my nose at her. My feet slid apart in the sand, and my hands came together before me. I assumed the pose that I used to take before my worshippers as if I were a goddess all over again.

Spirit energy rippled over my skin. It burned the air and made it waver with power. Giselle finally looked my way as if she'd just noticed my presence for the first time. I let my aura push outwards. The weak would kneel in my presence, but she barely blinked.

“So,” she said to Hunter. “You *are* trying to escape my contract! Why else would you enlist the help of old, crusty deities? You know no one has whispered her name in, like, three hundred years. Right?”

She rolled her eyes.

My fox gnashed its teeth. I wanted to take a bite out of the valley girl. There was no one else around. The beach was blessedly empty. No one would see if I tore her to pieces.

I could feel Hunter's prying gaze between my shoulder blades. Giselle had given him more information with one glance in my direction than he'd been able to glean this whole time. I'd been playing my cards as close to my chest as possible. It wasn't his fault he hadn't been able to figure anything out.

That meant this woman, Giselle, was more powerful than I wanted to admit.

“Who are you?” I asked, keeping my chin high.

She smiled, tilted her head, and batted her eyelashes before saying, “None of your damned business.”

Taken aback, I nearly recoiled.

Green light flickered in her eyes again. It wasn't the bright light of new life. This color seemed sickly, like a flame in the depths of the underworld. There was something horrid about her that made her aura putrid. The cute valley girl look was a guise meant to cover the stench, like cotton candy body spray over a bag of trash.

“Leave,” I warned.

Hunter stepped in front of me. Over his shoulder, he gave me a tight-lipped shake of his head as if to say I should not mess with this woman.

Personally, I didn't care if I hadn't had worshippers in several centuries. I could still take her. The thought made my demon grin, and I agreed. It was so rare that we worked together so well.

For Hunter? Anything was possible.

I'd known him less than a week, but if anything happened to him, I would level an entire city. There was nothing in this world that could stop me if I gave in to my demon.

Giselle waved her hand at me. “The old arts aren't entirely lost. All I need to do is crack open a book, and I'll know how to trap you in a cursed rock just like your sister.”

My heart thumped. Swallowing, I said, “A nap wouldn't be the worst thing right now. And we both know it can't hold me forever. Tamamo escaped recently.”

I tried to sound confident, but inside I was shaken. The idea of falling prey to Tamamo's fate terrified me. It was already lonely enough out here among the living. I couldn't imagine the emptiness inside a stone prison would help me cling to my sanity.

I would become something like Baba. Even now, I worried for Tamamo now that she was free. How had she fared? Was she out seeking revenge against the families that'd trapped her? Was she killing senselessly just to feel something?

I didn't want to be that.

My work in Lakesedge, helping the supernatural community, had been an effort to make up for everything I'd done in my past. I refused to be a monster again.

“If I tell Hunter everything you've done, maybe he'll help me contain you. You're clearly a threat to everyone you meet.” Giselle smiled. A lollipop appeared between her manicured fingers. She popped it into her mouth with a smug smile.

“Giselle,” Hunter snarled. His head snapped to the side like he was fighting to contain his beast.

I watched his spine ripple and reached out to put a hand on his back. The touch calmed him enough that he sucked in a breath and raised his head. His hands unclenched at his sides, but a rumble still vibrated his torso.

“I know enough to tell that you’re being prickly,” Hunter said to Giselle. “I trust Audra. She’s not a harm to anyone.”

Giselle pointed her lollipop towards Hunter. “Don’t think for even a minute that she can help you escape your contract. You’re not getting out of this.”

I tore my gaze away from Hunter. Was it my imagination or were there fine lines around the corners of Giselle’s eyes now? Vague dark circles sat beneath her cruel eyes, too. It was as if she’d aged five years before our eyes.

Her lips tightened. I watched her take a half-step back when our eyes met. A bit of panic made her movements jittery. Her mouth curled into a sneer before she jerked her chin up and strode away. Halfway across the beach, she vanished from sight again.

“Who the hell was that?” I asked.