



Of Socialites and Prizefights

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: She needs a woman's kiss to break her curse.

When Deepa Patel rejects the wrong man, he curses her: every night, she will transform into a wild animal until her curse is broken by true love's kiss. The problem is twofold. One: Deepa needs her nights to seduce shallow men into spending money on her—money she desperately needs to buy herself and her mother a better life. Two: she doesn't believe in love. She's never met a man she wanted to keep longer than a week, never mind forever.

She never considered her true love might be a woman.

Roz is unlike any of Deepa's past suitors. She's working class, with a nose that's been broken at least once, courtesy of an underground boxing club. And she makes Deepa feel lighter and softer than she ever thought possible. But Roz can't afford to give Deepa the life of luxury she craves.

Meanwhile, Deepa is posing as a wealthy nobleman's fiancée.

There's no love between them, but his lifestyle is everything she's ever wanted. Caught between a real relationship and a loveless fake one, Deepa has to choose: give up on her dreams for a chance at true love, or make her dreams come true but stay cursed forever.

Of Socialites and Prizefights is a butch/femme sapphic novel in the *Flos Magicae* series, a collection of queer romances set in an alternate 1920s world with magic. All the stories are standalones and can be read in any order.

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CHAPTER ONE

IN WHICH DEEPA PATEL IS THE UNWILLING RECIPIENT OF A CURSE AND A NEW BODY

Deepa Patel was not the daughter of a great maharaja, no matter what she told people. She had never seen the Taj Mahal, never mind set foot inside it, and she did not have a stable of elephants or curly-eared horses to ride, nor a menagerie of tigers and leopards in jewelled collars. Her bed did not have silk sheets, and she didn't keep peacocks in her courtyard. She didn't even have a courtyard.

What Deepa Patel had in that precise moment was a curse.

It hit her like a slap to the face and she reared back, affronted, to glare at the man who had cast it. Phillip Etonborough was a smarmy-faced toad of a specimen, with apologies to the toads of the world, and, apparently, worse at taking rejection than she had anticipated.

The night was mild and breezy in early June, and they were sharing a back corner of The Songbird, a jazzy nightclub known for its girls as much as for its drinks. Deepa had tucked them away where there was as much privacy as was possible to find without going to the toilets or the girls' dressing room, in order to let him down gently. But apparently, Phillip was keen to take advantage of the dark mood-lighting and the way everyone else was fixated on the dancing girls with their short skirts and big feathered fans in order to do something more nefarious than simply express outrage at his dismissal.

“What did you do?” she demanded.

She could feel the curse sinking into her, getting under her skin to settle in her bones, but she had no idea what it was meant to achieve. Her dress was enchanted with a multitude of charms and glamours, but it offered no protection against such things. Curses were very much illegal, which of course didn't mean no one ever dealt in them, but she'd never had one directed her way.

“You think you're better than everyone else,” said Phillip, “playing the field and flirting with every man you see. You can't recognise a good thing when it's right in front of you. You think you can do better than me? Go ahead and try. No one is going to touch you now that they can see you for what you really are. A wild thing that came loping in from the jungle, unfit for polite company.”

The insults were nothing she hadn't heard before, though she never gave anyone the chance to utter them twice. But Phillip's insults were attached unmistakably to the wrigglingly-unpleasant sensation of curse-magic, which was most worrying. Without waiting to hear whether Phillip had any more monologue to deliver, Deepa whirled away to find the club's toilets, where she pressed both hands against the porcelain edge of the sink and leaned in close to look at herself in the mirror.

She seemed unchanged. The relief was instant and overwhelming. Her livelihood depended on her good looks, in which she took no small amount of pride. The threat in Phillip's tone, the insinuation that he had somehow altered her appearance — she didn't know what she would have done if that were true. But she looked as she always did: her dusky skin unblemished, her plaited hair and doe eyes as dark and shining as ever; even her dress and jewellery were as she'd left them.

Phillip was waiting for her when she emerged. Being reassured of her continued beauty, Deepa was now in a better position to deal with him.

“I doubt I was the first woman to ever say no to you, and with your attitude, I'm certainly not going to be the last,” she informed him. “You act like an entitled child. It's unappealing. And I don't know what you were trying to do back there, but whatever it was, it didn't take.”

Though he was flushed red, going on purple with anger, Phillip barked out an ugly laugh. “Oh, it took, all right. And I know women like you don't believe in love, so good luck getting rid of it.”

“What's love got to do with anything?” Deepa asked, annoyed.

“I thought it was fitting. The old classic: to break your curse, you need true love's kiss. And I don't believe you're ever going to get it, shallow-hearted bint that you are.”

Before she could snap back at him, he turned and flounced off to his regular table by the stage, his nose in the air. Deepa stared after him, incredulous and seething at his audacity. He wasn't even leaving the club!

More unsettled than she would care to admit, Deepa reluctantly gave up the rest of her plans for the night. Normally, she kept nocturnal hours, rarely seeing her bed before three in the morning. The Songbird kept her occupied most nights, luring men close to the stage like a siren and baiting them into spending money on her. They swam in her wake like schools of fish, falling over themselves for a smile or a kiss.

She had no intention of marrying any of them, or at least, not anytime soon. Husbands rarely showered their wives in gifts the way they showered less-available women.

It was an early eleven-thirty when Deepa retired; by any standard the night was young and fruitful; but Phillip's threats still rattled in her head, and something sat

uneasily in her chest, a lurking sense of something bad awaiting her.

Shaking it off, she took herself through the back of the club and up the stairs at a brisk pace, her little strap heels clicking boldly with each step. The Songbird was a sweet club, older than it looked, trying its hardest to be stylish. It was a little shabby around the edges, a little varnished in places if one examined them too closely, but it was reliable, and it was home. Deepa shared the tiny flat above it with a dancer named Cherie, the two of them living out of each other's pockets as they both dreamed of something bigger and richer for themselves.

It was far too early for bed, but that sense of wrongness was growing stronger by the minute. The thought of going back downstairs to socialise for another few hours made her stomach turn. Better to have an early night, go to bed with a book or some such, and start fresh the next day, she decided.

In the loo, she undid her long plait, brushing it out until her hair fell in thick, glossy waves down her back. Piece by piece, she removed her jewellery, all of it gifted from various suitors, gold and diamonds and rubies glittering softly in the dim lamplight. Her piercings went first, earrings and septum ring carefully taken out and cleaned. Next were her necklaces, bracelets, and rings, set in a dish on the countertop like a treasure trove, each piece bringing her one step closer to the life of comfort and luxury of which she dreamed.

At one minute to midnight, she removed her gold sequined dress, shimmering with dozens of enchantments and good-luck charms designed to attract attention and make her the star of every event. She had all her dresses specially tailored by a friend who was as skilled with that sort of magic as she was with needle and thread. Deepa considered her dresses a solid investment towards her future, and worth every penny.

She had just folded the dress neatly over the towel rack and was about to roll down her stockings when Friday night ticked over to Saturday morning, and she turned into

a great cat.

The transformation took her by surprise, but it wasn't immediate. A wave of vertigo crashed over her, buckling her knees. As her vision blotched out around the edges, Deepa caught herself against the sink before crumpling to the floor with a startled gasp. The room swam around her and it was all she could do to sit there, clinging to the under-sink cabinets, trying to keep from being sick from her stomach's sudden swooping.

Just as abruptly, the nausea disappeared, though the dizziness remained, and the strangest sensation rolled over her. She felt like a child being tucked into bed under an impossibly heavy blanket, or possibly like a parakeet in a cage with a sheet being drawn over the bars, or maybe even like herself, slipping into a fur coat, with the silk lining whispering against her skin. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation so much as it was disorienting, made more so by the fact that her vision had blacked out entirely, and she was dizzy enough that standing was impossible.

A distant part of her brain that wasn't entirely preoccupied with her physical goings-on suggested that she should try pounding on the floor to attract the attention of someone downstairs, because she was clearly having some kind of unprecedented medical episode.

And then, exactly one minute into the smallest hours of Saturday morning, it was all over.

The vertigo receded, her mind cleared, and she opened her eyes to find herself on all fours on the bathroom tiles, exactly where she'd left herself, with one noticeable difference.

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While her body still felt like her own, it did not in the slightest resemble the form of a young woman. Instead of hands pressed to the tiles before her were enormous paws. Instead of smooth brown skin she had creamy, golden fur. And instead of a musical human voice bursting from her mouth, she had a crackling growl.

For a second, she didn't move at all. Maybe the entire evening had been a particularly vivid dream.

Carefully, she tried to move her fingers. Those great cream-coloured, black-freckled paws twitched in response. Shifting forward, she took stock of her body, moving her toes and shaking her head. Everything felt real. She was sitting back on her haunches, her legs tucked under her in a crouch with all her weight in her shoulders, pressing through her hands. Or rather, her paws. When a whine tried to escape her, it came out as a huff, her vocal cords no longer built to express anxiety. A frustrated growl, at least, was within her wheelhouse, and her tail lashed nervously from one side of the bathroom to the other.

Her tail.

Very carefully, she got to her feet — all four of them — and, finding her balance as she went, got her front paws on the countertop to stretch up and take a look in the mirror.

A sleek Indian leopard looked back at her from rounded, pale green-gold eyes.

With a squeak, Deepa dropped back to the floor and wrapped herself up in a ball, panting from distress.

It didn't feel like she was dreaming. She rarely remembered her dreams, and she had certainly never been aware of them while she was in them. This was either a full-bodied break from reality, or Phillip's curse had come to bear.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs from the club and the door to the flat swung open. Deepa's ears swivelled towards the sound before she turned her head to stare at the thin door separating the loo from the rest of the flat, her muscles bunched tight and her heart thumping madly.

"Hey, Deepa," Cherie called from within the flat. "You home, love?"

Deepa was almost never home so early, but the lights were on. Her instinct was to hide, but she could hardly go unnoticed by locking herself in the toilet. If she didn't answer, Cherie might worry that she'd passed out in the bath and try to break the door down. Everything in the flat was flimsy enough that it wouldn't be much of a challenge. She couldn't call out to answer, though, and she couldn't turn the door handle to let herself out, either. The window latch was likewise impossible to open without human fingers and thumbs. Growling, Deepa paced the tiny room from one end to the other, her paws silent against the tiles, though her tail thumped the side of the tub every time she lashed it, which she couldn't seem to help. Her stockings, which had been shredded during the change, fluttered away from her hindquarters in gauzy tatters as she moved.

Cherie knocked on the door. "Alright, love? You in there?"

Deepa tried to say no, and it came out as a rumbling meow.

Cherie's confusion was palpable through the closed door. As Deepa had been home alone, she hadn't turned the lock, so when Cherie tried the handle, Deepa stood up and put her front paws against it, trying to hold it closed. She'd retained the mass of her human body in leopard form, amounting to an even ten stone, which wasn't

enough to prevent Cherie from shouldering the door open. Deepa fell back, Cherie fell forward, and there was a split second when they were both standing in the loo together, staring at each other.

With a splitting scream, Cherie scrambled back, trying to find the open doorway behind her. Deepa yowled in response and stood up on her hind legs again, reaching for Cherie to cover her mouth and stop her screaming before it could draw anyone else from the club. Cherie's blind panic made her clumsy, as Deepa's unfamiliarity with her new form did the same to her, and their combined discoordination sent Deepa toppling into the other girl, both of them crashing to the floor on the outside of the loo door.

Covering Cherie's mouth with one paw, Deepa desperately tried to communicate her identity and her situation. Unfortunately, it seemed leopards had a much shorter range of facial expressions than humans, their languages were incompatible, and Cherie was regrettably unable to read her thoughts. The girl was hyperventilating under her, so, in a last-ditch attempt to communicate her lack of a threat, Deepa licked a broad stripe up one side of Cherie's face, then sat back and stared at her hopefully.

Cherie flipped herself onto her hands and knees to make a mad dash for the front door, and when Deepa managed to block her path, she course-corrected in an impressive display of athleticism, throwing herself into her bedroom and slamming the door shut in Deepa's face. Colliding with it, Deepa instinctively scrabbled at the gap under the door, trying to shove her paw underneath to reach Cherie before realising she was shredding the cheap wood with her claws. With a despondent warble, Deepa sat down heavily on her haunches, her tail swishing back and forth in obvious agitation.

"Go away!" Cherie panicked from within the bedroom. "I don't want any tigers in my flat!"

Unfortunately, while it was a fair sentiment, Deepa couldn't exactly leave. And, as the fire escape wasn't reachable from Cherie's bedroom window, the other girl couldn't leave either. They were at an impasse, and until Deepa figured out how to broach their communication barrier, there was nothing to do but sit and wait for something to happen.

Also, she wasn't a tiger.

At some point, Cherie would tire herself out and calm down, and Deepa would find a way to prove her identity. In a worst-case scenario, someone would visit the flat to check on them, and then Deepa would have even more people fearful that she was a bloodthirsty man-eater. Or — she wasn't sure if this was better or even worse — her mother would arrive for her usual weekend visit and she would be the one to find her.

Deepa didn't like the thought of that at all. If her mother failed to recognise her as a leopard, Deepa didn't know how she would go on.

By the time the night had rolled past three, Deepa had mostly got a handle on her new body, and found her movements came more easily when she wasn't overthinking them. Her senses, on the other hand, would take some getting used to.

Her eyesight was incredibly sharp, and keen even in the dimmest lighting. Her hearing was likewise improved, the sounds from the club downstairs as clear as if she were standing on The Songbird's stage. Smells were terribly distracting, though thankfully the smoke from downstairs and the spilled drinks and human messiness of the alley behind the building were overpowered by the spices in her kitchen. Deepa wasn't much of a cook, but her mother made sure to keep her stocked up on good, traditional Gujarati home-cooking, and the curry, cumin, and cardamom overpowered the less savoury scents of the London neighbourhood.

Deepa suspected that her mother's cooking wouldn't long sustain her current form.

What on earth was she supposed to do if this curse proved long-lasting? She could hardly hide in her flat forever, and London was ill-suited for a great cat. She needed to find a way to point Cherie towards Phillip so he could be made to reverse this debacle. Deepa's claws were wickedly sharp and her teeth were as long as daggers, and she wanted to sink every weapon at her disposal into that wretch of a man until he put her back the way she was supposed to be.

From behind the door, Cherie made a noise like that of a worried dove, and Deepa realised she'd been rumbling out a thundering growl. Disgruntled, she lay down lengthways in front of the closed door to make sure Cherie couldn't sneak out and cause trouble, and then resolved to wait for daybreak, which must surely bring with it some solution to her problems.

CHAPTER TWO

AN EVENING AT CLUB ARTEMIS

At dawn, Deepa woke in the process of turning back into a human. Reversing the process was less disorienting than the initial transformation, perhaps because she'd already done it once before, or perhaps because her human form was a known element.

Standing up on her two human feet, Deepa relearned her sense of balance as she wobbled over to fetch a blanket from the loveseat in the living room, wrapping it around herself before knocking on Cherie's bedroom door.

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A moment later, Cherie peeked out, looking like she hadn't slept a wink. Her platinum blonde bob was dishevelled, and the previous night's makeup was smudged under her eyes, making her look more exhausted than she really was.

"Good morning," Deepa said carefully.

"What the bloody hell?" Cherie croaked. "There was a bloody great cat in here last night! Did you see it?"

"Yes, unfortunately." Deepa cleared her throat. "That was me, actually."

Cherie covered her face with a groan. "I'd hoped I'd taken something to make me imagine all that," she mumbled from behind her hands. "Was it an enchantment?"

"A curse. I didn't do anything to break it, so I expect it will keep happening every night until I get it taken care of."

"Who on earth cursed you?" Cherie asked indignantly, dropping her hands to her hips.

"That weasel Phillip. He said true love's kiss would break it, but I have a mind to take his head off his shoulders and see if that does the trick. Now that I'm myself again, I'm going to go get Aaliyah. Assuming I have until midnight before I come over all feline again, I should think that gives me more than enough time to sort this out."

Aaliyah Kaddour was a terrifyingly competent woman. If anyone could break a curse,

Deepa wholly believed it was her.

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“A leopard?” Aaliyah said when Deepa explained the matter over espresso shots in Aaliyah’s favourite café. “I’ve never heard of a curse like that before. And he said you needed true love’s kiss? Classic, if pedestrian. I suppose you haven’t had the chance to go and knock him around until he undoes it? Because that would be my first recommendation.”

Aaliyah Kaddour was the only daughter of a wealthy Algerian merchant, and had both a legal husband, with their marriage being a political arrangement to satisfy both parties’ meddling parents, and a less-legal wife, who was a love match. Deepa admired Aaliyah for her no-nonsense attitude and her ability to get everything she wanted out of life. Even when she had to take a husband, she did it entirely on her own terms. In many ways, she was aspirational, though Deepa was in no hurry to land a husband, or indeed any spouse, in a sham-marriage or otherwise.

Deepa had, in fact, gone poking around looking for Phillip that morning, only to determine that he’d either gone deep into hiding, or left London entirely until he could be sure that Deepa wouldn’t be causing problems for him.

“His family’s got a home in France. He’s always going on about it, trying to impress me.”

“Well, if he’s bugged off out of the country, there’s not much you can do about that,” Aaliyah said realistically. “Have you given any thought to breaking the curse by more traditional means?”

“You mean by finding my true love?” Deepa was thoroughly sceptical, if not disdainful. “Phillip was many things, but he wasn’t wrong regarding my chances

there. I don't believe in love, true or otherwise. I can't imagine myself falling for any man, not even to save myself an eternity of nightly leopard transformations."

"About that," said Aaliyah, setting her cup down in its saucer.

"You're not going to suggest something mad like a love spell, are you? Because I might rather stay a cat forever than enchant myself to fall in love."

"Nothing nearly so drastic," Aaliyah assured her, as if she didn't have the components for an illegal love potion at her disposal. Deepa knew for a fact that she did. "It's just that this isn't the first time you've gone on about the impossibility of finding love with a man. I do have to point out that you have the entire fairer sex to explore as far as options go."

Deepa laughed reflexively. Aaliyah, smiling, did not.

"Wait. Are you serious?"

Aaliyah shrugged. "Surely you'd know by now if men did anything for you. You've tried enough of them. Clearly, they don't. So, either you're immune to love entirely, in which case, we'll have to arrange a trip to France so you can hunt down this little worm and threaten him until he undoes your curse, or you just need to try it on with a woman. It should be easy enough to find out which it is."

Which was how Deepa found herself at Club Artemis that evening with Aaliyah and her wife Jasmine.

Like Aaliyah, Jasmine Bailey trucked with no man. They both belonged to a glittering community of femininity uninterested in the male sex as a species, their worlds revolving around sweet perfume, shining hair, and soft curves. Born to a Jamaican immigrant mother, Jasmine was brilliantly dark, with stunning jewel-tone

features, as cool black as Aaliyah's were warm brown. She was intelligent and hard-working, owning and managing her own flower shop in the city.

Between the two women, they conspired to take Deepa to one of the only clubs in all of London with which she wasn't familiar. Club Artemis, on Gerrard Street in the West End, was a secret women-only establishment that made its home quite literally underground, hidden down a staircase underneath a more conventional bar.

"I have to be out the door by eleven," Deepa told her friends in a low voice. "I won't risk a spectacle by transforming anywhere but my own flat."

"I'll keep an eye on the time," Jasmine promised, ever the responsible one.

"How many proposals did you get this week, pre-curse?" Aaliyah asked, leading the way down the narrow stairs.

"Only two." Deepa followed Aaliyah, with Jasmine taking up the rear. "I'm sure I would have reached five if I'd stayed at The Songbird over the weekend."

Pushing through the painted door at the bottom of the stairs, Aaliyah flashed her a smile. "This will be a more promising use of your time."

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Club Artemis was green and gold, dimly lit and smoky like a sultry forest night. The bar ran in a long stripe along the back, couches and chairs lounging around the other two sides, with an area for the musicians on the third. In the middle, the floor opened up for dancing, though most of the patrons were sitting or standing in small groups or couples. Aaliyah presented the club with a flourish, and Deepa nodded respectfully. It was nothing spectacular save for its lack of men, who, in any other situation, would have been slaving at the sight of so many single women.

And the women were beautiful. In other clubs, they reminded Deepa of koi carp, glimmering and ornamental as they swam around, fishing for men's attention. Here, though they still glimmered, they seemed far more interesting, as if their inner lives were allowed to bloom, their personalities coming out strong, flaunting their independence and intelligence. Deepa had always been one of the koi carp, playing dumb and demure, batting her lashes and walking that impossibly thin line between innocence and temptation. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been to a crowded club without concealing her real thoughts and intentions.

"I suppose you said no to both proposals?" Jasmine asked as they made their way to the bar.

"She doesn't intend to say yes to any of them," Aaliyah scoffed, leaning in to catch the bartender's attention, ordering a shot of gin apiece.

Jasmine shrugged. "Stranger things have happened. You got married, after all."

"I'm married to you," Aaliyah countered, sliding Jasmine her gin as Deepa reached for her own.

“Technically, you’re married to Alphonse,” Jasmine said mildly, taking a sip.

Alphonse Hollyhock was a blond-haired, blue-eyed Englishman of leisure who, Deepa suspected, had never once entertained a single thought in his pretty head. He was a perfectly nice young man, but he was as disinterested in women as Aaliyah was in men, and their marriage had worked out wonderfully for everyone involved.

Deepa doubted she would find a husband equally happy to turn a blind eye if Deepa took his ring and his hand and announced that she wanted to continue entertaining other men. It seemed a hard sell. Though Deepa was very good at getting what she wanted, she couldn’t help but suspect that marriage would only make her life more complicated.

Of course, transforming into a leopard every night would complicate things as well. She supposed that put marriage in context.

“I expect this current rash of suitors will drop off once I stop taking their calls. Very few of them persist past the second rejection.”

“Except for Bassenwood,” Aaliyah noted. “Is he still coming around?”

Deepa heaved a sigh into her drink. “He is.”

Jonathan Bassenwood was the most determined of the lot, waiting to see her after every performance, promising his undying love. She’d made the mistake of sleeping with him once, early on, not realising at the time how drastically that would stoke his devotion. She should really stop accepting his gifts, but he was both extremely generous and extremely desperate to win her over. It seemed a waste to cut him off completely and miss out on the jewellery, dresses, chocolates, and wine he liked to bestow on her.

“You’ll have to put him out of his misery eventually,” Jasmine said gently. “Before he loses patience.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Which was true; she had historically been quite capable of defending herself against her more hot-headed suitors. None of the men she actually went out with were inclined to such temperaments, but she’d had more than one man barred from the club for taking too brusque or too entitled an approach. It was most regrettable that Phillip hadn’t raised any red flags prior to the cursing incident, or she’d have barred him too, and saved herself this current conundrum.

Jonathan Bassenwood, on the other hand, wasn’t like that at all. Jonathan was more akin to a spaniel fawning over her, sweet and pathetic.

“You can't deny women make better company than most men,” said Aaliyah.

Setting aside the fact that she wasn’t inclined to women, Deepa humoured her. “I just don’t know that a woman would be able to provide for me the way I want.”

“There are plenty of women looking for a princess to spoil,” Aaliyah said, and Jasmine nodded wisely. “I bet I could find you a better shot at true love here tonight than you’ve found in all your suitors so far. It wouldn’t even be a challenge.”

“Feel free to try,” Deepa replied, amused.

Knocking back the last of her gin and clunking the glass down firmly on the bar top, Aaliyah took Jasmine and Deepa by the hands and dragged them onto the dance floor. “No better way to catch a girl’s attention,” she promised.

The band was playing a lively piece, and Aaliyah wasted no time in pulling them into

a raucous Charleston. The three of them quickly drew more dancers onto the floor, and the hum of conversation raked up a notch, with people raising their voices to be heard over the band and the dancing.

Deepa was in her element as she whirled across the floor, willing the other dancers to pay attention to her. She'd never had to try very hard to make that happen.

That night, she was in a burgundy half sari draped to bare her midriff, the cotton hemmed in gold print to match her hoop earrings and bracelets that were beset with tiny stones to glitter in the scant light whenever she moved. From her navel, a jewel flashed in time with her steps, drawing attention to the bare skin of her stomach that was infinitely more tantalising than bare shoulders or knees. Her hair, long enough to drop past her waist if she left it down, she wore in an enormous braid, made thicker by the ropes of silk twined through it. The choli she wore in place of a blouse under her sari was downright indecent, according to her mother, and she took care to keep herself modestly covered in public. But on stage or at Club Artemis, decency was not her goal.

Aaliyah was in a minuscule black dress decorated with silver and gold beading, and Jasmine was in violet, both of them flashing their knees, arms loose and smiles bright. Aaliyah was right: there was no better way to catch anyone's attention than through dance, and Deepa had always been attuned to music. In that moment, it was easy to forget she'd been cursed a scant twenty-four hours earlier, in an establishment not so different than this.

Soon enough, she felt eyes on her, a gaze burning dark and hot between her shoulders. Turning in time with the music, she picked her admirer out of the crowd. A woman in a dark suit and a man's haircut lounged against one of the couches, her arms spread wide over its back, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee. She looked handsome and self-assured, and older than Deepa by a good ten years. Heat coiled through Deepa's core, pleased by the attention.

Catching on, Aaliyah elbowed her, grinning. “I told you!”

“Do you know her?” Deepa asked, leaning to speak directly in Aaliyah’s ear.

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“We’ve seen her around. She's definitely not one of the ones slipping out to avoid a husband at home.”

That much was obvious. The way the woman held herself, like a lioness lounging on her throne, suggested that she ran her own house and her own life, and would settle for nothing less.

They made eye contact across the dance floor and the woman smiled, pushing herself up and strolling over, her hands slung casually in her pockets. She cut straight through the crowd like a ship through water, and Deepa held her ground, a smile spreading as she waited for the woman to reach her.

CHAPTER THREE

IN WHICH DEEPA MEETS HER MATCH

They came together as the music shifted to a playful waltz, and the woman swept Deepa into position, taking the lead. None of the other dancers were drunk enough to cross each other's paths, and the waltz felt effortless, each step as easy as a swallow in flight.

“Rosaline,” said the woman. Her voice was strong and low and northern. “Call me Roz.”

“Deepa.”

Roz was a few inches shorter than Deepa, wearing men’s clothes with her dark hair

cut short and masculine, strands of silver shot through at the temples. Her eyes were grey and her skin lightly tanned, with broad shoulders and a thick, stocky build, though she was light on her feet. One hand was dry and callused where she held Deepa's, her other on Deepa's waist, firm without commandeering. She moved like someone comfortable in her own physicality; used to manual labour, Deepa guessed. Where Deepa had cultivated a feline grace in her own movements, intentionally seductive, Roz was straightforward and no-nonsense, without any wasted effort. She was a good dancer — not flashy about it, but competent.

And, Deepa realised, as Roz lifted one arm to spin her around, she smelled good, too: a dark, smoky cologne clung to her suit. Coming in from her twirl, Deepa positioned herself closer, breathing deep. The other woman seemed to enjoy her newfound proximity, though she didn't hold Deepa tighter or closer than what Deepa willing to offer.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Roz asked when the music changed.

"You don't waste time," said Deepa, amused.

Roz just smiled more broadly and offered Deepa the crook of her elbow, like a gentleman to a lady. Flattered, Deepa accepted, slipping her hand around the woman's arm, ignoring the way Aaliyah and Jasmine were cheering behind her back.

Roz might not be considered attractive by the men of London, but in Club Artemis, she was magnetic. Deepa couldn't take her eyes off her as Roz guided her back to the bar. Beside her, Roz was solid and warm, exuding confidence and charm. Deepa wasn't the only one caught up in her magnetism, either; a number of girls from the dance floor were tracking her, their gazes hungry.

"What can I get you?" Roz asked, turning to Deepa as she leaned one elbow on the bar.

“White wine, please.”

“Classy. I’ll have a shot of whiskey, myself.” As the bartender — a stylish older woman wearing a blue and white sailor’s top, with a long cigarette clamped between her lips — fetched their orders, Roz looked Deepa over with an air of speculation. “Deepa, was it? That’s a pretty name.”

“Thank you. I actually come from a long line of Indian maharajahs.”

The lie came as easily as breathing after years of repetition. It was an image she had specifically crafted to whet men's appetites for the exotic, and it wasn't as if any of them knew enough about India or even the British occupation to prove her wrong. And it was certainly better than sharing the truth about her parents, whose stories were far too common and tended to illicit pity more than wonder.

When she said it to Roz, though, it felt less like a deception and more like an invitation: a wink and a nudge prompting her to see through Deepa’s illusion.

“That so? I can see it.”

As so many of her suitors liked to do, Roz caught Deepa’s fingers to brush a dry kiss over her knuckles, lingering long enough to drop a second smaller kiss on the ruby ring she wore on her middle finger. Unlike with her suitors, Deepa didn't feel the urge to roll her eyes or wash her hands after.

“What brings an Indian princess to a place like this? I’ve not seen you before.”

“My friends said I should take a break from my regular club where I’m hounded by men night and day.”

“Do you like being hounded by women more?”

“It’s a new experience for me.”

When the bartender slid her glass of wine over, Deepa savoured a delicate sip as she studied Roz from over the rim. Roz toyed with her whiskey tumbler but didn’t drink yet, looking Deepa over just as Deepa was looking at her.

“Just here as a tourist then, are you, love?” Roz’s tone was casual, giving nothing away.

“I didn't come out tonight intending to get picked up, if that’s what you mean,” Deepa replied, keeping her smile light. “But I like to keep my options open.”

“Married?”

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“Certainly not.”

Roz took a swig and Deepa watched her swallow. “What do you do?” Roz asked.

“I sing. I go out with rich men and convince them to buy me nice things and not be angry when I leave them after. I’m...mostly successful.” Deepa left out her other, shadier dealings for another time and sipped her drink, gazing at Roz from big, black kohl-lined doe-eyes. “What do you do?”

“I’ve got a job fixing motorcars in my brother’s garage, but that’s just what pays the bills. What I really do is fight.”

Intrigued, Deepa leaned in. She’d never met a self-described fighter before. Judging from the calluses on Roz’s palms and the strength of her grip, she believed it.

“Who do you fight?”

Roz smiled. “Whoever wants to have a go. There’s this women’s boxing club I’m part of — underground, you know, nothing official — and we organise fights and tournaments for whoever wants it.”

“Do you make money doing that?” Deepa asked curiously. She couldn’t imagine Roz made much if the club was unofficial, but she’d been surprised by certain business ventures before.

“Some. The real money’s in the betting rather than the prize. I’m not in it for the money, anyway. But it’s a nice bonus, I’ll give you that.”

Deepa certainly couldn't relate to that sentiment. Shifting the topic away from money, she asked, "Do you ever get hurt?"

"We can get bloodied up some, yeah. Most serious anyone's ever had in the ring was a cracked rib or a broken nose. That's not so bad. Don't even need to go to hospital for something like that."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Does it bother you?" Roz countered.

"I'm afraid I've never been much for blood and gore." Taking another sip, Deepa waved the fingers of her free hand, rings and nail polish catching the light. "I don't like getting my hands dirty."

"Then I shouldn't invite you to come and watch my next match on Thursday," Roz said, watching her closely.

Aaliyah and Jasmine would be pleased with her evening. If there was one thing Deepa knew how to do well, it was flirt. Man or woman didn't seem to make a difference.

"As a friend, or a date?" she asked, glancing at Roz through her mascara'd lashes.

"Whatever you want, love."

"I think you'd prefer one to the other."

Roz shrugged. "Sure, yeah, but if you want to come as a friend, I can't stop you. Just so long as you don't bring any of your men along as a plus-one."

“Can I bring my girlfriends?”

“The ones who brought you here tonight? Sure you can.”

Deepa considered her options. Roz was attractive, physically and personally, but more importantly, she was engaging. And Deepa was restless, energy itching underneath her skin with the need to move, to change, to do something drastic. Aaliyah’s challenge to find her true love with a woman hung in the air like smoke, but that wasn’t the driving force behind Deepa’s actions. She didn’t need to prove anything to her friends, but she did want to spite Phillip and his intrusive, nasty little curse.

“Alright. I’ll watch the fight.”

Her lack of elaboration made Roz pause. “As a date, or?”

Before Deepa could either impulsively commit to the date or double down and keep things vague, Aaliyah shimmered up to them, looking simultaneously apologetic about interrupting and gleeful about the interaction playing out before her.

“I hate to butt in,” she said, “but...” She tapped her bare wrist where a watch might sit while raising her brows meaningfully at Deepa.

Deepa literally jumped, berating herself for not paying attention to the time. “Is it that late already?”

“Ten fifty-five. I would have let you keep going, but I didn't think you’d much appreciate it.”

“Somewhere you need to be?” Roz asked.

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“Unfortunately.” Deepa had to force her feet to move, and even then, she held onto Roz's hand until the last possible second. Roz seemed to appreciate her recalcitrance, at least. “You should write down the address of this fight, and I’ll be sure to attend.”

Offering Roz the little diary she kept in her handbag for just this purpose, Deepa watched as Roz scrawled down a time and place in blocky, workmanlike letters. At the end of the address, she hesitated a second, pen blotting the page, before adding her own name, like Deepa might forget who the note was from. Or maybe, Deepa considered, as Roz returned the pen and notebook, like she was laying claim to this little piece of Deepa’s life.

Deepa didn’t dislike the notion.

“See you then,” Roz said, her voice like a promise.

Deepa wasn’t above a night of fun, but this felt different, and she was wary of it. It was the novelty of flirting with a woman that made it feel more important than flirting with a man, she decided; not that she’d never flirted with a woman before, but not with real intent. Roz didn’t make leaving easy, standing there so invitingly.

Finally, Aaliyah took Deepa by the arm and physically dragged her away.

“Look at you, landing yourself a handsome butch on your first night out!” She slung an arm around Deepa’s shoulders, hauling her close as they collected Jasmine to head for the exit. “How does it feel? Are you joining the family, or are you going straight back to your endless, boring lines of manly suitors?”

The first option sounded rather impulsive; the second, absolutely dreadful.

“Roz says she’s a boxer. She invited me out next Thursday to watch her fight, and I said yes.”

“Do you know anything about underground boxing?” Jasmine asked. “Or boxing at all?”

“Nothing whatsoever. I look forward to being educated. However,” Deepa added in the face of her friends’ ebullience, “don’t think I’m about to start wearing trousers and sailor outfits and little monocles just because a handsome lady chatted me up for a single night.”

“She seems to like you just fine without any of that,” Jasmine said, which Deepa could hardly refute.

Any other night, she would have stayed out with Roz long enough for the other woman to make a move, had a little fun with her on the dance floor, then gone home without giving the encounter another thought. It could have been a fun night out with no ramifications.

But on any other night, Deepa wouldn't have been thinking about love; especially not the true fairytale variety. And any other night, the clock wouldn't have been ticking down towards her next transformation into a wild leopard.

“I can understand everything said to me,” Deepa explained as the three of them entered her flat shortly before midnight. “I’m perfectly lucid. It’s just that I’m restricted in my communications.”

“So, you don’t feel dangerous,” Aaliyah interpreted.

“Certainly not! Apart from wanting to tear Phillip limb from limb, I wasn’t aware of harbouring any sudden violence whatsoever.”

“But you weren’t able to actually test it,” said Jasmine.

“No, Cherie locked herself away before we could interact very much. And, on the off chance that my leopard does turn out to be a man-eater — well, I don’t want to risk it.”

“Right,” Aaliyah declared. “Well, first things first: let’s get this on you.”

From her bag, she produced a thick leather collar with a d-ring on the front, and a leash to match.

“Do I want to know where you got those?” Deepa asked, eyeing them with no small amount of trepidation.

“I bought them for my imaginary dog. The shopkeeper said they’re designed for mastiffs, specifically, you know, those great lion-fighting dogs. If it’ll do for a mastiff, I’m sure it will do for a leopard.”

Taking the collar, Deepa reluctantly fastened it around her neck, tipping her chin up to allow Aaliyah to clip the end of the leash onto the ring.

“Now, what have you got sturdy enough that we can tie the other end to?” Aaliyah asked.

Deepa glanced around the flat. There wasn't much in the place that could be considered sturdy, by any stretch of the imagination. “The bedroom door, I suppose,” she said doubtfully. “But if I want to get loose, I don't think it will prove much challenge for me, even lacking opposable thumbs. I'm not turning into a dumb

animal.”

“No, and I doubt you're turning into a vicious killer, either,” Aaliyah agreed. “But let’s find out, shall we?”

It was five minutes to midnight.

“What if I don’t change tonight at all?” Deepa asked, toying nervously with her bracelets. “What if it was just a one-off?”

“Does Phillip strike you as the type to give you a one-off curse?” Jasmine asked. “You haven’t broken it.”

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“No, but I have no idea as to his proficiency as a spellcaster. Maybe he's as inept with curses as he is with women.”

“Here's hoping!” Aaliyah said brightly. “Can we watch you turn, though?”

“No!” Deepa and Jasmine exclaimed in unison.

“For heaven's sake,” Jasmine added, “give the girl her privacy.” Taking her wife by the arm, she firmly steered Aaliyah into the kitchen, leaving Deepa to shut herself in her bedroom.

For a second, Deepa stared at the closed door, thinking on her friends' certainty that the curse was still in effect. Then, shaking off her inaction, she tied the end of the leash around the door handle, tightly enough that it couldn't slip free by accident. Someone would have to come in and deliberately untie that knot if she wanted out of it. Or, she supposed, she could chew through the leather. She rather hoped things wouldn't come to that, but it was always good to have a backup plan.

With the leash secure and under three minutes to go, she divested herself of her jewellery, placing each piece in the ceramic bowl on her nightstand. The familiar routine calmed her jittery nerves, though it wasn't enough to dispel them entirely. With her jewellery set aside, she stepped out of her heels and, balancing with one hand on the wall, peeled off her stockings and then her sari. As she attempted to remove her choli, she realised that, while she could get the bodice over her head, she couldn't actually get it off the leash without unclipping the end from her collar. With her time counting down, she ran it along the length of the leash to hang it from the door handle, aggravated with herself for not thinking the process through beforehand.

She was standing there, one hand on the bundle of beaded cotton as she debated whether to untie the leash, free the bodice, and hang it up properly, when her transformation began.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN WHICH RESEARCH ATTEMPTS ARE THWARTED

Without the physical panic and the fear that she was losing her mind, she was able to pay more attention to her body this time around. The lack of control was still frightening, but the fact that she knew what was happening helped. Rather than deal with the kaleidoscope of colours and sensations, she shut her eyes and turned her focus inward, counting her breaths as flesh and bone reshaped itself.

As the curse didn't seem inclined to fizzle out on its own, Deepa resolved to get what she could out of it. Lowering her head, she stretched her forelegs out in front of her, claws extended, and lengthened her spine all the way to the tip of her tail. Elbows on the floor, nose tipped up, she stretched as far as she could, and it felt spectacular. There was something luxurious about stretching as a cat that couldn't be replicated in human form. Perhaps this nightly experience needn't be altogether horrible.

A gentle tapping sounded from the other side of the door. "Deepa?" Jasmine's voice was pitched low, deliberately soothing in the way one spoke to unknown animals. "How are things?"

Deepa made her best approximation of a meow.

"Well, that answers that," came Aaliyah's voice. "Tap the door three times if we can come in. Growl, I guess, if you want us to stay out."

Deepa no longer had knuckles adept at knocking, but she made three soft thumps

with her right paw before backing up to wait expectantly. The door handle turned with an air of caution and Aaliyah poked a broom through the crack before she and Jasmine peered into the room. Deepa couldn't decide whether to be amused or insulted, like she was a stray that might need to be shooed off.

"Hello," said Aaliyah, wide-eyed but admirably steady as she inched through the doorway. "You certainly are a leopard, aren't you? Are you feeling at all bloodthirsty or murderous?"

Deepa shook her head definitively, but otherwise didn't move. She was by the bed, as far back from the door as the leash would allow, and was beginning to get annoyed with the restriction, not to mention the indignity. Hooking one heavy paw over the taut leash, she looked at her friends meaningfully, then to the knot of leather around the door handle.

"I'm going to give that a minute, if you don't mind," Aaliyah said, still holding the broom.

With a huff, Deepa sat back more heavily on her haunches.

"We might as well untie her," Jasmine said, watching from over Aaliyah's shoulder. "We're in the wrong place for that leash to do us any good. It won't stop her from approaching us at all."

To prove the point, Deepa got back to her feet and strolled across the scant distance between them. Her friends both skittered back through the doorway, broom held at the ready, for all the good it would do. When Aaliyah and Jasmine had been pushed into the kitchen, Deepa stopped in the bedroom doorway, swishing her tail back and forth and trying to look more playful than menacing.

"Speak?" Aaliyah asked hopefully.

Deepa obliged with a scratchy yowl.

“Shake a paw?”

Humouring her, Deepa offered up a front paw, though Aaliyah didn't come close enough to take it.

“Stand on your hind legs?”

“She's not a circus animal,” Jasmine chided. “Clearly, she understands you.”

“Fine, fine.” Handing the defensive broomstick to her wife, Aaliyah inched closer. “I'll untie you. Just watch where you point those claws, if you don't mind.”

Deepa kept a respectable distance as Aaliyah worked the knot loose, catching her discarded choli before it fell. Though she didn't comment, the amusement in her expression suggested that she knew exactly how Deepa had tried and failed to undress. Embarrassed, Deepa grumbled under her breath. Perhaps she could distract — or intimidate — Aaliyah into forgetting about it.

“I don't suppose we could take you anywhere like this to have the curse removed,” Aaliyah mused, tossing the bodice onto Deepa's bed before returning to Jasmine's side. “I wonder whether anyone with experience in curses would find it easier to undo the thing while it's fully manifested like this.”

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Anxious, Deepa thumped her tail against the floor. The thought of going out in public as a leopard, even secretly, didn't fill her with confidence.

Suddenly, Aaliyah snapped her fingers, and Deepa twitched. "Elizabeth," Aaliyah said. "She might know her way around curse-magic."

Elizabeth Turtledove was Deepa's friend and seamstress, specialising in good-luck charms and simple illusions meant to disguise or flatter the wearer. Good-luck charms and curses were tangentially related, as much as most curses were a manifestation of bad luck. Though she could follow Aaliyah's train of thought, Deepa suspected that her specific curse was rather more complicated than that, as full-bodied shapeshifting seemed a hair more drastic than mere bad luck.

Still, it was worth a go.

"We can go home, get the car, come back here to pick you up, and drive you straight to Elizabeth's," Aaliyah said. "Have you got a phone? We can call ahead to give her fair warning that we're on the way. No? That's alright. I'm sure she won't mind being woken for such an emergency."

Deepa, who didn't share Aaliyah's faith that Elizabeth would take a leopard showing up on her doorstep in the middle of the night in stride, growled in a panic and threw herself between Aaliyah and the front door.

"Or not," Aaliyah said quickly.

Deepa had a new dress to collect from Elizabeth on Monday morning anyway, not

that she could say so. Frustrated, she paced the length of the flat once, back and forth, before sitting down by the door and uttering a pathetically plaintive meow.

“It’s alright,” Aaliyah offered. “One way or another, we’ll get you out of this. In the meantime, is it very rude to ask if I can touch you?”

Deepa thought it over for a few seconds before deciding that she probably didn't mind. If anything, it might be nice. Trying to signal friendly passivity, she approached Aaliyah from an angle, and, like a giant housecat, butted the top of her head against Aaliyah’s leg before dragging herself longways around her friend’s knees, twining between the two women to do the same to Jasmine. One by one, they dropped their hands to her back, sinking their fingers into her dappled fur.

“That's so plush,” Aaliyah breathed reverently.

“You are very beautiful,” Jasmine told Deepa in a soft voice.

With a rumbling growl that was as close to a purr as she could manage, Deepa soaked up the compliments, each one serving to calm her down and warm her up. It wasn't that she was shallow, but she put a tremendous amount of effort into her appearance, and she enjoyed having that effort validated. Apparently, that carried over to her leopard form as well, though she had far less input into what she looked like as a cat versus a woman. If she was forced to spend her nights as a leopard, it helped to know that she was beautiful.

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At dawn, she woke a woman once more, laying on the kitchen rug under a blanket. On the loveseat, Aaliyah and Jasmine slept, slumped against each other.

Although each transformation was gentler than the last, it wasn't something Deepa

wanted to continue indefinitely. With Phillip having fled town, at least temporarily, and true love being a notion even more fanciful than shapeshifting, Deepa turned to research. If she couldn't compel Phillip to break the curse, then she would find a means to break it herself.

Unfortunately, she was no academic, and her access to scholarly texts was minimal. Furthermore, she had little knowledge of English magic practices, which differed considerably from the Indian magic taught to her in childhood by her mother. In that regard, Aaliyah and Jasmine, both immigrants themselves, were little help.

“You need to break into a university library or something,” Aaliyah said, once they were all up and breakfasted.

It wasn't an outlandish suggestion. Deepa had stolen things before, a fact of which Aaliyah was well aware, seeing as her last and most impressive theft had been to procure a birthdaypresent for Jasmine on Aaliyah's behalf, stealing a rare magical plant from Kew Gardens for Jasmine's flower collection.

In that case, Deepa had hired someone to carry out the task. She wasn't a professional thief or a cat burglar, and saw no need to invite that kind of risk when she could more easily outsource the job to someone who knew what they were doing.

But the thief she'd hired last time had recently absconded to America with a diamond necklace of truly staggering worth, and as such, was no longer available to work for her.

Sneaking into a university library to peruse a private collection of magical tomes likely wouldn't land her in prison the way stealing a highly regulated magical plant might, but still, she had no confidence in pulling it off without getting caught. She preferred to sweet talk other people into doing favours for her. Failing that, she generally had the means to buy their services.

With neither option available, she, Aaliyah, and Jasmine spent their Sunday staking out London's college campuses, of which there were many. Too many, in Deepa's opinion.

"Do you know where Phillip studied?" Aaliyah asked. "The books at his school should give you the most useful information on curses, assuming that's where he learned his craft."

"I don't know," Deepa said, frustrated. "Oxford or Cambridge, I should imagine. He's a pretentious twat."

After being chased off the third campus by overly suspicious groundskeepers, Deepa was ready to abandon her research efforts and book travel to France to hunt down that vermin and make him fix her. Wherever he'd studied, she was sure he and his professors deserved each other. English universities might allow women to earn degrees, however begrudgingly, but they favoured a certain look of woman, the criteria of which Deepa, Aaliyah, and Jasmine did not meet. Deepa couldn't be sure whether it was their colouring or the shortness of their skirts, but either way, she didn't appreciate being barred access.

"This is why I go out with men," she told her friends, infinitely annoyed as they stalked away from their last attempt. "Put me on the arm of the right man, and I can go anywhere."

"You wouldn't rather get around on your own merit?" Jasmine asked.

"What I'd rather do is irrelevant. I'm working with the choices available to me."

"And, in general, you're doing a marvellous job," Aaliyah assured her. "This leopard situation is a minor setback. Elizabeth will be able to help. If she can't break the curse, she should be able to point you in the right direction. She's very resourceful."

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Elizabeth Turtledove was resourceful when it came to enchanting dresses. With curses, perhaps not so much.

“Can’t you go to the police?” Elizabeth demanded, outraged on her behalf.

“Yes, I’m sure they’ll be most sympathetic to the unmarried, brown-skinned gold digger,” Deepa said dryly.

“Oh, damn. No, I suppose that would do you any good, would it.”

It was Monday morning and Deepa was sitting in the back room of Elizabeth’s chic little dress shop, with a friendly tea and a tin of jam biscuits on the table, and her latest order in a box in her lap. The dress was stunning, the charmwork and glammers exquisite as always, but this time, the magic left a bad taste in her mouth. It hadn’t been any of her dresses’ fault that Phillip had cursed her, but a voice in the back of her head suggested that attracting the wrong sort of attention the way she did was always bound to land her in trouble. Wearing so many enchantments designed to draw men’s eyes only ensured that the trouble would find her sooner than later.

“I really don’t know anything about that sort of magic,” Elizabeth was saying apologetically. “I can certainly read up on it, but I’ve never had any practice with curses. I’d hate to make it worse for you instead of better.”

“It’s alright. Eventually, the wretch will have to return to London.”

“You can’t just keep on as a leopard until then!”

“Aaliyah thinks it would be easier for me to find my true love and break the curse the way it was made to be broken. As if it’s so easy.”

“I don’t suppose you have any true loves on the horizon?” Elizabeth asked hopefully. It was easy for her to hope, as she herself had not one but two devoted lovers.

“Her approach was to take me to a lesbian bar. That should give you some idea as to how it’s going with my suitors.”

“Did the lesbian bar interest you any better than your usual fare?”

“Well.” Deepa paused. “I won’t say it was a complete waste,” she allowed.

“Oh?”

“Nothing happened. Maybe just...a spark.”

“A spark worth pursuing?” Elizabeth prompted.

“I may have promised to see her again. But that doesn’t mean anything.”

“It does if you intend to keep the promise! In any case, I’m happy for you, and I hope it works out. In general, but also for the sake of that curse. Oh, and your mother wants to know why you didn’t have her over this weekend,” Elizabeth added with a wince. Deepa’s mother was employed as Elizabeth’s housekeeper, the arrangement being friendly enough for them to chat. Chat, and complain about her daughter, evidently. “I suppose your leopard business must have interfered on that front.”

Slumping forward, one elbow braced against the dress box, Deepa covered her face

with a hand. “I haven’t even thought about telling her. She worries over me enough as it is.”

Elizabeth offered her a sympathetic pat on the back. “Maybe give it a few days and see if things resolve before bringing it up?”

“For some reason, I don't see this going away on its own like a head cold.”

“Have another biscuit,” Elizabeth suggested, pushing the tin towards her for lack of anything better to offer.

Glumly, Deepa accepted. “Don’t tell my mother I’m a leopard. I don’t want her fussing.”

“No, of course not.”

“You can tell her you saw me, though. And that I’m sorry about the weekend, and I’ll be in touch soon.”

“If there’s anything concrete I can do to help,” Elizabeth began.

“Short of going to France and wringing that man’s neck, I don’t think there’s much anyone can do for me right now.”

CHAPTER FIVE

A ROOFTOP BOXING MATCH

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The week passed fruitlessly. Deepa kept up her singing at The Songbird, both because she needed the money, and in case Phillip was keeping tabs on her. She wanted to present as if she were unruffled and the curse was, if not already broken, a mere inconvenience. However, she cut her nights shorter than she would have liked, always giving herself ample time to escape upstairs and transform away from prying eyes.

Her admirers drove themselves wild with speculation as to who or what she was running home to. She fanned the flames of their rumours in the hopes that they might fall over themselves trying to outbid their competitors for her attention, and because she could hardly come out and reassure them that she was spending her nights alone. Better to let them believe she was falling into the arms of some secret prince than transforming into a giant cat and sulking about it in the bath.

Despite her diminished time spent on stage, her admirers' gifts didn't dwindle in the least. Her suitors continued to leave her wine, chocolates, trinkets, and flowers in her dressing room. If anything, they left more. But she couldn't spend her nights taking them out one at a time to coax more expensive and long-lasting gifts from their wallets, and chocolates and flowers couldn't pay her bills. So, while the air of mystery seemed to help her popularity, the curse still had to go.

But she was no closer to breaking it.

Phillip was nowhere to be found. Sniffing out resources on curses and the breaking thereof was difficult, given their illegality, and the necessity of keeping her curse secret. Hardly helping was her lack of personal contacts who had any experience with curses, or at least access to historical or academic works on the subject.

That left her to break the curse as it was intended. Her scepticism on that front had not wavered in a week. Even if she did believe in love, she strongly suspected that the English bard was right when he wrote that its course never did run smooth.

Unfortunately, it seemed she had little recourse but to try it.

In light of that, Thursday evening found her following Aaliyah and Jasmine to a dive bar in the North End to watch Roz fight.

“The weather’s good, so the match will be up top,” Aaliyah told her, holding the door to shepherd her into the bar.

“On the roof?”

The bar was a small, sordid-seeming place that Deepa never would have patronised of her own volition, but it didn’t have an air of active hostility. It must have some redeeming qualities if it was willing to host a women's boxing match. Still, she was glad the fight would be outside, away from the sticky floors and smell of old smoke. Also, she’d never been on a rooftop before, and was curious as to what the experience might hold.

A stairwell behind a closed door at the back of the bar granted rooftop access, and up they climbed. The fresh air was a relief, though it still smelled of London. The roof was fairly small and almost square, a patchwork quilt of other building-tops allaround, and it offered a beautiful view of the June sky as dusk approached, inviting streaks of vivid pink and orange to linger over the horizon. The breeze caught the skirts of Deepa’s dress, blush pink to match the evening, making the tulle ruffle and flutter around her legs.

In the middle of the roof stood a makeshift boxing ring, with mats laid down to cover the concrete, and a square of ropes erected on all sides. A group of women stood

gathered at the ring's far side, while a mixed crowd of onlookers milled around the rooftop door where Deepa, Aaliyah, and Jasmine had exited.

It was no challenge to pick Roz out. She and another woman stood in the centre of the group by the ring, with a third serious-faced woman speaking to them both. All the other women looked to be listening intently, and Deepa didn't want to interrupt. Also, it gave her the opportunity to drink Roz in and see if her second impression stood up to the first.

Roz was in shorts and a muscle shirt, and she had the muscles to show off. Biceps, calves, and thighs — Deepa imagined that if she lifted Roz's shirt, she would find slabs of defined abdominal muscles as well, and back muscles to rival those of any weightlifter. Under the straps of her top, Roz's shoulders were like those of an ox, broad and strong. She looked masculine, but she didn't look like a man, not even when she was dressed as one.

Roz caught her eye from across the roof and grinned, jutting her chin up in greeting. Deepa smiled and waved in response.

"God, she is a specimen," Aaliyah said. "I wouldn't have guessed she'd be your type."

"What type did you expect of me?"

"Like an heiress or something, I don't know. Someone rich and dripping in gold and pearls to spoil you with."

"You've just described yourself," Jasmine said fondly. "Narcissist. Anyway, her men already do that. She was bored; maybe she wanted a change of pace."

"It's alright," Deepa said. "I'll admit to being a bit surprised myself."

“She could bench press any one of your men,” Aaliyah said. “Have you gone and got yourself a date, or a bodyguard?”

“Neither. I’m here as a friend.”

Aaliyah and Jasmine's eyebrows rose simultaneously, and the couple exchanged a glance.

“Does she know that?” Aaliyah asked.

“We left it intentionally ambiguous. It’s hardly been a week since we met. I didn’t want to promise her a date and then go home and change my mind in the interim.”

“So, you haven't ruled out a date,” Jasmine said.

“I never rule out anything. That’s how bridges get burned.”

The group of women split, meeting adjourned, and Roz cut across the roof straight to Deepa.

“You came.” Her voice was a low, pleased purr as she took Deepa’s hands.

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“You thought I’d change my mind?” Deepa asked lightly, as if such a thing were impossible.

“I hoped you wouldn’t.” Letting go of one of Deepa’s hands, Roz tipped her thumb back over her shoulder towards the ring. “We’ll be starting in a minute. Wish me luck?”

“I don’t think you need it,” Deepa said, but all the same, she leaned in, fingertips light on Roz’s shoulders and her other hand even lighter against Roz’s chest to press a quick kiss to her cheek. When she pulled back, Roz was grinning like she couldn’t help herself.

“Do I get another one of those after the match?”

“Only if you win.”

“Cheeky.”

“Good luck,” Deepa told her beatifically, and gave her a little push towards the other women. “Go fight. I’ll be watching.”

“You’re an awful tease,” Aaliyah commented as Roz stalked back to the ring, arms behind her head as she stretched to warm up. “Keep this up, and she’ll be wrapped around your finger like a love knot.”

“It’s only flirting,” Deepa protested with a laugh.

“Your flirting should be classified as a deadly weapon. A woman like that doesn’t stand a chance.”

“A woman like what, exactly?”

“The kind that wants to bend over backwards to please a pretty face.”

“And what kind of woman am I?” Deepa asked. Though her tone was light, she wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer.

Aaliyah glanced at her. “You’re the pretty face, obviously. You’re a professional temptress.”

“Playing hard to get,” Jasmine added.

“And well out of her league. The question is,” Aaliyah said, nudging her, “do you want to stay the course when it comes to Roz? Or do you want to try something different?”

“I think,” Deepa said carefully, feeling her way along one word at a time, “that I want to treat her differently than I treat my men.”

Aaliyah elbowed her, knocking her completely off balance just as the activity by the ring turned organised and intent. The group of onlookers crowded close, finalising their bets and passing money around, engulfing the three girls as the anticipation in the air hummed like electricity.

“Do you mean you actually want to try something with her?” Aaliyah demanded, all delight. “Do you think she could actually be the love you need to break your curse?”

“I promised her a kiss if she wins. That’s all I’ve said so far.”

“That's all you've said. But what are you thinking about?”

“I don't know yet. It's too soon to say.”

“It's been six days,” Jasmine pointed out.

“Six days apart,” Deepa countered.

“And whose fault is that?” Aaliyah asked.

“Be quiet,” Deepa said peaceably. “The fight is starting.”

That wasn't entirely accurate. Rather, the fight was about to start. The two boxers took to opposite corners of the ring, stretching their arms and dancing lightly as they limbered up. Roz's opponent was a taller woman with a blonde bob held back with a kerchief, less stocky than Roz, with a greater reach. They were both in sleeveless tops and shorts cut above the knee, with soft boots covering the ankle, and thick, padded gloves strapped on their hands. They wore no other protection, and for the first time, Deepa realised just how likely the fight was to hurt.

Roz had told her that none of them had ever been seriously injured, rarely even bloodied, but she hadn't said anything about the likelihood of bruising. As tough as the women looked, they were both pale enough that any bruises would show up as easily as on a couple of ripe peaches, and Deepa wasn't sure she wanted to see that.

A girl in a white blouse stepped up, slenderer and younger than either of the two fighters, with a chunky silver whistle in her mouth. She said something to the serious-looking woman at the side of the ring, who nodded in response and stepped away.

“It's too late to place any formal bets, but do you want to make a wager just between the three of us?” Aaliyah asked.

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“I think we’re all betting on the same fighter,” Jasmine said, her gaze locked on the ring.

Beside her, Deepa could only nod.

“First of three rounds!” the bewhistled referee called.

From opposite corners, Roz and her opponent stalked to centre-ring, sizing each other up before bumping gloves. The referee blew her whistle, silver tones piercing the air, and the fighters leapt light-footed to circle one another, fists raised, looking for an opening. The crowd pushed close around the ring, almost touching the ropes, and Deepa following along, finding herself next to the serious-faced woman who had been with the boxers in the beginning.

Up close, the woman was bulky and freckled, with red-blond hair carelessly tied back, and a nose that had obviously been broken at least once. As Roz and the other fighter exchanged opening blows, dancing in and out to tap each other on the chest and shoulders, Deepa sidled up to the woman and touched her elbow.

“You look like you know something about boxing,” Deepa said, when the woman turned to look at her.

“You don’t?”

Deepa liked that it wasn't an immediate assumption, but then, the majority of the women on the rooftop seemed well-versed in the sport. She shook her head. “It’s my first time watching a match. My name is Deepa.”

“Call me Kells.” Her voice was gruff, her accent Irish. She unfolded her arms just enough to offer a brusque, callused handshake.

“Do you run this place?”

“I train the fighters.” Kells nodded to the women in the ring. “Used to fight myself; not so much anymore.”

“Do you work at the bar downstairs?”

She shook her head. “Used to. Owner owes me a favour or two, lets us use the roof for the occasional match so long as we don’t make a mess or cause a scene.”

“Why boxing?”

“Because the girls wanted to learn it, and no one else was helping them out. Figured I might as well.”

“Have you ever got in trouble for it?”

Kells eyed Deepa from under her brows. “We keep our heads low, here.”

“Why aren’t you refereeing?”

“Lisa wanted to. She enjoys it. Jesus, but you’re full of questions, aren’t you?”

“I’m very interested in things,” Deepa informed her. “Can you explain the rules, so I’ll know who’s winning?”

“We’re in the first round. Three total, three minutes each. No hitting below the belt, or above the neck. If a fighter goes down and can’t regain her feet in ten seconds,

that's a knockout. She loses.”

“What if no one gets knocked out? How can you tell who’s the better fighter?”

Kells nodded to Lisa, the young referee. “Her call. She's keeping track of how many hits get landed, who keeps the better form, who gets through it without any fouls.”

“That sounds fairly subjective,” Deepa noted.

“A bit. But usually, there’s a clear winner. You place bets?”

“No, but if I did, my money would be on Roz.”

Kells snorted, re-folding her arms and returning her attention to the ring. “That’s a safe bet, yeah.”

The fight was brutal only in that Deepa had never seen a boxing match before. Though she couldn't have been paid to step into that ring, there was no denying the fierce pleasure the two boxers exuded at the controlled violence.

The crowd’s enthusiasm was infectious, and Deepa soon found herself leaning in, one fist pumping the air and shouts escaping her lips whenever Roz landed a particularly good hit. The rules were simple, even with her lack of understanding of the sport’s history, and she judged the referee was fair enough.

The whistle blew at the end of the first round and the boxers separated to opposite corners, throwing themselves onto their waiting stools to be doused with water.

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“One-minute break,” Aaliyah told her, “and then they’re back at it for two more rounds.”

“It looks exhausting,” Deepa said.

“Yeah, but imagine the adrenaline rush.”

“I’d rather get my adrenaline with less blood and sweat involved, thank you.”

“I’m with you,” Jasmine murmured, but neither she nor Deepa took their eyes from the ring.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEREIN THE VICTOR WINS A KISS

The second round went faster than the first, as if both fighters had got a feel for their opponent’s style. They were both bolder in their attacks and quicker to block, and the result felt like watching a brutal and fast-paced dance. They both landed such good hits, Deepa couldn’t tell who was winning. All she knew was that Roz looked powerful and in control, even when taking a punch, and watching her made Deepa feel a certain kind of way. By the time the second round was called, Deepa was sweating, her heart beating hard as if she’d been the one in the ring.

“I don’t know that I could watch this on a regular basis,” she admitted.

“Is it getting you all hot and bothered?” Aaliyah teased, then paused, rounding on

Deepa with one accusatory finger poking her in the chest. “It is, isn’t it! My god, who would have guessed. Miss pillow princess over here with half the men in London tied around her finger, getting hot for a white butch in boxing gloves.”

“You’ll have to hope she has a more delicate touch in the bedroom,” said Jasmine.

Resolutely refusing to blush, Deepa said, “I think you’re both getting ahead of yourselves by a few steps.”

“Oh, are we?” Aaliyah demanded. “Because right now, you look ready to give her a lot more than a kiss if she wins.”

That might be true. And Deepa did desperately want Roz to win. As they entered the third round, there seemed to be little question of it. The other fighter was slowing down, having overexerted herself earlier, but Roz was steady as a rock. She didn’t waste time or energy showing off or making fancy moves. Patient as an ox, she waited until her opponent tired, leaving her a split-second opening, and then she struck. Two minutes in, she got the other woman with a series of three perfect hits: the first to her shoulder, knocking her back, the next to her abdomen, doubling her over, before finally socking her firmly in the chest. The woman dropped to her knees, and the entire crowd held their breath, Deepa included, waiting to see whether she would struggle to her feet to finish out the last sixty seconds.

She only got one foot under her before her body made it clear that while the spirit might be willing, the flesh was done for the day. Keeling onto her side with a groan, she admitted defeat before Lisa could count her out. The whistle split the air and the crowd burst into applause as Roz bent over to tap her on the shoulder with her giant gloves. Rolling onto her back, feet planted against the mat, the defeated fighter raised her arms so Roz could hook their gloves together and pull her up.

“Good fight,” Roz said with a broad smile, one arm around the other woman's

shoulders in camaraderie.

Clearly exhausted but in good spirits, her opponent grinned back and knocked Roz's elbow until, laughing, Roz raised both gloves in the air and accepted her victory. Deepa whooped along with everyone else, her voice so loud she barely recognised herself.

When Roz stepped out of the ring, breathless and glowing with sweat, her grin was wide and proud. Deepa caught her as soon as she pulled off her gloves, taking her by both wrists and leaning in to press a kiss, lingering this time, against her sweaty cheek. Roz froze under the touch, still as a mountain, only returning to life when Deepa pulled back with a smile. Roz's eyes flashed to hers, searching, and Deepa slid her hands down Roz's wrists to squeeze her fingers once before letting go.

"As promised," Deepa said, fighting to keep her tone light and reasonable instead of sounding like she wanted to jump Roz on the spot. "You won the fight and got your kiss."

"You're a woman of your word."

Kells came around offering bottled water, which Roz immediately claimed. Tipping her head back, Roz opened her mouth and let the water stream in, and Deepa could do nothing but stare. When she'd drunk her fill, Roz poured the rest of the water over her head, letting it splash down her chest and shoulders before shaking her hair like a dog and setting the empty bottle aside. Deepa was sufficiently distracted by the sight of Roz's soaked top that the spray caught her, droplets freckling her face, as much sweat as water, and she flinched back, laughing.

Roz laughed louder as she set off for the rooftop door and the stairs down to the bar.

"So?" she called over her shoulder, in a clear invitation for Deepa to join her. "What

did you think?”

“I still don’t know anything about boxing, but you seemed very good.”

Roz held the door for her, gesturing her down ahead. At the back of the bar, the staff lavatory had been converted to a makeshift changing room, where the other fighter was already present with her entourage. She and Roz greeted each other like long-lost friends, bumping fists as if they’d parted a lifetime ago instead of two minutes.

“More or less violent than you expected?” Roz asked, turning away from her friends to glance at Deepa before scrubbing a towel over her soaked hair.

“About what I thought it would be,” Deepa said. “Though I thought you might get a black eye or a bloody nose out of it.”

“Not supposed to hit the face if you can help it.”

Sitting on one of the two chairs, Roz picked out the laces of her boots before pulling them off and setting them aside. Her feet had nice arches, Deepa observed, like she could have been a dancer if she’d chosen a different path. When Roz next stood up, Deepa belatedly realised that she meant to remove her shirt. Her opponent had already stripped down to toplessness without Deepa noticing, preoccupied as she was.

“Should I go?” Deepa asked, directing her gaze to the ceiling. It was water-stained and ugly, grey with coffee-coloured rings of yellow-brown.

“Don’t worry about it, love.”

Facing the wall, Roz peeled off her top like self-consciousness was a foreign concept. Since Roz was clearly unbothered, Deepa gave herself permission to look. And, once she did, she didn’t want to look at anything else.

Roz was beautiful the way beasts of burden were beautiful and cows were holy. Deepa, who had always appreciated trim-waisted elegance in her men, found her mouth gone dry and her pulse fluttering like a hummingbird when faced with such obvious strength in a woman. Roz could lift her one-handed and carry her on her shoulder. Her muscles rippled against her back, not cut for vain display, but with a healthy layer of body fat on top to pad them.

It was fashionable for women to be slim and flat like boys. Deepa herself had such a build, though she was taller than most women. Despite her androgyny, Roz couldn’t be further from that ideal. She wasn’t curvy like a Botticelli painting, but thick and sturdy as a bull, built to carry weight and take a hit like it was nothing.

As she pulled on a tight, elasticised bandeau designed to flatten the little chest she had, the muscles in her shoulders bunched and Deepa wanted to know what it felt like to be lifted by her, carried, held. She wanted to press her palms against Roz’s back and feel the animal heat of her, her heartbeat through her ribs, the strength of her core.

She’d never wanted to do such things with any of her men. She had never wanted, full stop.

Roz shrugged into a loose-fitting button-up as she turned, and broke into a wide smile when she caught Deepa openly staring. As the other women filed out of the room, Deepa took half a second to decide whether to play innocent before dismissing the notion. Wanting Roz was the first honest reaction she'd had to another person in a long time; she wasn't going to deny herself that.

“Like what you see?” Roz asked, pulling on her suit jacket as she closed the space between them. She was in a pearl grey top and dark slacks in a flattering shade of aubergine, though she would likely call it purple. Stopping a respectable few feet away, she put her hands in her pockets, but that was still close enough to send Deepa's heart flipping in anticipation.

“Do you win all your fights?” Deepa asked.

“Most of them. I'm glad I won that one, anyway. I would've hated losing in front of you.”

“Me, specifically?”

“There's always more on the line when I'm fighting for a beautiful girl. Can't compare to the regular crowd of punters.”

Deepa had been complimented on her looks a million times before. It didn't normally affect her.

“Can I take you to dinner?” Roz asked.

“Now?” It was closing in on nine p.m.

“I don't want to wait another week before seeing you again.”

Doing some quick math, Deepa said, “I need to be home by eleven.”

“Before your carriage turns into a pumpkin? Alright. Not a real dinner, then. How about just a quick bite?”

Deepa extended one hand in invitation. She didn’t have to wait long before Roz took hold. “Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“Depends what you like,” Roz said easily. “I figure you’d want something classier than pub food, yeah?”

“You choose. You must be starving after your fight.”

Roz seemed to take that as a challenge, though Deepa hadn’t necessarily intended it as one. “I know a good pub just a few blocks from here. You mind the walk?”

“Not at all. Let me just tell my friends not to wait for me.”

“Roz!”

Still holding her hand, Deepa could feel Roz tense at the call. Turning, she found a man leaning through the doorway to wave Roz down without actually setting foot inside the changing room. He looked out of place among so many women: stubbled and balding, with a once-strong body that had since gone paunchy.

“Excuse me a second,” Roz said to Deepa in an undertone. “That’s my manager wanting a word about the fight, I reckon.” Slipping away, she made her way to the door, shoulders squared and arms crossed as she blocked the man from coming any further. Deepa only caught a few words — congratulations on the win, scheduling further training — before they broke apart again, the man disappearing into the bar, and Roz making her way back to Deepa’s side, looking rather more stone-faced than

anyone should after such a solid victory.

“Trouble?” Deepa asked, blatantly fishing for context.

Roz just shook her head, recapturing Deepa’s hand to tuck it in the crook of her elbow. “Nothing important.”

“Your manager’s not important?”

Roz’s mouth twisted, a wry little hook to one side. “Not really. Come on, let’s get out of here before the night’s gone.” Walking Deepa from the changing room, they exited the bar without acknowledging Roz’s manager, who was on his elbows over the bar top to talk to the establishment’s owner.

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“You don’t need to meet him,” Roz said, steering her away. Deepa glanced back over her shoulder at the man, trying to get a read on him. Thus far, Roz hadn’t struck her as rude, so this deliberate exclusion must mean something.

“I don’t much like him,” Roz explained in response to Deepa’s quizzical expression. “I’m told I should be grateful that anyone wants to manage my fights at all, but between you and me, he’s a bit of a wanker.”

“Ah, I know the type. There’s no shortage, is there?”

“Unfortunately,” Roz agreed, lightening her tone as they exited the bar. “But let’s not waste time on that. If I’m to get you home by eleven, we’d best be moving.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A DINNER DATE AND A GOODNIGHT KISS

Aaliyah and Jasmine were waiting for Deepa on the dusk-lit street outside the bar, and she excused herself from Roz’s side to talk to them in private.

“I’m very attracted to her,” Deepa confided in them.

“Yes!” Aaliyah crowed. “The feeling is obviously mutual.”

“You don’t look happy about it,” Jasmine observed.

“I’m not. All I do is use people. How am I supposed to negotiate genuine attraction?”

“You use men,” Aaliyah said. “You don’t use us, do you? Because we’re friends. So, just make sure you’ve got her sorted in the right category before you go any further.”

“It’s that easy, is it?”

“Why shouldn’t it be? Anyway, even if you tried to use her the way you use all your useless suitors, what would you get out of it? She can’t afford to keep you in your current lifestyle.”

“Unless that’s what you’re really worried about,” Jasmine said. “Going out with a mechanic who won’t be able to buy you all the things a gentleman could.”

That might be a concern further down the line, if things with Roz got any further at all.

“My men at the club will keep leaving me gifts whether I go out with her or not. I just...” Deepa toyed with her bracelets, rotating them around her wrist as she debated just how much of herself she wanted to reveal. “I’ve never really wanted to be with anyone before,” she finally admitted.

“Haven’t you ever gone out with a man just for fun?” Aaliyah asked. “A good time with no ulterior motives?”

“Not really,” Deepa replied, faintly baffled by the concept.

“Well, start tonight. Go have fun.”

“And don’t stay out late,” Jasmine added.

Roz took her to a cosy little pub the likes of which Deepa had never patronised. In fact, she’d never been to a pub before at all.

They settled into a booth at the back, a pint of beer and a basket of fish and chips for Roz and a glass of crisp white wine with a plate of chips and salad for Deepa. The food was better than Deepa had expected for such a place, but she couldn't give it the attention it deserved. She was too distracted by the shape of Roz's hand around her fork, fingers strong and blunt but with such a light touch, and the way her throat moved when she swallowed, and how their feet touched under the table, which was small enough that, with a little effort, they could have bumped knees.

"Do you do this often?" Deepa asked, sipping her wine as she watched Roz cut another bite of fish. The wine was tart and fruity, perfect for a summer evening.

"What? Boxing, or taking girls out after?"

"Both. Either."

"When I can." Roz shrugged. "Both cases, it's the quality of the thing I like. I'd rather go out with one girl a month and make it a night to remember than go out with three different girls every week but not get anything special out of it. Same with fighting. I love a good match, but I won't go brawling in a pub or something." She offered Deepa a smile. "I guess you're new to both."

"Going out with women? Yes, this is very new. Going out in general? There, I have some practice," Deepa said wryly.

"How's this compare so far?" Roz asked, setting her fork down to fix Deepa with a playfully curious gaze, her grey eyes dark blue in the dim lighting.

Deepa wasn't ready to wear her heart on her sleeve so soon and admit that she found Roz's company more flattering and more scintillating than any of the dates she'd gone on with her men. "It's too soon to say, don't you think?" she teased. "A kiss on the cheek and a nice meal..."

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“Oh, I’ve got to work harder? I see how it is. Well, I can do that.”

“Are you a very competitive person?”

“Yeah, I am,” Roz replied, easy and upfront. “Especially when it comes to outperforming men.”

“I don’t think that’s much of a challenge. Not the ones I’ve been going out with, anyway.”

“Let’s talk about literally anything else,” Roz suggested, and Deepa laughed and skilfully turned the conversation away from her past adventures.

“Can I walk you home?” Roz asked, after they’d cleared their plates and she had discreetly paid the bill without letting Deepa see. Deepa was very good at letting her dates pay while she pretended not to notice. “Do you live far from here?”

“Do you know The Songbird Club?”

Roz shook her head. “I’m not down in proper London much.”

“It’s about a half-hour walk from here. And I would very much like for you to walk me home.”

Outside, the air was cool, and the breeze was enough to raise a chill on Deepa’s arms.

“You good to walk a half-hour in your heels?”

“Would you carry me, if my feet started to hurt?”

“Yes,” Roz said immediately, no hesitation. “On my shoulders or on my back or in my arms, however you like, as far as you need.”

“I’m taller than you,” Deepa pointed out. “Can you even lift me?”

With a grin that said she knew exactly what Deepa was doing, Roz took the bait, getting one arm around Deepa’s back and the other under her knees to sweep her off her feet into a bridal carry. It didn’t take her an ounce of effort.

With a flounce of tulle and a breathless giggle, Deepa wrapped her arms around Roz’s shoulders, their faces an inch apart. “A regular knight in shining armour,” she murmured through her smile.

“I try to be.”

It would only take the smallest movement from either one of them to close the distance between their lips, and for a second, Deepa thought Roz was going to do it. But then Roz shifted her grip and gallantly set Deepa back on the ground, one hand at her elbow and the other in the small of her back. As soon as Deepa had her feet under her, Roz took her place at her side, offering her an arm as she slung her other hand in her pocket. Twitching her skirts back into order and tucking her hand in the crook of Roz’s elbow, Deepa set forth at a leisurely stroll, biting back the impulse to ask Roz to pick her up again.

“Good night for a walk,” Roz observed. “Shame you can’t see the stars in the city. Not that Manchester’s much better. You grow up here?”

“My mother and I came from Gujarat, in western India. You can see the stars there every night, no matter where you are.”

“You miss it?”

“Sometimes. Not all of it. I've made opportunities for myself in London I never could have found back home. But I do miss the stars. And the trees, and the fruit, and the smell of it all. I'm not sure I'd trade what I have here to go back, though. Certainly not yet.”

“Good.”

Deepa made an inquiring sound.

“Means I get to keep your company a bit longer,” Roz explained.

It was such a simple thing, but it made Deepa hum her approval and lean into Roz's side, letting the other woman take her weight for a moment. Roz held her like she'd been waiting for the opportunity, dropping her arm around Deepa's waist, her touch firm but respectful, and her body solid and unyielding.

Generally speaking, what Deepa wanted from her admirers was to be placed on a pedestal, adored, but unloving in return. She wanted to flirt, and tease, and attract all the attention in any given room, but she never, ever wanted to reciprocate. Matters of the heart were anathema to her, and she was fine with that.

Roz, though, made her feel like a schoolgirl with her first crush. Deepa hadn't felt like that since her first time going out with a man, when she'd still been vulnerable to flattery. If she ever felt that way about any of her current men, it could prove disastrous. She could hardly toy with as many men as she did, coaxing them to spoil her and fund her plans for a more comfortable life if she had tender feelings for any of them.

Roz, on the other hand, didn't have the money to spoil her, pub food notwithstanding,

nor the social standing to introduce her to London's elite. Deepa could safely allow herself this one little crush, even if it didn't go anywhere. It might not be love, but it was something.

Though, if it were to go somewhere, that could be nice. Inexperienced as she was with women, Deepa knew her wayaround sex, and every instinct told her that a tumble in bed with someone like Roz could be fun. Her instincts had never suggested any such thing before.

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When they reached The Songbird, Deepa hesitated. Without meaning it to sound as suggestive as it did, she asked, “Would you like to come up and see my place?”

Roz raised her brows. “It’s nearly eleven. Don’t you need to disappear in a puff of glitter?”

“Just a quick tour,” Deepa clarified. “My flatmate should be home; you can meet her, if you like...?”

“Alright, yeah. I’d like that.”

Pushing open The Songbird’s doors, Deepa led Roz by the hand through the club, briefly stopping by the dressing room. It was her habit to check there before the end of each night, and she was rewarded with a velvet case and a note addressed to her. The case held a thick gold bangle inlaid with glass rather than real diamonds, but it was pretty enough to have some aesthetic value, if not monetary. Snapping the case shut, she tucked it under her arm as she reclaimed Roz's hand to continue on.

“The punters leave you offerings?” Roz asked curiously.

“When I’m lucky.”

“You get lucky a lot?”

“It's my job to make my own luck,” Deepa said with a smile.

Guiding Roz around the bar, she took her up the stairs leading to the flat on the next

floor. It was a far cry from the luxury of which Deepa dreamed, no more than two small bedrooms, a kitchen, and the lavatory, but rent was cheap as long as she worked at the club downstairs, and it let her save up for greater, more important things down the line. Cherie, curled on the loveseat in the kitchen, looked up at the pair's entrance.

"Alright, love," Cherie greeted her. "You've brought a friend around?"

"Cher, this is Roz. Roz, my friend and one of the dancers downstairs, Cherie. I'm giving her a house tour."

"Oh, right. That won't take a minute." Cherie returned to her earlier work, which was painting her toenails with a glossy, dark red varnish she'd borrowed from Deepa.

"I don't normally bring anyone up here," Deepa admitted. "It's a bit underwhelming."

"But it's yours," Roz pointed out. "Good to have a place to call your own."

"True enough. It's just not all I want for myself." Projecting confidence, Deepa tried not to cringe at the shabby state of the place.

"What happened here?" Roz nodded to the kitchen wall where a conspicuous chunk had been caved in through the drywall.

"That looks like the work of a fist or two. By all accounts, the previous lodger was an angry drunk. Or, at least a very clumsy one."

"And here?" Roz asked, gesturing to the bottom of Cherie's bedroom door, where claw marks gouged the frame and the floor around it.

"He was drunk, and he had a cat?" Deepa offered, her voice lilting uncertainly at the

end.

“A tiger?” Roz asked dubiously.

“Several cats.”

“I can fix all this up for you,” Roz offered, a faint furrow between her brows.
“Wouldn't take long at all, these kinds of jobs.”

“No, no.” Deepa dismissed the offer with a wave. “Don't go to the trouble. It's not as if I own the place.”

“No, but you've still got to live in it. Might as well make it nice, unless you're planning on moving out anytime soon.”

“Eventually, but not immediately, no.”

“Then let me fix it. Next time I'm down here, I'll bring some things from the garage and get the wall patched, at least. And I'll be a bloody sight faster at it than your landlord or any repairman he might call.”

“Alright,” Deepa allowed, heat creeping invisibly over her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“Don't mention it.”

“The window latch in her bedroom is broken, too,” Cherie chimed in. “It opens fine, but we can't lock it at night.”

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Roz's frown solidified. "That's no good. Have you got a tool kit? I can fix that right now."

"No tools," Deepa said, caught between apology and embarrassment.

"Right, no worries. Any business owner worth their salt will have something. Wait here, I'll be back in a mo."

And then she stomped off, her boots loud on the stairs. Deepa stared after her, tongue-tied as she tried to untangle the knot of feelings in her chest. They were more complicated than anything she could put a name to, leaving her off-balance.

She required true love's kiss to break her curse, but she wasn't sure she'd recognise love if it danced up to her holding a sign and wearing a feather boa. The curse was an insult. It rankled her. She wanted to break it by any other means just so she wouldn't have to admit that she didn't know the first thing about love.

At the same time, she wanted to break it properly to spite Phillip, who was so convinced she couldn't.

Deepa had never backed down from a challenge before. All she had to do was fall in love with Roz. It couldn't be that difficult; people claimed to fall in and out of love all the time. Her heart and mind just needed a little extra convincing, that was all. As for Roz falling for her in return: Deepa had few concerns on that front. She had it on good authority that there was nothing easier than falling in love with her.

And then, once the curse was broken, the matter of love could fall into irrelevance

once more. There needn't be any long-term consequences from the affair, and she could return to her pattern of tempting men and collecting proposals before the summer was out. She would have her life back, and Roz...

Roz would be fine, Deepa decided. Whether they proved a short-lived summer fling or continued seeing each other after the curse was resolved hardly mattered, as far as Deepa was concerned. She had no intention of hurting Roz either way. It would be a mutually beneficial scenario: Deepa would get her curse broken, and Roz would get Deepa, and everyone would be perfectly satisfied with the entire experience.

"Say, she's an awful lot more useful than any of the loverboys you've had around before," Cherie commented.

"Better than any of yours, too." Belatedly, Deepa set her newest acquisition down in her bedroom, the velvet case resting on the nightstand.

Cherie shrugged in acquiescence. "Shame she's got no money to speak of. Still, I suppose if she's that good with her hands, she might make up for it."

Roz returned in short order, bearing a toolkit she had apparently borrowed from The Songbird. Deepa had never given the first thought as to whether there was a toolkit in proximity, and, looking at it, she realised she had no idea where to start even if she had access to one. She had thought herself nominally self-sufficient, earning her own money as she did, but, standing opposite a woman as physically competent as Roz, she rather thought she might like to be taken care of.

It wasn't a terrible feeling when it was another woman inspiring it.

Roz headed for the bedroom, not waiting for an invitation now that she'd been assigned a task. Propping open the toolkit on the chair in the corner, she got straight to business, frowningthunderously as she slid the window up and down before

identifying the problem. A mere five minutes later, the lock was fixed, and she was returning the toolkit to order.

“Ideally, you want that whole window replaced,” she explained. “Good luck talking the landlord into that, I guess. This’ll hold for now, so long as you’re gentle with it. No slamming the thing open or closed. Alright?”

Deepa nodded, edging her way around the bed to join Roz by the window, gently blocking her path when she made to pack up and leave. Roz stilled, holding the kit by the handle at her side.

“If you don’t mind me coming back, I can patch those holes in the walls another day,” she said, watching Deepa intently.

“I feel I should be paying you for your work.”

“Don’t. It’s a favour.”

“In that case...”

Deepa took a soft step forward, closing the distance between them, to land both hands high on Roz’s chest. Tipping forward on one foot, she moved in slow motion to press the gentlest, most tentative kiss to Roz’s lips. For a second, there they stayed, mouth to mouth, Roz’s heartbeat thundering under her hands, before Deepa drew back just enough to look her in the eye.

“Thank you,” Deepa murmured, her breath soft against Roz’s just-open mouth.

Roz hadn’t breathed since Deepa first touched her. When she finally inhaled, she looked like she was waking from a dream.

“Guess it did end up being a date after all,” Roz managed.

Smoothing her hands over the front of Roz’s shirt, Deepa reluctantly backed up a step to allow for freedom of movement. Roz made as if to follow her, not wanting the space Deepa offered.

“Come to the club for my next performance,” Deepa said, searching Roz’s eyes. “I have a set tomorrow evening. Can you make it?”

“What sort of performance?” Roz asked in a rumble, dropping her free hand to Deepa’s waist. “Because I caught a look at those dancers on our way in...”

“Nothing salacious. Not on stage, anyway. And, to be clear, it is a date.”

“Good. I want that.” Roz stepped like she might inch past Deepa to exit the room, but instead, leaned close, eyes trained on Deepa’s lips like she wanted to kiss her again. Her hand was hot on Deepa’s waist, broad and steady.

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“I really did only mean to show you around,” Deepa said quietly. “Not put you to work. Not...anything else, either.”

Roz straightened. “Course, love. Not on the first date, yeah? And it’s after eleven, and all.”

Deepa had done a great deal more than closed-mouth kiss on the first date when the circumstances were right, and she wasn't ashamed of that, but she'd never been trying to court true love in those cases. Love felt like something she needed to woo, inviting it into her life one step at a time. She didn't dare say such things aloud. If her friends learned she was trying to run a con on love itself—

But she really didn't know how else to go about it.

In any case, it was getting late. The temptation to keep Roz around was strong, but she couldn't risk losing track of time.

“Good night, Roz. And thank you for such an illuminating evening.”

“Illuminating?”

“I'm learning a great deal of new things. Boxing, for instance.”

“Just boxing?”

“No,” Deepa admitted with a smile, playing with the lapel of Roz's suit jacket.

“Boxing's the least of it.”

Roz looked incredibly proud of herself, like she'd single-handedly dismantled Deepa's life in the best way possible. Deepa wasn't sure that introducing someone to the wonders of sapphism was all that impressive — girls must get curious about such things all the time — but she couldn't exactly deny Roz's victory, either.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEREIN A DEAL IS MADE AT EDEN

Complacency was the enemy of success. Deepa might be aiming for true love, but love wouldn't pay the bills. For all that she wished she could let Roz drive her to distraction, Deepa had men to seduce, money to earn, and parties to attend. All of which was made more difficult by losing the better part of her nights. Though the curse was slowing her down, she wasn't about to let it stop her.

The first party on her post-curse roster was a lively thing at a place called Eden, which she knew well. Eden was a playground for all the richest, most careless socialites of London, stylish in its gold and ivory, with ivy vines, pothos, and philodendrons trailing from the upper storey's balconies, glittering chandeliers hanging from the ceilings, quick-fingered jazz musicians on the bandstand, mixed drinks of every combination at the bar, and drugs in neat little lines of powder on the counters in the toilets.

At Eden, Deepa had met many a man who was easy with his wallet, and made many lucrative deals of all sorts. Eden had never let her down before, and she hoped that it wasn't about to start. Wearing a dark gold dress in the hottest flapper fashion, whose enchantments were as heavy as the fabric was flimsy, she thought her chances of success were acceptably strong.

“Miss Deepa Patel?”

It was Friday evening, too early to be at all fashionable, and hardly half an hour past her arrival. Deepa turned to find a dark-haired, pale-faced Englishman only a few years older than herself, dressed in a fine black suit and carrying himself with a haughty, aristocratic bearing.

“I’ve heard rumours that the most beautiful woman in London is the daughter of an Indian maharajah,” said the gentleman, assessing her with cool grey-green eyes. “I can only assume they must be talking about you.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” she returned, offering him her hand.

She kept her greeting fairly neutral, not knowing anything about the man, but even her most neutral was still obviously flirtatious. Taking her hand, he didn't try to kiss it as so many overly amorous gentlemen did, but merely gave her a polite shake, which piqued her curiosity more than any dramatic declaration of instantaneous love.

“Lyndon Appleton.” From his clothes, his bearing, and his posh accent, she was certain he must hold some title, but he didn't offer it. “Apart from your beauty,” he continued, “I’ve also heard you are a sound businesswoman.”

Deepa arched one black brow. The only people who knew of her business dealings tended to occupy the shadier side of the law. There was no telling what an aristocratic young man of means might get up to, but at a glance, Lyndon Appleton didn't strike her as the sort to rub shoulders with thieves and con artists.

“Well,” she said, “the gossip might be right. That depends on what manner of business you've heard I dabble in.”

With a gesture, he invited her to join him. “Might we speak privately? If you're all that I've heard, I may have a proposition for you.”

Tucked away in a little alcove that was shielded from the rest of the party by a black velvet curtain, Deepa faced Appleton expectantly. He didn't have a predatory air about him, but he certainly had an understated flair for the dramatic, gliding the curtain shut so the heavy fabric would mute their conversation and keep their words secret from eager ears beyond.

“I find myself in need of a minor scandal,” he explained. “For some time now, rumours have milled in my wake about my continued bachelorhood. Lately, these rumours have developed a nastier edge. I would like to nip them in the bud before they take on a life of their own.”

“You need to be seen out and about with a woman,” Deepa translated. It was a decent prospect. She suspected she knew the contents of those rumours swirling after him if he needed a woman of her calibre to offset them, but such rumours were irrelevant to her. Appleton had good looks and good manners; all that remained was whether he had good money to match.

“Do I understand correctly that you're open to this sort of arrangement?” he asked carefully.

“You need arm candy. Someone pretty and charming to go out with you and turn this gossip in a more flattering direction. That is a particular talent of mine,” she assured him with a playful smile. “Exactly how much company are you looking for?”

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“I have a number of high-profile events and parties to attend in the coming weeks.” He didn’t sound overly pleased by the prospect. “I don’t particularly enjoy social outings. They bore me, and I’m aware I don’t make pleasant or interesting company. Join me at enough of them to convince people we’re involved.”

“Romantically, or sexually?”

“Both,” he replied, with neither shame nor hesitation. “Though I have no interest in pursuing either option with you in actuality.” His gaze remained as cool and dispassionate as it had been from the start, and her suspicion of the situation solidified into confidence.

“I think we understand each other,” she said with a smile. “Men have propositioned me for such things before, of course. I can be as convincing as I am discreet.”

He dipped his head in a short nod, stone-faced. “Naturally, your time will be well compensated.”

“Make me an offer,” she said, camouflaging her challenge as a suggestion.

He studied her for a moment. “Ten pounds for every appearance we make together.”

He did have good money, then.

“I accept, on one condition. These outings must be during daylight hours only. Once night falls, I have other commitments that I cannot neglect for any amount of money.”

“I have little appetite for such nightlife anyway.”

Holding out his hand, he clasped hers in a firmly polite, no-nonsense shake to seal their agreement. It was a refreshing difference from the way in which her endless suitors touched her, always fawning or grasping, neither of which endeared them to her. She appreciated a business partner, and, at a first impression, Appleton seemed a decent investment of her time.

“When is the first of these outings, then?” she asked, as he moved to the curtain, sweeping it open to let her out.

“A few days’ time. How shall I get in touch with you? I’ll need an address to pick you up.”

“Find me at The Songbird. You know the club?”

His expression informed her that he certainly did not. No matter.

Drawing her notebook and a pen from her purse, she scribbled down The Songbird’s address and telephone number, tearing the page and folding it neatly for him. “Give me a call when it’s time, and I’ll be at your disposal. Of course, if our first outing proves unsatisfactory for either of us, I trust it will be a simple thing for me to bow out of any future events?”

“Of course. It’s not as if our conversation this evening is contractually binding. If you find the arrangement unappealing, or if your company doesn’t yield the results I require, we shall go our separate ways without argument.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Although I assure you, I will get you those results.”

Rejoining the party, she led him to the bar, swimming between throngs of revellers,

drunk and dancing despite the early hour.

“I have some time left of my evening,” she told him, leaning one elbow against the bar and angling the rest of her body towards him in a way that indicated to every onlooker that her attention was on him and him alone. “Would you like to put my company to the test right now?”

Most men would jump at the chance to spend time with her, and Appleton certainly wasn't rude about it, but his attitude suggested that he regarded it as more duty than pleasure. Still, he joined her, ordering them each a drink.

“Tell me,” he said, “how many dresses do you own with enchantments like that? Don't worry,” he added when she blinked in surprise at being called out so directly. He took a sip of his drink when it was brought to him. “Glamours and illusions are rather my specialty. I doubt anyone else would pick up on them at all.”

“I have a number of outfits for special occasions,” Deepa said, smoothing one hand down her beaded front as she took up her glass with the other. “Would you like me to wear them when we go out?”

“They're designed to attract attention, yes? Then they should serve my purpose nicely.”

“The seamstress who does them for me, I can ask her to work her magic on something of yours as well, if you like. A necktie, or a pocket square?”

Appleton shook his head. “I'm doing this out of necessity,” he said dryly. “If I must go out and draw attention to myself, I would prefer if most of it were deflected onto you.”

“As you like,” she said lightly. “If glamours are your specialty, pulling attention is

mine. I shall make us the most talked-about couple in the city.”

“Forgive me for prying,” he began, though he didn't sound apologetic. “But should I expect any jealous partners to emerge from the shadows as a result of our little charade?”

“I'm neither married nor engaged. You might inspire jealousy, but I assure you, it will be quite groundless.”

“Groundless or not, I'd like to be prepared if you expect it to be an issue.”

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She thought of Phillip, who certainly fit the bill when it came to potential concerns. Then, inexplicably, she thought of Roz.

“I’ve had trouble with one or two men who thought they had some claim to me. But I can’t see them doing anything to you. At best, their jealousy will work in our favour, fanning the flames of our rumoured relationship. Jealous men tend to lash out at the woman, not the other man.”

As for Roz, Deepa hardly knew her. It must be a common thing for her to watch her dates go flitting about between different men. She might not enjoy the sight, but she must be accustomed to it, surely. When Deepa next saw her, she would explain the Appleton affair and ease Roz’s mind. It couldn’t be pleasant, watching the object of one’s affection throw herself into the arms of another, making a public spectacle of their new relationship. Deepa had never before bothered sparing anyone’s feelings when she moved on to greener pastures, but Roz deserved better. Especially if they were supposed to be falling in love.

“Are you open to meeting any of my friends during these events?”

Appleton eyed her with only a small amount of suspicion. “If they help improve my image, then yes, I suppose. Although I would prefer the truth of our arrangement to remain between the two of us.”

“There will be very few people in my inner circle who’ll believe that I’m looking to settle down with any man,” Deepa cautioned.

“I don’t care if people believe you’re using me for my money,” Appleton said flatly.

“I only need them to believe that you’re in my bed.” Abruptly, he looked away. He didn’t blush, but he had clearly reached the limit of his comfort zone.

“That won’t be a problem. I can guarantee that talk of your sexual prowess will reach the ears of the king himself.”

He glanced back at her, looking halfway amused and slightly annoyed. “I don’t believe the king has any idea I exist, never mind is concerning himself with rumours of my bachelorhood.”

“The Prime Minister, then,” Deepa said carelessly. “The point is, I can make things known to whomever you need, whether they’re politicians, socialites, or your own family. Getting people to talk about me is a gift.”

Nodding, he surveyed the bar to ensure that all the partygoers in the vicinity were otherwise occupied, before withdrawing his billfold and sliding a crisp fiver towards her. “For the guarantee of a future job well done.”

With a brilliantly sharp-toothed smile, she tucked it away in a secret pocket — another of Elizabeth’s additions to an already splendid dress — and settled in to enjoy her drink. Once again, Eden had proved exceptionally fruitful.

CHAPTER NINE

A DRESSING ROOM LIASON AND AN INVITATION UPSTAIRS

It came as no surprise when Phillip reappeared in London. Deepa had guessed he would resurface eventually, if not for his social ties to the city, then to check up on her and revel in his curse-making. Thus, she could hardly be shocked when he walked through The Songbird’s front doors that night, with his shoulders squared and his chin up, hands in his pockets as he swaggered across the floor to plant himself

directly in front of her stage. He wore the smuggest smile ever to besmirch a man's face, silently gloating as she finished her piece.

She had dealt with worse distractions, so she didn't miss a note, though an awful wave of rage built inside her like pressurised magma. As soon as the last lyric left her lips, the pressure burst with the force of a volcano. Dropping off the stage, she took two steps across the floor to meet him where he stood, pulled back her arm, and cracked him across the face with such force that it could be heard even over the lingering music from the band. His head snapped to the side under her hand, a shocked sound falling out of him. But as soon as he righted himself, straightening the lines of his jacket, his smile was back in place, and any satisfaction she got from the slap was immediately turned back into seething rage.

"I see you're taking things in stride," he said. "Though I'm surprised to see you still working. I wouldn't have thought you'd risk being out in public."

"I'm better suited for public life than you, whatever my form," she snapped. "How dare you."

"Tell me, what did it end up being?" He was too obviously enjoying himself, even with the bright red imprint of her hand on his cheek. "I didn't dictate that part of the curse, you know. One of those simpering monkeys always pestering people for treats? Some sort of silly exotic bird? A snake would be fitting. Or, even better: a cow."

"You didn't even know what your curse was going to do," she began, her anger building into something bright and incandescent.

"Excuse me," a young man interrupted nervously. Jonathan Bassenwood, a floppy-haired brunet and Deepa's most ardent admirer, stepped up from his table where he'd been watching her show. "Excuse me, sir, but you seem to be upsetting the lady."

“I should hope so,” Phillip retorted. “Stay out of it, chap.”

Jonathan glanced at Deepa, who, biting her tongue, shut her eyes and pulled in a deep breath, trying to regain control. Were she a leopard in that moment, she might have torn out Phillip’s throat. When she opened her eyes again, fixing him with a knife-like glare, that urge must have translated, because he finally took a step back.

“It’s alright, Jonathan,” she said evenly. “Mr. Etonborough was just about to leave the premises.”

“You don’t own the club,” he began with a sneer.

“You think I can’t get an unpleasant patron tossed to the curb like a common drunkard?”

As if on cue, The Songbird’s manager came bustling over with a frown on his face and Cherie, looking pleased and vindictive, nipping at his heels like an enthusiastic sheepdog, herding him towards the problem.

“Mr. Etonborough, I must ask you to step outside,” the manager said. “I can’t have you upsetting the talent.”

“I’m a long-term patron of this establishment,” Phillip snapped.

“Yes, and a valued one, but not the only one,” the manager blustered. “If you’re going to be harassing my girls—”

“Harassing!”

“He’s a terrible pest, Gary,” Deepa said, “and he doesn't tip nearly as well as you think.”

“I saw him picking a fight with Miss Patel,” Jonathan supplied, looking offended on her behalf. “Absolutely ungentlemanly behaviour, I tell you.”

With a gesture from the manager, Stu, the door security, loped over to escort Phillip away. The man went, puce-faced and sputtering indignantly with every step, but he didn’t actually try to fight the security detail. Deepa wished he would, because Stu was a very large, very muscular fellow with a face like a brick wall, and she rather wanted to see him pummel Phillip into the ground. Instead, she had to settle for watching him get frog-marched out of the vicinity.

“Are you alright, Miss Deepa?” Jonathan asked solicitously, crowding close, though not daring to lay a hand on her without express permission.

“I’m fine, Jonathan. You don’t need to worry about me. Mr. Etonborough is persistent, but ultimately useless, I think.”

“A terribly rude chap, isn't he? Is there anything I can do to turn your evening around? Can I get you a drink? Or take you out? I know a lovely spot that does a curry to die for, and I’d love your opinion on the cuisine—”

“You're so sweet,” she interrupted, “but I really must finish my set.”

“After that—”

“I’m afraid I have a prior appointment. But another time, yes, I’ll have to try this curry. It sounds delicious.”

“Another time,” he echoed hopefully.

Cherie followed Deepa back to the stage, casting glances at Jonathan as he reclaimed his table to watch the end of the show.

“You wouldn’t go for that?” she asked wistfully. “He’s seemed a sweetheart, the few times I’ve talked to him. And that face! I wouldn’t complain if he wanted to take me out.”

“You’re welcome to him,” Deepa told her, climbing the stairs to take her place behind the microphone once more.

“He’s only got eyes for you, and everyone knows it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t return the sentiment. Eventually he’ll catch on.”

“What a shame,” Cherie murmured. “He talks like he’d treat a girl right, you know?”

“I’ll make sure to get the two of you alone together sometime,” Deepa said fondly.

As the band started up again, Deepa sank into the music, crooning honey-voiced and sultry as she swayed like a snake-charmer, enticing every man to inch closer and open their wallets. The crowd was growing as the hour inched past nine, and it only took one enthusiastic admirer to make it worth her time.

Halfway through her song, Roz entered the club. Dressed in a soft charcoal suit and

carrying an armful of wildflowers, she looked more handsome than any man in attendance, and infinitely more charming. From the moment Deepa laid eyes on her, she couldn't look anywhere else. She couldn't even pull her gaze away long enough to play the crowd. A helpless smile unfurled across her lips, escaping around the song. Roz didn't take a table, but kept off to the side, standing unobtrusively in the shadows holding her flowers in the crook of one arm, her other hand in her pocket, the perfect picture of casual self-assuredness. Cherie, flitting through the crowd to deliver drinks and entertain the men, caught Deepa's eye just long enough to throw her an exaggerated wink.

It was exquisite torture, forcing herself to stay on stage and finish her set. As the evening crept on, each song was sexier than the last, teasing the men as more dancers joined Cherie on the floor. When Deepa was done, they would take her place on stage to put on a show, but until then, they twined around the tables, trailing teasing touches over the men's shoulders and knees, bare legs flashing out from under tiny, swishy dresses, their bodies hidden behind enormous feather fans to play at being coy. Roz seemed amused by their antics, but her attention never wavered from Deepa's place in front of the stage's merlot-red-draped backdrop.

As ten o' clock neared, Deepa's set wound down, and she stepped back from the mic after her final song with a smile as the crowd rocketed to their feet, whistling and applauding. If Roz weren't there, she would spend another hour mingling with the men, accepting gifts and tokens and maybe a little more, depending on her mood. She was paid to sing, but it was the off-stage entertainment that paid her bills. Her livelihood depended on her popularity, and taking another early night would win her no new admirers.

Well. She supposed one more couldn't hurt.

Descending from the stage, she parted the sea of waiting men, offering them the bare minimum to keep them hanging on as she made her way towards her date. Roz waited

patiently, her gaze flickering over the gifts being pressed into Deepa's hands as she navigated the compliments and propositions put to her. Finally, Cherie took pity on Deepa and lead her flock of dancers to intervene, skilfully distracting the men in a flurry of glittering sequins, lipstick, and feathers, allowing Deepa to slip away unnoticed.

"Hello again," she said, a little breathier than she meant to be. "You came."

"Course I did," Roz replied with a smile. "Seeing you on stage? I couldn't think about anything else all day."

"Did I live up to your expectations?"

"You outdid them," Roz promised, and stepped close enough to put one hand on Deepa's waist, leaning in to press a kiss to her cheek.

It was an ostensibly friendly kiss, but the hand on her waist lingered just long and low enough to suggest something more intimate.

"Are you wearing magic?" Roz murmured, her lips brushing Deepa's skin. "I can tell. Got a nose for it." Pulling back, she tapped the sniffer in question, and Deepa's heart thudded in panic for a second before Roz continued. "You wear that when you're performing, yeah? To lure in the men?"

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She'd only picked up on the dress's enchantments, like Appleton had done. Not the curse.

"Just enough to catch their attention."

"All's fair in love and war?"

"Something like that. And I wasn't wearing it at Club Artemis or at your fight," Deepa added, as if Roz wouldn't have been able to tell. "It's just a little glamour, and only when I'm working."

Roz raised her hands, the bouquet of flowers rustling in her arms. "I'm not judging you, love. Not like I didn't know what I was getting into. Watching the men buzz around you, knowing you've got to play them a certain way...that's just what girls have to put up with to get by, isn't it?"

Deepa's conversation with Appleton was still fresh in her mind. "So, you're not the jealous type?"

Roz sidled close once more. "I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't rather keep you all to myself."

"And what would you do if you had me?"

In the shadows, with the crowd's attention safely on the dancers, Roz toyed with the beads at the waist of Deepa's dress. "Why don't you take this little number off, and I'll show you?"

“Moving fast tonight, aren’t we?” Deepa asked, doing absolutely nothing to push her away.

“We can go as fast or slow as you want, sweetheart. But you’ve got more glammers sewn into this thing than I can count, and they’re making me feel love-drunk to look at you. Have done since I first laid eyes on you this evening. Now, I don’t mind sweet-talking you, but I’d rather do it when I feel like I’m in control of my own words.”

“Fair enough. Come to my dressing room?”

Deepa didn't have her own personal dressing room, but shared the space with all the other girls. At least for the moment, they were busy on the floor, so she shut the door behind Roz and hoped they could catch a few minutes of privacy before an inevitable interruption reared its head. She’d taken men back to the dressing room before, when she’d needed to give them a little extra sugar to smooth the way for further gifts.

Taking Roz back there felt significantly different. She felt giddy and fluttery and almost shy, the kind that lent itself to blushing and stolen glances, lingering touches that could be construed as friendly but felt inappropriate, with butterflies in her stomach and a hush to her voice like every word had to be kept just between the two of them. Like being a few drinks into a bottle of expensive wine, where everything was warm and tipsy. It felt intoxicating.

With the door shut, Deepa deposited her night’s spoils on the vanity before turning one shoulder towards Roz, sweeping her hair forward as she angled her body coquettishly. “Would you get the zip for me?”

Setting her flowers on the vanity overtop Deepa’s new baubles, Roz traced her way up the back of Deepa’s dress until she came to the zip resting between Deepa’s shoulder blades. Gently, she tugged it down to the small of her back, the dress falling

away from Deepa's upper body in a multitude of beads and charms. When neither of them stopped it, the fabric fell to the floor around her ankles in a shimmer of music, leaving Deepa in her shift and stockings.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Deepa asked, when Roz didn't make a move.

"Can I...?"

"Kiss me."

Deepa turned as Roz stepped forward, meeting in the middle. One hand went to Roz's shoulder, the other to the side of her face, guiding her straight to Deepa's lips. The spark was instant, and Deepa threw herself into it, tongue and hands exploratory and sweet. She felt more for Roz than she'd ever felt for anyone — more interest, more intrigue, more desire. That had to be worth something.

Is this love? she wondered, chasing Roz's taste.

As hopeful and fluttery as she felt, she didn't really believe it. Love was an impossibly strong word. Attraction, at least, she could believe. Infatuation, even. She'd seen enough evidence of both of those at work. Love, though, and for a woman she'd only met a week ago? Love didn't feel real.

But maybe whatever this was would be close enough to do the job. It wasn't as if Phillip was a master of his craft. Maybe any kiss would do.

By the time they broke off to breathe their own air again, Deepa didn't feel changed. Perhaps she wouldn't know whether the curse had broken until the stroke of midnight. She hadn't really felt it take effect until her first transformation, after all. Maybe it would leave as subtly as it had arrived.

“Were those glammers just on your dress?” Roz asked. They were still standing close enough to function as a single body, Roz’s face turned to the side of Deepa’s neck, nuzzling behind her ear, nose against her dangling earring. “I can still smell it on you...”

“Maybe that’s just my scent,” Deepa breathed.

Roz hummed, her arms looped low around Deepa’s waist, her hands flat in the small of her back. Their fronts were pressed together, ribs to ribs and breasts to breasts, warm and solid. It wasn’t nearly enough to satisfy.

“Would you like to come upstairs?” Deepa asked in a low voice.

Roz shifted to press her lips to the line of Deepa’s neck. “It’s only an hour till eleven.”

Deepa hesitated. Either that kiss had broken the curse or it hadn’t. If she was already home, she wouldn’t need more than a few minutes to prepare for the rest of her night either way.

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“Eleven-forty-five?” she offered, and Roz kissed her open-mouthed over her throat, making her shiver deliciously.

“Lead the way.”

CHAPTER TEN

ON BATH SOAPS AND BEDROOM INTIMACIES

“What do you want to do with the time we’ve got?” Roz asked, following her into the flat.

“I didn’t plan this far ahead,” Deepa admitted. “You should kiss me again while we think of something.”

Roz obliged as if there were nothing more in the world she’d rather do. “Let me run you a bath?” she murmured against Deepa’s lips.

Deepa hesitated a second before inclining her head and sweeping one arm towards the bath in invitation. Every instinct her mother had ingrained in her to play the hostess and dote on her guest crashed up against the fact that Roz wasn’t a tea-party guest but something more intimate, and if she wanted to spoil Deepa in her own home, then Deepa should allow it. Taking her by the hand, Roz tugged her into the bathroom like it was her place, not Deepa’s, and Deepa followed willingly.

Inside, Roz looked to her for permission before turning the water on, testing the heat, then stopping the drain and letting the claw-foot tub fill up. Along the rim by the wall,

a flock of jars and bottles lined up like an apothecarist's shop, each with its own colour, scent, and purpose.

“Not that one,” Deepa said, when Roz reached for a lavender bottle of liquid bath soap.

Roz paused with her fingers curled around the cap, a question in her eyes.

“It's too floral,” Deepa explained, wrinkling her nose in mild embarrassment. “It was a gift from Bassenwood, so I use it when I know I'll see him, but I don't care for it.”

“What scent do you like?”

“The one that looks like honey. It smells like vanilla and brown sugar.”

Roz lifted the bottle from its row of mates, twisting the cap off to give it a try before pouring it under the rushing faucet. Warm gold bubbles foamed up to crowd against the porcelain edges of the tub. Roz knelt there, one hand in the water to monitor the temperature, her back to the rest of the room. Deepa watched her for a moment, down on one knee, head bent, looking so serious, like there was nothing more important in the world than fixing the perfect bath for her girl.

Deepa felt like she was already submerged, so warm she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She finished undressing in silence, the rustle of fabric hidden under the sound of running water. With her slip in a silken pool around her feet and her hair free of its ties, she waited as Roz finally determined that the water had reached its perfect depth and temperature, and twisted the faucet off. She turned, about to speak, only to freeze, dumbstruck.

Deepa stood naked, brown-skinned and long-legged as a fawn, without a single charm or glamour to disguise her. Roz stared like she'd been graced with the

company of a living, breathing goddess, her lips parted and her eyes round and soft.

“Oh, fuck me,” she breathed, all reverence.

Slowly, Deepa removed her piercings and then the rings on her fingers. Roz held out both hands, palms cupped to receive them, standing up halfway and offering her elbow for Deepa to hold as she stepped into the bath. The bubbles crackled, caressing her skin, as she lowered herself into the water. The temperature was perfect, which came as no surprise, and she settled herself comfortably at the end, breathing deep the warm scent of sugar-sweet vanilla before meeting Roz's gaze.

“Are you just going to watch me soak?” she asked playfully.

“Sweetheart, I'd be happy watching you do anything.”

Though Deepa's shoulders, knees, and the tops of her breasts were above the water, the bubble bath cloaked her completely, covering every hint of skin up to her neck. Naked as she was, her attire had never been more modest.

“I don't know that I'm giving you much of a show.”

“If I wanted a performance, we could've stayed downstairs.” Setting Deepa's jewellery on the sink counter, Roz knelt again by the side of the tub, her elbows resting on its rim, hands folded respectfully. “God, you're gorgeous,” she murmured. “Why bother with all those spells and glamours when you look like this without them?”

“It's not out of vanity or self-deception. I can't afford to let men not pay attention to me.”

“You literally can't afford it.”

Deepa skimmed her hands over the water's surface underneath the bubbles. "I know I'm not exactly living in a fairytale castle," she said with a self-deprecating smile. "But I enjoy a certain lifestyle, and I'm planning for a very specific future. If I drop the glammers, I run the risk of men passing me by to spend their money on someone else." She shook her head, her hair trailing through the bubbles, getting heavier as the ends soaked through. "I can't have that."

"No, we can't have you working for a living," Roz said. Though she was smiling, her words didn't sound entirely like a joke.

"I am working for a living. Not with my hands, but it's work, all the same."

"I know. Didn't mean it like that."

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When Deepa lifted one hand from the bath, Roz caught it and pressed a kiss to her painted fingertips. “A girl like you deserves to have someone pay her way without expecting anything in return.”

“If only.”

Roz’s lips were warm against her fingers, and Deepa missed the touch as soon as it was gone.

“If the world were so simple, I could just magic myself up stacks of gold and diamonds, and not have to rely on anyone paying my way at all.”

“That’d take some doing. Do you do your own work on those dresses? The charms, and the like?”

“No, I’m a bit useless with magic, to be honest.” Deepa called up a little illumination spell, sending a few spheres of soft, yellow light to float up to the ceiling like a cluster of paper lanterns. “That’s about the extent of it,” she admitted. “If I could do anything more impressive, I’d be making use of it.”

“Seems you’re plenty talented in other areas. I’ve never had much of a knack for magic, either. Not in the traditional sense, at any rate.”

“In the untraditional sense?”

Roz smiled, dropping her gaze somewhere in the vicinity of the bathmat. “A bit of dreamwalking, I suppose you’d call it. Hasn’t got much use in the waking world, but

it's not nothing. It's peaceful, like. I could show you sometime, if you wanted."

Deepa hummed, soft and pleased at the offer, before slipping underwater. The bubbles felt like kisses against her cheeks as she submerged, wetting her hair to the roots before returning to the air. The bubbles came up with her like she'd been crowned in honeycombs. Reaching over, Roz scooped them off before running one hand down the smooth, slick fall of Deepa's hair. Using her forearm, Deepa lifted it away from the back of her neck. Her hair felt like an aquatic animal when it was wet, infinitely graceful in the water, and ungainly and difficult to manage out of it.

"Hand me the pink bottle?" she requested.

Roz plucked it from the row of bottles near the faucet, but didn't immediately hand it over. "Can I?" she asked, her thumb poised by the cap, waiting to flick it off.

When Deepa nodded her permission, Roz smiled to herself before squeezing a dollop of glittering pink liquid into her palm, eyeballing the quantity in comparison to the length and volume of Deepa's hair, and then adding a little extra. Deepa turned ninety degrees to sit with her back to Roz, her chin tipped up and her eyes closed. Cupping her hands over the crown of Deepa's head to shepherd the shampoo from one body to the next, Roz let it pour out before moving both hands down Deepa's hair.

"I'm told I'm good with my hands," Roz murmured, "but let me know if it's too rough."

Deepa had seen Roz throw a punch, had seen her elbow-deep in a toolkit for household maintenance, but she couldn't imagine her with a rough touch. Roz treated Deepa like she was something precious, made of rose petals or butterfly wings or gold filigree. The thought of her being too rough was laughable. Deepa felt worshipped, like she was something holy.

Roz gathered the swirls of Deepa's hair from the water before returning to her crown, where the shampoo was sinking through the heavy layers. At first, Roz worked from the heels of her hands to the fingertips, massaging the shampoo into a lather. It smelled of sweet strawberries, nectarines, and coconut, and Deepa didn't have to open her eyes to know it foamed into a perfectly soft, baby pink shot through with sparkles. Rather than try to pile Deepa's enormous length of hair atop her head to lather it manually, Roz let the shampoo run down and through it, setting her blunt nails to Deepa's scalp.

Deepa bit back a moan as Roz got started, her nails scratching lightly against Deepa's skin, sending little tingles over her skull and down her spine in shockwaves. It felt heavenly, in no small part because it was done with the sole purpose of bringing Deepa pleasure. Roz got nothing out of it, certainly, kneeling on the thin bathmat with her shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, bathwater and bubble bath dampening her front.

"Eyes shut," Roz said softly. "Duck down and rinse."

Deepa obeyed, returning to her original position to sink underwater for a second time. There, she held her breath as Roz reached into the bath to massage her scalp again, chasing away the lather. Deepa resurfaced before she ran out of air, coming up just enough to take another breath. She made a little island in the bath, the mountains of bubbles pushed to the edges, her hair streaming around her like an ink spill.

Glancing over, she caught Roz's eye and nearly lost her breath all over again. No one had ever looked at her like that before, simultaneously hungry and gentle. Roz's hair curled in the steam, escaping its careful style to tumble over her forehead and frame her eyes. The curls made her look ten years younger.

Carefully, without looking away, Deepa inched to the other end of the bath, her feet by the faucet, to lay back and soak her hair while leaving her face out. Roz rinsed her

hair like Deepa was one of her engines, intricate and expensive, affording care to the smallest of details.

Laying there, half floating, the water the same temperature as her body, Deepa could almost believe she was dreaming. But the butterflies in her stomach and her hummingbird heart were too aflutter to let her drowse off. Soothing as they were, every one of Roz's touches made Deepa's nerves sing.

One by one, the bubbles dissipated, revealing Deepa's body an inch at a time. She could have soaked there until the water cooled and she was naked under Roz's gaze, waiting to see what Roz would do then. But her fingers and toes were already wrinkling up like little prunes, and there was only so long she could comfortably lay in a bath before her neck started hurting from the angle. More importantly, she didn't want to waste the rest of her evening with Roz.

"Time?" she murmured.

"Ten to eleven."

As soon as she wrapped one hand over the edge of the tub, Roz sat back on her heels, reaching for her towel. When Deepa stood, tepid water sloshing around her calves, Roz immediately wrapped her in the fluffy cloth and helped her out. Despite Roz's actions, Deepa could tell that if she'd been content to stand there naked, Roz wouldn't have been shy about admiring her body.

The attention filled her with warmth, sparkling like a fresh bottle of champagne. Deepa was used to doling out her body in bite-sized pieces, either to string men along or reward them for their generosity. The men she baited were simple, in that respect, like dogs begging for a cut of steak. And she enjoyed their attention, but it was always a guarded enjoyment. The pressure to play the right part and look the right way to keep their interest was crushing. Any flaw on her part, any hint of

vulnerability, and they would abandon her to find juicier meat elsewhere.

She felt no such pressure with Roz. Maybe it was because Roz knew what it meant to navigate the world as a woman, even if they had chosen drastically different approaches. Maybe it was because Roz couldn't afford to buy her diamonds and pearls, so the only thing Deepa risked losing was her company.

Deepa had always valued riches over anyone's company. She preferred money to friendship, and diamonds to love. She'd thought herself ruthless and cold-hearted in that respect, and made her peace with it.

Roz made her feel...

Roz made her feel.

It could be love; she had no other context for the emotion. If that kiss in the dressing room had lifted her curse—

Standing on the bathmat, Deepa didn't bother drying off. Instead, she untied the towel from where Roz had tucked it high around her chest, letting it fall open teasingly before bending forward at the waist, her hair tumbling down in front of her face. Roz took a sharp breath in, as if about to speak, but couldn't find the words. Smiling behind the privacy of her hair, Deepa let Roz look, knowing she could only catch glimpses of Deepa's body from that angle. She wrapped the towel around her hair, gently twisting it atop her head before flicking it over her shoulder to hang down her back like a peacock's train. Only then was she properly naked and on display for Roz.

Her skin was already beginning to dry, but little rivulets of water ran down her body like streams of crystals. Droplets gathered in the dip between her collarbones before darting down between her breasts, over her naval to catch in her belly button, then meandering down her long legs to finally pool between her painted toes. Roz traced each path with her eyes.

"My hair takes a while to dry," Deepa informed her huskily. "We'll have to pass the time."

"I can think of a few things to do." Roz's voice came out in a dark rasp that sent shivers down Deepa's bare back.

They walked to the bedroom hand in hand, their steps light and careful like they were

afraid of disturbing the gossamer bubble of summer night around them. Roz held Deepa's hand at shoulder level, just her fingers, like Deepa was a fine lady in need of an escort, and for a second, Deepa pictured herself as a fairytale princess, with Roz her steadfast knight. She wore no crown but the towel wrapped around her hair, and no gown but the faint shimmer of bathwater still clinging to her skin.

In the bedroom, she took down the silk robe that hung overtop the flimsy privacy screen in the corner, slipping it over her arms and tying the sash loosely around her waist. It was red, printed with intricate gold peonies all over, and looked more luxurious than it really was. It was thinning at the elbows and around the middle where the sash rubbed it. Soon she would hand it over to her mother so it could be cut up and sewn into something new, but until then, she enjoyed wearing it around the flat when she wasn't dressed to the nines.

Sitting delicately on the edge of the bed, she reached for Roz, drawing the other woman to sit beside her.

"Tell me this idea of yours," Deepa said, "about what we should do."

Roz leaned in fractionally, the merest shift of weight, and Deepa turned to meet her. They both shut their eyes at the same time, fingers brushing on the bedspread, and the last thing Deepa saw was the strong angle of Roz's nose and the dark sweep of her lashes against her cheek, so close to Deepa's own. When their lips met, the kiss was as good as it had been downstairs, and maybe better. In the dressing room, there had been an instant in the beginning where they had both been shy and tentative. Now, knowing each other's taste, with nothing separating Deepa's body from Roz's touch but the thinnest layer of threadbare silk, there was a delicious hunger to the meeting of their mouths.

Roz slid off the edge of the mattress, her hands on Deepa's knees as she sank to the floor in front of her. As Roz slipped up her outer thighs, hands just under the hem of

her robe, Deepa's breath hitched.

"You want me to?"

Deepa's reply was in the spreading of her knees. Roz's grin was wide and wicked as she pushed Deepa's robe up to her hips and moved in.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN WHICH A DELIGHTFUL EVENING COMES TO AN ABRUPT END

Deepa had no idea it was possible to feel so good. Furthermore, she had no idea how to go about returning the favour. She might not have had much — any — practice at it, but she was certainly willing to try. The mechanics seemed straightforward enough, and she knew all the parts involved, which must make it simpler than anything with a man.

But Roz had other ideas. In very little time, every thought of reciprocity fled Deepa's mind, followed by every other thought, until her head was completely empty save for the syrupy waves of pleasure Roz wrung from her. Every time Deepa got close, Roz pulled back just enough to keep her balanced on the edge until time slowed down, stretched out, and lost all meaning.

Finally, when Deepa couldn't do anything but gasp and squirm under Roz's hands, which were firmly holding Deepa's legs apart, Roz stopped teasing and brought her off. Open-mouthed with her head thrown back and her eyes shut, Deepa came silently, one hand clenched in her silk gown and the other in Roz's hair.

Having finished her work, Roz licked her lips before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, brusque and careless, and god, how did that make Deepa want her even more?

“Good?” Roz asked huskily.

“Very,” Deepa breathed. “Good, and new.”

“Has no one done that for you before?” Roz looked ready to fight every man Deepa had ever been with.

“They have, but nothing like that.”

Sitting back on her heels, Roz looked well pleased with herself.

“Can I do the same for you?”

Deepa somehow doubted Roz would complain at any lack of skill. She was a quick study, and, based on previous disappointing experiences, she suspected she had yet to reach her full potential in the bedroom.

But Roz shook her head, rocking forward to kneel upright, her hands light on Deepa’s knees. “I’m not done with you yet. Can I brush your hair?”

Wordlessly, Deepa tucked her trembling legs onto the bed and turned, freeing the heavy curtain of her hair from the towel and sweeping it behind her shoulder, offering Roz her back. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, her hair reached the mattress like a waterfall of ink. Though the outermost layers had dried in the air, those closest to her skin were still damp, her hair too thick and heavy to dry evenly.

Carefully, Roz knelt behind her, getting into position like she was faced with a task far more serious than what it was. Though she had Deepa’s soft brush in her lap, she didn’t use it at first. Instead, she gathered Deepa’s hair in both hands, lifting it away from her back as if to test the weight, before running her fingers through it like a comb, teasing apart the wet innermost strands.

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Bowing her head, Deepa relaxed into it. She was already nearly boneless from Roz's earlier ministrations, and she had always enjoyed having her hair brushed, as she enjoyed being fussed over in general. One of her earliest memories involved her mother braiding ribbons into her hair, but that wasn't what she was thinking about when Roz touched her.

Roz was sitting close enough for Deepa to feel the heat from her knees on either side of her hips, not quite touching, but with an electric charge zipping back and forth between their bodies that somehow created even more unspoken tension than an actual touch. With careful attention, Roz finger-combed her hair, easing out the few tangles without pulling.

When Deepa's hair was completely smooth and Roz could run her fingers through from top to bottom without getting caught, it was time to switch to the brush, but Roz was in no hurry. Instead, she continued using her hands, fingertips skating over Deepa's scalp before landing with more confidence. Blunt nails scratched their way across her head, starting at the crown and moving in ever-widening circles.

Eyes shut, Deepa hummed, communicating her pleasure as a cat communicated with purrs. Behind her, Roz shifted closer so her knees finally connected with Deepa's hips. The shock that passed between them was instant and powerful, sending a delicious shiver up Deepa's spine to the back of her neck, where it joined the tingling sensation Roz inspired on her scalp.

"I used to have long hair when I was a little girl," Roz said quietly, her tone conversational. "Never kept it as nice as yours."

Deepa struggled to find her voice, resurfacing from her haze of pleasure. “When did you cut it?”

“When I was twelve. My mum got sick of brushing it out for me, and I was old enough to know I didn’t want to deal with it. Too much work, keeping it from getting tangled. Yours, though. Your hair’s a thing of beauty. You must be proud of it.”

“I’ve never cut it.”

“I love it long. Makes you stand out from all the rest, with their trendy bobs and whatnot.”

“You said you were going to brush it for me. Have you got distracted?” Deepa teased.

“Just enjoying the process, love.”

Roz lifted the brush and Deepa almost told her to never mind it and keep using her fingers, but she bit her lip, smiling to herself as she folded her hands in her lap. The brush was soft against her hair, an altogether different sensation from before. It felt like being petted: slow, steady drags from top to bottom.

“I feel like I’m playing servant to a princess,” Roz murmured.

Deepa cast her a glance from over her shoulder. “Do you like that?”

Catching her gaze, Roz offered her a crooked smile. “Wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“My friends say there are certain women who like to find beautiful girls to spoil. Is that true?”

“I guess it must be.”

“What do you get out of it?” Deepa asked curiously. “Men, I understand. They want a trophy wife or a mistress to parade around, while the girls get status and security in exchange for sex. Is it the same between women?”

“Sure, sometimes.” Roz shrugged. “Me, I just like feeling useful. Making someone happy, being able to provide and protect. I like a girl who’ll let me look after her.”

“As much as I enjoy being spoiled, I still appreciate my independence. Is that a problem?”

“Hell, no. But letting me brush your hair or carry your bags or buy your drinks doesn't make you any less independent, does it?”

Deepa smiled. “No, it doesn’t. But what am I doing for you in return?”

“You’re letting me,” Roz said simply.

“I have something to tell you,” Deepa said, softly confidential. “If you’re truly looking for a princess to spoil, then you should know this. Despite what they say of me, my father is not a great maharaja.”

“Is he not? And here I was taking everything I heard at face value.”

“My mother is a housekeeper. Everything I have, I got for myself, and everything I do is to ensure that one day, she and I can live comfortably.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“Perhaps you could meet her sometime.”

Roz smiled gently. “I’d like that. Must be a hell of a woman, to raise someone as

clever and driven as you. You two are close?”

“She's my whole family. She left my father when she found us a chance to come to England. He was...well, I suppose he was typical of men anywhere. Self-centred and entitled.” Deepa looked down at her hands, the burgundy gloss painting her nails. “It makes her sad to watch me run through men the way I do. She doesn't want me to settle for an inadequate husband, but she wants me to find someone.”

“A man?” Roz asked.

Deepa laughed. “Most likely, yes. But I don’t like my chances of finding a husband. I know there are good men out there — I’ve even met some — but they don’t seem inclined to visit The Songbird.”

“You could look elsewhere,” Roz suggested carefully, continuing to brush Deepa’s hair. “Don’t get me wrong, I love the thought of keeping you for myself, but if you wanted to find a good man...”

It felt like a test.

“Ah, but men don’t buy their wives pearls and diamonds. Wives get to do the cooking and cleaning, and maybe they have a job outside the house or maybe they get a little allowance, but they don’t get the kind of money I want. A truly wealthy man would never look twice at someone common like me. I can only ever play mistress to the likes of them. Speaking of which,” she continued, before she could be accused of feeling sorry for herself, “there’s something I wanted to tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s a man I’m about to start seeing, some noble by the name of Appleton. It’s very new. Don’t look like that,” she added, turning around when Roz’s hair-brushing stilled. Shuffling forward, she pressed their knees together, her hands finding Roz’s around the brush. “Everything is strictly professional between us, but I wanted to tell you about him as a courtesy. I don’t want you feeling slighted, or that I’m stepping out on you, because that’s not what this is.”

“You can't step out on me if we're not serious in the first place,” Roz pointed out. “If you and I are just to be a few nights of fun—”

“Is that what you want from me?”

“No,” Roz said immediately, squeezing her hands. “No, I want more.”

“Well, so do I. And I don't want this man, this Appleton, to distract from that. I'm going to be spreading certain stories about him and I, salacious things, and I don't want you to fall for them. It's all smoke and mirrors.”

“A nobleman,” Roz repeated. “I thought men like that wouldn't look twice at the likes of you?”

“He's not looking at me as a potential wife,” Deepa dismissed with a roll of her eyes.

“You're getting paid,” Roz surmised. “What's he getting out of it?”

“Nothing more than the pleasure of my company at a few social events, and some tall tales to tell his friends. Do you trust me?”

“I do,” Roz said, studying her closely. “And this is what you want?”

“Yes, of course. It's easy work, and enjoyable enough. It's infinitely preferable to some alternatives I can imagine.”

“And...” Roz hesitated. “This Appleton. Smoke and mirrors aside, whatever that means, you think he'll treat you right? You're clearly not worried about him, and you can tell me not to worry, either, but I saw how the men in your club look at you like a piece of meat. Or is he too high-class for that?”

“It’s early days yet, but he doesn't give me that impression. What he and I are doing is entirely for the spectacle. In public, I'm to be his, at least for now. But that’s only in public.”

“And you’ll keep this act up for...a month? A year? Until he’s got what he wants and moves on?”

Deepa shrugged. “So it goes. When I can no longer use my looks to charm men into spending money on me, I’ll have to consider settling down with one of them. I don't relish the thought, but if I work hard enough now, I hope to avoid that fate altogether.”

For a moment, Roz was silent. She gathered a handful of Deepa’s hair, bringing it forward over her shoulders to resume her brushing. On the nightstand, the velvet box containing that pretty gold-and-glass bangle from the other night sat in the orange glow of the lamplight, a conspicuous reminder of Deepa’s work.

“I'm no prince, myself,” Roz said eventually. “I've got no peerage, nor much of anything to my name. Pearls and diamonds are a bit beyond my means.”

“I know that,” Deepa began. “I don’t expect anything—”

Roz silenced her with a kiss to her shoulder. “I’d get them for you if I could. I'd buy you whatever you wanted, and then some. I wouldn't keep you cooped up as a little housewife, either.” Leaning close, she lifted Deepa’s hair with both hands to bring it to her face. “What’s in that shampoo? You still smell of magic.”

“Just a little something to keep me looking my best,” Deepa lied. The shampoo had nothing in it but fragrance, soap, and oils. “Can you really smell magic?”

“Yeah. It’s not just your hair, either; it’s all of you. Could practically taste it when we

were kissing. Even stronger when I had my mouth on you.”

Deepa went hot all over again at the memory. “Is it...good?”

“Bloody intoxicating,” Roz grumbled, dropping her hair to smooth it out with the brush again. “Just don’t recognise it. Magic doesn’t usually cling to a person like that unless they’re actively using it.”

“Maybe I’m special,” Deepa offered.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt.”

“Is a wife what you want, though?” Deepa held her breath waiting for the answer, knowing what she wanted it to be, but unwilling to think about what that implied.

“If I said yes, would that scare you away? I’m of an age where settling down starts to sound more appealing. Having somebody to come home to...”

“I think,” Deepa said carefully, trying not to think about her own feelings or her reaction to Roz's words, “that you could make the right girl very happy.”

Roz’s laugh was a warm breath against her skin. “Suppose I’ll just have to keep looking until the right one falls into my lap, then, won’t I?”

“How will you know when you find her?”

“Well, I like to think she’ll tell me.” Roz planted another kiss to Deepa’s shoulder before straightening up. “But not tonight. Looks like I’ve already overstayed my welcome.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lost track of time,” Roz said apologetically. “Was enjoying myself too much and took my eye off my watch. It's just about midnight.”

“What!” In a scramble, Deepa grabbed the woman's wrist to get a look at her watch face. It was more than just about midnight; the seconds were ticking down to the hour:

eleven, ten—

“Is this set ahead a minute?” Deepa asked desperately.

“No, I always keep it accurate.” Roz looked baffled by Deepa’s sudden distress. “I’ll go, I really didn’t mean to lose track—”

“Go,” Deepa begged, pushing Roz off the bed, but it was too late. In a panic, she could only watch as the second hand passed over the hour—

Nothing happened.

Shakily, she let out her breath, checking herself over for changes. No claws, no fur.

“You alright, love?” Roz asked cautiously.

Had their dressing-room kiss actually done it? Or any of their subsequent ones, after the bath? Deepa could hardly believe that she’d fallen in love with the first woman she’d ever kissed, but she certainly hadn’t done anything else to break the curse.

“Deepa?”

She raised her eyes to meet Roz’s concerned gaze, a tremulous smile on her lips. “I think—”

And then she transformed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A LATE-NIGHT DREAMSCAPE AND A CURSE REVEALED

Roz's watch was ten seconds fast.

That made sense, because of course Deepa wasn't in love. Even if it were possible for her to fall in love with a woman — with anyone — it would never happen so quickly. She'd been a fool for even entertaining the possibility. She should never have invited Roz upstairs in the first place, and she certainly should never have taken her attention off the time. To let her guard down around a handsome woman who wanted to take care of her was one thing. It was quite another to let her guard down when she had every reason to expect to transform into a giant wildcat on the stroke of midnight.

With a self-recriminating growl, Deepa dug her claws into the bedspread, tail whipping back and forth, before abruptly pulling herself together, her gaze shooting to her guest.

To her credit, Roz hadn't immediately thrown herself out the bedroom door. She stood frozen with one hand on the door at her back, braced for action as she faced Deepa on the bed. For a minute, neither of them moved. Deepa was terrified of scaring her, not to mention the risk that Roz might tell someone downstairs. And Roz didn't move out of fear of provoking the sudden leopard into an attack.

When the first minute dragged into a second, Deepa dropped to her stomach, resting her chin on the mattress, front paws hanging over the edge as she looked at Roz beseechingly. The problem with having the form of an apex predator was that every position looked somewhat threatening. If only she'd been cursed to take the shape of a wolf instead, she could at least roll over and show her belly, but a cat was as dangerous on its back as on its feet.

Still, Roz hadn't left yet.

Deepa made as small a sound as she could, a tiny mew, and stretched one paw forward to gently bat the air in front of Roz.

“Hullo,” Roz said shakily. “Deepa?”

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She nodded enthusiastically in response.

“Is that mostly you in there, or mostly cat?”

Sitting upright, Deepa pressed her front paws together like a prayer, which apparently looked ridiculous enough for Roz to relax and take her hand off the door.

“I reckon that’s the magic I smelled earlier, then,” she said, taking a cautious step towards the bed. “Some manner of curse, is it?”

With a garbled wail, Deepa agreed.

“Do you know how to break it?”

A nod.

“But you can’t,” Roz guessed.

Miserably, Deepa shook her head.

“How long have you had it? Must be recent, or you'd have been more careful about the time. How long does it last?”

Unable to communicate or even mime the concept of dawn, Deepa could only give a frustrated yowl.

“Right, right. I guess I’ll find out. Do you...” Roz hesitated. “Do you want me to stay

the night? Or should I go?”

Leaping off the bed, Deepa streaked across the room to butt her head against Roz’s thighs, pushing the whole weight of her body against the other woman until Roz stepped back, her shoulders pressed to the door for balance, as Deepa dragged the length of her body from cheek to tail-tip across her legs. With a careful laugh, Roz dropped both hands to Deepa’s back, lightly stroking along her spine.

“That's a yes, stay?” Roz interpreted.

With a rumbling growl, Deepa rubbed the side of her face against Roz’s hip before butting into her hand, encouraging her to pet her.

“Alright, I can stay. Do you need anything? Food, or water?”

Deepa had drunk water during her previous transformations — the kitchen sink was easy enough to manipulate even without thumbs — but she’d yet to try eating anything. The refrigerator was difficult to open, but, more importantly, she suspected that leopards really ought to eat fresh, raw meat, and she wasn’t ready to cross that particular boundary. She’d been raised on vegetarian Gujarati cuisine; even the English dishes she chose were meatless. Personal preferences aside, she worried at what a sudden change for the carnivorous would do to her stomach the next day.

Thus far, she’d stayed indoors, expending relatively little energy, so found it easy enough to fast until daybreak. So, she nudged Roz across the room to the bed until the woman sat down on the mattress, at which point Deepa climbed up beside her to settle in for the next six hours.

She hadn’t got much sleep since being cursed. Mostly, she spent her nights pacing the flat, or curled up in a ball of misery fretting about things outside her control. When she tried to sleep, her semi-lucid thoughts were anxious, and she met the dawn

overtired and restless, with that particularly heavy ache in her bones that came from too many consecutive nights with too little sleep. With Roz by her side, she hoped to put an end to that.

“Alright,” Roz said softly, settling on the bed with her back to the wall.

When Deepa snuggled into her lap like an overgrown housecat, Roz carefully put one hand on her head, scratching behind her ears. Deepa sighed in response, rubbing her face against Roz’s outstretched leg as she made herself comfortable. It seemed she didn’t need words to explain her intent; Roz stayed still like she was content to spend the night serving as Deepa’s pillow.

“I always liked cats,” Roz told her, slowly petting down the back of her neck and around her cheeks. “My mum used to take in strays, growing up. Had an awful soft spot for them. Never met any cat with fur as soft or dense as yours, though.”

As Roz spoke in a low, soothing tone about her childhood pets, Deepa drifted to sleep in her lap under the steady pressure of her hands. For the first time since falling victim to the curse, she felt safe and secure.

She dreamt she was on stage at The Songbird. Though she could feel Phillip watching her from somewhere in the crowd, she couldn't place him. With every song she sang, the air of malevolence emanating from the audience grew stronger, until it seemed that every man watching her was Phillip in a hundred different guises, and her nerves stretched thinner and tighter, fraying at the edges until she was afraid they would snap entirely.

When her voice broke on the last note, one of the hidden Phillips in the crowd booed, and all the others broke into jeers, throwing things at her microphone stand. When a bottle shattered across the stage, she flinched back with a startled cry, and the jeering grew louder in response. Men hurled insults as easily as drinks and cigarette butts,

each projectile landing closer and closer until her last nerve snapped.

With a furious snarl, the leopard leapt out from her skin. Crouching low against the stage, with her ears pinned flat and her eyes flashing, Deepa bared her teeth and roared at her antagonists, desperate to drive them back.

“You see!” The real Phillip stepped forward, sweeping out his arm as a ringmaster presenting his next circus act. “Now you can see her for what she really is. A wild beast, undeserving of love.” He gave a theatrical shudder that did nothing to hide his self-satisfied expression. “Truly a loathsome creature.”

As the crowd swelled with derogatory laughter, Deepa turned tail and fled backstage, through the heavy merlot-red drapes. Pounding footsteps chased after her, and she threw herself into her dressing room, but instead of the expected vanity table and racks of costumes lit by the dim yellow glow of bare bulbs, she found herself in a forest.

She had only the faintest memories of Gujarat, but this was Sasan Gir, unquestionably. Birds called from the acacia trees, out of sight above her head, and insects chirped and whirred from between fragrant blooms. Ducking low, Deepa raced through the ferns, fronds trailing dewdrops against her fur as she made her way deeper into the greenery, letting the forest shelter her from her pursuants. Eventually, they gave up the chase, dismissing the jungle as a messy, savage situation and a waste of time. Only then did she slow her pace, tail twitching and paws digging into the soft black soil as she slunk onward, trying to get her bearings.

When the sounds of the last men fell away, night-time silence blanketed her. Climbing over a great ridge of tangled roots, Deepa’s next steps took her into a garden. The teak trees opened into a sprawling estate where cobblestone footpaths wound between flowerbeds and enormous stone walls of climbing roses. The abrupt shift in scenery stole her breath away. Perfume buffeted her from all sides, the

delicate scents of jasmine and lavender and night-blooming flowers the names of which she didn't know. Their leaves looked navy blue and violet in the moonlight, the ground painted in soft shades of grey. Above, the stars twinkled like a million tiny diamonds scattered over a black velvet cloth.

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“You found your way,” Roz noted from a little wooden bench tucked under one of the rose walls. She lounged with one arm slung over the back, an ankle crossed over the opposite knee.

“I’m dreaming,” Deepa said with utmost certainty.

“Sure. So am I.”

To her knowledge, Deepa had never in her life realised she was dreaming while in the midst of one. She would have expected it to be unsettling, but Roz’s presence grounded her, not least because Deepa suspected this was Roz’s dream more than her own. The harassment on stage at The Songbird had been hers, certainly, and likely Gir Forest as well, but this garden was as unfamiliar as it was beautiful, and she felt no recognition as she walked its paths.

So intent was she on studying the garden that she hardly noticed having left her leopard form back in the ferns, approaching Roz in her peony robe on the same two feet with which she’d been born.

“What is this place?”

Roz shrugged. “No name for it, or anything. Just something I made where I can come to be alone.”

Deepa crept up to the bench, looking around with wonder as the stars winked down at her. “Shutting yourself in the bedroom and locking the door doesn't do the trick?”

“I started building this place before I had a room of my own. Out there, someone always wants something from me. And I don’t mind it; like I said, I like being useful. Knowing people think I’m reliable enough to ask favours of me, that makes me feel good. But I can’t be doing that every minute of the day. So, when I need to shut all that out, get some peace and quiet where I won’t be interrupted, I come here. Somewhere I can just sit and breathe.”

“It’s beautiful. Is it based on a real place?”

“Bits and pieces of a lot of places. Parks and gardens I’ve been to, photos I’ve seen, or places described in books. Like a scrapbook, of sorts. All the places I find calming, or that I’d like to go.”

“How long have you been building it?”

“Since I was a young ’un, before I even really knew what I was doing. Eleven or twelve, I guess. The oldest parts, I don’t go around to them much anymore. They’re just about the same as they were then. I’ve got to be in the right state of mind to want that, you know? A certain brand of childhood nostalgia that doesn’t do me much good now that I’m pushing forty.”

“I understand.”

Roz chuckled, not a mean sound. “Think you’re a bit young yet to understand it, but that’s alright. You will.”

“You invited me here,” Deepa guessed.

“I’ve invited lots of girls here, over the years. Because — and this is important, yeah? — I can shut them out any time I like. No one gets in without an invite, and no one can stay if I don’t want them to.”

Deepa sat on the bench beside her, fitting herself to Roz's side under her outstretched arm. "How did you extend the invitation?" she asked curiously. "I didn't notice anything."

"I guess it wasn't an invitation, technically. More like, I left the door open, and if you found your way through, I'd meet you here. I thought you could do with some peace and quiet," Roz added in a softer tone. "You want to talk about it?"

With a mutinous frown, Deepa slumped deeper and crossed her arms over her chest. "No."

"One or two answers would be helpful, love," Roz prodded gently, shifting her arm from the back of the bench to drape over Deepa's shoulders. "You don't have to tell me any details. Just enough for me to get by."

Heaving a gusty sigh, Deepa leaned into her, but didn't unfold her arms. Offering specific details was out of the question. That she had considered for even a moment that Roz might have been her true love's kiss to break the curse — that was mortifying.

Still, Roz had a point about the rest of it, especially seeing as she'd gone to bed cradling a giant leopard without asking any questions, and was currently hosting Deepa in a very pleasant dreamscape.

"It's a recent predicament, as you guessed," Deepa began. "Since last Friday, on the stroke of midnight I turn into that creature, quite against my will. My mind stays clear throughout the transformation, for all the good it does me, until I become human again at daybreak."

"One week is hardly any time at all," Roz said with a frown. "It's some kind of a curse? Do you know how to get rid of it?"

“It's proving stubborn,” Deepa replied shortly. “I expect I'll have to find a professional to help, but I'm not interested in going through legal channels to do it. It shouldn't be too difficult. Out of everyone I know, someone must have a contact who knows their way around curse-magic.”

“Legal channels might be faster.”

“And messier.”

If Deepa went to Scotland Yard's magic division with her problem, in the course of breaking her curse — if they even could — they would very likely discover Phillip as its originator. She would either be pressured to keep quiet about his involvement, or, if he were confronted about his use of illegal curse-magic, he might retaliate in an even more unpleasant manner.

Either way, she certainly wouldn't be pressing charges, much as she'd like to see him pay. The trial would be a sham and his family would buy him a cleared record. That he might ever see the inside of a jail cell, never mind prison, was laughable.

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Furthermore, there was her own discomfort in getting the police involved in her personal life. She'd skirted the edges of the law too many times to invite any scrutiny into her relationships or professional dealings.

"I prefer to keep things under the table and behind closed doors," she said. "You can understand my desire for privacy."

"Then I shouldn't ask how you got this curse in the first place?"

"You should not."

"Because if you picked up some cursed object, that would be easy enough to toss aside, wouldn't it?"

"Roz," Deepa warned, straightening up. "I'm not going to tell you."

"You're safe, though? It's nothing to do with your Appleton bloke?" Roz's concern was palpable, and Deepa thawed.

"I'm safe," she promised, and returned to Roz's side, accepting her touch once more. "And no, Appleton is quite uninvolved, though I'm sure you'd like the excuse to hate him. I promise, it's unwarranted."

Roz hesitated a minute. "Can I ask you something?"

"That depends."

“The men you flirt with. Professionally, I mean.”

“Ah, I think I know where this is going.”

“You sleep with any of them?” Roz asked carefully, like she wasn’t sure whether she was allowed the curiosity.

“A few. Back in the beginning, when I was still getting my bearings.” Deepa offered a wry smile. “I don’t regret it, but I’m not interested in repeating the experience, either. Appleton certainly isn’t interested in me that way.”

Roz nodded. “So, it’s not something you do anymore.”

“I’m not stepping out on anyone to see you, if that’s what you mean. And, though I’m not going to give up my work at The Songbird, I won’t be stepping out on you, either.”

“You don’t have to make me any promises,” Roz began, though she sounded pleased to get one all the same.

“My business is men’s pleasure. But for myself, I don’t cross the two. If you and I are to keep spending time together, I don’t want to be thinking about anyone else.”

“I appreciate that. Won’t hold you to it, though. I know it’s not always easy for a girl to avoid getting roped into marriage.”

“What does that mean?”

Roz shrugged, glancing away. “Sometimes it seems like a husband’s the only viable choice for some girls, that’s all. I’m just saying, I won’t hold it against you if that proves the case.”

“Well,” said Deepa, vaguely offended but mostly bemused, “if I suddenly find myself so incredibly desperate that a husband seems my only way forward, I’ll at least give you the courtesy of advance warning.”

“Didn’t mean anything by it,” Roz murmured, turning to kiss her cheek. “Personal experience, that’s all.”

“Hm.”

“You’re welcome to stay here tonight,” she said against Deepa’s hair, tucking a flyaway strand behind one ear, careful around the loop of Deepa’s earring that had carried into the dream from her earlier daytime fashion. “If you’d rather stay looking like this than a leopard.”

“I’m told I make as good-looking a cat as I do a woman.”

“Oh, so you’ve no preference?”

“I’ll stay here, thank you,” Deepa said primly.

Roz snorted. “Looks aren’t everything after all?”

“I didn’t say that.”

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“You do make a pretty cat. But I’d rather hold a beautiful woman in my arms all night, if it’s all the same to you.”

With a soft hum, Deepa said, “Can I ask you a question, if you promise not to get sentimental about it?”

Roz raised her brows. “Sounds intriguing. Also sounds like a trap.”

Frowning into the roses, deliberately not looking at the other woman, Deepa asked, “Do you believe in love?”

Roz made an incredulous sound.

“True love, as the stories say. One half of another soul, and such.”

“Yeah, fairytales aside, I believe in love,” Roz replied, amused. “Might have even fancied myself in love, once or twice before.”

“Truelove?” Deepa repeated, twisting around in Roz’s arms to look at her this time. “As in, soulmate love?”

“Yeah,” Roz said with a shrug and a smile. “I do.”

“And you thought you’d found it before? But it couldn’t have been true love, then, if it didn’t work out.” Deepa immediately winced at her lack of tact.

“Maybe not, but there’s all sorts of love. Some of it fizzles out. Some of it isn’t strong

enough to stand up to outside forces.” Roz paused for a second, as if there was some specific example still fresh in her mind. Deepa didn’t have the chance to ask before she continued. “But yeah, I think there's a love out there that can last forever, if I can find it.”

“That’s overly romantic,” Deepa informed her.

“What about you? I take it you don't go in for that sort of thing.”

“I can believe a love like that exists,” Deepa allowed reluctantly. “For all the one-sided infatuations and train-wreck relationships I've seen, I’ve also seen couples head over heels foreach other years after getting together. If that's not real love, I can’t imagine what is.”

“But?” Roz prompted, stroking Deepa’s arm.

“But, I don’t think it’s for me.”

A month ago, Deepa would have declared it proudly. Love was a frivolous, if not dangerous, thing, and she would never risk ensnaring her heart when it was cold calculation and manipulation that would get her all she wanted. Now, with that leopard waiting for her every night, for the first time, her loveless life seemed something of a failure.

“It’s a vulnerable thing, I’ll give you that,” said Roz. “Opening yourself up to love. I can see why you wouldn’t want it.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just don’t think you much enjoy being vulnerable, that's all.”

“And you do?” Deepa touched one finger to the broken bridge of Roz’s nose. “A boxer who can knock a man flat with one punch and lift girls one-handed is hardly a picture of vulnerability either.”

“I’m soft where it counts,” Roz said quietly.

As if admitting some grave sin, Deepa said, “You make me want to be a softer person.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

With a sigh, Deepa distanced herself from the warmth of Roz’s side. “I can’t afford to be.”

“Things change,” Roz offered.

“Not fast enough. When I think about how far I have to go...”

“Do you never look back to see how far you’ve come?”

Deepa shook her head. “I can’t risk becoming complacent. When I’ve made enough money to buy my mother a nice home of her own, and I can keep myself comfortable without taking to the stage every night, then perhaps I’ll stop long enough to celebrate my successes. But not before that.”

“Seems to me you’ve achieved plenty already. Not enough, I know,” Roz added, before Deepa could interject. “I just think you could do with having someone celebrate you once in a while. Remind you how remarkable you are.”

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“I don’t need flattery from you. I get it enough from my suitors.”

“It’s not flattery. It’s facts. If I wanted to flatter you, I’d be comparing you to all the flowers in the garden.”

“Cliché,” Deepa chided teasingly.

“Not just your looks.” Pulling her close, Roz nuzzled the side of Deepa’s jaw, pressing tender kisses to her throat. “Your smell. Your taste. Like honey. Nectar. Ambrosia.” Each word was punctuated with another press of her lips, and Deepa shivered delightedly under her ministrations. “I’m no poet, but I reckon I could describe you better than any of these flowers.”

“Or you could put your mouth to better use,” Deepa suggested breathlessly, and Roz smiled like a wolf against the curve of her neck before taking her advice and moving down her body to drink her in like a worker bee at the cup of a dew-fresh dahlia.

“Wait.” Deepa caught her at the last second, drawing her back up from between her legs. “You didn’t let me return the favour when we were awake. It’s only fair I take my turn.”

“You don’t have to,” Roz began.

“Do you not want me to?” Deepa asked bluntly, to which Roz replied by way of a ruddy blush and a stammer, neither of which were ano. “If you actually don’t want me to,” said Deepa, watching her closely, “then say so. But if you’re only refusing out of some sense that you should be providing for me but not the other way

around...”

“There's no obligation,” Roz began again.

“Who do you take me for?” Deepa asked indignantly, and wasted no more time in working open the buttons at the front of Roz’s trousers to slip her hand inside. After that show of unabashed initiative, Roz had no further protests, and Deepa hungrily swallowed the sounds of her moans as they turned the summer night wet and syrupy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A TENTATIVE FANTASY IN THE MECHANIC’S SHOP

Roz was warm and solid under her, one hand resting on Deepa’s back over her hair, the other on her thigh just above her knee. Even first thing in the morning, she smelled good, the previous day’s cologne still clinging to her undershirt, mingling with Deepa’s own scent from her bedsheets. Still half asleep and with the leopard not far gone, Deepa buried her face in Roz’s neck to breathe her in.

Evidently, Roz was not her true love, if the curse-magic was at all accurate. But she was something, and Deepa liked her, and what she liked, she held onto by whatever means necessary. There was still a chance that Roz only wasn’t her true love yet.

Under her, Roz exhaled a laugh. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Deepa mumbled in reply, finally sitting up to stretch.

Roz didn’t pretend to do anything other than stare. “Did you sleep well?”

“Better than I have in days. I could stay in bed hours longer.”

“I promised to put in an appearance at the garage, or I’d stay,” Roz said regretfully.

Shaking her head, Deepa pushed herself up to her elbows. “It’s just as well. My mother comes for afternoon tea on weekends. Whatever I need to have done, there’s only the morning to do it.”

“Anything exciting?”

“Not remotely. Groceries, tidying up...”

“In that case, would you want to stop by the garage with me? Don’t know that you’d find it too interesting — it’s messy, you know — but...?”

Deepa hardly had to think about it. Visiting a garage wasn’t as good as lounging about in bed all morning, but it meant she got to keep Roz’s company a while longer. “Yes,” she said immediately. “I want to see your work.”

With a nod, Roz sat up, carefully shuffling out from under Deepa’s weight. “You might want to dress down for it,” she said, reaching for her own clothes she’d cast aside the previous night. “If you’ve got anything that might be construed as dressing down.”

“Why? Are you planning to get me dirty?”

“If only,” Roz returned with a wicked grin, pulling her trousers on. “No, it’s all professionalism over there.”

“Do your colleagues know about your proclivities for women? Or are we going undercover?”

“My family, you mean? We’ve got an understanding.”

“Have you brought girls there before?”

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“A few times, yeah. Same as I've taken them around to watch my fights a few times before. It's got the same appeal, I think.”

“Physical competence?” Deepa guessed, letting the sheet fall away as she went searching out something suitable to wear. “Watching you work with your hands and outperform every man they've ever been with?”

“Keep talking,” Roz encouraged, lounging against the door to watch Deepa dress. “I like this.”

“This is as dressed down as I've got,” Deepa announced of her outfit. It was an older dress, still fashionable, but no longer cutting edge, and without a single enchantment to raise its worth.

“If you get any grease or motor oil on you, you'll have to borrow some of the clothes I keep in the office.”

“You look like you're enjoying that thought rather too much. I don't want any grease, oil, or mess of any kind touching me.”

“Understood. I'll make sure to get you back for tea with your mum all in one piece, without a mark on you.”

“You're welcome to join us, if you like,” Deepa offered spontaneously.

Roz hesitated.

“Cherie will be there,” Deepa added. “My mother is very social; she’s always wanting to meet new people. I think she’d like you.”

With a gentle smile, Roz leaned over to press a kiss to the side of her head. “If you want to introduce me, lay the groundwork,” she suggested. “I’ve been introduced as a friend enough times to know how it works. Now,” she said, changing the subject before Deepa could respond, “have you got any food in the flat that I can make you breakfast?”

Deepa shook her head. She didn’t know how to respond to Roz’s assumption that they would be introduced as friends instead of lovers, so, like a coward, she let it go. “Put the kettle on while I do my makeup, and then we can pick something up from a café on the way to the garage?”

“Sounds perfect

???

Deepa had never been in a garage before. Having no car herself, there was little cause for it, and certainly none of her previous dates had ever supposed she might be interested. That was fair enough. Prior to Roz, she’d never supposed there was anything about the art of car repair to catch her eye.

Of course, none of her previous dates had likely set foot inside a mechanic’s shop themselves, either. They all owned and drove motorcars, but they had people to keep such tedious appointments on their behalf. They certainly weren’t the sort of men interested in getting their hands dirty, so they weren’t interested in the sort of woman who dirtied her own hands. Or rather, it simply never occurred to them that any woman might want to try.

“You ever driven a car before?” Roz asked, as Deepa lingered in the shop entrance,

taking it in.

There were two cars parked in the bay, both of them quite stylish, though Deepa couldn't say any more about them than that. The cars each had a man working on them, and a light further inside the shop suggested a third person working in an office. The whole place smelled sharply of metal and petrol, which wasn't necessarily unpleasant. Deepa felt very much like she was stepping into someone else's world, as surely as Roz's dream garden had been its own separate world.

"I've never driven, no," she said, looking about with keen interest.

"Want me to teach you?"

Deepa laughed before realising Roz was serious. "What, here and now?"

"Maybe we won't borrow a paying customer's car for it. I can take you out someplace less busy, with fewer pedestrians for you to mow down."

If it were a man asking, Deepa would have brushed aside his offer with a blush and a giggle. Because it wouldn't be an offer, not sincerely. Women like Deepa were expected to be chauffeured around. Driving one's own car was unbecomingly independent.

"Yes," she said decisively. "You should teach me sometime."

Roz gave an approving nod. "When I was your age, the thought of a woman driving her own car was impossible."

"Had cars even been invented yet, when you were my age?"

"Cheeky! You shut your mouth."

“Oi, Roz!” The nearest of the two men straightened up from under the hood of his car. “You going to come take a look at this, or are you standing around chatting up birds all day?”

“Keep your hair on,” Roz returned peaceably. “My brother, Joey,” she explained to Deepa, striding up to the man. Deepa could see the resemblance: both of them stocky and dark-haired, though Joey was older and rougher around the edges. “Joey, this is Deepa. I’m just showing her around. And that’s my cousin, over there,” Roz added of the man in the second bay, who didn’t so much as glance up, his head under the car’s hood.

“Pleased to meet you,” Joey said brusquely, his expression suggesting that Deepa was wildly out of place.

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“Now, you said yesterday you had something to show me,” said Roz, one hand planted on the car as she leaned in to poke around under the hood. “What am I looking at?”

“Nothing I’ve seen before, though I don’t know why I’m surprised.” Joey snorted. “This daft git tried to spell his engine to run faster. He’s got the magic all tangled up in the mechanics. It’s a right fucking mess. Excuse my language,” he added, glancing at Deepa.

“Please, don’t mind me,” she said breezily.

Leaning in, Roz must have found whatever Joey was talking about, because she let out a long, low whistle. “He meant business, didn’t he? It’s a bloody miracle he managed to keep the car running long enough to bring it into the shop.”

“Right? But this isn’t engine trouble. What the bloody hell am I supposed to do with it?”

“You don’t have problems like this often?” Deepa asked, coming in to peer over Roz’s shoulder. Under the hood, the car engine was a complicated knot of machinery of which she couldn’t make heads nor tails. Buried deep amid the blocky mechanics and coils of metal, she caught a glimmer of magic, tightly entangled, as Joey had said. A jolt of sympathy for the car made her sick to her stomach for just a second.

“It’s not the first time I’ve heard of some idiot trying to enchant their car to run faster, or fly, or go underwater or whatever wank they get in their head,” said Joey, “but it’s the first time anyone’s ever brought me the problem to fix after the fact.”

“You're not especially handy with magic, then?” Deepa asked.

“I'm handy enough,” Joey said, glaring at the car. “But this goes a bloody stretch beyond.”

“Well,” said Deepa, “as much of a mess as it might be, it's only a little spell. It's not as if you're dealing with a curse.”

Roz leaned back to bump her shoulder against Deepa's in sympathy. “I suppose if we bust the engine trying to take the spell off, we can fix that easily enough.” She sounded doubtful. “These Vauxhalls are meant to hit a hundred miles an hour; what's he need to spell it faster for?”

Deepa wasn't normally given to sentiment, but as Joey and Roz discussed how best to approach the problem, she couldn't help but feel the whole situation was rather unfair to the poor car. It hadn't asked for that magic to get tangled up in it, and it didn't deserve to get broken apart and put back together just because someone else had been irresponsible with it. But she couldn't express that without sounding like she was overidentifying with a hunk of machinery, so she left them to it and went to look around the rest of the shop.

Most of what she found on the shelves and in the toolkits, she couldn't identify, so, as she browsed, her mind wandered. This was Roz's world, and, like the gardens, she wanted to stay longer. Unlike the gardens, hazy dreamscape that they were, it was harder to imagine a place for herself in the garage.

There was no sense imagining a future with Roz, but sense had never stopped her from fantasising. It was as harmless as window-shopping, and if window-shopping had taught her anything, it was that there was always a way for her to get her hands on something if she wanted it badly enough, no matter how unrealistic or out of reach it seemed.

Deepa tiptoed her way into the fantasy as tentatively as a bird stretching her wings, preparing to leave the nest for the first time. In this fantasy world, Roz would court her just the same, but there were no men for Deepa to flit off to. There was no hunger for money or social standing hanging, like a sun-ripe mango, just out of reach in the tree. Because Deepa wasn't blind; whatever Roz said, Deepa knew she didn't want to watch her flirt or go out with other men, no matter how unseriously. Roz wanted a wife, so a wife was how Deepa imagined herself.

When Roz dropped to one knee to present her with a modest ring in a box of brushed velvet, Deepa would blush and cry prettily from joy, both hands covering her mouth until Roz gently pulled one loose to slip the ring onto her finger. It would be a tiny diamond, but beautiful, and Deepa would cherish it as if it were the Crown Jewels. The wedding would be small — unofficial, of course, but red and gold and loud, to make her mother happy, with Deepa's hands and feet mehndi-painted, and Roz's hands, too.

Every day, Roz would work in her garage, elbow-deep in her motorcars, and Deepa would have supper on the table when she got home. Their house would be small but comfortable, sharing a wall with the neighbours, and Deepa would fill it with all the bright colours and patterns and spices that reminded her of home an ocean away. They would go out to Eden and Club Artemis before going home together, falling into bed and each other's arms, and so it would go for years, for decades, until their hair turned silver and wiry, and lines permanently etched their faces.

It was a quiet life Deepa led in this fantasy, without wealth or fame. Roz would spoil her as best she could, which would amount to a perfectly respectable level of lower middle-class spoiling, and she would never miss an anniversary or fail to make Deepa feel appreciated. Deepa would cook and bake and clean, just as her mother did, albeit on her own terms instead of an employer's. It was the sort of modest fantasy in which a great many women indulged, realistic enough as to be a decent goal when it came to finding a spouse, yet just romantic enough to keep them hopeful.

It wasn't bad. There was nothing wrong with it. But when Deepa compared it to her fantasies of living in a stately home, with diamonds at her throat and rubies on her fingers, silk sheets on her bed, fresh fruit on her table, and sapphire-and-emerald peacocks keening from the courtyard...

Playing wife to a working woman, no matter how handsome or devoted, simply couldn't compare. It would be nice to be satisfied with something so simple, but that wasn't who she was. Deepa wanted that mango.

With such self-awareness, it was hard to be surprised that her curse was still intact after so many kisses.

Roz moved through the garage like she'd been born there, with motor oil running through her veins. Deepa couldn't imagine someone like Appleton, who might be as close to her ideal man as she would ever meet, trying to do Roz's work. It was every bit as ridiculous as trying to imagine Roz dressed up in Appleton's fineries, asking with a posh accent if Deepa would put a price on her company.

If money were no matter, there was no question with whom Deepa would rather spend her time. She would happily cheer from the sidelines at every one of Roz's fights, watch her work on her cars as she shed layers from the heat, engine grease streaking her skin, the perceived roughness making Deepa's mouth water.

But money was an issue, and it always would be. Eventually, the fickle men of London would grow bored of her, and she needed to secure a future for herself and her mother before that happened. Her ability to manipulate men had a timer on it, counting down to middle-age as it counted down on all women's beauty. She couldn't afford to throw away a single viable year, no matter how tempting the distraction.

Unlike those men, Roz couldn't possibly believe a woman's worth was tied to her youth and beauty. She herself was nearing forty; she'd be a hypocrite to declare any

woman her age of lesser value when she herself was still going so strong, and she didn't strike Deepa as the sort.

But then, she'd been as much drawn to the bright young things in Club Artemis as any man, all of them honeybees starving for the beauty of a flower in the sun. When the flower faded and her nectar dried up, how many bees could be expected to stay? And if the bees found out that the flower turned into a leopard every night—

Deepa firmly set that metaphor aside before it could get any further out of hand.

Roz found out, and she stayed, Deepa's sense of reason pointed out. It sounded like her mother. Roz won't discard you like last week's milk once you reach thirty-five.

"Got it," Roz declared triumphantly from under the hood. When she withdrew and stepped back from the car, something in the engine snapped and crackled like an electric shock, and vivid blue sparks leapt out. She and Joey both took a hurried step back.

"Blast it," Joey muttered, wiping his hands on his coveralls.

“It broke the spell, though,” Roz said, trying to sound optimistic.

“It shot the carburettor, is what it did,” Joey retorted. “I’ll have to order one in to replace it.”

“That’s an easy enough fix.” Roz shrugged, cleaning her own hands on a nearby rag that seemed intended for just that. “If he was mad enough to try bespelling his engine to win a race with his mates, he deserves to pay for a new carburettor.”

Joey grunted in response, stalking off to the office to place the order, or perhaps call the car’s owner. Deepa made her way back to Roz’s side, standing on her toes to peer around Roz’s shoulder and under the hood. The magic had dissipated, but a plume of smoke curled out, thick and noxious.

“That’s one way to do it, I suppose,” Deepa said, trying not to feel too bad for the car.

“Magic’s not really in our job description,” Roz said apologetically, giving Deepa a quick peck on the cheek, careful not to touch her with her oil-smudged hands. With a little more privacy, Deepa was inclined to get those hands on her, oil, engine grease, and all, despite her earlier protests.

“I suppose cars are easier to repair than people after they get tangled up in magic that has no business being near them.”

“Yeah,” Roz agreed with a wince. “Can’t recommend this approach to your problem.”

“No matter,” Deepa said briskly, keen to change the subject. “Do you have more to

do here? Because if not, I think it would be a marvellous idea if you took me back to your car and reminded me just how good you are with your hands.”

Roz swallowed. “I can do that. Just let me wash up first.”

Shaking her head, Deepa grabbed Roz’s wrist, forestalling her. “No, I want you just like this.”

Roz’s laugh was throaty and genuine and quite possibly Deepa’s new favourite sound. “I see how it is. The maharajah’s daughter’s looking for a bit of rough trade, is she?”

“Yes, please, and she doesn’t like to be kept waiting, so if you don’t mind?”

It was difficult to say which of them was more eager to reach Roz’s car outside. Once they got there, Roz was very good at distracting Deepa from any and all unpleasant thoughts about broken carburettors and inconstant honeybees, and then from any thoughts whatsoever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TEA-TIME AND A MOTHER’S LAMENT FOR A SON-IN-LAW

Deepa’s mother was a regular visitor on weekends. They could have easily gone out for tea instead of squeezing into Deepa’s tiny flat, but her mother was used to living in close quarters with more people than that, and furthermore, she had taken it upon herself ages ago to see both Deepa and Cherie fed. It wasn’t that they couldn’t fend for themselves, but every week she insisted on cooking enough to feed them for days, never mind that she spent her weekdays cooking and cleaning.

Deepa always protested, insisting that her mother take more time to rest, and that she

didn't need to be looked after to such an extent, but her mother always forged ahead regardless. She had adopted Cherie as a second daughter, since she could hardly bring food over for one but not the other, and Cherie converted to Gujarati cuisine immediately, with a vocal appreciation that always made Deepa's mother puff up with pride.

"I thought I would have a friend around tomorrow, if you don't mind the company," Deepa said, once she and her mother were settled on the loveseat, and Cherie was perched on a kitchen chair.

"Oh, am I finally meeting one of your gentleman friends?"

Her mother had adopted English fashions for the sake of her work, though she still favoured richer colours and heavier patterns than most Englishwomen her age, and she wore her long, iron-silver hair in a neat bun at the back of her head, with a pair of spectacles on a beaded loop around her neck. She was small and soft, smelling perpetually of baked goods, with her hands dyed from spices and the soles of her sensibly-heeled shoes always worn a little thinner than they ought to be.

"No," Deepa stressed. She had never introduced any of her suitors or club regulars to her mother, and she wasn't about to start. "No, it's a girlfriend. Not one of the girls from the club, either. She works, like you. She fixes motorcars."

Her mother bobbed her head. "I will meet her, if that is what you want, my dove. I will bring cakes."

"No, mama, you don't have to do that. It's your day off."

"No, no, I was going to bring you food and sweets anyway. You don't get enough good homecooked meals, going out to that club every night. I have to make sure you are getting something decent in you. If that means I am feeding your friends as well,

then I will feed your friends.”

“Mama—”

“Do not argue with me,” her mother cut in with a warning smile, raising one finger.
“I have to make sure my girls are eating.”

“Could you make chana masala, then?” Deepa asked meekly.

Cherie perked up. “Chickpea curry?”

Her mother chortled, pleased. “Yes, yes, I can make chana masala.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:14 pm

“And coconut rice?” Cherie asked hopefully.

“You’re a good girl. Yes, I will make coconut rice, just for you.”

“I love you, Mrs. Patel.”

Deepa’s mother waved her aside, smiling. “Now, you tell me about this girlfriend. She works with motorcars? Why do you want me to meet her?”

“Just because we’ve been spending time together, and I think you might like her.”

“Hm. She is more important than the dozens of men you like to hide from your mother?” she asked shrewdly.

“They’re not important at all, and they’re certainly not friends.”

“I only want you to be happy and settle down.” She took Deepa’s hands, bringing them to her lap to fold them over her knee. “A mother worries about her daughter. You work very hard, and I know you have great plans to support yourself, but it is good to have a family, too. I do not want you to judge your own prospects by the way my marriage turned out, do you understand?” When Deepa didn’t answer, her mother tutted. “This motorcar friend of yours. She is not married either?”

“She’s not, and she doesn’t plan to be.”

“Your Aaliyah is married, though, and she is very happy.”

Deepa couldn't exactly explain the particulars of Aaliyah's situation.

Sighing, her mother turned to Cherie. "And you? Do not tell me you are also determined to stay unwed all your life."

"Oh, I don't know," Cherie said lightly. "I always imagined I'd get married someday. I just have to find the right man for the job."

"You are a beautiful girl. You must have suitors tripping over themselves to propose."

"Well, a couple, yeah, but the right one hasn't come along yet. Don't worry, Mrs. Patel. You'll be invited to the wedding when I do finally meet the perfect man."

Deepa shot Cherie a look of thanks for taking her mother's attention off her in regards to future wedding plans. She had no intention of settling down with any of the shallow, frivolous men who courted her for her looks. She didn't blame them for falling into her web, not when she went to such lengths to attract their attention, but she did resent them a little, as contradictory as that was.

If Roz were a man...

Deepa wasn't sure how to finish that thought. If Roz were a man, Deepa doubted she'd be terribly interested. It was specifically the novelty of dancing with a woman, of kissing her, that made her heart burst with butterflies. She wanted a partner, a confidant, a friend, and an equal. No man could be those things to her, not when she entered every relationship knowing they only meant to use each other.

Roz was different. Emotionally, Roz could give her what she wanted. Financially, however, she was less than promising.

“Now,” said her mother, “is there anything you want to share with me? I can tell something is bothering you.”

Deepa froze. For a second, all her thoughts were of Roz, before she remembered her more dramatic secret. She couldn’t tell her mother about the curse. It had only been a week; that was hardly enough time to even try breaking it. There was no sense in worrying her mother until she had exhausted every option.

“Everything is fine,” she managed with a weak smile. For all her talent in lying to men, she was terrible at lying to her mother. “I’ve been busy, that’s all.”

Her mother gave a sceptical hum. “You work hard. You must take time to rest.”

“Ah, there will be time to rest later, when I’m done,” Deepa said, brushing aside her concern.

“And when will you be done, hm? Never. You have too many excuses to keep working.” Her mother waved her off when she opened her mouth to protest her innocence. “Yes, yes, it is all important. Fine. Tomorrow I will come back with chana masala and coconut rice to meet your new motorcar-girlfriend, yes? And maybe after you eat my cooking, you remember how I am your mother and you tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Yes, mama,” Deepa stammered.

Satisfied, her mother turned the conversation to gossip, catching her up on all the comings and goings of her employers, Elizabeth and her husband Arthur Leicester, and their permanent houseguest, the eccentric and renowned artist Jules Coxley. Deepa didn’t consider it malicious gossip, getting details of her friends’ personal lives from her mother. She had no intention of using any such details against them, and even if she did, Coxley especially had weathered worse scandals than anything

she could concoct.

He had been the one to introduce her to London's finest and most lucrative social circles, after she'd modelled for some of his art and he had painted her nude as Lady Godiva. Though she didn't owe him any favours, she was modestly grateful that he'd taken her under his wing in that time. Possibly, her good looks would have got her just as far without him, but he'd certainly saved her some time and effort.

Still, she enjoyed hearing her mother's tales of their household. Knowing Elizabeth, Deepa couldn't be entirely surprised that she'd caught herself two men for the price of one. Deepa's automatic reaction was to wish that she could also be so lucky — but that wasn't true. She didn't want two men; not even two men who adored her and wanted to provide for her every need. Elizabeth was actually friends with her husband and her...whatever Coxley was. Deepa could hardly imagine where to start when it came to cultivating a genuine friendship with a man.

So: she knew enough to say with confidence that she didn't want a husband. She'd always assumed that meant she must not want anyone at all.

The more time she spent with Roz, the more she had to question that assumption.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE MIDNIGHT GARDEN

That evening, Roz met her at The Songbird at the end of her set again.

“I have an idea,” she said, cornering Deepa backstage as the dancers came out in a sequined flock. “How much do you trust yourself after midnight?”

“That's quite the line,” Deepa noted, playing like it didn't thrill her. “Are you planning to seduce me?”

“Pretty sure I already have,” Roz returned with a crooked grin. “But I wanted to take you somewhere, if you're up for it. I know you haven't gone out since it happened.”

“Where?”

“Since you liked my dreamscape so much, I thought I'd find the nearest thing in real life. See if your cat enjoys it as much as you do.”

A great part of Deepa wanted to say yes without thinking twice. Yes, she wanted to spend more time with Roz, going anywhere, doing anything. She wasn't worried about letting her instincts get the better of her. If she could control herself in the flat, there was no reason she couldn't control herself anywhere else. But it wasn't herself she had to worry about.

“What are you going to tell people when they see you out walking with a giant wildcat?” she had to ask.

“No one will see us.”

“You can’t promise that,” Deepa pointed out. “There’s nowhere in London you can guarantee will be completely empty of people, no matter the hour.”

“It’s a private property outside the city, and the owner won’t ask questions. We can drive out there before midnight. Unless you don’t want to,” Roz added, her brow crumpling in a frown. “Obviously, that’s your call.”

“I want to,” Deepa said immediately, just to see Roz break into a smile again.

Roz drove her north of the city, where the rise of buildings first turned to suburbs, and then to fields of farmland. For all her nightlife spent in the city, Deepa had never driven through the countryside at night before, and the land looked navy and indigo as the city streetlamps were swallowed up by the darkness and left behind. In the country, there was no smog to blanket the sky, and the stars shone in a dazzling array above the horizon, entirely galaxies swirling across her field of vision.

Leaning forward to peer through the windshield, Deepa held her breath with wonder. She didn’t care if it made her look naïve or unworldly. With Roz, it was easier to shed the skin of that carefully-poised socialite and return to her younger self, when she had been so easily enchanted by the world, and so much easier to impress.

Behind the wheel, Roz drove with a faint smile on her lips, casting glances to Deepa on her left every so often, as if entertained by her sightseeing. But it was a warm, fond entertainment that didn’t feel anything like mockery.

“Most people get all starry-eyed seeing the city for the first time,” Roz said, “not

stretches of empty countryside.”

“I live in the city every day,” Deepa returned, not shifting her gaze from the scenery.
“England is beautiful at night.”

“As beautiful as India?”

“In a different way.”

“Careful,” Roz teased. “You could almost pass as a romantic.”

“Maybe I’d like to try being one for a little while,” Deepa murmured.

Pulling off the main road, Roz eased onto a dirt path that seemed designed for cart tracks more than car tyres, and they trundled along at a slower and slower pace until she finally pulled them off the path altogether and onto a flat shoulder of grass. In the near distance, a little cottage stood surrounded by mounds of flowerbeds, the first house Deepa had seen in miles. An apple tree stood between their car and the cottage, its gnarled branches grey in the dark, hunched over like a little old lady tending to her garden.

“This is Kelly’s place,” Roz said. “The boxing coach; you met her at my match?”

The strawberry blonde Irishwoman with the firm handshake: Deepa remembered her.

“You’ve got three minutes. I’ve been keeping my eye on the time, since I know it gets away from you,” Roz said, tapping her watch with a wink. “Do you want to turn out there, or in the car?”

“You’re sure no one will notice?” Deepa asked, already beginning to unwrap her sari. She was going to transform whether there were witnesses or not; there was no sense

in destroying her garments either way.

“Nobody comes walking out this way, and Kelly’s a good one. She’ll turn a blind eye if I ask her to.”

“Have you tested that?” Deepa asked sceptically.

With a grin, Roz reached over to open the passenger side door for Deepa, whose stomach swooped delightedly when Roz's arm brushed across her midsection.

“She’s like us,” Roz said. “She knows how to keep a secret.”

Like us. Not just like Roz, but the both of them. Deepa could hardly object. Roz might be the one going out with girls on the regular, but Deepa couldn’t deny her own interest in women. Compared to her feelings for Roz, she wasn’t sure she’d ever been interested in men at all, apart from their wallets. With a thoughtful hum, she unbuckled her heels and shimmied out of her stockings, peeling them over her toes one leg at a time, shifting from one hip to the other in her seat to make room. Roz watched like it was a strip tease.

“Come on,” Roz finally prompted, exiting the driver’s side and circling around to pull Deepa’s door open and usher her out.

As soon as Deepa set foot on solid ground, she changed, the leopard rippling over her as she dropped smoothly to all fours, stretching into a yawn and flicking her tail back and forth before looking up at Roz expectantly.

“Don’t look at me for instructions,” Roz said amusedly. “Go stretch your legs. Run. Hunt a rabbit or something.”

Deepa had never hunted anything before in her life, and didn't relish the thought of making such a mess. She wrinkled her nose at the prospect, and Roz laughed.

“Go on, go be a cat! If you’re going to spend every night like this, you might as well lean into it.”

As much as Deepa shrank from the thought of losing all her future nights to leoparddom, she had to admit that Roz had a point. The cottage grounds were lovely, and the night was crisp and fresh. If her transformation were voluntary instead of cursed, she would have no objection.

With a growl she could only hope sounded playful, she launched herself at Roz, all four paws colliding with the woman’s core. The impact knocked a laugh out of Roz, her arms coming up to hold Deepa around the shoulders, catching her in mid-air. Rumbling, Deepa rubbed her face against Roz’s cheek before licking a broad stripe over her chin and nose.

“Creature!” Roz laughed, shoving Deepa’s face away. “Get off me, you great bloody minx. Go find something for supper that isn’t my face.”

It was a straightforward suggestion, and a sensible one, but Deepa had a better idea. Mindful of her fangs, she opened her mouth and pressed the flat fronts of her teeth to Roz’s neck, a pantomime of a threat. Against her, Roz froze like a rabbit for just a second. Ever so carefully, Deepa exhaled, a hot rush of breath fanning Roz’s skin.

“Deepa?” Roz asked carefully.

Without words, Deepa replied by opening her jaws and very gently catching Roz’s throat between them. She did it with the utmost caution, applying only the barest pressure to that delicate skin and strong muscle, not nearly enough to risk a single drop of blood. Then, like the paintings of those legendary man-eaters back home, she held herself perfectly still and waited to see what Roz would do next.

“I know you’re not going to hurt me,” Roz murmured. Deepa could feel the vibration

of her voice through her throat. “You want to play?”

Deepa growled, wishing she could purr instead.

“Alright. Let’s play.”

By unspoken agreement, each simultaneously released the other. Without Roz to hold her up, Deepa dropped gracefully to the ground. She thrilled at the promise of a challenge in Roz’s expression, before, with a grin, Roz turned and ran. The darkness enveloped her within yards, but Deepa’s eyes were keen, and she could track Roz’s movements as easily as if it were broad daylight. Tense with anticipation, she waited until Roz was out of sight before bounding after her.

Her paws were silent against the soft earth, and she moved like a golden ghost. For the first time since the curse had been laid, she didn’t feel bespelled to take a feline form against her will. In that moment, she was a cat, and it was joyful, and that was all there was.

The cottage grounds were of a good size, but Roz could hardly outrun a leopard. Though Deepa had never tested her senses outside the flat before, she found herself instinctively honing in on Roz’s location, every sharpened scent and sound easily tracked through the trees and flowerbeds, around the little stone walls and wooden fences that shaped the gardens.

As she drew near to Roz, she slowed her pace, dropping to her belly to slink along, stalking her as a huntress stalks her prey. Roz, too, had stopped running, trying instead to find a hiding place, unable to catch sight of Deepa with her poor night vision even when she was so close, with her dappled coat camouflaging her amid the leaves.

Deepa felt at home in a predator’s skin. Though she played the part of a doe-eyed

innocent for the men, entreating them to provide for her as if she were a soft and helpless thing, she had always been a huntress. She was too hungry — for money, for power, for status — to ever think of herself as prey. Perhaps Phillip, despicable worm that he was, hadn't read her so wrong after all.

Three yards away, Roz clung to the trunk of a sweet cherry tree, peering out into the darkness. Roz might be playing the prey's part for Deepa's entertainment, but it didn't suit her any better. She carried herself too confidently, every movement strong and self-assured, broadcasting just how capable she was of looking after herself. The moonlight found every strand of silver in her dark hair and made them glitter like precious metals.

Crouching low under a stand of lion-headed dahlias, Deepa wrapped her tail around herself, paws pressed together as primly as any housecat, and drank in the sight of her. Roz was even more handsome by moonlight, with her strong hands and her boxer's stance, braced for anything. The silvery gardens lent her a delicate aura, like one of England's Arthurian knights in shining armour, proud and brave and capable.

Watching her, Deepa was not occupied by chivalrous thoughts. Though she wouldn't mind playing the part of a lady in need of Roz's rescue, she didn't particularly care for her knight to be chivalrous. Deepa was more interested in being whisked away in her knight's strong arms, without care for propriety, and laid out on a down-filled canopy bed with silk sheets and velvet covers. To be quite honest, she would rather like to be ravished by her knight in silver armour. Oaths of fealty and loyalty and dedication were all very nice and perfectly romantic, but the men in her clubs were full of such words, and she knew them to be little more than hot air. Instead of men of words, she wanted a woman of action.

"Here, pussycat," Roz called in a low voice, still shielded behind the cherry tree. "Come here, kitty. Come and get me."

Deepa obliged her. Giving in to every feline instinct, she stalked out from under the dahlias, winding around the cherry tree to approach Roz from behind. She was silent and all but invisible, and Roz had no idea where she was, still staring through the moonbeams as if Deepa would magically materialise before her. With her gaze fixed between Roz's broad shoulders, Deepa pounced. The press and release of her muscles as she leapt was like a tightly coiled spring set free.

Roz sensed her a bare instant before they collided, turning just in time for Deepa's forepaws to touch her shoulders. Everthe athlete, Roz moved with the impact rather than try to brace against it, and they tumbled to the ground in a harmless roll of limbs. Deepa landed on top, teeth bared in a victorious smile, adrenaline flooding her as she pinned Roz flat on her back.

"Never heard you coming," Roz panted up at her through her smile.

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But she wasn't content to let Deepa win so easily. In a move befitting a wrestler more than a boxer, she wrapped her legs around Deepa's middle and twisted to the side, effortlessly flipping Deepa off her and reversing their positions. Belly up, Deepa was no less dangerous, but Roz didn't seem concerned. She buried both hands in the thick, creamy fur of Deepa's belly, where her leopard spots were loosely painted like watercolour petals.

"You're magnificent like this, you know? The magic's coming off you in waves. I can practically taste it."

Deepa growled, not wanting the reminder, but Roz shook her head.

"It smells like you," she promised. "All you. Like cinnamon and cloves. Better than any of those soaps and perfumes you wear. Your magic's got a deeper layer to it than those, like the smell of your bedsheets in the morning. I love it."

Leaning close, she put her face against Deepa's throat, where her fur was shorter and impossibly soft, and breathed in deeply. Wrapping her paws around Roz's shoulders to hold her close, Deepa inhaled her smell in turn: her simple soap, her men's cologne, and her salt-musk sweat, committing it to memory before she returned to her human senses.

She wanted to keep Roz. Paradoxically, things were simpler as a leopard. Despite having the same human consciousness night and day, her feelings and desires seemed less complicated when she was transformed. At night, she wanted to give chase, and feel the thrill of victory when she caught her prey. She wanted to press her teeth to something soft and have it give way, and feel the earth under her paws, and stretch

out in the moonlight and admire the tiny diamond stars and great sweeping arms of the Milky Way above.

She wanted to curl up with someone warm and solid, and feel Roz's arms around her, and hold her in return. She felt possessive in a way she'd only ever felt about fine jewellery before. She wanted to keep Roz the way a leopard wanted to keep a cache of red meat, a broad territory to patrol, a dry den in which to sleep. Something and somewhere to call her own, where she would be safe. Roz could provide safety, her leopard instincts told her, contrary to her every human instinct looking for money and social security.

Laid out under the cherry tree that was just beginning to ripen with sweet, midnight-coloured fruit, with the moon caught in the branches above like a fat opal set in an intricate necklace, Deepa wanted to keep Roz like a leopard kept her mate.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN WHICH MATERNAL MATCHMAKING IS UNDERTAKEN

The next morning, after Deepa had returned to her flat, she lay in bed against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. Her sari, she bundled in both hands to hold over her heart, thin cotton warmed through with body heat so it almost felt like there was another person in bed with her. The ceiling was mottled, and in the watery morning light, she could pretend she was staring up into a sea of clouds.

She felt things for Roz she'd never felt for anyone, yet the continuation of her curse said it wasn't love.

Despite her foray into the world of sapphic sex, she didn't feel changed on any fundamental level, but then, she rarely felt fundamentally changed by anything. Her first kiss at twenty hadn't much changed her; neither had her first tumble with the

first of her many men. She was, at heart, a player and a con artist, and she'd long told herself that in order to achieve all she wanted, love would prove a frivolous commodity that she could ill afford.

As there was yet some distance between herself and her goals, love must, by necessity, be kept far from her heart and mind. She had so staunchly avoided any possibility of love that now, when her curse-breaking depended on it, love shied away, rebuffed too many times previously to indulge her.

But something fluttered in the pit of her stomach, something bright and tentative like a swallowtail butterfly yearning to flit its way up under her ribs to make a nest in her heart. Heat flared at the memory of Roz's touch, even though she was entirely alone. Squeezing her eyes shut, Deepa blocked out the fantasy of clouds and tamped down on both the butterfly and her rising warmth.

She and Roz had kissed, several times over now, and nothing had changed. Whether she wanted it to be love was irrelevant.

But maybe...maybe their next kiss would be the one to do it. Maybe next time, love would stop avoiding her and the curse would finally break.

"Get a hold of yourself, girl," she muttered.

The remonstrance didn't work.

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At noon, Roz arrived to meet Deepa's mother. She was dressed in nice taupe linen trousers, a matching jacket, and a tucked-in blouse of the palest blush pink. Her hair had a little wave to it, like she'd put extra effort into making herself look presentable. When Deepa greeted her at the door, she swooped in for a quick kiss on the cheek,

warm all over at the sight of her.

“My mother is already here. I hope you’re hungry; she’s brought enough food to feed a dance hall.”

“I can always eat,” Roz promised. “I brought — well, you didn’t say whether she drinks, but I brought a bottle of white anyway, and flowers, in case she doesn’t.” She presented a bottle with a label Deepa knew, more expensive than she would have expected from Roz, and a bouquet of bright, speckled orange and yellow lilies, the paper wrapping the stems only slightly rumpled at the corners.

“She enjoys a glass now and then, and she’ll love the flowers. And so do I,” Deepa added, giving her another appreciative kiss. “And the wine, too; it’s one of my favourites. Now, come on, come inside.”

Tugging Roz along by the wrist, Deepa took her to where Cherie and her mother were seated around the kitchen table, making small talk about the weather and nibbling on the plate of almond biscuits her mother had brought.

“Mama, this is Rosaline,” Deepa introduced. “Rosaline, this is my mother, and you’ve met Cherie before.”

“Mrs. Patel,” Roz said, stepping forward and holding out one hand for a shake. The wine, she tucked under her other arm, still holding the bouquet. “Pleased to meet you.”

As she accepted Roz’s hand, Deepa’s mother looked her up and down, from the tips of her freshly-polished oxfords to her short-shorn hair. Deepa held her breath. Her mother was a traditional lady in many ways, and Deepa wanted her approval.

Then again, maybe she needn’t have worried. After all, Elizabeth and Arthur ran a

rather unconventional household, having invited Coxley into their marriage, and Deepa's mother had never breathed a word against them. But then, there was a world of difference between judging the actions of her employers, who paid her wages, and those of her only daughter.

“It is lovely to meet you, Rosaline,” Deepa's mother said genially. “Sit, sit. Tell me, how did you meet my Deepa? She says you do not go to her club. She says you work on motorcars.”

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“That’s right, ma’am.” Roz claimed a spot on the loveseat; Deepa perched on the other cushion beside her. “I’m a mechanic; I work at a shop in north London. I met yourDeepa when I was downtown for a night. Some mutual friends introduced us.”

“Aaliyah and Jasmine,” Deepa supplied.

“Oh yes, those are nice girls, very good.”

“These are for you,” Roz offered belatedly, as if only just realising she was still holding her gifts, rising and brandishing the flowers somewhat awkwardly. “I know Deepa’s fond of pretty things, so I hoped you’d appreciate the same. And wine, too.”

Deepa’s mother tutted, as admonishing as she was pleased. “You shouldn’t have.” Accepting the bundle, she brought them to her face to take a deep breath. “They are beautiful. Tiger lilies?”

“Ditch lilies, we always called them,” Roz confessed, setting the wine on the kitchen table before returning to her seat and scrubbing her hands over her knees. “Tiger lilies sound a good bit classier, don’t they?”

“I’ll get a vase,” Deepa said, rising with one hand on Roz’s shoulder to keep her from getting up again.

Roz obeyed, nodding to Cherie at the table. “Good to see you again, Cher.”

“And you. Do you like Indian? Because Mrs. Patel is the most amazing cook I’ve ever met.”

At the kitchen sink with her back to the others, Deepa smiled as she filled a tall glass to keep the flowers fresh. Roz was flustered, like she'd never actually met anyone's mother before and didn't know what to do. It was endearing. Not that Deepa enjoyed seeing her wrong-footed, but she did like to see Roz less than perfectly composed.

Arranging the lilies in their makeshift vase, Deepa caught a flash of crimson from deep within the bouquet. Using both hands to part the splashes of speckled orange and green, she found a single rose nestled in the heart of the bouquet like a secret meant for her alone. Hiding her smile amongst the petals, she breathed it in before adjusting the lilies to cover it again, not wanting to share the secret Roz had gifted her.

"Start with a biscuit, my dear," Deepa's mother said, picking up the plate from the table and passing it over as Deepa returned to the loveseat. "Tell me, that accent: what is that? I hear it from some people in London, but I never know where exactly they originate."

"Manchester, ma'am," Roz said with a broad smile, taking an almond biscuit as instructed. "You hear this accent, you know we're good Northern working-class folks, none of that posh nonsense you hear down here sometimes."

Deepa's mother nodded sagely. "And how did you come to work on motorcars?"

"My dad had a shop. My brother and I both grew up underfoot, watching him tinker with whatever he could get his hands on. I come by it naturally. And I don't think the motorcars are going to disappear anytime soon, so it feels like decent job security."

"Very good. No husband for you?"

"Definitely not," Roz confirmed with a polite smile.

“That can be good, especially if you are making your own way in the world.”

“Mama!” Deepa exclaimed. “You never say any such thing to me.”

“Rosaline is not my daughter,” Deepa’s mother returned amicably. “And a mechanic is a good, reliable job. She can support herself without anyone worrying.”

“I could probably support someone else, too, if they didn't mind living a bit tight,” Roz said, glancing at Deepa.

The look didn't go unnoticed. “How long have you known each other?” her mother asked, passing the biscuits around again. “I like to meet Deepa’s friends, but she so rarely introduces me.”

“Oh, we’re only recent acquaintances,” Roz said casually.

Deepa’s mother raised her brows. “Acquaintances? Deepa, I have never met acquaintances before. Tell me, Roz, do you own your own shop? Or will your father give you his when he is done?”

She was investigating Roz’s prospects, Deepa realised, as surely as if Roz were one of her many male suitors. Before Roz could enmesh herself deeper in this subtle marital interrogation, Deepa blurted, “Mama, she’s also a boxer.”

Her mother blinked. “A boxer?”

“I fight,” Roz supplied, rubbing one hand over the back of her neck. “I...I hit people. As a sport.” She shot Deepa a wide-eyed look as if to ask, Why would you tell her that?

Deepa winced apologetically in response. It wasn't her intention to make Roz look

bad; she'd panicked, needing to change the subject before her mother could go into full matchmaking mode. Matchmaking had been one of her greatest passions before leaving Gujarat, and she had far fewer opportunities to practice it now, especially with full-time employment occupying her days.

"I am not very familiar with boxing," Deepa's mother admitted. Hopefully, she added, "I don't suppose you play football at all? Or cricket?"

"I play football with my mates sometimes," Roz agreed, "though not so much anymore. Good game. That's big in India, yeah?"

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“My Deepa used to play,” her mother confirmed proudly, and Deepa nodded along.

One of her only memories of her father — one of the only good memories, anyway — was kicking a football around with him on the rare occasion he had time to spare away from work or his constant philandering. But her mother disliked hearing any mention of the man, which Deepa supposed was fair enough, so she brushed aside Roz’s curiosity without elaborating.

“I was a little girl,” she said. “It was good fun, but I never played properly, and I wouldn’t know where to start now.”

“I could show you,” Roz offered.

“Anyone can kick a ball around,” Cherie cut in around a mouthful of almond crumbs. Standing, she went to poke hungrily at the food warming on the stovetop. “You should teach her to box, instead. That sounds much better fun.”

“Cherie!” Deepa hissed, casting a mortified look at her mother.

“What? Are you telling me you wouldn’t want to?”

Deepa absolutely wanted to. The thought of getting Roz alone in her boxing gear and putting their hands all over each other was more than enticing, and something she absolutely did not need to be imagining in her mother's company.

“You would teach my daughter to box?” Deepa’s mother asked, regarding Roz intently.

“If she wants me too, yeah, sure, of course. I mean, if it's alright with you, Mrs. Patel.”

Deepa's mother wore a shrewd expression. “Deepa, my love? Is that what you want? To learn boxing from this woman?”

Deepa was keenly aware that boxing may have turned into a metaphor for something else entirely. Swallowing an undignified meep, she shot Cherie a pleading look, requesting backup. Seeing as she was the one who got Deepa into it in the first place, Cherie took pity and instigated a distraction.

“Mrs. Patel! Sorry to interrupt, but you've got to tell me what spices you use in this.”

On the stove, the chana masala simmered in its pot, creamy orange and yellow sauce bubbling around the chickpeas and chunky vegetables. In the pan on the other burner, the rotis were browning nicely, puffing up in the middle as they warmed through.

“I've made it for you before,” Deepa's mother said, getting up to join Cherie by the stove.

“You have, and it's brilliant, but I don't know the first thing about seasonings. And all this talk about marriage, it's got my head spinning, and I just think that when I do get myself a husband, I want to be able to cook for him at least half as well as you cook for us.”

Deepa's mother clucked disapprovingly, bustling Cherie out of the way in order to stir the pot. “Cooking for your husband is well and good, but you must find a man who is not afraid of the kitchen. If he cannot or will not cook for you at least once in a while, he is no good. That is a warning sign of greater trouble on the horizon, and you should throw the whole man out right away.”

“Mama Patel!” Cherie said with a gasp, delightedly scandalised.

“Rosaline?” Deepa’s mother asked, with a pointed look. “Do you cook?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Roz replied, struggling to hide her grin. “I know my way around the kitchen. I’ve got my mother’s pot pie recipe for Sunday dinners and my da’s roast for special occasions. Nothing fancy, especially compared to yours, I’m sure — smells amazing — but I can put on a decent spread when I need to.”

“And vegetarian meals?”

“There, I’ve less experience, but I expect with some practice I could figure it out.”

Deepa’s mother gave an approving hum and returned her attention to the stove.

Leaning sideways towards Deepa on the loveseat, Roz asked in an undertone, obviously amused, “Is your mother trying to set us up?”

“All she’s ever wanted is to see me married off to someone good,” Deepa replied with an exasperated huff. “Apparently, she’s accepted that all the men in my circle are useless, so she’s broadening her parameters.”

“She’s a nice lady. I like her.”

“The feeling seems mutual.”

“Should I ask for her blessing?” Roz teased.

“Don’t you dare. She’d give it to you, at this point. That’s how badly she wants to see me settle down.”

“Well, I know how you feel about a traditional marriage. What about an untraditional one?”

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Deepa faltered. Her words literally got lost on the way from her brain to her tongue, and she floundered for a second before rallying. "It's been a week," she managed, pulling out her flirtiest smile. "Surely not even your lot move as fast as that."

Slinging one arm over the back of the cushions, Roz rolled her shoulders and offered an easy smile. "I've seen it happen. Some women skip the engagement and go straight to living together, moving in and getting all domestic-like. No one looks twice at two unmarried women the way they do at a mixed couple."

"Would you do that?" Deepa asked, powerfully curious and equally terrified of the answer.

Roz shrugged, her smile so carefully constructed that it had to be a front. "In theory? I suppose so. Never met a woman who put me to the test before."

"But you'd consider it," Deepa pressed.

Before Roz could answer, Deepa's mother announced the meal was ready, and any potential marriage proposals were thankfully put on hold.

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"I like her," Deepa's mother murmured, drawing her close to say their goodbyes after tea. At the kitchen sink, Cherie and Roz washed the dishes, Roz studiously scrubbing each one clean before handing them over for Cherie to dry. "Was that what was worrying you earlier, that I would not like your new friend because she is a boxer and a mechanic and has no interest in a husband? I have always liked the friends you let

me meet. You are a good judge of character, my dove. I will like anyone who makes you happy.”

“I wasn’t worried about anything,” Deepa said with a smile, as if she could lie to her mother. “But I’m glad you like Roz.”

“I see she is important to you. And I see she makes you smile.” Stepping back, her mother patted Deepa’s cheek with a nod. “You should smile more often. Those men at your club, they are not good enough for you. I do not like to see you waste your time with them.”

“It’s not wasted time, mama. They’re paying my rent.”

Shaking her head, her mother dismissed that old argument rather than rehashing it for the hundredth time, only because Roz and Cherie were around. She preferred not to cause that kind of fuss in front of company.

“I will be back next Saturday,” she said instead. “And you will call me if you need anything, yes?”

“Of course, mama, but I’m sure we won’t. You made enough food to feed us for a month.”

“Anything,” her mother repeated, tapping one finger against Deepa’s chest. “Anything at all.”

If Deepa ever found the words to explain to her mother that she was cursed, then yes, perhaps she would call and say so. As a last resort. Until then, she would exhaust literally every other alternative and break the curse without ever burdening her mother with that knowledge. With any luck, now that Roz had her mother’s approval, her curse-breaking would be as simple as their next kiss.

“Yes, mama,” she promised, like a liar, with a brilliant vermillion smile. “I’ll call.”

With her mother’s departure, Roz finished the dishes and joined her by the door, slinging an arm low around Deepa’s waist and a kiss to her shoulder. Deepa worried for a moment that Roz was going to revisit that whole not-quite-a-proposal conversation, but it was the sort of worry that was easily confused with anticipation.

“Don’t think I’ve ever had anyone’s mother’s blessing before,” Roz noted, endlessly amused.

“Like I said, she’s getting increasingly desperate.”

Deepa softened her words into a light tease, putting her arms around Roz so they stood face to face, their embrace close but loose.

“You know, your accent comes out stronger when you’re with her,” Roz told her, her attention on Deepa’s lips. “Sounds pretty as anything. I love it.”

Deepa stole a quick kiss, enjoying the flirtatious banter, but Roz dropped her gaze, something more serious on her mind. Deepa sobered, outlining patterns against the lapels of Roz’s jacket.

“The thing is,” Roz said, “is I could provide for you.”

Deepa’s heart stuttered, as anxious as she was thrilled, resulting in tumultuous confusion.

“I make a perfectly good living wage,” Roz continued, running her hands up Deepa’s arms, “and I could support myself and a wife in a little house with a garden, and that would be enough for me. For plenty of folks. I know you want bigger things, and that’s fine. I get it. But I could give you a comfortable enough life if you’d let me.”

“I don’t want to be comfortable enough,” Deepa said with a dry mouth. “I want everything there is to have.” Before Roz could say anything, Deepa lifted one hand to forestall her, pressing over her heart. “I don’t believe that makes us incompatible,” she said quickly. “Maybe the odds are stacked a little higher against us, but the odds have always been against people like us. We’ve beat them thus far, and I have no intention of laying down and simply accepting what the world offers me. We can beat them the rest of the way.”

“You want more than I have to give, but you don’t take that as a sign to look elsewhere?” Roz asked carefully.

“No, because I want what you’re offering. I just want more. And I think that's a scenario we can make work.” Deepa paused. “Are you actually proposing to me right now?”

“Don’t think I can propose without a ring.”

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The relief was as strong as the bewildering disappointment.

“Just testing the waters,” Roz continued. “No sense in treading water if neither of us think we can handle getting any deeper, is there?”

Deepa had never attempted swimming into deeper waters with anyone. The risk of drowning was a messy business that had never seemed worth taking before.

“I don’t know how ready I am to dive in all the way,” she said carefully. “This is all uncharted, for me. But I might like to leave the shallows, if you don’t mind going slowly.”

“None of this has been slow so far,” Roz pointed out. “You’ve been making every move like you’re in a race against time.”

Every night felt like a race with that curse nipping at her heels, mocking her lack of love.

They’d been on dates, been to bed, literally and figuratively slept together, and won her mother’s approval. Surely it wouldn’t require an actual wedding ceremony to prove that Deepa deserved her curse to be broken.

“Let’s try it,” she said decisively. “Nothing drastic. Just a trial-run at partnership to see where it takes us.”

A complicated emotion flashed over Roz’s face before she bit her tongue, set her jaw, and nodded. “Alright. If you believe we can make it work, then we’ll give it a go.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN WHICH A MARRIAGE SCHEME IS CONCOCTED AT THE ROYAL ASCOT

Deepa's first public appearance with Lyndon Appleton was at the Berkshire horse tracks on a gloriously sunny Tuesday afternoon, the best day England had seen in a week. The stands were as bright as any jungle, with the women in their enormous plumaged hats and floral dresses, and the men in their colourful ties and pocket squares and patterned sports coats. On the track, in a rainbow of silks, the jockeys warmed up their mounts, riding around in a great loop. So far away, they looked like children's toys parading in the sunshine.

Somewhat less sunny was Appleton's mood.

"I don't care for horse racing," Appleton explained, "but the equestrian world is close-knit. I can't afford not to make an appearance once or twice a year. The Royal Ascot, especially, expects me."

"You're an equestrian?" That would explain his impeccable posture even more than whatever peerage he claimed.

"Dressage. Do you ride?"

"Naturally. My father has a stable of a hundred Marwari horses."

He glanced at her. "Of course. Your father, the maharajah?"

"Yes, him." Leaning into him, Deepa added, "You never told me anything of your own family, by the way. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"What do you need to know?"

“Mostly whether I should be calling you Lord Appleton or Your Grace.”

“Please don’t,” he said with a subtle grimace.

“But you are of the peerage, aren’t you?”

“The Earl of Hertford,” he admitted with great reluctance.

Lord Appleton it was, then.

“And I’d been hoping for a duke,” she joked. Which was true, but she wasn’t going to turn her nose up at an earl, either.

Appleton resisted scoffing or rolling his eyes, though she could tell he wanted to. Refusing to indulge her, he returned his attention and conversation to the horses. “I keep Andalusians, myself. If you ever find yourself missing your father’s horses, you’re welcome to visit my estate.”

“You’re generous,” Deepa demurred. She’d never actually sat on a horse before, never mind ridden one with any competency, but then, she suspected Appleton knew that. Regardless, he seemed content to play along with her charade. It would be hypocritical not to, considering the charade they were enacting for his benefit.

Deepa was decked in the latest English fashions, from her hat to her heels, every article of clothing designed to display both wealth and taste. She swept aside the musical lilt of her home country in order to adopt a posh English accent to match Appleton’s, blending in seamlessly with the native speakers.

Obviously, she still stood out; even besides the colour of her skin and the impressive length of her obsidian-black hair, the myriad enchantments on her dress ensured it. On stage at The Songbird, she often donned the brightly patterned saris with which

she'd grown up and allowed her natural accent to carry her speech, playing into the patrons' fantasies of exotic orientalism.

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With Appleton, she played a different part. She still needed to be eye-catching, of course, but with her arm looped through his, she had to look like she belonged. Appleton didn't need the illusion of a mistress or a jazz club singer. He needed someone to be taken seriously as a potential wife. The Royal Ascot counted the British royal family among its audience; it was not a place to seem shabby or common.

To fit in with the likes of Appleton was only marginally more challenging a role than her usual fare. She had too much practice playing too many parts since swimming into London's high-society to fail now.

Appleton was obviously well respected, even if he wasn't entirely comfortable rubbing elbows with his peers. He came from the kind of family other old-money families kept tabs on, keeping track of one another's business dealings and marriages, which were often synonymous. For Appleton, notorious bachelor that he was, showing up to one of England's most popular racing events with a woman on his arm — a new-money socialite, no less — immediately made him the centre of everyone's attention. And centre stage was where Deepa thrived, no matter the circumstance.

Appleton was in a rose grey suit of the finest linen for the summer weather, his tie pink, while Deepa's dress was carnelian red, with the largest hat imaginable pinned in place atop her up-do. The wide-brimmed hat was buttercup yellow to bring out her dress's lighter shades, as her lipstick and rouge served to highlight its redder tones. Together, they made a sophisticated pair, and though she was without an engagement ring, whispers were already swirling.

On the track, one of the announcers was calling out the horses' names and numbers as

the jockeys lined up behind the gate. The horses jostled, all tossing heads and stamping hooves, champing restlessly at the bit, knowing what was coming and eager to run. The horses' names didn't mean anything to Deepa, nor probably to most of the onlookers, but Appleton and his equestrian colleagues paid attention as if they were to be tested later.

"You don't strike me as a betting man," Deepa said, tucking herself under his arm to press against his side in a rustle of skirts, looking every bit the attentive date. "But tell me, how do people guess which one is going to win?"

"If they're being serious about it, they'll know each of the horses' pedigrees and track records. For many of these horses, this is their first race, though people may have been following their training. Conformation also plays a role in the betting, and you can reliably judge a horse's looks without knowing anything of their background. Good conformation is king, above all."

"Who would you suggest I stake my money on, then?"

"The race is starting. Bets are closed now."

She leaned more of her weight against him, urging him to stop scowling at the track and look at her, instead. "I know that, darling. I'm not actually placing bets. Play along."

"I would put my money on the dark bay colt in green," Appleton said reluctantly. "His sire won the Epsom Derby last year, and his dam comes from a Spanish line to which I'm partial. He looked good in the warm-ups, with a long stride and a level head."

That all sounded perfectly good to Deepa, and meant absolutely nothing to her. "I'll bet on that silver-looking one with the white stockings."

“The filly on the outside? Why her?”

“I like the colour,” Deepa said truthfully. It reminded her of Roz’s hair.

Roz, who still wasn’t her true love. Their goodbye kiss on Sunday after they had tentatively committed to taking their relationship more seriously had failed to break her curse; so too had all their kisses on Monday evening, stolen in a tiny window after Roz had finished her day’s work at the garage. They couldn’t spend every day and night together, no matter how they might have liked to, not with Roz needing to keep a schedule at the garage, even if Deepa’s time was more flexible.

For all that Roz’s kisses were clearly not what the curse-breaking required, Deepa couldn’t bring herself to cut things off and go hunting for a new potential love. Being with Roz felt right, even if it wasn’t perfect. Deepa had never believed in love; there was no reason to feel hurt by its lack now.

A sharp crack from the starting pistol split the air, the gate clanged open, and the horses flew out in a thunder of hoofbeats. Around them, the stands erupted in cheers and shouts as onlookers egged their chosen horses on, but Deepa was more interested in studying the people around her than in the race. It was her job to make a convincing partner for Appleton, and she needed to know whether people were paying them the correct amount of attention.

Besides the whispers fluttering nearby, she caught more than one stolen glance from the corner of her eye. Appleton must truly have been a solitary figure prior to their arrangement, if all it took to get people talking was a pretty girl on his arm for a single afternoon. Still, rumours were strange beasts, and Deepaknew how quickly they could go running off with a life of their own, far from their originator’s intent.

“Put your arm around my waist,” she murmured in Appleton’s ear.

“Pardon?”

“You’re being far too polite and proper with me. You don’t want anyone looking at the two of us and assuming I’m like a sister to you.”

“You look nothing like my sister.”

“A cousin, then. A distant relative; it doesn’t matter. Just put your arm around me, put your hand lower than you think it should be, and act enamoured.”

Dutifully, Appleton embraced her, placing his hand against her lower back like he was afraid her dress might bite him. He was doing his best, but he was far more occupied by the race than by her company as the horses charged into the homestretch. Watching them, Appleton was tense, radiating disapproval as if expecting a disaster at any moment.

“What on earth are you afraid is going to happen?” she asked. The horses all looked focused on the track ahead, the jockeys competent, so it wasn’t as if they were waiting for chaos to break out at any second.

“Accidents aren’t uncommon at the races,” Appleton replied through gritted teeth, not taking his gaze from the track.

The first horse, a leggy chestnut, swept over the finish line, and the crowd absolutely exploded. Second came Appleton’s bay colt, followed by all the others running in a tight pack, from which Deepa was just able to pick out her silver filly at the forefront.

It was only when the last horse crossed the finish line without incident that Appleton relaxed, and Deepa realised he’d been holding his breath for the horses’ safety.

“Second and third!” she said brightly, facing him so she could throw both arms

around his neck. “That's not bad, is it? Come on, give me a kiss to celebrate.”

She had no doubt the kiss looked as playful as it did passionate, but it felt like nothing at all when his lips met hers. Though she was a consummate actress, she felt not the faintest spark for him, not even a bloom of warmth from the physical contact. He wasn't as good an actor; she could tell he didn't feel anything either, but none of that mattered as long as they looked convincing.

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“Are we schmoozing around with all your friends now that the race is over?” she asked against his lips.

“Friends is a strong word.”

“Then you won’t feel bad for lying to them about how you’re so infatuated with me. Don’t worry,” she added, stepping back and trailing her hands down his arms until she reached his fingers. “You don’t need to do anything other than introduce me, and follow my lead.”

It was obvious that Appleton had little interest in the other racetrack attendees, but he took Deepa around and introduced her to everyone he could tolerate. She quickly determined the difference between the people he actually disliked and those in whom he was simply disinterested through no fault of their own. His problem, she guessed, was that he would always rather be at home with his horses than out socialising with other people, no matter who they were or how friendly they might be.

She would have felt bad for dragging him back and forth between so many different people, smiling and chatting with the women and very pointedly not flirting with the other men, except that he’d hired her to do exactly that. He didn’t seem to care if people disliked him or thought him rude, which was just as well, because she couldn’t work miracles to that extent. He only cared that people might think that he didn’t like women the right way, and even then, he probably would have been happy to ignore that too if it didn’t have more serious ramifications.

“Lyndon, old thing,” said a possible cousin whom Deepa could have sworn was someone from parliament, flushed and tipsy from celebratory champagne after

winning his bets. “So good to see you! You’re never at these things, you know, and we miss you, old boy.”

“You have Deepa to thank for today, I think,” said Appleton.

An older woman in a cream dress and severe pearls looked Deepa up and down, a fluffy plume bobbing judgementally from her fascinator. “Appleton, dear boy. How on earth did you end up with a woman like this?”

Deepa’s smile sharpened like a knife’s edge, perfectly friendly and terrifyingly polite as she waited for the group to decide whether the woman was being complimentary or insulting. She knew how it was intended, of course, but these things tended to go by popular vote.

“We met at Eden,” Appleton said, entirely truthfully.

“He asked me to dance,” Deepa supplied, “I said yes, and he hasn’t let me go since.”

“Of course you said yes,” the older woman said with a haughty sniff.

“Well, naturally,” laughed a younger woman in a royal blue dress. “Who would say no to Lyndon?”

“A bit of a late bloomer, but it had to happen sometime, eh?” the cousin said jovially, clapping Appleton on the shoulder.

“I’ve been out dancing before,” said Appleton. “I just prefer to keep my private life private.”

That, Deepa suspected, was also true.

“Oh, but I love going out,” she said with a bright smile. “I told him, it’s perfectly alright with me to stay joined at the hip, but we can’t stay cooped up the entire week without getting some fresh air and seeing the sights.”

“Did he keep you dancing as long as that?” asked another of the women, leaning in and just begging for gossip.

“I wouldn’t have thought Appleton had it in him,” added her man, casting Appleton a speculative glance.

“We danced at Eden, yes, absolutely,” Deepa confirmed. “And then he took me home and we spent the next two days in bed!”

The group laughed in delight and no small amount of surprise, as much for her saying it as at the thought of Appleton, of all people, keeping a woman in his bed for so long, or at all.

“It’s a marvellous way to spend the time, don’t get me wrong,” Deepa said, wrapping her arm tighter around Appleton’s back to keep him from making an escape. “But I’m afraid I’m much more of a social butterfly than poor Lyndon. I’ve been threatening to drag him out to all manner of parties. I simply couldn’t let him miss the Royal Ascot — this one, at least, was an easy battle to win.”

“Does that mean we’ll be seeing more of you this summer?” asked another of the men. “I know you take your horsemanship seriously, and your training keeps you so terribly busy all the time, but it would be jolly good to see you out more.”

“I find I’m hard-pressed to refuse Deepa anything she asks,” said Appleton, turning into her. He didn’t exactly look besotted, but he was trying. “You’ll see me at the Royal International Horse Show next month, at the very least.”

“July!” the man began, dismayed.

“Oh, you’ll certainly see us before that,” Deepa cut in, giving Appleton a gentle nudge of admonishment. “July is still terribly far away, and I’m sure I can convince him to socialise with more people than horses if I try hard enough.”

“Of course, darling,” he murmured, gracefully acquiescing. He still felt a little stiff, but it was only their first time out together. Hopefully he would warm up with practice.

As the afternoon swam on, Deepa relaxed, and gradually, the conversations moved away from her and Appleton — though scrutiny remained — and she was able to drift along with the ebb and flow of talk rather than having to direct it from start to finish.

“You seem thoughtful,” Appleton noted during a momentarily lull, during which the two of them went off to fetch fresh drinks.

“Do I?” she asked airily.

He didn't comment on it again.

Deepa was, in fact, running through a number of thoughts. First and foremost being: this is everything I've ever wanted. To fit in amongst London's elite, to be accepted as one of them; she even enjoyed the sharp edges and petty cattiness that was to be expected. It was everything she'd been working towards, presented on a silver platter with a cherry on top. She'd been afraid that once her goals were realised, she would find them lacking, a sign of perpetual dissatisfaction.

This was perhaps worse. It was like slipping into a form-fitting dress, tailored specifically to her body. It tasted like the creamiest, melt-in-her-mouth chocolate mousse. Every minute she spent masquerading as Appleton's partner was a minute of bright, victorious heaven. Her exploits in *The Songbird* faded in comparison. Her little flat housing all her earthly belongings seemed embarrassingly small. Appleton's world glittered, like the London elite lived insulated from the struggles and mundanities of reality inside a shimmering snow globe. And finally, instead of skating over the glass's surface, pretending to be one of them, Deepa had been invited inside, and it was everything she'd ever dreamed.

It was, most unfortunately, worth marrying a man to access permanently.

Even if Appleton didn't really want to court her, he could introduce her to the right calibre of man. Not the ones who went skulking about clubs and dance halls looking for a fantasy woman, but an aristocrat looking for a proper, respectable wife. She could make herself into whatever manner of woman he wanted, and she could be set up for the rest of her life. Her mother need never work another day. She could have access to the sort of money that obliterated every earthly stress and worry.

Two problems threatened to snarl this imaginary future.

The first was the matter of her curse. Condemning herself to marriage and living out the rest of her days as someone's wife was something she could stomach, provided it granted her access to this particular snow globe in exchange. Finding a husband who would give her everything she wanted who was also understanding of his wife turning into a leopard every night was rather another, and one she suspected would prove more challenging.

The second problem was Roz. Or rather, the lack of Roz. Unlike Deepa, Roz couldn't reinvent herself to fit into such a world. Furthermore, she had no interest in trying. And not even a lack of interest — Deepa expected that if she asked, Roz would scoff at the idea of wanting to spend any time among the upper class, let alone belong there.

Deepa whirled through possibilities. She could recommend Roz's garage to all her new friends when their motorcars needed servicing. She could make Roz the go-to mechanic for the rich and fashionable of London.

She pulled up short. She wanted to drag Roz into this shiny new world alongside her, but for what? If Deepa was to marry her way into elite society, Roz could either be her friend or a footnote in her past, but not her lover.

Deepa had long been prepared to sacrifice anything in order to achieve her goals. In that respect, she fancied herself ruthless. Why, then, did the thought of sacrificing her potential future with Roz hurt like a fresh bruise? Especially when there was evidently no love between them? Affection, certainly, but Deepa could build affection easily enough with someone else. She might even come to feel affection towards the right man, if he was rich enough and he treated her well.

The solution to both problems, she realised in a burst of genius, was the man already

on her arm. Appleton knew her priorities, and they were laying the public groundwork of their relationship. He wasn't interested in occupying her nights or her bed, and certainly wouldn't care whether or not she loved him. She even doubted he would object to her carrying on a clandestine lesbian affair, as long as she was discreet. The Earl of Hertford was the perfect answer to her question of how to make her fortune and keep Roz at the same time.

Of course, he might require some convincing before he could muster any enthusiasm for the idea. That was alright. Deepa had a great deal of practice convincing men to see things her way.

“We can go, if you like,” Appleton murmured. “We’ve been here long enough to get them talking.”

She turned to him with a dazzling smile. “One more kiss, before the curtains fall?”

They kissed, and people pointed and whispered behind their hands, and, though she felt no satisfaction from the kiss itself, she did feel a fierce surge of hope and determination for her new course of action.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A GARDEN PARTY AND A PROPOSAL REJECTED

“You’re inviting me out to third-wheel on your date with some rich bloke?” Roz asked doubtfully.

When she put it like that, it did sound a bit much of an ask.

Deepa had rung her up on The Songbird telephone behind the bar that Saturday morning, having just received the invite herself. Appleton was requesting her

company at a garden party hosted by his sister, which was apparently the only reason he expected it to be at all tolerable, knowing the hostess was in his corner even if he wasn't interested in any of the guests. It was a relatively casual event, nothing like the Royal Ascot or even a high-profile dinner party, so Appleton had encouraged Deepa to invite any of her socialite friends along.

She expected he was broadening the invitation so there would be more people in attendance to deflect attention away from him. Even when he was going out specifically to start new rumours about his love life, it seemed he couldn't help but shy away from the limelight. Deepa only felt a little bad for him, but she readily agreed to invite her friends along. Aaliyah, Elizabeth, Alphonse, and Coxley would thrive at such a party. Where Aaliyah went, she would take Jasmine, who at least had the wardrobe to fit in with the richer classes, even if she came from a drastically different background herself.

Roz, on the other hand, had neither the wardrobe nor the inclination. Deepa's earlier fantasy of making a place for Roz in high society was still alluring, no matter how unrealistic. She had the means to make it happen; she only needed Roz to be open to it.

"I'm inviting you because it's going to be fun," Deepa said, hoping to convince herself as much as Roz. "Aaliyah and Jasmine are coming as well, so you won't be by yourself while I'm busy. And Appleton is paying me to be his date. There's absolutely nothing more to it."

"So, it's just work."

"Yes, exactly. And it would make the work less tedious to have you around."

"Do I have to meet him?"

Deepa wished she would. They'd have to meet eventually, if her perfect plan were to come together. Instead, she said, "Just wear something nice, dance with my friends, and have a good time."

"Something nice," Roz repeated. She still didn't sound convinced. "This isn't a club where I can blend in and do my own thing. How nice are we talking?"

"It's a garden party, not a wedding. The suit you wore to meet my mother will do perfectly well, if you don't have anything else."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:15 pm

Roz sighed. “Look, I appreciate the invite, but garden parties aren’t really my scene, you know?”

“No one's going to question it if you turn up with Aaliyah,” Deepa said, frowning down the receiver. “I wouldn't ask if I thought anyone was going to be wretched about your clothes or your work. I won’t let that happen.”

“There’s no need for you to defend me if I just don't go,” Roz pointed out.

“But I want you there.”

There was a pause, long enough that Deepa nearly checked to see if the call had been disconnected.

“Then I'll come,” Roz said finally.

“It will be good,” Deepa promised, and hoped she wasn’t lying.

As the party was hosted on his own estate, Appleton couldn't exactly put it off or arrive fashionably late. He collected Deepa from The Songbird as he’d done before, and the drive from the city to the countryside wasn't so much nervous as it was resigned.

“You’d think we were driving to a funeral,” Deepa said from the passenger side, foregoing delicacy for the sake of her curiosity. “I have to ask, do you always resent being made to have a social life, or is it only so bad because you’re having to put on this act with me?”

“It’s nothing to do with you,” he replied, casting her a glance that wasn’t exactly fond, but it wasn’t cold, either. “I approached you with this, after all.”

“It’s the necessity of putting on an act at all, then,” she guessed, and he inclined his head in agreement.

“I would much prefer to be left alone. If I choose not to make time with women, if I show myself to be disinterested in marriage, I don’t see why that should be anyone else’s business.”

“The curse of being born into a highly-visible family,” she said lightly.

“I don’t make a habit of complaining about my lot in life,” Appleton said curtly. “I recognise the immense privilege under which I’ve been brought up. But I have no interest in politics, nor in any great business ventures, nor anything else that should put me in the public eye. All I want to do is train my horses, and compete. If my parents wish to bemoan my lack of a fiancée, wife, or children, that’s well within their rights. But for anyone else to be whispering about it or speculating behind my back—” He shook his head. “If I could disappear entirely, I would.”

“It’s not impossible to disappear,” Deepa mused, “though it would certainly be to a drastically different quality of life.”

“Rather less possible if I want to take my horses with me,” he said dryly.

“So, instead, you came up with a plan to make yourself even more visible.”

“Unfortunately, yes. This stunt with you should buy me some time, though how much, I won’t presume to guess.”

“Have you given any thought to actually getting married?” Deepa asked in a voice of

perfectly innocent curiosity.

He cast her a sidelong glance from behind the wheel. “In the most literal sense, yes. Enough to determine that I’m disinterested in the prospect.”

“As am I.” She drummed her nails against the car door, a steady beat that didn’t betray her nerves. She needed to handle the conversation delicately, so as not to frighten him off. “In a traditional marriage, that is.”

He didn’t reply, but he was clearly awaiting her next line.

“I have a couple of friends who are in a similar position to us, I think. Disinterested in marriage, I mean. In order to avoid the same family pressure and rumour mill that’s currently hounding you, they decided to get married despite their disinterest, and it’s turned out to be a surprisingly happy union.”

“Miss Patel,” he began, closing off like a brick wall as he returned his gaze to the road ahead. “I hired you with the specific understanding that the parameters of this arrangement were clear to you.”

“They’re perfectly clear,” she soothed. “I’m not suggesting that you marry me or any woman and find yourself in unexpected marital bliss. I think we understand each other better than that. Your disinterest would be clear from across the ocean. It can be read clearly from the stars. But, after a few weeks, if you find yourself enjoying the benefits of our current arrangement, there is a way to make it permanent without any sacrifice on your part.”

“You want us to marry,” he said slowly.

She shrugged one elegant shoulder. “I’m merely putting it forth as a possibility. A mutually beneficial solution to our respective problems.”

“You would get access to my money, my standing, and my estate, and I would get...a wife.” His scepticism was resounding.

“A beautiful wife,” she corrected, “who would excel in every social situation that chafes you, and understand you on a level that other women — the ones who genuinely want to make themselves your wife — do not. Because I do understand you, Lyndon. I think we share certain similarities that make us uniquely suited.”

Absolute silence reigned in the car. Deepa was exceedingly annoyed at herself for having inspired such discomfort in two separate people in a single day.

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“The benefits are clear,” Appleton finally said, his gaze steady out the windshield as the countryside rolled by in hills and farmland. “But my family would never approve the match.”

Her stomach dropped. “An earl needs his family’s approval?”

“An earl has no shortage of relations who would gleefully see him stripped of his peerage and take that title for their own,” he replied. Finally, he looked at her, and there was something like an apology in his eyes. “The daughter of a mysterious maharaja isn't quite the same as an English lady of unquestionable money and pedigree.” Returning his eyes to the road, he said, “I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, I can’t imagine any other man in the world turning you down.”

Crushed under the weight of unexpected disappointment, Deepa cleared her throat. “I’m sure I can count on one hand all the men in the world I might tolerate as a husband.”

“Anyone as beautiful as you can afford to be discerning, I suppose,” he said carefully.

“Ah, but the only man I would ever marry would be the one disinterested in my beauty. Just as the only woman you could ever stomach as a wife must be disinterested in you as a man. So it goes.” With a shrug, she packed up her disappointment and set it aside to be tidied away and disposed of. She still had a job to do, a performance to give, and more than enough time to come up with a new plan.

The Appleton estate was enormous, which was to be expected, though the party was sequestered in a relatively small section of the gardens. Appleton took Deepa to the

party via a winding route, forestalling their arrival for as long as possible under the guise of giving her a guided tour around the flowerbeds. She allowed his procrastination, as it furthered their image of a young couple head over heels for each other, stealing any moment of privacy they could manage.

Though they hadn't coordinated their outfits, they matched nicely: he in a creamy tan three-piece and she in a marigold-bright sari, her skirts sunny yellow and her draped top burnt orange, the hems of both heavily embroidered with spellwork. Metallic charms glinted and chimed from the skirt's folds. Her bare arms were adorned with bangles, at least one of which she was determined to get onto Appleton, if not during the garden party, then certainly before their arrangement had concluded. Englishmen, she found, were frustratingly averse to such self-décor, which was, in her opinion, to their detriment.

Finally, Appleton ran out of garden space unless he wanted to loop her around the mansion's entire perimeter or take her through the stables, and she had to draw the line somewhere. Arm in arm, they approached the party, which was set up with long tables where black-and-white waitstaff were arranging platters of hors d'oeuvres, miniature desserts, and drinks. Sunlight beamed through the clouds in patches, with the rain seeming far enough off to miss them, and the well-manicured grass was barely damp underfoot from the last shower.

"Your sister," Deepa said through her smile. "Does she know about our arrangement, or are we acting for her, too?"

"I haven't told anyone anything, but she may be suspicious. I don't know."

"Lyndon!" Their hostess greeted them with a cheerful call, swanning over the instant they came in view. Charlotte Appleton was a tall brunette with the same striking cheekbones and grey-green eyes as her brother, similar enough that they could be twins. She gave him a light embrace, which he returned without complaint, before

they both turned to Deepa.

“I heard my brother had been spotted out and about with a new friend,” said Charlotte, “but I thought I must be mistaken, seeing as he failed to tell me anything of the sort.” She turned a playful glare on her brother, whose expression remained impassive.

“Charlotte, meet Deepa. We met recently at Eden.”

“Eden! Thrilling.” Charlotte did a double take. “Deepa Patel? Not the model for Jules Coxley’s Lady Godiva painting?”

“That was me,” Deepa agreed, feigning modesty. “Actually, I invited him along this afternoon; I hope you don’t mind? Lyndon gave me the impression that it was the more the merrier.”

“Brilliant, brilliant. Yes, of course, we have room enough for plenty. If the guests overflow, I’ll simply open up another section of the gardens. Are you good friends with Mr. Coxley?”

“We stay in touch, though I don’t model for him much anymore.”

“No? Seeing you as Godiva was so terribly striking, though.”

“I’m told it made an impression on a number of people,” Deepa agreed, swallowing her laughter.

“My brother included, it seems, though I wouldn’t have thought you were his type before today.”

Before Deepa could defend either herself or her date, Charlotte turned with a gesture

for Deepa to join her and meet the other guests who were beginning to arrive, the beads on her dress flashing in the sunlight.

“If you’ve gone out with him at all, you must know that you can't rely on my brother to introduce you to anyone,” Charlotte told her, taking Deepa’s arm as she marched her up to a handful of newly-arrived men and women, all of them dressed to the nines. “He’s terrible. You know your way around a party, of course, but as the hostess, I’d be remiss not to break the ice myself.” Charlotte beamed at her. “To think, my brother finally has a date! I doubted I’d ever see him partnered off.”

“He likes his privacy,” Deepa said with an easy shrug. “I’m sure there have been others he’s kept secret. He's tooexperienced for me to have been his first, if you know what I mean.”

Charlotte laughed once, the sound startled out of her, before batting Deepa’s arm in despair. “Oh, no, tell me less! I'm tremendously happy for him, for both of you, but please, don’t tell me anything about it. I’ll just die if I have to imagine my little brother like that.”

Deepa was as much in her element as Appleton was out of his. By the time her friends traipsed in, she was well on her way to charming all of Charlotte’s acquaintances, and was in the process of starting several new rumours concerning Appleton’s stamina and generosity as a lover. She found that the more drinks were involved, the more outlandish the tales her audience was inclined to believe, so she always scaled her storytelling appropriately at parties. Though it was early afternoon, the drinks flowed freely, and it wasn’t as if the Appletons knew many people who had to keep strict schedules. If they wanted to drink themselves silly in the middle of the day, they were entirely free to do so.

Appleton himself drank lightly, just enough to avoid appearing antisocial, while Deepa walked the tightrope of getting delightfully tipsy without drinking enough to

lose her metaphorical or literal balance, though by sleight of hand she made her intake seem greater. At her friends' arrival, she peeled herself away from poor Appleton's side, allowing him to take refuge behind the dessert table as she went to greet them.

"You made it! Everyone here is absolutely lovely," she declared, waving her champagne flute in a toast to the company at large, "and the food and drinks are very nice, too. Aaliyah, you have to meet Charlotte Appleton. She throws a very sensible party, and I think you'll like her."

As Aaliyah and her entourage went winding through the garden to find their hostess, Deepa discarded her drink to grab Roz by both hands, drawing her close. She wore a navy suit with a light bowtie and brown oxfords, her hair gelled in careful finger waves, and she smelled amazing, dark and mouth-wateringly smoky, to the extent that Deepa was tempted to pull her close enough to steal a taste. She resisted, but barely. "I'm glad you came," Deepa told her in a more intimate tone. "You look stunning in the suit."

Roz's smile was only slightly strained around the edges as she squeezed Deepa's hands in return. "You look gorgeous, as always."

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She didn't comment on the weight of magic swimming around Deepa's sun-coloured sari, though it must have been strong enough to intoxicate her.

"Come on, come and meet everyone," Deepa urged, tugging Roz into the garden. "You said you didn't want to see Appleton, but really, you might like him if you'd give him the chance."

"Why should I?" Roz asked, reluctantly following along.

"Because, for all my complaints about my suitors at The Songbird, Appleton's really quite decent," Deepa said with a smile. "And it might set your mind at ease."

"That so?"

"In a perfectly simple world, he'd be the ideal man for me to marry," Deepa informed her, plastering cheer overtop the memory of his earlier rejection. It was but a temporary setback. "He could solve all my problems at once. Obviously, nothing's simple, but I've never let that stop me before."

Roz dug her heels in, bringing Deepa to a teetering halt. "I'd rather not."

Crestfallen, Deepa said, "I can't make you talk to him, but I wish you'd at least humour me."

Shaking her head, Roz offered a tight smile. "I know it's a business arrangement, and I said I wasn't much for jealousy. But let's not put it to the test, yeah?" Slipping free of Deepa's grasp, Roz patted her hand before stepping back. "I'm going to go have a

perfectly nice time without running into your beau. Your friends are a right laugh; I'll stick with them, and catch up with you in a bit. Don't worry about me, alright? Go work your magic. Do what you have to do."

Slinging her hands in her pockets, Roz strode after Aaliyah and the rest of Deepa's friends, steering clear of the larger gatherings like she expected them to snap at her or tell her to get out.

Deepa watched her go, regret and uncertainty turning her stomach, before she shook herself out of it. Her friends would see that Roz was taken care of. Roz might not be the best fit for Appleton's world, but Deepa knew how to make things seem like they belonged in places they had no business being.

In the meantime, she had a job to do. Setting her shoulders back, she put a swing in her step and went to find Appleton, coaxing him out of his hiding place and back into the limelight to fan the flames of the tireless rumour machine. When everyone was drunk enough that dancing was the only possible course of action, she dragged Appleton into the midst of it and kissed him so thoroughly that there could be no doubt in anyone's mind as to the validity of their relationship. He played his part, putting his hands on her waist and kissing back with a hunger neither of them felt. They kept at it until laughter erupted around them, and Charlotte intervened by throwing a wadded napkin at her brother's shoulder.

"Enough!" she protested laughingly. "Take that back to Eden if you want to carry on, but you're not doing it in the middle of my party."

"Apologies," Appleton murmured, not meeting Deepa's eye.

"Well, I'm not sorry," said Deepa, to more laughter and more than one wolf-whistle. "But, you're right. It's not for polite company."

“Last time I kissed a girl like that,” said one of the men, “I had to marry her.”

“Oh, don’t say that in front of my brother! You’ll scare him back into hiding.”

“Let’s give ourselves a bit more time to work up to that,” Deepa said diplomatically with a dazzling smile.

Through the crowd of dancers, she caught Roz’s gaze, and her stomach dropped at the unreadable expression on her face.

“I have to admit, I feel some kind of way about going out with a girl who’s openly scheming to marry someone else while she’s with me,” Roz said when Deepa caught her alone by the drinks.

“I’ve always been upfront about my goals. It’s not as if I’m having a love affair behind your back.”

“I know. And I’m not judging you for doing what you feel you’ve got to do. I just don’t much like watching it unfold right in front of me, as it turns out.”

Deepa sighed. “I don’t blame you for not liking it, but there’s really nothing to be jealous of. Even if I wanted to run away with Appleton, it’s not as if he can actually marry me.”

“Good to know you haven’t put any thought into it,” Roz said, flatter than Deepa had ever heard her.

“Nothing’s changed,” Deepa said uncertainly. “I’ve told you from the beginning, this is strictly mercenary. It’s not as if we love each other.”

“And you told me from the beginning that you never meant to marry any man, but

you've never had your hooks in any as posh as this one," Roz countered. Before Deepa could object, Roz huffed a sharp sigh and shook her head. "Look, never mind. I'm not trying to get into anything with you. I've just seen how this goes, alright? Nobody wants to get roped into marriage until all of a sudden, it gets too hard to keep hacking it without a man to smooth the way. It happens every day; it's nothing unique to you."

"Fine, yes, obviously I've put some thought into it," Deepa returned with a crinkle of annoyance. Her tipsiness retreated in the face of an argument, leaving her hungry and on edge. "That's what I do: I weigh my options. There are some marriage arrangements, such as what Aaliyah has with Alphonse, that I might consider worthwhile. But if you think for one second that I'm about to throw you over to tie myself legally, romantically, exclusively, to some man who can't hope to satisfy me half as well as you do, you must think me completely mad. Because," she continued, coming close to run her hand over the front of Roz's suit, "you're meeting my needs perfectly well, in case you haven't noticed. Or am I remembering last weekend very differently?"

Roz was resistant to her levity. "I don't want to get in your way, or for you to stop what you're doing on my account. I'll just head off a bit early. And I probably won't come out to the next one of these."

"Wait," Deepa said quickly, catching her when she turned to go. "Don't leave without setting up our next date."

Roz hesitated, her expression cautious. Everything had gone so terribly pear-shaped in the course of a single afternoon; it was crucial that Deepa wasted no time in winning her back.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:15 pm

“Do you still want to teach me boxing?” she asked, and was rewarded with a crooked smile, like Roz couldn’t help herself.

“Yeah? Boxing?”

“Stay till the end of the party,” Deepa implored. “Then we’ll go back to London together. To your club, wherever it is you train.”

“Alright,” Roz said finally, squeezing Deepa’s hands. “Alright, it’s a date.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

When they arrived at the boxing club, the place was empty, as if the other women had better things to do on a Saturday evening. Deepa couldn’t care less what they were up to. It left Roz without a sparring partner, setting the perfect scene for Deepa to volunteered herself in a more experienced fighter’s place.

The club was a hole-in-the-wall shoebox of an establishment, unmarked from the street and unremarkable to look at. Inside, a number of heavy punching bags hung from the ceiling along the back wall with tumbling mats taking up much of the floor space. The training ring itself was a square construct with three ropes on every side, and the floor within was scuffed and well-worn from being trampled by so many feet for so many years. The whole place smelled of sweat and effort.

As Roz got straight to business, Deepa struck a seductive pose — not entirely on

purpose; it was just that most of her body language was seductive, from force of habit — leaning one elbow against the doorway, the orange drape of her sari hanging down as its charms winked invitingly.

“You’re not going to stand there and hit that punching bag the whole time, are you?”

Roz turned back to look at her, one hand on the bag’s leather. “You said you wanted to learn. Figured I’d show you the basics on the punching bag first.”

“That seems a rather conservative approach to teaching when we have the luxury of this place all to ourselves.”

“You want to get in the ring with me?” Roz asked, bright-eyed in her amusement. “No easing into things?”

If Deepa were serious about learning to box, the correct thing to do would be to start with the bag. But Deepa had other priorities, and she glanced around, casing the joint. “How much privacy are we likely to have here, exactly?”

Roz’s eyebrows shot up. “Worried about embarrassing yourself in front of an audience, princess?”

“Not quite,” Deepa replied, flashing a smile. “But let’s go somewhere we can ensure we won’t be interrupted.”

With that instruction, Roz took her to the changing room. It was long and narrow compared to the big square space of the club, with a few skinny benches running lengthways down the middle across from the lockers where the athletes and trainees kept their gloves and other personal belongings. That left just enough room at one end to move around, which was plenty of space for Roz to demonstrate how to throw a punch, and even enough for two women to grapple, if they were more inclined to

wrestling than boxing. Deepa wasn't particularly inclined to either, but what she had in mind wasn't far from grappling, so the space would serve her well enough.

"You want to be wearing something comfortable, that you can move in," Roz said.

Glancing down at herself, Deepa allowed that her sari would probably not fit the bill. "What do you suggest?"

In response, Roz shed her jacket and unbuttoned her shirt, peeling out of it before tossing it over. Deepa caught it by reflex only, staring dry-mouthed at Roz in her fitted undershirt, under which she was very conspicuously not wearing a bra.

"And my skirts?" Deepa managed.

"Best lose them," Roz replied, barely hiding her grin.

Turning away as if in modesty, Deepa shed her layers one at a time — her draped sari, her long skirt, stockings, and finally her choli — folding them atop the bench until she was left standing in her underwear. Coyly, she glanced back at Roz from over her shoulder, batting her lashes before slowly pulling on the sleeves of her borrowed shirt. Her choli would have served perfectly well, sleeveless as it was, but then, that would lose her the excuse to wear Roz's top, which smelled of her cologne.

Leaning one shoulder against the lockers, arms loosely crossed, Roz watched her like she was putting on the best show in the world.

With a brilliant lurch of heat, Deepa recognised that her greatest challenge wasn't going to be learning how to box. Her greatest challenge was going to be staying focused for long enough to learn anything at all. Bare-armed in her undershirt with her nipples visible through the fabric, Roz was distraction incarnate, and Deepa didn't really want to resist. Roz looked good, and she wasn't even within reach. By the time

they were actually touching — by the time their hearts were pounding and they had both worked up a sweat, and Deepa was close enough to smell her, to taste her, even — By that point, Deepa seriously doubted she could keep pretending it was boxing she was thinking about.

But she doubted Roz would be much interested in boxing by then, either.

“Does this room have a lock?” she asked, and Roz’s eyes went dark and hungry like she knew exactly what Deepa was thinking.

Wordlessly, Roz returned to the door, pushed it shut, and turned the lock. Then, she visibly gathered herself, eyes shut for the duration of one strong breath. When she opened them, she looked like she was holding herself together through sheer force of will, and it was fraying.

“First, let me wrap your hands. If you throw a single punch, you want some protection to keep from breaking any bones.”

Obediently, Deepa held out her hands as Roz opened her locker to withdraw a roll of elasticised fabric. One hand at a time, Roz wound it around Deepa’s wrists, across her palm, in between each finger, overlapping and going around and around in an intricate pattern. Though Roz was focused on her work and clearly knew what she was doing, as if she’d wrapped her own hands a thousand times before, her touch was anything but businesslike.

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With one hand, she held Deepa's wrist like a steadying rock underneath her, keeping her in place. When she needed Deepa in a new position, she turned her like a painter positioning her model. Her calluses rasped delicately against the thin skin of Deepa's inner wrist, where Deepa could feel her own pulse pounding. Roz's skin was warm and dry, and Deepa made a study of the fine lines of her knuckles, the shapes of her fingernails, pared short and kept meticulously clean, the way the bones in the backs of her hands danced under her summer tan, and the dark mole like a single freckle at the base of her thumb.

No man had ever touched Deepa like that. She'd never allowed it nor wanted it. There was a studious reverence in everything Roz did with Deepa, like she was trying to commit her every facet to memory. Deepa had never wanted such scrutiny from men, but Roz made her want to lay herself bare like a butterfly pinned to a board and invite countless hours of worshipful study. Because when Roz looked at her so intently, it meant she was allowed to look back.

Still, there was at least the pretence that they were there to box. So, when Roz had secured the last of the wrap around Deepa's hand, fixing the loose end firmly to her wrist, Deepa didn't grab Roz by her undershirt and drag her into a hungry kiss. Instead, she flexed her hands, testing the wrap and getting used to the way it squeezed, like she was still carrying Roz's embrace even though they were no longer touching.

When Roz spoke, her voice was huskier than usual. "Let me walk you through the stances before we get the gloves on. Now, you want a lower centre of gravity so I can't knock you over. Keep everything loose, everything limber. Don't lock your knees. And...spread your legs."

“You say that to all the girls,” Deepa said, pretending the words didn't affect her as hotly as they did. Widening her stance, she bent her knees and brought her fists up in a rough approximation of a fighter. “Like this?”

“Gorgeous. You're a knockout.”

“I don't know; I think you could take me.”

“Do you want me to?”

Playfully, Deepa reached out like she meant to tap Roz with her knuckles, only for Roz to easily dodge, swatting her hand away. With a smile, Deepa darted closer, bobbing lightly on the balls of her feet as she pretended to be a boxer, looking for Roz's weakness.

“How much of boxing is putting on a good show?” she asked, jabbing again as teasingly as a kitten with its claws extended. “Is there an art to it, or is it all about brute strength?”

“There's an art,” Roz agreed, continuing to dodge and feint as if Deepa were a real opponent capable of landing a hit. It felt more like warming up for a dance than anything approaching fighting. “But make no mistake, it is very much about hitting the other person.”

“Put my gloves on and show me how to throw a punch, then,” Deepa challenged.

But Roz shook her head. “I'll show you how to make a fist, first.”

“Does that take a special technique?” Deepa balled up both hands and pretended to go for her again.

The next time Deepa extended her arm in a pretend blow, Roz caught her fist in an open palm and pulled Deepa to her, easily folding her in both arms and pinning her elbows to her sides. Breathlessly, Deepa went still except for her thrilling heartbeat, allowing herself to be contained.

“You've got your thumb on the inside,” Roz informed her, tapping Deepa’s knuckles without releasing her. “That's how it gets broken. You want your thumb outside your fingers, like this.” Opening Deepa’s hand like manually unfurling the petals of a flower, Roz gently repositioned her, lingering over Deepa’s closed fist when she was done. “You've got long nails, so you want to be careful of that, too.”

“Isn't this what the gloves are for?” Deepa asked, trying to find her voice through the steamy wave of arousal hitting her at Roz’s prolonged touch. “To protect my hands as much as my opponent?”

“Sure, but it’s good to know the right form going in. Same way it's good to know all the tools in your kit before you get to work on your first engine.”

“I don’t know if that’s much applicable to me.”

Roz just grinned. “A week ago, you wouldn't have guessed boxing would be applicable, either.”

“Or sapphism,” Deepa agreed, pressing against Roz's front. “And now look at me.”

“I haven’t been able to stop.” Roz’s voice was practically a growl, the arm she had around Deepa’s middle squeezing against her ribs, like she wanted to press Deepa all the way into her and never let her go.

“Good. I don’t want you to.”

“All eyes on you, all the time, right?” Roz’s tone carried a hint of melancholy urging Deepa to pay attention.

“Right now, it’s only your eyes I care about.”

Turning in Roz’s grasp so they stood facing each other, their bodies pressed together all the way down, Deepa dared Roz to suggest that she wanted anything other than what she had right in front of her.

“Are you going to teach me how to throw a punch?” Deepa asked, one hand high on Roz’s chest, where her skin was bare above her undershirt.

“Yeah,” Roz breathed, looking up at her with her hands on Deepa’s waist.

“You’re going to teach me how to win a fight?”

“I’ll do my best.”

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“The loser has to stay down for a count of ten, is that right?” Deepa slipped her other hand around Roz’s neck, fingers curling through the short hair at the back of her head. “Do you think I can bring you to the floor for ten seconds?”

“Let’s find out.”

Roz’s chin was tipped up either in a challenge or for easier access, her mouth a mere inch from Deepa’s. As little as Deepa knew about boxing, she was certain their current position wouldn’t be allowed in the ring.

“You ready?” Roz asked.

Deepa swallowed her in a kiss.

Grabbing her by the hips, Roz lifted Deepa like she weighed nothing, swinging her up and around to press her back against the lockers. With a delighted gasp, Deepa wrapped both legs around Roz’s waist as Roz got one arm under Deepa’s thighs, holding her there as she slipped her other hand under Deepa’s waistband.

Intent as she was to continue their kiss, Deepa couldn’t help but moan and drop her head back against the locker at the first confident slide of Roz’s fingers. Roz worked her until she was drenched and trembling, bicep straining as she held her up with one arm the whole while. Deepa came panting Roz’s name, fingers clenched against her shoulders and thighs bracketing her middle, heels digging into the small of Roz’s back as she arched into her.

“Good?” Roz asked, her mouth against Deepa’s collarbone.

“Nn,” Deepa said nonsensically, trying to catch her breath.

“Again?”

Deepa replied by wrapping herself around Roz’s frame, grateful when Roz continued holding her rather than setting her shaking legs down on the floor. Looking immensely pleased with herself, Roz gently deposited Deepa on the bench, tugged her underwear down, and dropped to her knees at Deepa’s feet. One hand was warm on Deepa’s leg, the other at her waist, holding her close for a second before trailing around to toy with the little jewel hanging from her pierced navel.

Bracing both hands behind her, Deepa dropped her head forward and spread her knees to watch as Roz settled in for a second round, kissing her way up Deepa’s inner thigh where her skin was softest until she was all the way between her legs, licking into that wet heat.

Neither of them quite hit the floor at any point during their altercation, and Deepa certainly couldn’t have declared which one of them was the winner, but she was more than satisfied with the outcome. Based on Roz’s hood-eyed expression and her wet-lipped smile, the feeling was mutual.

“Well,” Deepa said, leaning back with both hands pressed heavily against the bench as she caught her breath and let her heartbeat slow to normal. “I don’t know how much I learned about boxing just then, but I certainly enjoyed myself.”

Roz snorted. “I think we both knew that was going to happen.”

“When is your next fight? Perhaps I’ll learn more by watching instead of attempting to participate.”

“Thursday night.”

Roz's tone was suddenly flat and unenthused, prompting Deepa to sit up straighter and pay attention. "Are you not looking forward to it?"

"The fight itself, sure, always. But my manager's been giving me trouble." Still sitting at Deepa's feet, Roz drew patterns over her knees like she was painting Deepa in mehndi, paisley and mandalas. "Our last few meetings haven't gone well. I'm not looking forward to running into him again. I'd rather cut him loose, but I haven't found anybody else willing to take me on in his place."

"A business disagreement?" It was easy to say that Roz should simply drop her manager if she didn't like him, but Deepa knew what it was like to put up with distasteful people for the sake of good business.

"The money's in the betting." Roz scowled as she continued to paint invisible mehndi down Deepa's calves. "And I'm a good fighter. People know to bet on me."

"He wants you to throw your next fight," Deepa said, realisation washing over her.

Roz's expression darkened. "He says he can make good money off it, and half the winnings will be mine if I agree to go down in the second round."

"You don't want to," Deepa assumed.

"Hell, no. I've got professional pride, haven't I? Losing a fight to a better boxer is one thing. I can stomach that just fine. But to cheat, and go down for the sake of a payout?" Roz shook her head. "That's not how I do things."

Lightly, Deepa teased her nails across Roz's scalp, and was rewarded with a hum and a shiver. "Is your pride more important than making money to pay your bills?"

"My pride is all I've got," Roz returned wryly. "There's always going to be more

bills.”

“With that attitude, certainly. How much money are we talking, exactly? A few quid? A hundred pounds? I have no idea how popular your matches are.”

Roz paused her mehndi patterns. “You think I should do it.”

“It depends on the money in question.”

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“But there's some amount of money I could win from these bets that you think would be worth selling out for.”

“Of course,” Deepa said with an easy smile. “Everyone has a price, don't they?”

Roz withdrew. Not just her hand from Deepa's knee; the loss of that contact was instant; but all of her, drawing in and shuttering as if putting on a coat of armour to protect herself. In response, Deepa drew one leg up, planting her heel against the bench and adjusting her borrowed shirt to cover her lap. Her hand felt like it was resting atop a marble statue.

“I don't have a price,” Roz said.

“I do,” Deepa said slowly. “I have a hundred different prices for a hundred different lines I'm willing to cross. Appleton pays me ten pounds for every outing I make with him, and that's only one of a dozen such deals I've made in my time. Do you think less of me for it?”

Roz shook her head immediately, but she didn't meet Deepa's eyes, and Deepa's heart dropped.

“You've been upfront about your dealings from the start. I said I didn't have a problem with it, and I don't. But I could throw every fight for the rest of my career, and I'd never make enough money to live the kind of life you're aiming for,” Roz said, finally looking at her. “You said we could try to make this work, but I'm never going to be anything but working class. And me, I'm fine with that. I might not have the wealth you want, but I've got my pride, and I've got my honour. And yeah, that is

more important to me. If I'll never be rich no matter what, then I want to live with integrity."

"I lack integrity," said Deepa.

"No," Roz cut in. "I didn't say that."

"But it's true. In your position, I would throw the fight and take the money. And I would feel no shame concerning it. My mother came from a good family, for all the good it did her. When she left my father, she brought me here with nothing. We must work to get by, the same as you. If I don't cheat and scheme to get what I want, I won't get it at all."

For a long minute, Roz didn't speak. The silence stretched between them like a chasm.

"Boxing isn't a means to an end for me," Roz finally said. "I do it because I love it. And I won't cheat like that. If that means I can't make the kind of money you need from a partner—"

"When have I expected you to pay my way?" Deepa demanded, the last of her patience frittering away. "When have I ever asked you—"

"But you want me to." Roz's expression was as closed-off as her words. "You want someone to provide for you. You've been clear about that from the start. I've seen the things you get at The Songbird, the gifts and the money it takes to buy all your spelled-up dresses. And I can provide a lot of things, but not a king's ransom."

"I haven't asked it of you."

Shaking her head, Roz got to her feet, moving out of Deepa's reach as she headed for

the exit. The chasm widened.

“I want to give you everything without you having to ask. That’s how I do things. I need to feel useful. Whoever I’m with, I want to provide for her. If I can’t, how will either of us be satisfied?”

With one hand on the door, Roz turned back to look at her. “You asked me earlier if I’d ever been in love,” she began in a low voice, and Deepa froze. “And yeah, I have, or at least, I thought it was love at the time. I thought she loved me, too. We were dreaming of making something together, but she got cold feet at the last minute and left me for a man. Told me she didn’t love him, but that it didn’t matter who she did or didn’t love, because she had to think about it from a security perspective. She figured he could provide for her in a way she couldn’t count on me to do.” Roz shrugged, eyes downcast. “She’s got a kid with him, now. No idea if she’s happy or not, but I guess it wasn’t about happiness, for her.”

“I’m sorry.” Deepa felt like Roz had dropped a bomb on her, though it wasn’t entirely unexpected. There must be any number of women who explored their options before resigning themselves to a traditional marriage. With Roz’s charm and good looks, it held that she should be unlucky enough to attract more than her fair share of them.

Roz shivered, a little flinch through her shoulders like she was shaking off the memory. “Like I said, I get where you’re coming from. Just want you to understand where I’m coming from, too.”

“I’m never going to do that,” Deepa said firmly. “Not to you, and certainly not to myself.” She took a deep breath. “But I won’t give up my livelihood just to earn your trust.”

Looking at her warily, Roz said, “Not asking you to.”

“I have to earn it somehow, though, don’t I?”

“Just tell me. Even if you keep working, keep going out with men like Appleton. Tell me I could be enough for you.”

Standing, Deepa stalled for time. Roz’s shirt was long enough on her to reach her thighs, a powder blue, cologne-scented veneer of modesty. As she rolled the hem between her fingers, her mind raced, desperately trying to find an honest answer that would keep Roz from walking out that door. She would have to mean it if she said she didn’t need riches to be happy. She would have to mean it with every piece of her heart, because otherwise, Roz would see the truth — maybe not right away, but soon enough — and feel inadequate.

At the end of the room, Roz waited with one hand on the door, her back to Deepa but her head turned ever so slightly, giving Deepa the chance to call her back.

Deepa couldn’t force her voice to cooperate. She couldn’t renounce her dreams of living as London royalty, not even for Roz’s sake.

When no words came, Roz’s shoulders slumped, her head dropped, and she exited the changing room, leaving Deepa alone in nothing but her hand-wraps and Roz’s borrowed shirt.

CHAPTER TWENTY

IN WHICH A DISASTROUS NIGHT OUT ENDS IN ATTEMPTED MURDER

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Deepa returned to The Songbird. There, she donned her shortest dress with the heaviest enchantments and took to the stage, transforming herself into a siren luring men to dash against her rocks. As she warmed up in front of the microphone, humming lonely tune fragments and song verses, her thoughts continually took her back to Roz.

Roz had spoken of pride; Deepa was proud, too. Grasping for money and material goods with both hands was one thing, but to chase after someone who had walked out on her smacked of something pathetic.

At The Songbird, surrounded by her adoring, hapless suitors, Deepa was a study in contradictions. She had to be aloof, yet warm enough to keep them close. Charming and interesting, but never smarter than the men trying to impress her. She relied on every gift they gave her and every meal they bought, yet she could never appear too grateful, or let on that she depended on their charity. She hadn't been scraping by in years, having saved up a modest nest egg of cash, to say nothing of her jewellery's worth, but it wasn't yet the sort of money that would let her rest easy.

Above all else, she had to be beautiful: the kind of intoxicating, exotic beauty they could never see in their English wives, even if those wives were Indian themselves. She had to be otherworldly, but only untouchable up to a certain point, lest they grow bored with her temptations. Being tempted was only fun if they thought they were getting something out of it in the end.

Roz made things simpler. There was less artifice involved with her. Going out for supper together, for drinks, for a walk, Deepa hadn't felt entirely like a construct. Roz didn't look at her like a doll to be dressed up, nor an automaton into which gifts could

be inserted in exchange for certain favours. She didn't look at her like something wild to be tamed and put in a jewelled collar. With Roz, Deepa felt like an entire human being with a depth of desire and opinion. She had felt, for a short while, almost capable of love.

There was no love like that in *The Songbird*. Even if Roz wasn't the true love needed to break Deepa's curse, that love had been truer than anything Deepa offered her men. She thought that meant something, but apparently, it didn't amount to anything at all.

She sang, she danced, she flirted and charmed, but her heart wasn't in any of it that night. The men couldn't tell. They flocked to her like vapid butterflies clamouring for a Venus flytrap, begging her to devour them whole. Normally, she would be sizing them up, licking her chops in anticipation of a good meal. In Roz's wake, she was disinterested, barely able to pretend otherwise. The men's bright butterfly colours bored her; all she can think about was the silver and grey of Roz's hair and eyes.

She stayed late at the club, weaving through the sparse crowds until it was near midnight, tempting fate, as if to show Phillip — who wasn't even present — that she wasn't afraid of her curse, and she was through with letting it dictate the patterns of her life.

At five minutes to the hour, she whisked herself upstairs, shutting herself in the privacy of her bedroom to transform without a sound.

For the first time, she faced her night alone. Cherie was out, untethered by anything so tedious as a curse, making the most of her time in good company, or at least, profitable company. Deepa hadn't said anything to her other friends about her argument with Roz, because she didn't want their advice. And she still hadn't found the courage to explain the situation to her mother. No one else in the world knew of her predicament. There was no other soul in whom she could confide, and certainly

no one with whom she could share her secret now that it was past midnight.

She paced her too-small room, imagining different ways their argument could have gone. Half the time, she imagined what she could have said to make Roz stay, defusing the situation as easily as she defused the jealous spats that arose so often in the club. The other half, she lived out the fantasy of convincing Roz to set aside her pride and accept the necessity of sometimes doing distasteful things in order to get by.

There was no escaping that, in London. Wealthy men might be able to do whatever they liked with their pride intact, but people like them — women, immigrants, the working class, and the queers, if Deepa had the right to claim the latter — inevitably had to sacrifice some ethics to survive.

To believe otherwise was unforgivably naïve, and Roz was too old and sensible to be accused of such ignorance. Whether it was throwing a fight or marrying a rich man, none of it had to mean anything. It needn't define a woman, and it certainly wasn't a betrayal of anyone. When next they met, Deepa would make her see that. Even if Roz had already spoken to her manager, refused his deal, even fired him outright — even if she really believed Deepa would rather marry some man than be with her, and didn't want to see her again — she had to concede that her sense of morals was unrealistic compared to Deepa's ruthless pragmatism.

But it would have to wait until dawn. Frustrated, Deepa beat her tail against the walls, flexing her claws in and out to scour the floorboards. Dawn was hours away, and there was no one to help her pass the time. She was wound too tense to sleep, imaginary arguments filling her head and keeping her from rest.

With snarl, she leapt from the bed and threw her full weight against the closed door, which shuddered on its hinges and swung open under her force. She was wholly sick of her confinement, sick of her tiny flat with its thin walls closing her in, and above

all, sick of allowing Phillip's curse to control what she could or couldn't do with her own nights. The man had forced her into the guise of a wild animal, and it was past time he dealt with the consequences.

Rippling with fury, Deepa stuck to the shadows as she crept downstairs and out the back of the club into the little alley below her bedroom window. For the first time, she focused on Phillip's magic, clinging to her and altering her form. It was everywhere, from her skin to the marrow of her bones, cloying like an overpowering perfume. She'd been doing her best to ignore it, but now, she used it to track Phillip's path through the city like a huntress following the scent of her prey.

No matter the hour, London bustled with activity, and that night was no different. Despite the risk of witnesses, she did not for an instant entertain the thought of turning back. She'd had enough; it was time to confront that pig and make him put things right. As long as she was careful, anyone who caught a glimpse of her in the shadows would assume their eyes were playing tricks on them, and she must simply be a stray dog rather than an oversized jungle cat.

But her frustration made her careless, and she was scarcely out of her own neighbourhood before she turned a corner too quickly and ran smack into a young couple of drunken revellers.

She pulled up short with a startled hiss, but the damage was already done. Their tipsy apologies at tripping over someone quickly turned to shouts of alarm, the two youths grabbing hold of each other and stumbling over their own feet in their haste to back away.

"Tiger! It's a tiger!" the first one yelped, clinging to his companion as he dragged them both backwards.

"It's got no stripes, idiot!" the second protested, no less panicked for his pedantry.

“That's a cheetah!”

“I don't care what it bloody is! Look at the size of its teeth!”

Deepa bolted.

If she had her wits about her, she should have ducked into the nearest dark alley, made her way to the rooftops via the fire escapes, and tiptoed back to her flat to wait for morning. Colliding with that pair had startled her badly, and that, combined with her initial recklessness in leaving the flat, urged her towards her destination with even more speed than before. She'd set out to find Phillip and make him fix her, and that was the only thing left in her mind.

It was only as she went streaking down the street in full view of every late-night bar patron and neighbour looking out their window to take note of the commotion that she realised howbadly she had misjudged her situation. Cringing, she flattened her ears against her head, ducking away from the incredulous stares and shouts that greeted her, and raced with all the speed of the cheetah she wasn't towards Phillip's location. His curse-magic guided her unerringly, the one decent thing it had done for her.

Deepa didn't for a minute actually believe Phillip lived in the flat where she found him. The place was too small, too out of the way, on the edge of the city far from all the attention on which he thrived. All her sources suggested that, following her curse, he had removed himself from the public eye, intending to hide until her fury blew over. This flat, she assumed, was borrowed from some friend or parent. No matter. She'd found him, and no amount of hiding could save him from her now.

Furious at her lack of opposable thumbs, Deepa scratched at the front door until the pretty blue paint chipped away, leaving a horrible mess of gouge-marks in her wake. The noise was enough to wake any nearby sleepers, though she rather doubted Phillip

had any close neighbours who liked him enough to be concerned for his well-being. But she couldn't claw the door to ribbons and gain entry that way, so, not being content with mere vandalism, she prowled to one of the two ground-level windows. First, she braced one shoulder against it, testing its strength. Then, when she had a sense of the force needed to break it, she turned away, shifted all her weight onto her forepaws, and aimed a mighty kick at the glass with her hind legs.

Her first blow achieved little, the second cracked it, and the third shattered it completely, the glass cascading down in a musical cacophony that pleased her greatly. As a human, she would have hesitated before breaking a window and pulled her punch, afraid of getting hurt. As a leopard, she had no such nerves, and besides, her fur protected her from the worst of the glass. From inside, there was a commotion like someone falling out of bed, then a lamp lit the darkness. Leaping through the open window, Deepa landed with a soft thump on the rug within, and quickly stole to the side of the room, pressing herself to the wall to avoid detection as Phillip emerged from his bedroom, carrying a fire poker and switching on lights as he advanced.

For a moment, she watched him in seething silence, studying his movements. He looked wary, but she wanted more from him than that. She wanted him terrified, begging for his life.

She'd never hated anyone before. She'd certainly never physically fought anyone before, and even if Roz had taught her to box, those skills wouldn't have been particularly relevant. However, as a leopard, she had no doubt that between her and Phillip, the cat would be the one coming out on top.

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“Who’s there?” Phillip called boldly, immediately following that with an under-the-breath mutter of, “God above, look at this mess.”

A growl began deep in her chest, moving up to her throat with a crackle, before exploding from between her teeth in an awful yowling scream. Phillip jumped a foot in the air, swinging his fire poker uselessly in front of himself. Hissing so furiously she was spitting, Deepa stalked right up to him, batting the poker out of his hands and forcing him up against the couch, which he climbed over backwards in an attempt to escape.

“Deepa?” he stammered, both hands on the back of the couch, the cushions between him and her. “Is that you?” He gave a nervous laugh. “That's how the curse turned out, is it? I can feel it on you.”

Snarling, she launched herself over the couch as he scrambled away from her, knocking things off tables and bumping into chairs as he tried to get away. He was clumsy in his fear, and she was faster, catching him before he could find the doorway, and slamming him against the wall with her front paws on his shoulders and her bared teeth an inch from his throat, pinning him.

“I imagine you want me to break it,” he said. “Because I was right; you can't manage to break it yourself, can you?”

She dug her claws into his shoulders, not enough to draw blood, but certainly enough to make the threat clear.

“I can’t!” he yelped. “I told you how to break it, but I can't do it myself. I've always

been rotten at breaking my own curses.”

She stared at him, eyes widening as she processed that. “How many more women have you cursed?” she demanded, but it could only come out as a raspy, spitting snarl.

He flinched back from it, which was gratifying, but it didn't answer her question. Frustrated, she shoved at him, but with nowhere for him to go, she could only bring him forward and slam him back against the wall again, hard enough to rattle his teeth in his skull.

“Killing me won't break it,” he said quickly. “It won't help you at all.”

She sneered, very much doubting that. There was no magic in the world that could survive death. If she killed him, her curse was sure to break. And who could trace a wild animal mauling back to her? Flexing her paws, she let her claws slide out a little more, piercing the shoulders of his robe like ivory daggers.

“You can't,” he stressed, desperately looking for some way to get himself out of this.

To Deepa's right, in between them and the doorway, a writing desk stood against the wall. As she followed his gaze, he threw himself sideways towards it, wrenching out of her grip and falling to his knees, frantically fumbling through the drawers. Dropping back to all fours, she went after him, violence written in every line of her body and in every firing neuron in her brain.

Too slow.

Ripping open the drawer he was looking for, Phillip pulled out a little firearm that looked like it had quite literally been through the war, cocked it, and aimed it right at her head.

She drew up short.

He wouldn't shoot her. Not with the knowledge that she was really a woman, rather than a dumb leopard.

But he'd already cursed her. How much personhood did he really believe she had?

He pulled the trigger and Deepa shrank back with a full-body flinch before realising the pistol had jammed, either not well-cared for or simply handled too inexpertly. Either way, she wasn't giving him the opportunity to try again. Hissing, she fled, throwing herself back out the open window and booking it through the garden and into the night. Though he shouted after her, and a sharp report from the gun followed, she didn't look back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

IN WHICH REFUGE IS SOUGHT IN FAMILIAR GROUNDS

Running blindly, Deepa's paws carried her north of the city, away from the metropolis and into rolling farmland and cottage gardens. She couldn't say how long she ran, flooded with panic, frustration, and self-loathing at the fact that she hadn't gone through with it and killed the wretch — self-loathing equal in amount to the fact that she'd seriously thought about killing him at all. She ran until her lungs burned and her paws hurt and she didn't know where she was, or how long it would take to get back home.

She wasn't afraid so much of being lost, as she was confident that her feline senses could guide her back to her flat easily enough, but she was concerned that dawn might break before that happened, and she would be stranded somewhere on the city's outskirts without any clothes. She wouldn't be the first to find herself in such a situation, though previous accounts had always involved more drinks, drugs, and

revelries than curses, from what she'd heard.

As she slowed her pace, fear and adrenaline subsiding, she considered the most sensible course of action. Returning to Phillip's flat to rip out his throat was appealing, but too risky, what with him being armed and her uncertainty as to the time. It would be best to make her way to Aaliyah and Jasmine's house, where they lived with Alphonse and Jacobi just outside the city. But she wasn't entirely sure where their house was in relation to her current position, and wasn't confident she could track it down the same way she could retrace her steps to her own flat.

Besides which, going to Aaliyah and Jasmine meant telling them about Roz once she had a human voice again, and she didn't particularly want to have that conversation. Seeing as they were both keen on her finding her true love with a woman and joining their sapphic ranks, they would advise her to offer an olive branch. Deepa had never been the first to reach out to anyone, nor offer an apology. It felt demeaning.

Furthermore, she didn't think she had anything for which to apologise. Throwing the fight and winning the money was the smart thing to do, pride be damned, and she wouldn't be convinced otherwise. If anything, Roz owed her an apology for assuming Deepa would throw her over for some man, just because a past lover had done the same.

Deepa had promised Roz they could make things work, and she believed it. She'd never have floated the idea of marriage to Appleton if he seemed at all interested in women, or if she thought there was any chance he'd want her as a genuine wife. Engaging in a sham marriage for the sake of optics without even consummating it was a world away from actually marrying anyone. Roz was too much of a romantic if she couldn't concede that.

Not that it mattered, what with Appleton shutting her down.

The musky hay-sweet scent of horses came to her on the breeze, and she turned towards it, sense-memory hitting her. She knew where she was. Though Appleton hadn't given her a tour of the stables that afternoon at his sister's garden party, she recognised the smell. Despite the night's confusion, she'd made her way to his estate as if her thoughts of him had summoned it from the ether.

If she was very lucky, perhaps Appleton would be walking the grounds, and she could intercept him and explain her situation. It was wishful thinking at such a late hour, but she was rattled and desperate. She might not have wanted to tell Appleton about the curse, but he had the sort of money that came with connections. Perhaps he could find her someone to break it. All assuming she could reach him, and furthermore, communicate her woes.

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As if the universe finally deigned to bestow on her a favour, she spied a lone man crossing an open grassy stretch between the stables and the main house. Crouching flat, she watched him until she was confident that it was indeed Appleton, and not some random member of his staff. There was nothing to provide cover between the two of them, so, standing tall, she tried to channel the confidence she carried into every social interaction, and trotted straight up to him, tail swinging.

With his human eyesight, he didn't notice her until she was within ten yards, at which point he went perfectly still, eyes wide. Not wanting to alarm him, she stopped in turn, and willed him to recognise her. They were supposed to have an understanding, after all. Surely it wasn't such an ask for him to see her as she truly was, just as she saw the truth of him.

No, said the universe; it was indeed too much to ask. And really, she should have expected it. There was only trepidation in Appleton's gaze, and, though she doubted he would try to hurt her unless in self-defence, she couldn't be so sure about the rest of the estate.

When he shouted for help, a light flickered on in one of the outbuildings, backlighting him with a yellow glow. Her instincts told her that if she moved towards him, he would bolt, and if she made a move for his stables, he would wrestle her with his bare hands before letting her near his horses. With another person on the way, she'd lost her chance to spell out her story.

Disappointed, she dropped her head and turned on her heel, loping back the way she'd come. The darkness swallowed her before she reached the woods bordering his property, and though she heard Appleton and the other man talking back and forth,

searching the grounds, she left no trace to be found.

Hurt and anxious, she proceeded at a slower pace, skirting the edges of the woods until her paws unwittingly guided her to that little cottage Roz had shown her with the apple and cherry trees. Relieved to have found something familiar, Deepa entered the garden, digging her toes into the soft soil and breathing the flowers' perfume, even though most of the petals were folded shut for the night. In the sky, the moon was a ghost, mostly hidden by clouds.

Deepa circled the cherry tree, instinctively rubbing her cheek and shoulder against its bark to mark her presence, before sitting down atop its roots, eyes shut. Mentally, she sought out Roz's private gardens, where they had walked together in their dreams. What she would say to Roz if she found her, she didn't know. Protest her differences from Roz's past lover, perhaps, or tell her about Phillip's inept shooting. Mostly, she wanted to replace her last image of Roz with something better than her back to Deepa as she walked away.

The gardens weren't there.

A door stood shut in her mind, blocking her entry. It was a nice door, pretty and well-maintained, but it was very solid, and would not allow so much as a stray thought to pass through, never mind an entire consciousness. The gardens were off-limits, as surely as if Roz had put up a sign telling Deepa specifically that trespassing was not allowed.

Her eyes flared open at the sound of the cottage door, and with her cat-eyed night-vision, she recognised Kells, the Irishwoman who coached the rooftop boxers. Standing on her back step in a tattered dressing gown, holding a torch casting a weak and watery beam, Kells scanned the garden with her own far less accurate eyes, looking for the source of whatever noise she must have heard. Deepa sat perfectly still beneath the tree, and she might have remained unseen if the clouds hadn't shifted

at that exact moment, the moonbeams illuminating her golden coat.

Kells took a step back, obviously not expecting a leopard in her garden. In response, Deepa offered a tiny meow, trying to make herself small and non-threatening. Though she didn't know Kells, and the woman certainly owed her nothing, Deepa could use a kind word, if not a friend.

At the very least, she would appreciate not being run off with a pitchfork. Phillip's pistol had been more than enough excitement for one night. She was tired and lonely and hurting, and a single gesture of kindness would go a long way to carrying her home again before daybreak.

"You're not meant to be out here, are you?" Kells asked warily.

If Deepa ran again, she would only lose her bearings and it would take even longer to find her way home. Hoping for the best, she approached the woman with her head and tail raised high, doing her best to impersonate a friendly English housecat rather than an apex predator from the forests of western India. She must have been at least marginally successful, because Kells stood her ground, even when Deepa came within two yards.

"Well now, you're a big one."

Kells was still cautious, but she didn't seem afraid, perhaps counting on her ability to retreat inside the cottage before Deepa could pounce. Seeing as Deepa had no intention of threatening, much less attacking the woman, she didn't try to calculate who would be faster. With the smallest meow she could muster, she sat down on her haunches, leaned over with a studious expression, and scratched in the dirt the wordhello. She took the time to write the letters upside down and backwards, so the word would be immediately apparent to Kells, who watched in silent solemnity before nodding.

“Hello to you, too. Magic, is it? I don't suppose you can tell me who you are, and what you're doing here.”

Deepa couldn't possibly spell out her entire story in a coherent way. She would run out of garden space before she finished, for one thing, not to mention the time it would take. She thought for a second, running through her options, before hesitantly writing, Roz's friend. She didn't know if she still had the right to claim that title, but Roz was all she and Kells had in common, and at least Roz could verify her story should Kells reach out and ask.

“Not the pretty Indian girl she invited to her last match?”

Sitting up on her hind legs, Deepa pressed her front paws together and nodded emphatically, her eyes wide and hopeful.

“I remember you,” Kells said thoughtfully. “Roz seemed smitten, so she did. Now, this leopard situation. Is it an intentional thing you do?”

Immediately, Deepa crumpled in on herself with a mournful sound.

“I take it that's a no. What did you come to me for?”

Miserably, Deepa shook her head.

“No reason? Well, I don't know that I can much help. I dabble in potions, small-scale things. I think what you've got going on is more complicated than that. I wouldn't risk giving any of my potions to a cat, anyway. I don't know how that would work.” Folding her arms, Kells looked her over with a faint frown. “Tea?” she finally offered. “Not that I suppose that'd do any good, either.”

Tea didn't sound much appealing as a cat, but Deepa appreciated the offer more than

she could say. Keeping low to the ground and projecting harmlessness, she came close enough to butt the top of her head against Kelly's shin, before glancing up, trying to communicate her gratitude.

“Best I can do is sit with you,” Kells said, “and call some people in the morning, if you like.”

Deepa rubbed her face against Kelly's legs, blinking up at her from big, pale green eyes.

“I'll put the kettle on anyway. Night's cool enough to warrant a warm drink.”

When Kelly returned a few minutes later, it was with two steaming mugs of herbal tea, which she set on opposite ends of the step before taking a seat beside one of them.

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“Made one for you anyway,” she said gruffly, her elbows on her knees. “In case you change your mind.”

Stepping delicately into the space left between Kells and the other mug, Deepa curled up beside her and pressed just near enough to feel her warmth, but not so close as to seem clingy or overly familiar. If cats were capable of tears, she might have cried. From the curse itself to being shot at, her argument with Roz — her day had been terrible, more so than any in recent memory, and the weight came crashing down upon her all at once. The only thing keeping it from flattening her completely was Kelly's silent company and the offer of tea. It might not have seemed like much to an outsider looking in, but for Deepa, it was just the right touch of unassuming maternal support she needed.

“I’m not much for spellwork,” Kells said eventually, holding her tea between both hands, her dressing gown splayed over the stone step like a mantle of worn terrycloth. “Or anything to do with curses, as the case may be. Like I said, I’m better with potions. Grow most of the ingredients here myself.”

She took a drink. “I’ve a friend who’s a bit of a shapeshifter. Not like you, mind. Subtler. The sort of thing you’d never guess to look at them. I mix them up potions, custom-made, to help them change. So’s to avoid the mess of involving doctors or buying glammers, risking folks finding out, you know. They like their privacy. Their body’s nobody’s business but their own.” Another drink, as she gazed studiously over her garden. “So, I’m good at that manner of thing. Wouldn’t know where to start for turning a cat back into a human, though. I’ve never tested any of my stuff on animals. Don’t know how it would work.”

Deepa chirped, a soft and curious sound.

Kells shrugged. “But that's something to try, I suppose, if you get desperate enough. Given enough time, I expect I could whip something up. If you’re willing to wait that long.”

At Deepa’s quizzical look, she elaborated. “Few weeks or months, most likely, depending how complicated it proves.”

Deepa couldn't help the crushing disappointment at hearing that timeline.

“Too long, is it? I suppose I wouldn’t want to wait that long, either. But, so it goes. We have to play the hand we're given.”

Side by side, they sat on the step and watched the clouds play over the surface of the moon until finally, Deepa fell asleep with her head in Kelly's lap sometime in the blue hours of pre-dawn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE MORNING AFTER THE DARKEST NIGHT

Deepa woke with the yellow dawn, woman-shaped once more, as Kells draped her dressing gown over her, looking both unimpressed and begrudgingly amused.

“I’ll give you a lift back to the city, shall I?”

“Yes, please,” Deepa said in a small voice, sitting up and gathering the gown around herself as delicately as she could manage.

“I take it your curse isn’t broken as simply is that?” Kells asked, driving Deepa home

in borrowed clothes.

“Unfortunately not.” Deepa cleared her throat. “I appreciate your offer from last night, about the potions. Do you suppose it would be easier with me being a woman half the time?”

“No idea,” Kells said bluntly. “Could be easier, then again, could make the whole thing twice as tricky. No way to tell without running a few experiments.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Deepa asked, aiming for levity and ending up somewhere in the vicinity of morbid curiosity, instead.

Kells cast her sideways glance. “Proper shapeshifting like what you're doing isn't even supposed to be possible. Stories about people turning into animals and vice versa, that's supposed to've all been glamours and illusions. Changing the human body bit by bit like my friend, that's all connected to hormonal shifts, and the like. Natural stuff that already happens in the human body. I wouldn't know where to start with you.”

“Well, you couldn't possibly make my situation worse,” Deepa joked, trying to hide her mounting desperation.

Kells snorted, returning her eyes to the road. “Don't even say that. I guarantee you, it can always get worse.”

Despondently, Deepa expected she was right.

“Say hello to Roz if you see her before I do,” Kells said as she pulled up outside The Songbird. “You watching her fight on Thursday?”

“I'm not sure I'm invited.”

What manner of falling out Kells was imagining, Deepa didn't want to guess.

“Come by anyway,” Kells finally said. “You've got to return these clothes, if nothing else.”

That was true, though by Thursday, Deepa might decide to send them back to Kelly's cottage by way of post instead of returning to the boxing club and facing Roz again.

???

When Deepa received Appleton's next missive on Monday morning at The Songbird, she tossed the note aside without replying. Continuing their charade seemed pointless. He couldn't marry her, he hadn't seen through her leopard form, and no matter how many men she swindled or deals she brokered, her life was never going to be the perfect glittering snow globe existence she craved. None of her efforts mattered. She'd achieved nothing but a curse and the taste of something wonderful in Roz's company, that was then immediately lost. She was tired of striving for more and better when the world seemed so determined to throw all her work back in her face.

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“Miss Deepa!” Jonathan bounded up to her that night at The Songbird, his arms full of flowers and an expression of anxious, shining hope in his eyes. She already knew he was about to instigate a conversation she didn't want to have. “May I speak to you privately?”

Swallowing a sigh, she took him to an empty table near the back. The dressing room was too private, and she wanted to be able to make a quick escape. Taking a seat, she invited him to join her, but he remained standing, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet as if unable to contain his nervous energy.

“These are for you,” he said, holding up his enormous display of flowers. Roses, peonies, and ranunculus made up the fattest bouquet she'd ever seen, all of them soft and pale and pink, dreamy and fit for a princess's wedding.

“I know you prefer longer-lasting gifts, but you look so good with flowers, and I thought — I hoped — that I might have the opportunity to give you something more valuable next time.”

“The flowers are very beautiful, Jonathan,” she said tiredly. “Thank you. But I'm—”

“Wait,” he blurted. “Wait, I have a whole speech prepared, and I really need to get it out in one go if I'm going to get it right.”

She cringed. “Oh, no, please don't go to the trouble—”

“I know you get proposals from men every day,” he said in a rush, “and maybe I'm a fool to think you'll accept mine when you've turned down so many others. And I

know you turned me down too, the first time, but that was—”

That was when he’d tipsily but heartfully proposed to her naked in the middle of the night, the one time she’d taken him to bed. They both winced at the memory.

“But I truly adore you, and I would be so good for you, Miss Deepa. I’d worship the ground where you walk. And I know, I know that’s easy to say, and I’m sure you’ve heard it before, but it’s the truth. You’re so beautiful, and so talented, and I would be such a good husband to you, I promise. I can give you everything you want, everything in the world. I have a good flat and a nice car, and my parents would adore you. You’d never have to so much as think about money, never mind worry over it. I’m no prince, but I’ll treat you like a queen, if you’ll only let me.” He took a deep breath, his face brave and hopeful. “What do you say?”

What could she say? Jonathan was young, rich, handsome, and he adored her with the kind of helpless puppy love that, as long as she gave him a kind word now and then, would last years into the future. He had the means to give her a good life, with far fewer strings attached than any of the more aggressive, controlling proposals she’d heard from other men. His wealth wasn’t on Appleton’s level, but that only meant his family was more likely to accept their class difference.

Jonathan would be kind to her, she knew. He would be as sweet on their fifth anniversary as he was on their first. And her mother would be impressed, if not with Jonathan’s intellect or work ethic, both of which were negligible, then with his good looks and reputation, at least. She would stop fussing over Deepa and worrying that her time was running out to find a decent husband.

In another life, Deepa would have been tempted to say yes. Yes, trade her independence for security, trade her constant efforts for luxury. Let him take care of her and her mother.

But Deepa couldn't do it. She didn't love him, which hardly mattered except for her curse. Even if she wanted to give up her independence and her constant con artistry, even if she wanted a genuine husband, she couldn't say yes. Not while she was turning into a leopard every night.

And she couldn't do it to Roz.

"Jonathan..." He was one of the few men frequenting The Songbird who didn't want a siren, a temptress, or a mistress, so much as a friend. That alone softened her, though one could hardly build a friendship out of the idol worship he aimed her way. "I think very fondly of you. You know that, yes?"

He nodded, still buoyed by hope.

"Then please believe that I mean this with all my heart: I can't marry anyone right now. If I could, you would be perfect for it."

"You can't?" he asked, all confusion.

"Personal matters prevent me. And it's not the sort of problem you can solve," she added quickly, when he opened his mouth to propose a solution. "I can't marry you or anyone right now, or possibly at all."

"I can wait!"

"You could be waiting a terribly long time. I can't do that to you."

Finally, his face fell, and his frame drooped like a plant denied water for too long. "I see. Well, I went in knowing it was a longshot, what? It was worth a try." Straightening up, he pulled himself together and offered an approximation of his usual sunny smile. "In any case, I hope you won't think worse of me for making the

attempt.”

“Of course not.” It was inevitable; eventually, every man in her vicinity felt the need to try their luck. It wasn’t their fault. She orchestrated it, after all.

“Would you mind accepting the flowers anyway? It’s just that they’re awfully heavy, and I got them especially for you. I wouldn’t really know what else to do with them.”

Opening her arms, she allowed him to pass the bouquet over, silk-soft petals brushing her bare arms and under her chin as she gathered them up. They were indeed enormously heavy, and must have cost a fortune. While they were yet stood close to one another, she leaned in to press a brief, red-painted kiss to his cheek.

“I would have chosen you,” she murmured, a tinge of regret colouring her voice, and it wasn’t even entirely a lie. When she stepped back, Jonathan was blushing, and he looked over the moon at having received even such a small gesture.

“If you don’t mind,” he said faintly, one hand pressed to the lipstick mark she’d left, “I think I’m going to chuck it in early. Maybe a drink or two, then some time alone to lick my wounds, what?”

“I hope this won’t keep you away from The Songbird for long.”

“Oh, no! If you don’t mind seeing me around, I’d certainly like to come back.”

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“You’ll find a far better wife than me,” she promised. “You only need to keep your eyes open.”

“Ah, right, yes. Well, I suppose all things are possible, what?” With a slightly embarrassed smile, Jonathan took his leave just as Cherie approached, her blonde hair painted cherry red by the light reflecting off the walls and her sequins. They brushed by each other as he left and Cherie made her way to Deepa’s side.

“He proposed, then?” she demanded, all aflutter with delight. “I’ve been waiting for him to try again! Did he have a ring this time?”

“No, I don’t think he liked his chances quite enough to invest in a ring.”

“Oh.” Her excitement turned to disappointment. “You said no, did you? That’s a shame. He’s a decent one. We’ve talked a few times, you know, and he’s always so respectful, even when I’m dancing. Such a good face on him, too.”

Deepa glanced at her over her mountain of flowers. “You really like him?”

“Well, yeah,” Cherie said, like it was obvious. Which Deepa supposed it was, now that she thought about it. “He’s a catch. But he’s only ever had eyes for you, and I can’t compete with that.”

“Cherie...”

“I’m not mad about it,” Cherie said, waving her off. “I’m not even jealous. It is what it is, you know? You’re a good friend, and I’m not about to get petty about a man.

Maybe if I could afford one of those charmed dresses you wear, I'd have a chance — No, I'm kidding," she added quickly, at Deepa's expression. "I get plenty of attention on my own, thanks. I'm doing just fine."

"You're beautiful, and you're funny, and you're kind," Deepa informed her. "If you want a husband, you'll get one. I'm certainly not going to poach anyone away from you."

"I'll land one eventually," Cherie said with a careless shrug. "Anyway, I came to give you this."

She presented a flyer, realised Deepa didn't have a spare hand to take it, and stood back to hold it up so Deepa could see. On the front was a drawing of a fearsome wildcat, with printed text underneath warning the public that a leopard had escaped from some zoo or circus and had been spotted in London. Deepa's heart gave a panicked lurch into her throat.

"Someone just dropped it off at the door for you," Cherie explained. "There's a note on the back, but no name."

Flipping the flyer over, a handwritten scroll in blocky, workmanlike letters read, Deepa — you alright?

"I know who it's from," Deepa confirmed, forcing her panic back down before it choked her. "Just a friend checking up on me."

"Was the leopard sighting real, then?" Cherie asked, examining the drawing with great interest.

"It was probably just a prank that got out of hand," Deepa said carefully.

“Oh. Oh, god! Was that you?”

“Keep your voice down,” Deepa hissed.

With her giant bouquet, she herded Cherie into the dressing room, laid the flowers down — they engulfed the whole vanity table, mirror included — and locked the door behind them, then, as an afterthought, braced a chair under the handle.

“Bad enough I was spotted like that; I don't need rumours whirling around about my personal life on top of it. I can't believe there are flyers. There's no way Phillip is going to miss this. Oh, he'll be gloating. What I wouldn't give to slap that smug look right off his face.”

“What happened?” Cherie squeaked, bouncing with excitement. “Did you attack anyone? Did you eat somebody's face?”

“No! Absolutely not.”

Cherie looked unconvinced.

“I may have tracked down Phillip and threatened him into changing me back,” Deepa admitted, “but that didn't go terribly well. I wish I had eaten his face,” she muttered, arms crossed. “I don't know what else to do. And this needs to be resolved soon, now that people are going to be on high alert for a great cat roaming the streets. What if someone spots me through the window, or someone in the club hears me pacing around? The longer I stay cursed, the greater the chance of someone finding me out, no matter how careful I am going forward.”

“No more late-night expeditions, certainly.”

“Definitely not,” Deepa agreed grimly.

“The next thing to try is giving a serious go at breaking it yourself,” Cherie declared.
“Round up all your friends with even a lick of magic, and see what they can do.”

She said it with far more confidence than Deepa felt the idea deserved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A GROUP ATTEMPT AT CURSE-BREAKING

The problem was that none of Deepa's close friends particularly excelled at magic.

Aaliyah was very good at small, practical magic, the kind that made sure things went where they were supposed to go, polishing away scuffs or mending tears. Jasmine could sculpt with magic and breathe life into those forms. Elizabeth had her textile illusions and her good-luck charms, and Coxley had the showy sort of magic he liked to bring out at parties to break the ice or cause a scandal here and there. Alphonse, Aaliyah's de facto husband, was all but useless at the stuff, as was Arthur, Elizabeth's husband, though Alphonse had never had the talent, whereas Arthur had lost his in the war. Cherie could do little flashes of magic, but never on command, and rarely intentionally.

The only person in their group who had any chance of cracking anything as complicated as a curse was Jacobi, Alphonse's former valet and now husband. Jacobi was strikingly competent in every other aspect of his life, so it followed that he should be equally competent when it came to magic. However, he played his cards so close to the chest that Deepa had no idea, really, if he was up to the task, or if it was just an assumption.

The one person to whom she wished she could have brought her problem was a former associate by the name of Sebastian, whom she had hired last autumn to execute that Kew Gardens robbery on her behalf. Sebastian had strong, clever magic, and furthermore, he was the sort of conniving con artist whom she could ironically trust, what with the both of them being cut from the same cloth.

Unfortunately, Sebastian had stolen a truly outstanding number of jewels from The National Gallery and fled the country to start a new life in America, with his special gentleman friend — with whom he wasn't in love, Deepa remembered him maintaining — in tow. So, regrettably, his help wasn't really an option.

“Why isn't Roz with you?” Aaliyah asked in an undertone, as things were getting underway. “She doesn't seem the sort to miss something so important.”

“Scheduling conflict,” Deepa replied, turning to the rest of the group before Aaliyah could interrogate her.

They had gathered at Aaliyah's house to try to break her curse, or rather, more properly, at the Kaddour-Hollyhock household. Deepa sat in the middle of the living room floor with her friends sitting in a circle all around her, the furniture pushed out of the way against the walls. Seeing as none of them had any experience with curse-breaking, or indeed, with curses at all, none of them knew what might happen if they succeeded.

Or, Deepa supposed, if they failed. Presumably, a failure to break the curse would simply result in her continuing to turn into a leopard every night, but there was a chance it could backfire and cause the magic to lash out in a defensive or destructive way, depending on just how much of a bastard Phillip was.

It seemed safe to say the answer to that last question was ‘an enormous one.’

“I can feel the magic on you,” Elizabeth said, a pretty frown furrowing her brow as she clasped Deepa's forearm. “It's in deep, isn't it? I found an old book with a chapter on curse-breaking. I'm not sure if it's at all outdated — some of its other chapters are a bit suspect, I admit — but it says, basically, that to break a curse, you have to untangle the threads from the victim's own magic, where they've got tangled up.”

“I imagine that’s rather easier said than done,” Deepa noted.

“Really?” Alphonse asked. “It sounds simple enough.”

“You couldn’t untangle a ball of yarn if it had snarled in your lap,” Aaliyah pointed out to him. “This will take some doing with a delicate touch, but it’s certainly not impossible.”

“I had a chat with an old friend who’s run into a curse here and there in his time,” said Coxley, sitting cross-legged and peering at Deepa intently. “His account was much the same as Elizabeth’s. You’ve just got to sort out whose magic belongs to who, and cut out the bad stuff.”

“Like flushing an infection from a wound,” Arthur said.

Deepa took a steadying breath. She didn’t terribly like the sound of that, but it had to be better than these nightly transformations. “Alright. Who wants to give it a try?”

“Show us your magic first?” Coxley requested.

He had the same look as when she had first modelled for him, an expression of intense concentration as if puzzling out a complicated composition, mapping the colours in his head before putting them to canvas. It was a different sort of attention than most men paid her, and she had enjoyed it then in his studio, and she enjoyed it well enough now, though she could do without the raised stakes.

Centering herself, she let her magic flow to the surface and well up in the palms of both hands, showing it off without directing it into any particular spell. Her magic was a rich plummy colour, dark purple with maroon and burgundy tones at its core, and indigo-navy on its surface. It billowed gently from her hands like dry ice, drifting this way and that with the room’s air currents. Her friends all huddled close, studying

the colours and getting a sense for it, hoping to tell the difference between her magic and Phillip's.

She'd mostly avoided thinking about his actual magic thus far, but now it was unavoidable, and it left a bad taste in her mouth. Previously, she had taken care to only think of it as 'the curse.' 'Phillip's curse,' even, but like it was a separate entity from him, a misfortune that had befallen her. Not like it was his actual magic in her body, in her blood and bones, making a home where he had no right to be.

She hated the invasion of it, the unwanted intimacy, and her own magic flared in a rush of defensive fury. She couldn't feel that foreign magic in her, but she wanted it out. She would rip it out with her own nails and grind it under her heel into the nice hardwood of Aaliyah's living room floor before she put up with it for one more night.

"Lovely," said Coxley. "Just keep holding it like that, my dear, and we'll hunt down this curse and see what it's made of."

It was indeed easier said than done. With their own magic, Deepa's friends poked and prodded at her, every exploratory tendril they sent accompanied by a wincing apology. Spellwork was perfectly common in Britain, but it was supposed to be performed very properly, every bit of it controlled and contained. Deepa found it overly rigid, an entire culture of denying one's better instincts and keeping oneself in check. But now, with so many people surrounding her and putting her under their metaphysical microscopes, their magic brushing up against hers as they tried to sniff out her curse like a pack of hounds routing out a stubborn badger, she suddenly quite understood the appeal of keeping everyone's magic firmly buttoned down.

It was all terribly close, to the point of claustrophobia. Much as she enjoyed being the centre of attention, she disliked actually being seen, and this felt like being stripped bare of every glamorous illusion she'd ever worn, every societal mask behind which she liked to hide, to stand naked, plain and shivering, before a panel of judges who

could read her every secret.

Abruptly, she wished she were alone in a room with Roz instead of with her friends. Roz, with her keen nose for magic, could surely sniff out the curse's root. The same way she'd so tenderly wrapped that fabric around Deepa's hands, she could unspool the curse from Deepa's bones.

The worst part was that if Deepa asked, Roz would try to do it, even if she was still angry with Deepa, even if she didn't want to otherwise see her.

Just as Deepa was about to insist they take a break so she could be left alone for a minute, Elizabeth declared, "I've got it!"

Phillip's magic wasn't suddenly made visible, and Deepa didn't feel any different, but Elizabeth seemed confident that she had located the foreign magic, even if she hadn't broken Deepa free of it.

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“Now what?” Alphonse asked expectantly. “Untangling it like a ball of yarn, eh?”

“I think I can pick away at it,” Elizabeth said, “but I don’t know how long that will take.”

“Try something,” Deepa suggested through gritted teeth.

“I don’t suppose we can just yank it out, like snapping a thread,” said Aaliyah.

“That seems rash,” said Jacobi, contributing to the discussion for the first time. He was a man of few words, at least in mixed company, preferring to keep himself to himself until the situation — which was often either a case of Alphonse putting his foot in his mouth, or Aaliyah charging forth like a bull in a China shop — compelled him to politely intervene.

“You want it broken, don't you?” Aaliyah asked her. “By any means necessary? It doesn’t seem like the sort of curse that can up and kill you. Breaking it by force might not feel pleasant, but I doubt it’ll do you any serious harm.”

“Try it. Just...stand by in case anything goes wrong.”

Cherie scooted forward to pat Deepa’s knee reassuringly. “I’ll come up with something to tell your mother if we accidentally kill you.”

“Let's not let it get that far,” Deepa advised. “Now, how are we going to do this?”

In tandem, Elizabeth and Coxley worked to draw the curse-magic out, and it wriggled

forth, wormlike, from Deepa's chest. As soon as they had unwound a smidge of it from where it had her heart in a parasitic grip, Jasmine leapt into action, coaxing it into the open air as a sculptor coaxes art from solid stone.

Phillip's magic was a sickly yellowish green, an ugly colour befitting an ugly man, or perhaps only turned ugly because of the curse itself, like Phillip's intent had soured the magic against its will and turned it rancid. It writhed through the air, thrashing like a fish in Jasmine's masterful grip, until it was drawn out in a long, taut line. Staring at it, Deepa was sick to her stomach, furious and disgusted that it had been inside her, and that she'd let it stay so long before trying to force it out.

"Hold still," Aaliyah ordered, kneeling upright with both hands raised like she was waiting to catch something about to be violently lobbed her way.

Reaching out with her own magic, she wrapped it around the curse with a firm hand, like tying two lengths of parallel rope together. When she was satisfied that it was secure, she commanded her magic to give it a good, firm yank, trying to pull the curse out of Deepa with sheer strength.

The force yanked Deepa forward with it, and she fell to her hands and knees with an unladylike grunt. Aaliyah was strong, but the curse was brittle, and instead of getting pulled all the way out, it snapped like an old, dried-out elastic and rocketed back inside her, slapping her hard enough to knock her back again.

With a snarl, Deepa shook her head got to her feet, tense all over and irritated that she had entertained Aaliyah's reckless idea.

"Oh my," Elizabeth said nervously. "So, that's how that works."

"Fascinating," Coxley breathed, leaning forward with his hands on his knees.

Deepa took stock of herself. She was a leopard again, though it was barely mid-afternoon. Thoroughly fed up, she marched over to Aaliyah where the other woman was sitting back on her heels, and gave her a sharp, reprimanding shove right in the chest with one great paw.

“Sorry,” Aaliyah said ruefully. “I really thought that might work.”

Gently, Jasmine said, “Let’s get you put back.”

Deepa levelled her with a glare as well, not feeling particularly magnanimous towards anyone present, but she sat down, tail wrapped firmly around her paws, and waited. A twitch of movement caught her eye from the side, and she whipped her head around to catch Alphonse reaching forward with onetentative hand, as if he meant to pet her. At her look, he immediately jerked back, nearly swallowing his own tongue in the process, and sat on his hands to keep from giving into future temptation.

“It’s alright,” said Elizabeth. “I think I saw what happened. Let me just tease that curse-magic out again, and we should be able to get you back on two legs.”

“Do you lose your clothes every time you transform?” Coxley asked, and Deepa glanced down to find that her back paws were tangled in the remains of her dress, which had torn quite dramatically at the seams when it was suddenly asked to accommodate a ten-stone cat rather than a woman.

She’d liked that dress, she thought mournfully. It wasn’t one of Elizabeth’s works, nor particularly expensive, but it had been flattering enough for what it was. Sitting there, she allowed herself to wallow in self-pity for the full three minutes it took her friends to undo the transformation. It was nice, in a way, to be able to feel so abjectly miserable without anyone being able to read her expression.

As soon as she was a woman again, she pulled herself together and set to work

figuring out the next course of action. Her friends couldn't break the curse for her, so she had to try something else.

First, she needed clothes. Faced with her sudden nakedness, Arthur and Jacobi both politely cleared their throats and looked away, abruptly interested in the ceiling and windows. Alphonse turned bright red and turned around completely, giving her his back. Coxley was unbothered, having seen her naked before, and for a much longer period of time. Aliyah just sighed and got to her feet, as if curses and leopard-women were inconveniences she dealt with every day.

“Come on,” she said. “You're too tall to fit in any of my clothes, but I'll lend you a robe to get you home.”

“I'm going to have to tell my mother, aren't I,” Deepa said despondently in the bedroom as Aaliyah wrapped her in a light, summery robe, tying the sash firmly around Deepa's waist.

“Maybe she'll have some brilliant solution in mind,” Aaliyah offered. “Maybe she has some secret experience with curses, and knows how to break them cleanly.”

“She believes in love.”

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“So do I, but I know it doesn't just work on command like that. Even if she thinks you might find your true love one day, I doubt she'll be content to leave you cursed till then.” Aaliyah gave Deepa's shoulder an encouraging rub through the silk. “And you never know. Roz could still pull through for you.”

Deepa's face did something complicated, causing Aaliyah to pull back.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” Deepa lied. “She really couldn't make it today, and she wouldn't have been able to help much regardless.” She drew the robe closer around herself. “My mother likes her,” she said in a small voice, as much to distract Aaliyah as to impart the truth of it.

Aaliyah took the bait. “Don't worry about this curse business,” she said kindly. “She's your mother. I'm sure she's seen you in worst states than this.”

“I'm not sure I've been in worse,” Deepa replied, but Aaliyah was right. Having exhausted all other sources, it was time to turn to her mother's wisdom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IN WHICH A LEOPARD IS OFFERED UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND A LECTURE

Upon receiving Deepa's uncharacteristically meek call, her mother came to her flat straight away, sitting with her until midnight while Cherie worked the club below.

“I didn’t want to waste your time on this,” Deepa muttered, squirming with embarrassment and unable to meet her mother’s eyes as she kept busy, brewing them each a tea.

“Silly girl,” her mother chided from the loveseat. “Ridiculous. How can I enjoy a night off knowing you are here alone, upset? You need me. Of course I will be here.”

“I wanted to deal with it myself, without bothering you.”

“It is no bother,” her mother countered, accepting her mug of tea and patting the empty cushion at her side for Deepa to join her. “I know how hard you work, trying to make enough money to support the both of us at once, as if I do not have a perfectly good job myself. It is not my daughter’s job to support her mother like this, hm? Not while I am still perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

“You should have better than what you’ve got,” Deepa said into her tea.

“Maybe I should have better. Maybe I deserve worse. But I have exactly what I have, and I am content with it.” Reaching over, she stroked Deepa’s hair, smoothing a tiny flyaway curl off her cheek and behind her ear. “I admire your spirit,” she said gently. “Such fire, such hunger, always fighting for more and better. But you don’t have to improve my life when I am happy with the work I do. You should not be setting yourself on fire to keep me warm.”

“It was working, though. I was managing it.”

“Anyone can manage anything up to a certain point. Now, tell me about this curse. Who did this to you?”

“A man.” Deepa rolled her eyes dismissively, underplaying her fear and anger. “He says the only way to break it is with true love’s kiss. So far, that seems accurate.

Nothing else I've tried has worked."

"And you are not closer to finding love?"

"Obviously not."

"But you have been trying," her mother surmised. "Introducing me to your friend? Rosaline? Don't make that face," she added. "You cannot hide such things from your mother. I was surprised at first, yes; it is not a traditional match, looking for that sort of love with a woman. But then, Cherie has told me about the men who court you. They may be rich, some even handsome, but they do not seem the sort of men I would trust to treat my daughter as she deserves. I know they flatter you and bring you gifts, but a marriage should not be built on such a shallow foundation. You can do better. And then I thought, if those are the men in your life, perhaps it is best that you turn to a woman and see what she has to offer instead." She shook her head. "I'm sorry it was not enough love to break your curse."

"I can't imagine what will be," said Deepa. "I don't even believe in true love."

Her mother tutted. "A shame. Are you still seeing Rosaline?"

"We had a falling out."

"And?" her mother prompted with a frown.

Deepa took a long drink of her tea, unwilling to elaborate.

"You cannot finally introduce me to someone and then refuse to tell me anything more about her," her mother warned. "You think I cannot make you talk? After all this time I've waited?"

“I only have to hold out until midnight,” Deepa said around the rim of her mug. “After that, I’ll be a leopard again, and I won’t be able to tell you anything even if I want to.”

“And when you are a leopard, you won’t be able to talk back to your mother.”

Deepa snorted inelegantly into her tea. “I suppose that’s true. The communication barrier has been frustrating, at times. The only night I was able to get around it was with Roz. She took me dreamwalking — you know, like Auntie Sita used to do when you were children — and I was human there. But I haven’t been able to do it without her.”

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“If it lasts from midnight to dawn, you should be spending that time resting,” her mother said, reproach in her tone. “Those hours are for sleep.”

“I’ve never kept conventional hours, mama. You know this.”

As midnight approached, Deepa grew restless, more nervous of her mother’s reaction to the great reveal than she had been of any of her friends’. She channeled that restlessness into tidying, pointlessly re-folding clothes and rearranging the contents of the kitchen cabinets until finally, her mother took her by both hands, guiding her back to the loveseat and forcing her to still.

“Deepa,” she said, in a tone of infinite patience. “My dove. You have done this many times before, yes? And you have always kept your human mind throughout the change?”

Wordlessly, Deepa nodded.

“There is no danger in your transformation, not to yourself, and not to me. My heart hurts for you, but I am not afraid.” With fingers permanently dyed turmeric-yellow, her mother touched the side of her face, tracing her from temple to jaw. Deepa nuzzled into her hand, craving that softness. “You will show this to me, and I will tell you that I still love you, and I will stay here until morning thinking of ways to lift this unwanted magic away from my child. That is how our night will pass, from start to finish. No surprises. Yes?”

“You promise?” Deepa asked in a small voice.

“Of course I do. Ridiculous child, questioning your mother. Now, go, go change out of your nice clothes, and stop worrying about me. It is my job to worry about you, not the other way around.”

In the bedroom, Deepa changed out of her nice clothes as instructed, and then, as the clock ticked past midnight, she changed out of her skin. Sitting there, spotted and golden-furred and leonine, the supposed epitome of grace and power, she didn't dare make the first move. Either her mother would come in to see her, or they would sit silently in their separate rooms until daybreak, after which Deepa would never broach the subject again. There was a part of her that hoped that would be the case, but it was the fearful, nervous part of her that always assumed the worst of everyone, and couldn't be trusted to reveal her heart.

The greater part of her wished desperately that her mother would come into the room, put her arms around her the way she'd always done since Deepa was a swaddled babe, and hold her to her breast as if her fangs and claws and fur changed nothing.

As the seconds ticked on and there was no sound from the other room, Deepa began vibrating with anxiety, shifting her weight from one paw to the other atop the mattress, wishing for anything to break the stalemate.

At five interminable minutes past the hour, her mother came to the doorway. “There you are,” she said gently. “I thought you would let me know when you were ready, but I suppose it was a fast change, was it not?”

Nervously, Deepa dropped low, her front paws hanging over the edge of the bed as she stared up at her mother, for once guileless.

“Stand up and let me get a look at you,” her mother instructed, entering the room slowly but without hesitation. Deepa obeyed, rising to her feet and turning in a slow circle, paws sinking into the soft bed covers.

“Of course, you are as beautiful a leopard as you are a woman. I expected nothing less. What a foolish boy, to think he could demean you like this. Sit, sit, be comfortable.” Joining her on the bed, Deepa’s mother sat with her legs neatly crossed at the ankle, her hands folded in her lap. “Now, my dove, because you cannot interrupt me like this, you will listen to what I have to say.”

Deepa made a noise of protest, which her mother immediately hushed with a pat to her forepaw.

“None of that,” she chided. “My daughter is a strong, clever girl, but she can still benefit from her mother’s wisdom. I see the choices you make, and I let you live your life as you see fit, but now that you are a captive audience, you will hear my advice, hm?”

“My advice to you is this: go back to your Rosaline and make up with her. I don’t know what it is you argued about, but I have met her, and I believe she will forgive you. Don’t give me that look — I know you, Deepa, and yes, I think it is you who must be forgiven, not her. I know too that you worry she does not have enough money for you. Always, you are so concerned with money.

“You have never allowed me to matchmake for you, and I have respected your wishes, but I see these silly boys fluttering after you, giving you pearls and diamonds, and every time, I want to tell you, my daughter can do better. It is better to live a modest life with someone who loves you than a life of luxury with a man who will not respect you in marriage. Don’t hiss at me; I know what I am talking about. I see the lengths you go to catch their eyes, the way you paint your face and bare your skin to get their attention, making yourself like an exotic peacock next to the plain sparrows of their Englishwomen. And all these silly little boys with their silly little trinkets, they find you alluring now, but they will not respect you.

“Rosaline, she is not like that. And you know it, because you introduced me to her

when you have never so much as told me the name of a single man who has courted you.

“Your father had all the money in the world, but no tenderness in his heart, and where did that get us? His wife is a housekeeper and his daughter shares this tiny flat with its thin walls and broken doors. I do not want you to walk the same path as me, my dove. I want you to find love. Even before this curse, I have always wanted you to find love.”

Deepa buried her face in her mother's skirts like she used to do when she was a little girl, shutting her eyes and breathing in deep. She hadn't allowed herself to be held like this in so long; since before leaving Gujarat, even. Her mother felt different now, dressed in her starch-stiff English fabrics, but she smelled the same, of warm kitchen spices and almond biscuits. As her mother petted down her back, slow and steady strokes the way she used to brush Deepa's hair, Deepa tried to crawl into her mother's lap. With a huff, her mother opened her arms, pressing Deepa's face to her chest as she bundled her up and held her tight.

“Poor thing,” she murmured, running her fingers through Deepa's fur. “Go to sleep, get some rest. I will be here in the morning, and all will be well.”

In her mother's voice, it seemed so easy. Go back to Roz. Open herself up to love. Allow it to happen. But the hardened part of Deepa's soul, the part that would only be fed with pearls and diamonds, wines and chocolates, insisted that what her mother was really describing was the act of settling. Settling for affection instead of wealth, for the bare minimum instead of luxury. She made it sound easy, to find comfort in the mundanities of the working class. She made it sound like it wasn't such a terrible way to live. The hungry part of Deepa's soul bristled, resisting the idea, but the smaller, softer part of her — the part that missed Roz — wondered if perhaps, her mother might be right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

IN WHICH A LADY BESTOWS A FAVOUR ON HER KNIGHT

All day Wednesday, Deepa flip-flopped about whether she would attend the boxing match. On Thursday, she changed her mind on an hourly basis, by turns missing Roz, wanting to argue her case, and wanting to stay away entirely. Her vase of tiger lilies still stood on the kitchen counter, as vibrant as they had been the day Roz brought them. Deepa expected to part the flowers and find the secret rose within withered from lack of care, but it was unchanged, as lush and delicate as ever, which was somehow more annoying than if it had died.

She was close to giving into her worst impulses and staying at The Songbird for the night when Cherie brought Aaliyah, Jasmine, and Elizabeth home, mercilessly siccing them on her friend.

“Come on, get up,” Aaliyah ordered. “Put on your best dress and all your jewellery. We’re going out.”

“Are we?” Deepa asked archly from the kitchen table, where she was calculating the worth of her latest round of gifts.

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“Moping over your curse, I can understand. It's a wretched situation. But letting Roz slip through your fingers because you're too proud to hold onto her is unacceptable. She hasn't done anything wrong, so I'm not going to sit back and watch you fuck yourself over for no good reason.”

“Excuse me, how exactly do you know any of what happened between us?” Deepa demanded, indignantly getting to her feet. “I never shared a thing with you!”

“I was suspicious, what with your history of being a consummate liar, so I asked her directly. Now, get up before I dress you and drag you out of here myself.”

“If you want to break things off with her, that's alright,” Jasmine said gently as Deepa got dressed, angrily zipping herself into her finest dress. “I just think you should tell her that to her face, if that's what you want. She's as proud as you are. If you want to end it, one of you is going to have to actually come out and say so.”

“Oh, no,” Elizabeth interjected, waving at Deepa's dress. “Don't wear one of mine. The last thing you need to bring to a conversation like this is a glamour. Here.” Fishing a little pendant from her purse, Elizabeth pressed one of her handmade good-luck charms into Deepa's palm. “Take this, instead. You don't want her thinking you're trying to enchant her.”

“I want her to think I was right,” Deepa said mulishly, accepting the charm to fasten it around her neck, “and admit that her passion for boxing isn't any nobler than wanting to make a living.” As she spoke, she hunted a red-and-cream half sari without any magical embellishments from her wardrobe and began arranging it over her most indecently small choli.

“She makes a perfectly respectable living,” Jasmine said. “A mechanic will always be in work.”

“She might not be old money,” Elizabeth began.

“Or new money,” said Aaliyah.

“But with the two of you working, she could certainly afford to keep you in a better place than this.”

“That's not the point,” Deepa snapped, causing all of them to finally shut their mouths for a second. “I like her. I like how she treats me. But if you’re trying to push me into her arms because you want me to find my one true love, you're too late. Kissing her didn't break my curse, and believe me, we tried it enough times to be certain. She wasn't the one, even before our asinine argument, and she certainly isn't the one now.”

“Bullshit,” Aaliyah said firmly.

Deepa froze in the process of fixing her sari's drape.

“Love is a choice you make every day,” Aaliyah said. “Jasmine and I keep choosing each other, and Jacobi keeps choosing Alphonse, god help him. Elizabeth chose to go after Coxley, and she keeps on choosing to make it work with him and Arthur, and them with each other. To say that Roz can't be your true love is just letting that pissant Phillip make your choice for you. It's complete and utter rot. You're cleverer than that.”

“The curse,” Deepa began, arranging her skirts as Aaliyah's words tugged uncomfortably at her heart.

“Is just magic! It’s not fate. It doesn’t get to decide anything for you. You can undo it or cut it out or kill him, or you can find a way to live with it, or walk into the forest to live as a cat for the rest of your life. None of that matters! And none of it dictates whether you and Roz are good for each other. If you want to break things off because of personal differences, fine, but don’t use your curse as an excuse for giving up on her.”

Aaliyah glared at her, chin up and arms crossed, and Deepa found that she didn’t much like being on the receiving end of Aaliyah’s tough-love approach to problem-solving. It felt rather like the floor falling out from under her, and all she wanted was for Roz to be at the bottom of her fall waiting to catch her.

She just didn’t know whether Roz was still interested in playing that part.

“I feel like you’re not taking my curse as seriously as I’d like,” Deepa finally said. “If I could just brush it off one way or another, I would have by now.”

“Yes, yes, it’s all very inconvenient and life-changing,” Aaliyah said impatiently. “But it’s got nothing to do with Roz. I’m not saying you have to apologise for anything. I’m just saying, come watch her fight, and see if you can’t find a way forward with her. Because we’re all still rooting for you two.”

Jasmine, Elizabeth, and Cherie all nodded their agreement.

“Fine.” Deepa swallowed. “But only because I have to give her back her shirt. And Kelly’s, too.”

“How many women have you been borrowing clothes from, exactly?” Aaliyah asked.

“None of your business,” she replied, pulling a wisp of a scarf from her wardrobe to toss around her neck as they departed.

Downstairs, an obstacle blocked Deepa's friends' exit from the club. She might have been grateful to postpone her meeting with Roz, but the stars aligned to take her day from bad to worse. It was Appleton awaiting her, unreadable as ever, and speaking to him was hardly preferable to attending the fight. But he was a business associate, not a friend, and she had reneged on their deal. She owed him an explanation, if not an apology.

"Give me a moment," she said to her friends, walking over to Appleton without waiting for a reply.

"You can't brush this off just because you have business to attend," Aaliyah began, but Deepa shook her head, not slowing down.

"It's important, and it won't take long."

"There you are," said Appleton, as soon as she was in range. "You missed my last invitation, but your manager assured me it was delivered, so—"

"Privately," Deepa said, taking him by the elbow to steer him into the empty dressing room.

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“If you want to break things off because I said we were ill-matched for marriage, I understand,” he said stiffly, as soon as the door was closed. “But I do expect the courtesy of actually being told so, rather than this sudden absence and ignoring of my messages.”

“That's not it,” she said quickly.

“Then what? Because I had taken you for a professional, but this behaviour is making me rethink that assumption.”

She took a deep breath. “You’re right. I was unprofessional in ignoring you. But the thing is, I’m in some small amount of personal trouble. And the one person I thought might be able to help just walked away, in no small part because of the perception that I was choosing you and your lifestyle over what they could offer me instead. I’m sorry for not coming to your last party. I’m normally much more reliable.”

“Personal trouble,” he repeated. “Are you alright? I won't pry, but if there’s anything I can do—”

Shaking her head, she brushed aside a rogue tear, angry with herself for letting it slip. “I’m fine, really, and no, I don’t think there's anything anyone can do, but I’ll get it sorted. In any case, it's no excuse for my lapse in professionalism.”

His frown deepened, sharp eyes scanning her as if trying to work out what exactly was wrong, or, more likely, whether she was being honest. When he opened his mouth, she cut him off without giving him the chance for a single word.

“Have you come to break off our arrangement, then? I understand completely. I can introduce you to the other girls, if you’d like a replacement. Running through a string of showgirls should work wonders for your reputation, in fact.”

“I didn't come here to end anything,” said Appleton, looking wholly wrong-footed by Deepa's speech. “I came to make sure you were alright, firstly, and then to ask whether you were still interested in working with me, or if I should take your silence as an answer in itself. I understand that there are extenuating circumstances at play, and I won't hold them against you. You're well-liked; I still believe you're the best person to help me. I would like to continue things as they were, provided you actually communicate with me in the future about any complications that might arise.” He paused. “I'm not unreasonable,” he said in a quieter voice. “We've all had bad days. We're only human.”

“Of course,” Deepa said, through her surprise. “Communication. I can do that.”

He nodded, still eyeing her warily. “If I may overstep for just a moment to offer some advice.”

“On what matter?”

“Your friend. If their leaving was truly because you would choose my lifestyle over theirs, you should perhaps reconsider your stance.”

“I'm sorry, are you telling me you would give up your estate, your mansion, your inheritance, and your horses, and trade it all in for a modest little life in the city?” Deepa asked incredulously.

With staggering bluntness, Appleton said, “You haven't got any of those things. No one can ask you to give up what you don't have.”

With a short nod, he removed himself from her path, leaving Deepa to digest that unwelcome truth.

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They arrived late to the fight, which was unsurprising, given that Deepa hadn't planned to go at all. It was taking place at the gym where Roz trained, and when they slipped through the doors to join the crowd, the first round was already underway. The air was sharp with sweat and heavy with the sound of feet against the mats, and boxing gloves connecting with flesh and muscle.

Alight with nerves, it wasn't until Deepa had watched the fight for a full twenty seconds, standing on a crate at the back of the crowd to see above the other onlookers' heads, that she realised Roz was losing.

“Did she take the deal?” Aaliyah asked in a whisper.

Numbly, Deepa shook her head, her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. “She wouldn’t.”

“Maybe she's doing it as a gesture,” Jasmine suggested uncertainly. “To prove she’s serious about you?”

“Not without firing her manager first.”

The man was ringside, looking far too pleased with himself to have been let go.

Roz had said she didn't mind losing to a better opponent, but in that case, her manager wouldn't have asked her to throw the fight in the first place. The other fighter looked big and strong, but she was nothing spectacular. Deepa didn't know much about boxing, but she still would have bet on Roz.

And she'd have lost her money, because Roz was clearly struggling.

When her opponent landed a solid hit to her ribs, Roz staggered back. Angry red marks marred her arms where she'd tried to block more of the same. Some were already beginning to purple, bruises spreading under the skin like stones under the river's surface.

With the next strike, Deepa covered her mouth with one hand, swallowing a cry. "Her manager wanted her to go down in the second," she said through her fingers.

"It looks like she might not have a choice." Aaliyah's tone was light but she looked concerned.

Deepa shook her head. "She'll stay up out of spite."

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“She can try. She’s already taken some good hits. If she gets knocked down—”

“I wanted her to take the deal and throw the fight because it was the smart thing to do, but I don’t want to see her lose like this.”

A silver whistle split the air to end the first round, and the fighters retreated to opposite corners of the ring. They both looked tired, but Roz was in considerably worse shape.

Cherie gave Deepa a little shove, toppling her off her crate. “Go cheer her on, then!”

Deepa dug her heels in. “I’m the last person she’ll want to see right now.”

Kelly and Roz’s manager were there with her in her corner, Kells dousing her with water to rinse the sweat away as her manager leaned in too close, whispering conspiratorially in her ear.

“Second last,” Deepa amended. She couldn’t see Roz’s face, but she could imagine the disgust curling her lip in a sneer.

“She’ll want to see you now that you want her to win,” Aaliyah said.

“If she's losing, I can’t magically turn that around for her!”

“You can make a difference,” Jasmine said, coaxing Deepa forward. “Trust me, you can help.”

“Go now,” Elizabeth urged, “before the next round starts!”

On feet she couldn't feel, Deepa made her way to Roz's corner, sliding through the crowd until she reached Roz's back, staring at the broad slope of her shoulders. It was Kells who noticed her first, cutting her an assessing look before nodding and moving aside, allowing Deepa to approach.

“No distractions,” the manager barked when he noticed her next, but Deepa ignored him as easily as a fly. The man was a nuisance not worth her effort.

“Roz,” she said, and when Roz turned to look at her, it was as if the rest of the world fell away.

Deepa hadn't seen her since Saturday night, and though their argument was as stingingly fresh as if it had happened minutes ago, it felt like they'd been parted a year. She wasn't angry anymore; she didn't want an apology or for Roz to admit she was right. The nuances were more complicated than that, because life was complicated, and relationships even more so. There was a reason she'd been adamant about avoiding them for so long, after all.

“You came,” Roz croaked.

“Now's not the time,” her manager began.

“Quiet,” they said in unison, neither of them sparing him a glance.

“I know how this looks.” Roz had a stubborn set to her jaw and a gleam in her eye that spoke of defiance, despite how she was bruised and beaten. The pride she valued so much more than money was still pumping strong in a way it wouldn't be if she'd taken those hits after agreeing to her manager's deal.

“I know,” Deepa said. “Listen.”

Having spent the better part of the week on the outs with Roz, seeing her again left Deepa with no question that this was what she wanted. If love was a choice, then she was choosing Roz, and if that wasn't enough to break the curse, then the fault lay with Phillip's magic, not with either of them. If Deepa's curse never broke, if she spent every night as a leopard for the rest of her life, with the curse insisting that their love couldn't be true, then she would choose Roz anyway, and keep choosing her every day.

Taking Roz by the face, two slender fingers on her jaw and her thumb on Roz's chin, Deepa looked her in the eye and said, “I want you to win.”

Roz's breath hitched and wonder sparked in her grey eyes. When the whistle pealed, she got to her feet without help and returned to centre ring without taking her eyes from Deepa until the last second. Another whistle marked the beginning of the next round, and Roz threw herself into the fight with renewed energy.

It wasn't enough. Roz might worship her as a goddess, but Deepa couldn't work miracles. Roz was already tired from the first round. Whatever had gone wrong had happened early on, before Deepa had arrived. She had the awful feeling that it had actually gone wrong before Roz had even set foot in the ring, and that it was her fault Roz was performing badly. If Deepa had supported her from the beginning, backing her decision to win, Roz might have entered the ring balanced and confident. Deepa didn't know if her presence now was enough to reverse Roz's fortune. It seemed naïve to think Roz could draw on her as a source of strength, like having Deepa's favour was enough to turn the tide.

Like a knight fighting for her lady, Deepa recalled, and unwound her scarf from around her neck.

The second round ended in an apparent draw, both fighters having dealt and suffered an equal number of hits. Roz was still the underdog, trying to make up ground from that weak start, far behind her opponent now in terms of strength and stamina. But she looked more solid than she did in the beginning, like she'd regained her drive, even if it didn't make up for the darkening bruises.

When she returned to her corner for water and a moment's rest, Deepa raised her silk like a flag.

"What's this?" Roz asked, a mouthful of water spilling carelessly down her front.

"A token." Deepa reached through the ropes to tie the scarf around Roz's waist. "Will you win for me?"

"For you," Roz repeated. "I didn't think I'd see you here tonight." Her voice cracked, vulnerable.

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“I wasn't sure you would either,” Deepa admitted.

“What changed?”

“I made a choice.” With one hand on Roz’s chest and the other on the middle rope for balance, Deepa leaned in to press a kiss to Roz’s cheek. “I want you to win,” she murmured against the salt of her skin. “I want you to win every time, betting be damned.”

“Do I get another one of those if I manage it?” Roz asked carefully, like she was testing the waters.

“You can have whatever you want,” Deepa promised, “whatever the outcome.”

With the whistle, Roz launched herself back into the match, and Deepa clasped her hands over her heart, standing lightly on her toes, bottom lip caught between her teeth as she fought the urge to follow Roz into the ring. Her scarf was wrapped flat around Roz’s trunk, a brilliant carmine red to match her gloves, marking her as Deepa’s as surely as that smudge of lipstick on her cheek.

Deepa could only hope Roz wouldn’t choose to untie the scarf or wash clean the lipstick after the fight.

“Win for me!” Deepa shouted over the ebb-and-flow cheering and barking of the crowd.

Roz glanced in her direction as if drawn by a magnet, a grin lurking in one corner of

her mouth.

The other fighter jabbed, her punch aimed too high, and as Roz tore her gaze from Deepa to return to the fight — a split second of distraction — the blow caught her square in the corner of the jaw and knocked her clean off her feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

OF FIGHTS HARD-WON AND RECONCILIATIONS MADE

Roz hit the floor with a thud that made Deepa's bones hurt in sympathy. Her hands flew to cover her mouth, a shocked gasp escaping as she threw herself against the ropes. It was Kelly who pulled her back, keeping her from climbing in and invalidating the entire match.

"She's alright," Kells told her, one arm around Deepa's shoulders more as a restraint than a comfort.

"She needs to get back up."

Even as Deepa said it, Roz groaned and rolled onto her hands and knees, pushing herself up with a grunt before the referee could count her out.

"I heard she was supposed to go down in the second," said Kells.

"Not a chance," Deepa said firmly, her gaze fixed on Roz like she could keep her standing through sheer strength of will. "Roz doesn't lose."

Overhearing this, Roz's manager rounded on her in purple-faced frustration. "You're the one who talked her out of it, are you?"

“I told her to do it, actually,” Deepa replied, not bothering to look at him. “I also told her to fire you.”

“You—!”

Another earth-shattering blow sent Roz staggering back, winded, her defensive form momentarily lost as she fought to keep her feet under her.

“Get back in there,” Deepa hissed, her hands wrapped around the middle rope. If she had claws, she’d have been shredding it to ribbons. “Get in there and hit her back!”

The third blow sent Roz wheeling, and as she spun, their eyes met. Helpless, Deepa felt only capable of distracting Roz at the worst possible times. Pressing her lips to her fingertips, she reached out with a kiss, all she could offer.

It was enough. Swinging around, Roz met her opponent with a strong right hook, forcing her back a pace and giving Roz room to follow up with a quick one-two that knocked the other woman off-balance.

As if Roz had only been waiting for Deepa to give her audience, she knocked the other woman back for the first time since Deepa’s arrival. If her opponent hadn’t already tired herself out in the first two rounds, she probably could have taken Roz down anyway. But as it was, Roz’s last hit knocked the woman to the mat, and for a split second, the crowd was completely hushed, holding their breath in shocked anticipation. Deepa didn’t cry out this time or cheer her on for fear of distracting her again, but she held the ropes in a death-grip and beamed every ounce of love and admiration and heated wanting in her fighter’s direction, willing her to come out on top.

Dropping to one knee, the referee began her countdown, her whistle between her teeth and one hand pounding the mat as she marked the time. Panting, Roz stood over

the two of them, keeping her fists up with a strength that looked like it was flagging by the second. If the other fighter found her feet, her next hit would likely take Roz down for good.

Her opponent struggled to her knees — Deepa didn't breathe — only to list heavily to one side, swaying as if drunk, before dropping her head and waving one gloved hand in defeat.

The final whistle pierced the air, silvery and pure. Leaping to her feet, the referee grabbed Roz by the wrist and thrust her arm up, and the crowd erupted in a roar of approval as she claimed her victory.

Deepa's knees buckled in sweet relief before she climbed between the ropes and into the ring. She didn't try to pull Roz away from her victory, but waited in her corner to catch her as soon as she was done.

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“You came,” Roz repeated, and Deepa might have worried she’d caught a blow to the head, but Roz’s eyes were bright and clear, albeit wary.

“I came,” Deepa agreed. Her heart skipped triple time at the thought that Roz might not actually want to see her. “I had to return your shirt,” she added, breaking eye contact.

“And mine, as well,” said Kells. She was eyeing the crowd, mentally calculating the take from the punters’ bets, but standing near enough to hear their conversation.

“Anyone else’s clothes you’ve borrowed since I last saw you?” Roz asked.

If Deepa weren’t so shameless, she’d have blushed. “I’m not going to apologise for encouraging you to throw the fight,” she told Roz in an undertone, “but I’m glad you didn’t. Whether or not you forgive me, I was pleased to see you win tonight. You were magnificent.”

Roz grunted. “I don’t feel it.”

She swayed heavily, and Deepa had to dart in to catch her before she fell. Plastering herself to Roz’s side, she took Roz’s arm over her shoulder, bracing herself to support the woman’s weight. Roz sagged, her bones going heavy as the last of her adrenaline eked away.

“You took it hard tonight,” Kelly said. “You want me to give you a hand, or shall I leave you with this one?”

“Let me,” Deepa murmured, holding her closer. “I want to take care of you.”

Roz didn't refuse.

In the changing room, Deepa waited until the other fighter and her entourage had left before coming to stand between Roz's knees where she sat on the bench. One by one, she removed Roz's boxing gloves and unwrapped her hands, not saying a word. Her heavy braid fell forward over one shoulder to hang between them like Rapunzel's rope, inviting Roz to climb up and come inside.

Roz was silent, watching her from hooded eyes, offering her first one hand and then the other. Every touch from Deepa was an apology and a request to try again, and there wasn't a single touch Roz rejected outright.

When she was finished with Roz's hands, Deepa smoothly lowered herself to the floor, folding up cross-legged to remove Roz's boots. At eye level, Deepa could see the way Roz grabbed the edge of the bench until her knuckles were pale under her tan, trembling faintly as she resisted the urge to reach out and rest one hand on Deepa's head. Deepa wouldn't have protested if she'd done it. There was an ache in her chest to think that Roz needed to ask permission before touching her now. One silly argument had undone so much between them.

“I missed you,” Deepa admitted, glancing up at Roz from her feet. “I don't think I've ever missed anyone before. But you're under my skin, and I like having you there. I don't really want to dig you out.” Sitting up a little straighter, she plucked at the scarf she'd tied around Roz's waist. “It's not that I didn't think I could love a woman. I didn't think I could love anyone at all. But if this isn't love, I can't imagine what is.”

“Pearls and diamonds?” Roz offered in a barely-there voice.

“That was never love,” Deepa scoffed. “And I don't care if you never give me a

diamond in my life.”

“What about a man like Lord Appleton?”

“I was intoxicated when I told you Appleton would be the perfect man for me to marry, and you didn't let me explain myself.”

“Explain now, then. Because the longer I spend with you, the harder it is to ever want to let you go.”

Curling both hands over Roz's knees, Deepa shifted closer, and felt Roz take a sharp breath in response. “I meant it as another game,” Deepa said, willing Roz to follow her, “but neither you nor Appleton were getting conned. If I could marry a man like that, I could get everything I've ever wanted: his house, his money, the respect of his peers.”

When Roz tensed under her, Deepa squeezed her tightly and rocked up onto her knees, putting them face to face. “But I would get to keep you, too. It would be the perfect arrangement, for me to enjoy all his assets without ever being asked into his bed, all my social hours and my nights free to spend with you. On paper, I might be his wife, but in private, you and I would be entirely each other's. That was what I wanted, when I said I would have liked to marry him. He would have been an ally, not some boorish husband getting in our way.”

“What about now?”

“I won't lie to you. I'll never stop coveting wealth. But I'm choosing you over every man I've ever met.” Deepa hesitated before adding, with less certainty, “If you still want me.”

Roz exhaled in a long rush. “I'd be hard-pressed to ever stop wanting you.” Releasing

the bench, she offered Deepa a hand, palm-up, allowing Deepa to slot their fingers together. “I need you to tell me what you want from me,” Roz said, looking at her intently. “Straight up. No subterfuge, no flattery. What do you want?”

“You make me want to be a softer person.”

“I thought that was a bad thing.”

Deepa shook her head, her earrings swaying against her neck and the loose gathering of her braid. “It’s not as bad as I thought.” Toying with the hem of Roz’s muscle shirt, she said, “Your bruises are going to turn very dark. You’ll be black and blue in a day.”

Groaning, Roz shifted forward to get to her feet. “They’ll need ice on them. I won’t find that here.”

“Come back to The Songbird with me.” Deepa caught Roz’s other hand, holding her lightly so she was free to pull away. Roz didn’t move. “Let me get you some ice. Let me look after you tonight.”

“I can look after myself. Been doing that long enough, now.”

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“I’m offering. Let me tend to my knight in shining armour. After, if you want to go, I won’t stop you.”

With a pained expression, Roz let her eyes fall shut, pulling back to keep Deepa at arm’s length, though she didn’t relinquish her hands. “If you invite me back into your bed, you’ve got to know I’ll never want to leave. Either you’ve got to keep me, or you’ve got to let me go right now.”

Deepa’s heart flew into her throat at the thought of either option.

“I asked you once already if you might want to marry me, and I meant it. But I can’t go around doing things by half measures.” Opening her eyes, she met Deepa’s wide-eyed, flustered gaze, and asked, “Do you want me, or not?”

“I do,” Deepa said firmly. And then, “But what if it isn’t love?”

“So what if it’s not?”

“You’d settle for less?”

“Nothing about you feels like settling,” Roz told her. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“And a few things you want nothing to do with,” Deepa countered wryly.

“No. I want all of you.”

Roz didn't falter for a second, silver eyes locked on Deepa's kohl-dark gaze. Deepa couldn't deny Roz's words any more than she could look away.

"I love your ambition," Roz told her. "I want your hunger and your cleverness as much as every other part of you. When I asked you to tell me that I was enough, I didn't mean that I wanted you to throw out all your plans and give up on your goals. I just meant, let me look after you in every other way. Don't look to men for attention or security. Keep using them for money, if you have to, but let me be enough for everything else."

"Oh," Deepa managed. The butterflies and hummingbirds were staging an uprising, threatening to overwhelm her from the inside out, but she thought it might be good. "I thought you didn't like that."

"I like you." Roz stroked her thumbs over Deepa's hands where they were joined. "Now, what's this preoccupation with love? I thought you didn't believe in it."

"I don't. But... I never told you how I'm supposed to break my curse."

Realisation dawned in Roz's eyes, and she pulled Deepa closer. "They got you with a classic, did they? You need true love's kiss, like in the fairytales?"

"But none of our kisses have worked. Like you said, I never believed in love, so it shouldn't matter to me. But you're more of a romantic than I could ever be. Does it bother you?"

"Not a bit," Roz said immediately. "If you say you're choosing me, that's more than good enough."

"Even if it means we don't really love each other?"

Roz snorted. “That curse is infallible, is it? I don’t believe that for a minute.” Raising their hands, Roz spun Deepa in a twirl, her skirts flaring, before pulling her in for a kiss. “I love you, Deepa Patel, curse and all, and I want as much of you as you can give me,” she said against Deepa’s lips. “What do you say?”

Looking at their joined hands, it was easy to imagine them covered in ceremonial mehndi, and for the first time, Deepa realised that her casual cotton half sari bore the red-and-cream patterning of Gujarati wedding attire. For once, the thought of getting married didn’t make her stomach twist.

Untangling their fingers, she flung both arms around Roz’s neck, and she would have wrapped both legs around Roz’s waist, too, if Roz hadn’t been so thoroughly beaten. “You have me,” she promised, and marked Roz’s mouth with a press of carmine lipstick to seal the deal.

For the first time all week, Roz’s grin returned to full-wattage, and she caught Deepa around the hips to lift her off the floor for just a second.

“Yeah? Alright then. Let’s go get that ice.”

The Songbird was always busy on a Thursday night, but it was no challenge to sequester Roz in a corner of the dressing room where they could be alone. There, Deepa sat Roz on the little wooden stool in front of the vanity and undressed her piece by piece. She wiped the sweat from Roz’s body with a wet cloth before wrapping ice from the bar in that borrowed button-up to press it to the worst of her bruises.

Each mark, Deepa softly worshipped, following every curve and line of muscle, committing Roz’s body to memory as Roz had committed hers so many times before. Under her touch, Roz was stone-still, only the tremor in her breath giving her away.

“What if I never break the curse?” Deepa asked. In that moment, it felt more like a curiosity than a real problem. She held the ice pack to Roz’s ribs with one hand, her other hand low on Roz’s stomach, resting over the line of her abs, just above the waistband of her shorts. Roz’s skin was still hot from the fight, and hotter still from their proximity. “What if I’m going to turn into a leopard every night for the rest of my life?”

“There’s plenty we can fit in around it.” With Deepa standing so close, Roz’s voice felt like a rumble. “Midnight till dawn isn’t so long, by my count. Anyway, I think you’ll break it.”

“How?”

Roz shrugged. “It’ll happen.”

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A sharp cry sounded from outside. Before Deepa had time to react, much less question what was going on out there, the dressing room door was literally kicked open to reveal the repugnant Phillip.

“You!” he cried. “I knew I’d catch you back here eventually. You must have thought you’d got one up on me that night, you wretched little harlot. You think you can threaten me? In my own home?”

“That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?” she asked coldly. Her fingers dug into the ice pack with such force, her bones ached. “To bring my savagery to the surface? In that case, I’m afraid it backfired.”

“I should have you arrested,” he seethed, jabbing one finger at her as he took a threatening step inside.

Between them, Roz slowly pushed her stool back from the vanity to stand, her hands curling into fists as she placed herself between Deepa and the man.

“You can’t,” Deepa said, with a confidence she didn’t fully feel. “Not unless you want them to find out what you did to me.”

Dropping his voice, Phillip growled, “Then maybe I’ll come back here later to finish the job I started that night. London’s no place for a man-eating tiger. The city will thank me for putting down a dangerous animal.”

“I’m not a tiger,” Deepa snapped back. “You’re so incompetent, you can’t even grasp the results of your own curse. And you only wish I were a man-eater. I wouldn’t put

my mouth on you for all the money in the world.”

Outside, a crowd began to gather, morbidly curious and hungry for a scandal. Cherie was there, looking concerned as she directed her dancers to fetch security, and Appleton, who seemed wildly out of place and annoyed about it. A gaggle of showgirls and punters peered in around them, pointing and whispering at the unexpected entertainment.

“That would be the one thing you wouldn't do for money,” Phillip said with an ugly sneer. “And here I thought you'd sink to any depths for a few quid.”

“I would,” she retorted. Her grip on the ice was such that it was beginning to melt from the pressure. “Just not with you.”

“You smart-mouthed little—”

“Are you really going to threaten me in front of so many witnesses?” she interrupted. “I thought your style was more clandestine than this.” With one hand, she shooed him back as if he were no more than a whining mosquito. “You're embarrassing yourself. Get out before I have you thrown out on your ear.”

“You forget who has the power here. I cursed you once; I can do more than that. I can—”

With a rumble of disapproval, Roz took two strides across the room, pulled one arm back, and clocked him squarely in the face. With a garbled cry and a spurt of blood from an immediately-broken nose, Phillip dropped like a sack of potatoes, both hands clutching his face. The crowd tittered, enthused, and parted around him, doing nothing to break his fall.

“Enough of that,” Roz said shortly. “Deepa? You alright?”

On the floor, Phillip gave a weak moan, curled in a fetal position on his knees, forehead pressed to the floor.

“I’m fine,” Deepa said. Shaking her head, she stepped closer to Roz and reclaimed her hand. “Thank you.”

Roz sniffed, looking down her nose at the man curled in a heap. “What a bloody waste of space.”

“Deepa!” Jonathan came careening around the corner, skidded to a halt in the dressing room doorway, tripped over Phillip and stumbled headlong into the room. “Deepa, are you alright? I heard raised voices, and then I heard him saying the awfulest things to you—”

“I appreciate your concern.” Completely redirecting the conversation, Deepa put on a bright voice and asked, “Do you know Cherie?”

Cherie poked her head through the doorway, looking well-fed on gossip.

“I think you two should take a booth, have a few drinks on me, and get to know each other,” Deepa suggested.

Breaking into a bright grin, Cherie bounced into the room to grab a flustered Jonathan by both hands, cheerfully bopping into his personal space. “We’ve chatted once or twice,” Cherie told him. “I don’t suppose you remember me.”

“I certainly do,” Jonathan stammered with a fetching blush. “Are you sure—?”

“Very sure,” Cherie said. “Come on, love, let’s get out of the way before Stu comes by to shovel this mess out with the trash.”

“Righto, good idea.” But Jonathan didn’t make an immediate move to leave, seemingly transfixed by Cherie’s face. “I never noticed before, but you have the most beautiful eyes. Green and blue at the same time.”

Cherie’s smile grew more heartfelt and she squeezed Jonathan's hands, beaming up at him. “Come on,” she repeated. “Let's go someplace we can talk. Tell me,” she added, leading him away, “do you cook at all?”

“In the kitchen? I can’t say I do, but I always thought it looked like jolly good fun. I wouldn’t mind giving it a crack.”

“Because I’ve got a curry I’ve been trying out, if you ever wanted to help me with it...”

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“They could make a cute couple,” Roz said, draping an arm around Deepa’s shoulders as they exited the dressing room, gently encouraging the gaggle of onlookers to disperse. Appleton lingered, eyeing Deepa with a speculative frown.

“Cherie certainly thinks so, anyway.”

Deepa kept her eye out for Phillip, considering giving him a sharp kick in the ribs as she passed, but he’d already picked himself up off the floor. Dragging himself onto the stage, Phillip wrestled the microphone into submission with a screech of feedback. Everyone in the club who hadn’t witnessed his tantrum and subsequent blow turned to stare at him.

“That woman!” he announced thickly through the gush of blood from his nose, stabbing one finger in Deepa’s direction. “That woman is the same wildcat that’s been terrorising the streets of London.”

Appleton turned to Deepa, wide-eyed with realisation. “That was you?” And then, with a deepening frown: “You’re cursed.”

“You can just look at me and tell?” she demanded.

“I’ve only ever seen you with all those glours woven into your dresses. They disguised the rest of the magic.” Without looking back at Phillip, Appleton tipped his head in the man’s direction. “This is his doing, I take it?”

Deepa sniffed. “Rather.”

“Would you like me to break it for you?”

Deepa’s whole world rocked on its axis. “You can do that?”

“I think so. A curse that changes one’s form should be tangentially related to the sorts of illusions I know well. At least in theory.”

“Then yes, please, let’s do that.”

“Wait,” Roz cut in, taking Deepa’s hand to keep her from rushing off with Appleton immediately. “Can it wait just a minute? There something I need to say, first.”

“Are none of you listening to me?” Phillip demanded from the stage. “She’s a beast! A monster! She hunted me down in my own home and tried to kill me!”

“Do be quiet,” Appleton told him, as cross as he was bored. “You’ll be dealt with later.”

“What was it you had to tell me?” Deepa asked Roz.

Still holding her hand, Roz pulled her back into the dressing room and shut the door firmly behind them, blocking out the rest of The Songbird and all its crowds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TWO PROPOSALS AND A BROKEN CURSE

As soon as they were alone, Roz said, “Watching you flirt and scheme and play the field hits different if I know you’re coming home to me every night.” She sidled closer, her orbit around Deepa’s celestial body growing smaller step by step, until they were one. “You need to know that I’d never ask you to give up your work to

play housewife for me.”

“I won’t be your housewife,” Deepa agreed, “Just like you won’t be my man. If I’m going to be with someone, I want us to be partners. I won’t have you breaking your back trying to prove you can provide for me. I want to be able to take care of you, too.”

“I’d like that. Does that mean...?” Roz broke off, rubbing one hand over the back of her neck, her smile going crooked. “I mean, I’ve proposed once already, half-joke that it was.”

Deepa remembered it perfectly: the two of them crowded in her little flat, with her mother just around the corner. She’d been both thrilled and terrified by the question, even knowing Roz was less than serious, but there was none of that now. Though the butterflies were working up a storm in her stomach, even stronger than their frantic beating of wings was the sense that this was absolutely correct.

“Let me, this time,” she said. “I’ve been on the receiving end often enough; I’d rather like to try asking the question, for once.”

“Please do,” Roz said hoarsely.

Taking Roz’s hands, careful of the knuckles on her right where the skin was split from punching Phillip in the face, Deepa didn’t kneel but gathered her close to hold their conjoined hands between both their hearts.

“My knight in silver armour, my rock, the moon to my sun. A friend told me very recently that love isn’t like fate, or magic. It’s a choice you make, and have to keep making every day. Someone else told me it was ridiculous to choose some gossamer-spun, imaginary future over the one and I can actually hold and touch. So, this is me choosing you in every circumstance.”

Pulling free, Deepa plucked her ruby ring from her finger, the same ring Roz had kissed on their very first meeting. “If you’ll have me?”

Roz answered her with a kiss.

“Yes,” Roz said into her mouth, crushing her close until Deepa could feel Roz’s heart thundering against her own. “Yes, I’ll have you, in every way you’ll let me. I want a life with you. I want the whole future.”

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Breaking their kiss, Deepa pulled back just enough to slide the ring onto her finger. “Consider this a placeholder until I can get you something more your style?”

Roz stared at it for a second, the gold band incongruously delicate on her finger. “No, it’s perfect.” Clearing her throat, she reached for her jacket draped over the vanity, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. “I actually have one for you already.”

From the breast pocket, she withdrew a little paper envelope, which she opened to shake a ring out into Deepa’s open palm. “I picked it up a short while back. Found it by chance in a pawnshop when I was looking to pick up a replacement hood ornament for work. I wasn’t thinking of it as an engagement ring at the time, but I was thinking of you, all the same.”

The ring was a slender band of silver with a single tiny blue stone set in it, which was as likely to be coloured glass as a real gem. Deepa didn’t care. The silver and blue were Roz’s colours as surely as the ruby and gold were her own, and she slid the ring up her finger with a sense of belonging she’d never felt before, but which she hoped to experience every day for the rest of her life.

“I’ll get you a real diamond,” Roz said, watching her closely.

“It doesn’t matter. I love it.”

“I’ll get you a diamond anyway. Can’t have anyone thinking I don’t know how to treat a girl right. I’m in this for the long haul, after all.” Taking Deepa’s hand to hold over her heart, Roz leaned up for another kiss.

“Even if the curse doesn't break?” Deepa asked against her lips.

Roz shook her head, moving to pepper Deepa's jaw, down the line of her neck, tugging her sari out of the way to reach her collarbones. “Not worried about it,” she said confidently.

“Do you think Appleton can do it?” Deepa pressed.

“Maybe. I don't know him,” Roz replied carelessly, more intent on working her way down Deepa's front than interested in the matter of curse-breaking.

Deepa was tempted to let her continue and see how far she could get, but a great commotion burst out from the other side of the door for the second time that night, and she had to reluctantly put a hand on Roz's shoulder to stop her. “We'd best see what that was.”

“Probably that twat Phillip. You want, I can hit him again,” Roz offered, holding her around the waist like they were dancing.

Emerging from the dressing room, they found Phillip and Jonathan engaged in an embarrassing round of fisticuffs on the edge of the stage. It was clear that Jonathan had never thrown a punch in his life, and equally clear that Phillip didn't know what to do without a little pistol to wave around threateningly.

“Bloody awful form, the both of them,” Roz said disparagingly.

With a sharp sigh, Deepa marched onto the stage, and, grabbing each of them by their collars, pulled them apart like separating two cats engaged in a back alley spat. Jonathan, she instantly released with a little push away from the fight, but Phillip, she gave a shove and sent him sprawling off the stage to land flat on his arse on the floor. Standing centre stage, she glared down at him, with his bloodied nose crooked and

swollen, his voice gummed up from it.

“Yes,” she said in a cold, clear voice that carried through the entire club, “I was the leopard London saw that night, and yes, I do rather wish I’d clawed your face off when I had the chance. You might have cursed me to take the form of a wild animal every night, but you, Phillip, are a pig all on your own.”

Turning away without waiting for whatever rejoinder he had to offer, she marched down the steps of the stage, her heels clicking smartly with each one, and left him sputtering uselessly without an audience. Returning to Roz’s side, Deepa grasped her hand before searching out Appleton from the gathered crowd.

“Now, about this curse,” she began.

Appleton nodded. “I see you've taken care of it.”

She stopped short. “I’m sorry. I. What?”

Beside her, Roz squeezed her hand with a pleased hum. “Told you not to worry about it.”

“What—”

Letting go of Roz, Deepa furiously patted herself down, trying to feel out any change. It was hardly noticeable, like slipping out of a silk shift, but if she screwed her eyes shut tight and concentrated very hard—

“But we'd already kissed!” she objected, outraged, her eyes flying open again. “We’d already kissed a dozen times!”

“We hardly knew each other then,” Roz said calmly. “True love doesn’t just come out

of nowhere. It needs some time to build up.”

“Could you tell before I did?”

“Smelled it change before we left the dressing room again.”

“And you.” Deepa rounded on Appleton. “You could tell just by looking at me?”

“Without all your other illusions swirling around, yes. Something green has lifted from your aura. This colour suits you better,” he added. “It looks plummy, now, and healthier.”

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“You must be Deepa’s beau,” Roz said, stepping forward to offer her hand. “I’m Roz.”

“A pleasure,” he replied neutrally, glancing back and forth between them as he connected the dots of Deepa’s curse-breaking. If Roz’s grip was overly firm, he didn’t show it.

“I hear marriage isn’t in the cards for you two,” Roz said, still holding onto him as she watched his face. “A shame.”

“Yes, most unfortunate,” he replied, his gaze flickering to Deepa’s new ring. His expression betrayed nothing. “I expect I’ll be congratulating Miss Patel on her engagement long before I secure my own.”

Satisfied, Roz nodded and let him go.

“Now that I think we all understand each other, where does this leave you and I?” he asked of Deepa. “If you find yourself otherwise engaged—” His gaze cut to Roz for a second before returning— “Then of course I understand if you shouldn’t want to accompany me to any further events.”

Roz gave Deepa a gentle nudge. “Whatever you want, love. I won’t stop you.”

“You won’t be jealous, staying up worrying that the Earl of Hertford is going to steal me away?” Deepa teased.

“I don’t think that’s much of a concern, no,” Roz allowed with a laugh. “Now that

I've met him, you two have got my blessing to go out and spread as many rumours as you like."

"Much obliged," Appleton said dryly. "As a matter of fact, if you are interested in moving forward, I was reconsidering your marriage proposal." He held up one hand before Roz had the chance to bristle. "As I said earlier, my family would never approve, and I don't mean to step on any toes. But I thought a long, drawn-out engagement might serve our mutual purposes just as well. As tedious as I find these endless social outings, I can't deny that you've reshaped my reputation in remarkably short order. So, if you would enjoy some job security for the next eight to twelve months, this is a conversation we might pursue in the near future."

Eight to twelve months of posing as Appleton's fiancée would net her a very tidy sum, especially if she had her nights back and could return to her regular sets at The Songbird. She stole a glance at Roz, gauging her reaction.

"Yeah?" Roz asked, squeezing her waist where she held her. "You want to?"

"Yes," Deepa said emphatically. "As long as you don't mind."

With a smile, Roz kissed her cheek, and Deepa leaned into it, glowing. "Whatever you need to do, I'm behind you as long as you're mine."

"Now," said Appleton, with a genteel little cough, "may I be of any assistance in dealing with that Mr. Etonborough? Assuming you haven't already alerted the authorities."

"I didn't think they'd be leaping over themselves to help, given my situation," Deepa pointed out.

He inclined his head. "Quite right. Seeing as I have somewhat more sway in those

particular circles, I would be happy to take him off your hands without requiring any further involvement on your part.”

“And do what with him, exactly?” Roz asked.

“He won’t see the inside of a prison without a long and messy trial, requiring Deepa’s participation, which I foresee a marginal chance of winning, with public opinion being what it is. That being said, I have family who work high up in the branches of government dealing with magical regulations, and I imagine they would be quite keen to impress on him the gravity of his actions.”

“And I wouldn’t have to get involved?” Deepa asked.

“My word against his will more than suffice,” Appleton replied carelessly, as if that weren't a terrifying prospect.

“Then yes, do that. I have no interest in a drawn-out legal battle. I don’t much care about the particulars of his punishment, so long as he never comes near me again.”

“I assure you, he will not.”

“I say!” Phillip blustered over to them, a handkerchief clamped firmly over his nose. “I say, Appleton. Are you talking about me? Because I've got a side of the story you'll want to hear.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” said Appleton, “but come. You and I are leaving.”

“I have a mind to press charges, you know,” Phillip said, glaring at Roz and Deepa from eyes that were beginning to nicelyblacken. “People like you can't just hit men like me without consequence.”

“They can't, but I think you'll find I can,” said Appleton impatiently, gesturing towards the exit.

Phillip failed to take the hint. “I won't forget about this,” he warned Roz, finger raised imperiously. “If you think you can just break a fellow's nose—”

“I'll break more than that,” snapped Deepa, putting herself in between him and Roz. In the dim club lights, her eyes flashed green-gold like a cat's in the dark, and Phillip was so hasty in his attempted retreat that he stumbled over his own feet and put himself on the floor again.

“Your eyes,” Appleton began.

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“What?” In a panic, Deepa covered her face with both hands, but her body felt unchanged. “You said the curse was broken!” she hissed to Roz and Appleton at the same time.

“It is,” Appleton said, though the confusion in his voice somewhat underwrote the confidence of his answer.

“It definitely is,” Roz promised. “Looks like your body’s just holding onto the echoes of it.”

“The magic in you now is entirely your own,” Appleton declared after a moment’s concentration. “Roz is likely correct. Whatever changes you may now experience will be entirely of your own doing.”

In wonderment, Deepa lifted one hand and stretched her fingers out until translucent claws emerged from their tips, wickedly sharp yet as painless as if she’d always had them. At the sight, Phillip swallowed a whimper, his eyes showing the whites all around as he scrambled back to his feet.

The claws made the hit that much more satisfying when she cracked him on the cheek, though she didn’t actually scratch him, with her fingers carefully curled and covered by her thumb. Roz gave a growl of approval at her fist and, reeling away, Phillip’s knees buckled. A terrified mewl escaped him before he realised she hadn’t actually maimed him.

“Let this be a warning and a reminder,” Deepa told him, “to leave me and mine alone. Now, get out of my club, and don’t come back.”

Watching Appleton frog-march Phillip out of the club, flanked by Stu the security detail and Gary the manager was one of the better experiences of Deepa's recent past, but it paled in comparison to having Roz back. They were engaged, they were demonstrably in love, and—

“Oh, I'm going to have to tell my mother about us,” Deepa realised.

“Is that good?” Roz asked, leaning into her.

“She's going to be beside herself. We might not be able to get legally married, but you can rest assured she'll want to throw us the most lavish wedding you can imagine. Have you ever seen a Gujarati wedding?”

“Can't say that I have.”

“It will put any of your British royal weddings to shame. I wonder if Appleton would lend us a horse or two for the event...?”

“What did we miss?” Aaliyah demanded, barging into the club with the rest of her friends in tow. “You took off after the fight so quickly, we hung back to give you time to work out whatever you needed to do, but now it looks like we've missed the show. We just passed the Earl of Hertford marching that Etonborough away like he'd arrested the stupid git. What happened?”

“Phillip isn't going to be a problem anymore,” Deepa said serenely, “and yes, Roz and I made up.”

“Made up,” Aaliyah repeated, clearly fishing for details.

“Your curse is broken!” Elizabeth exclaimed with a smile. “How did you manage that?”

“Like she said, we made up.” Roz’s smile was the smuggest Deepa had ever seen.

Bouncing up, Aaliyah clapped her hands together with a wicked grin. “Ha! Was it true love’s kiss after all? With your first ever woman, that you met because Jasmine and I took you out to a lesbian club? Where you were so doubtful you’d find anyone?”

“Yes, yes, credit where it's due,” Deepa said with a fond roll of her eyes.

“Congratulations,” Jasmine said warmly. “On the curse-breaking, and the...engagement?”

When Deepa flashed her ring, putting on airs as if it were a real diamond after all, her friends burst out in excited shouts and congratulations, cheering and swarming in to catch her in a group-hug.

“We’ll have to throw a party, obviously,” Aaliyah said, “for the curse and the ring and everything else. God, the one time I stay behind, trying to be polite—”

“You can air your grievances at the wedding,” Deepa told her cheerfully, ducking out of her friends’ embrace.

“I’ll be talking to your mother about helping her put that whole thing together, by the way,” Aaliyah warned. “Don’t think you can keep me out of the planning.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, darling.”

“Say,” Roz said with a wince, shifting against Deepa, “would you mind awfully if I sat down and got that ice back on me? It’s just, I’m starting to feel that fight, and I’m not sure I’m going to be able to move tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Deepa said quickly. To her friends, she said, “As much as we have to

catch up on, right now I would really like to call it a night and enjoy the rest of my evening with my new fiancée, now that I'm no longer at risk of turning into a cat. Roz? Let's grab that ice and get you upstairs."

With a pleased hum Deepa could feel in her bones, Roz gave her half her weight as they took their leave of the club. Behind them, The Songbird's chatter and music and dim, smoky ambience faded away as Deepa gave her full attention to Roz, and the entire night they had ahead of them. Her flat was still smaller and shabbier than she would have liked, but she thought that with Roz in her bed, it might feel cosy more than anything. And with a year of Appleton's employ to look forward to, she and Roz would easily be able to afford a place of their own, and have enough left over to see that her mother would be well-off, too.

As Deepa turned the key in the lock and stepped inside, Roz pressed herself to Deepa's back, one cheek against her shoulder and her hands clasped around Deepa's middle. When Deepa dropped her own hand to meet them, the bands of their rings clinked together. The ruby and blue stones caught the light when Deepa flicked the lamp on, a tiny glimmer of colour blending to dusktime-purple.

"I love you," Deepa said aloud, just to see if she could. Her heart didn't stop; her world didn't end. As far as she could tell, she felt exactly as she had a minute earlier; a week earlier; as the first night she'd met Roz.

"I love you, too," Roz said against her shoulder, kissing the back of her neck.

Turning to gather Roz into her arms, Deepa smiled and kicked the door shut behind them, blocking out The Songbird and all its patrons. They had no claim to her, and for the rest of the night, she wouldn't pretend otherwise. She was Roz's and Roz was hers, with no work or curses to distract or interrupt them. Wrapped around each other, they shed their clothes in a trail of silk and cotton on their way to the bedroom, and so busy were they that when midnight struck, neither one of them gave it the slightest notice.

The End