**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 20 - Part 2**

**Episodes 2469-2486**

**Episode 2469**

I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the idea of being left alone with Lakini. Surprising no one, my mates agreed.

“That’s not gonna happen,” Greyson said.

“Ever,” Xavier added.

Lakini didn’t seem all that intimidated, though. What was it with witches being badasses? I wish I had an ounce of their cool, collected demeanor.

She looked between all four of us and said, “I’m not going to do anything to endanger Cali. I just need to talk to her alone—consider it one of my terms.”

What could she possibly want to talk about, though? Now I was curious.

“It couldn’t hurt. I think I should talk to her,” I told the boys.

Greyson slapped his forehead, and Xavier literally growled. Eloquent.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Realistically speaking, I assume that Lakini over here is smart enough to know that she should not, under any circumstances, try anything foolish.” She stared at the witch. “Am I right?”

Lakini nodded. “Obviously. Why would I harm Cali? I’d get nothing out of it.”

“Another great point,” I said. “I’m interested to see what she’s got to say that you two can’t hear.”

“Sounds shady to me,” Xavier snarled.

*You sure about this?* Greyson mind linked.

“You sure about this, Cali?” Xavier said out loud at the same time.

It was hard not to laugh a little at their concern as both their words reverberated in my head and ears. I mind linked to them both, *I know you’ll be right outside the door. And if anything seems weird or wrong, I’ll scream. Okay?*

Xavier and Greyson exchanged a look and huffed in a similar manner.

“Let’s go,” Greyson grumbled, gesturing for everyone to exit with him. Xavier begrudgingly followed, but not before he paused by the door and stared at me one last time.

*Be careful what you say*, he said.

I snorted. *I know. I’ve learned my lesson. It’s why we’re here.*

When the door closed behind them, I slowly turned to face Lakini. After my mates’ fervent declarations, I was a little surprised that they’d agreed to leave. It wouldn’t make sense for Lakini to hurt me, like Big Mac had said, but since when did my mates listen to logic?

*Maybe they do believe I could take care of myself?* I thought.

I covered the dubious snort that escaped me with a cough, and then I stared at Lakini gravely.

“Take a seat,” she said.

I did, and then I blurted, “Just letting you know—I’m Fae for real, and I won’t hesitate to use my magic if you try anything.”

Lakini raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t expect anything less—I have a lot of respect for Fae. It’s one of the reasons why I’ve agreed to help.”

Well, this was an interesting turn of events. But still, something was fishy here…

“What’s the other reason?” I asked cautiously.

“I want something that only someone like you can give. As you could imagine, The Rusty Wrench doesn’t attract a lot of Fae,” Lakini explained.

I squinted at her suspiciously. “Go on.”

“Most Fae have no need for my magic, and we all know relationships between witches and Fae aren’t the best. But you brought a witch with you, so you must already know the value in working with someone like me.”

Lakini had this weird, calm look on her face—all diplomatic and shit—and I wasn’t sure how to feel. Definitely uneasy. What the hell was her angle?

“I think you’re going to need to start speaking plainly,” I said, trying to sound confident. “What is it that you want?”

Lakini stared at me. “A Fae promise.”

I flinched. Was this woman for real? I was still cursing myself for entering into one Fae promise—dealing with a second one wasn’t something I wanted to do. Plus, I could already imagine what Greyson, Xavier, and Big Mac would say.

Definitely a huge-ass nope there. And I remembered what my mom had told me—that the promise I’d made to Charon had enough ambiguity to it to give us some options—but Lakini seemed to be asking for a direct, no-nonsense Fae promise. That would be awfully difficult to get out of, and I really didn’t want any more complications in my life.

“You seem surprised…” Lakini trailed off, studying my face thoughtfully.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I asked, bewildered. “I don’t get any of this—why can’t you and Charon just work things out? Wouldn’t that be much easier?”

Lakini scoffed. “The time for talk ended when Charon tried to have me killed, thanks.”

“Okay. Point.” I shook my head. “As much as I want this revulsion curse gone, though, I can’t make another Fae promise. I can’t just go around offering them to people like candy!”

I was trying to be reasonable here. Interestingly enough, it worked.

“I understand,” Lakini said calmly. “But please don’t make up your mind until you hear my proposal.”

The truth was that either way, I was intrigued by Lakini. I didn’t trust her, but she was definitely more pleasant to deal with than Charon. “I’m listening.”

“I will try to break Charon’s revulsion curse, but not only is the outcome of a spell never guaranteed—I’m sure your witch can attest to that, if you don’t believe me—but it would also pose a great risk for me.”

I scowled. “What kind of risk?”

“You know, the usual life-and-death variety,” Lakini said.

I swallowed audibly.

“So, you see why I need some assurance,” Lakini said.

“I can understand that, but I suppose I’m still a little in the dark,” I asked. “What kind of assurance can I offer?”

“No matter what happens, promise that you and your mates won’t kill me,” Lakini burst out.

It took a second for me to process her words. Did she look… scared? Was I imagining things?

Witches were so tricky, though. Damn.

“You need to realize,” Lakini said in a lower tone, “that Charon will come after me either way. He won’t stop until he kills me, and I obviously don’t want that to happen.”

“Understandable,” I said wryly.

“Thanks,” she replied in the same tone. “I’m in danger just talking to you right now. If Charon’s blackmailing people into murdering me, he must be getting desperate. This is pure hatred and spite—and of course jealousy for all the things I’ve accomplished.”

I cringed. “He sounds like a delight.”

“He’s a monster who calls himself a ‘nice guy,’” Lakini said, her tone almost bitter, suddenly. “I was just too blind to see it. There might be some room for you guys to interpret the promise you made to him, but what he truly wants is to see me dead. He wants to destroy me, and he won’t ever stop. I’ll always have him breathing down my neck, unless…”

I paused, staring at her. “Unless what?”

Lakini held my gaze, her dark eyes intense and penetrating. Her voice dropped an octave, sending a shiver up my spine. “Unless, of course, he dies first.”

“Wait…” I stared at her, feeling my throat dry up. “You want us to kill Charon?”

Before she could speak, I started rambling.

“That’s why we’re in this mess in the first place,” I explained. “I don’t want *anyone* to die because of some stupid magical promise I made. And I’m not going to make the same mistake and agree to *another* one of those promises. I just can’t!”

“If this comes down to the last witch standing, it’s going to be me, Cali,” Lakini said seriously. “I’m not rooting for Charon to literally die, but if anyone needs to go, it has to be him.”

“Oh my god, why is everyone in the supernatural world so casual about murder?” I exclaimed. “Nobody has to die!”

Lakini snorted. “That’s a naïve way to see things. You’re a Fae living with a werewolf pack and a witch. I have no doubt you’ve experienced death in many forms.”

Her words gave me pause. Yeah, technically I had killed werewolves, but it had always been in self-defense, and they’d all been horrible.

*… Much like Charon is horrible.*

No way, I wasn’t seriously considering this.

“I promise no one will miss Charon if he dies in the fallout,” Lakini went on, when I didn’t reply. “He’s universally despised.”

“You used to love him, though,” I commented.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” she said coldly. “Charon was my biggest, and I think all the evidence points to that.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I sighed. “Look, Lakini—”

“It’s a simple question,” she said, cutting me off. “Are you going to make a Fae promise to ensure that I’m alive at the end of this entire thing, and to kill Charon when the mission is over?”

“It can’t be a Fae deal,” I said, not budging on that. “I’m too wrapped up in the other one—I can’t just go around promising people stuff. I don’t even know what could happen if I make a Fae deal that contradicts another.”

Lakini tapped her fingers on her desk. “I thought you wanted to break the revulsion curse. It must be really difficult to be disgusted by the man you love. It would be a shame to spend the rest of your lives like that…”

My stomach clenched at her words. It all sounded all ominous and horrible, but I couldn’t give in. Not on this.

*I’m kind of proud of myself for not mindlessly giving her what she wants just because she’s trying to push my buttons*, I thought. *Oh my god, am I maturing?*

Basking in my self-discovery, I told Lakini, “I’m not making any Fae promises, but I know there has to be another way. Xavier and Greyson have offered you a deal that could be beneficial for all of us if we enter into it in good faith. Take it or leave it. What’s it going to be?”

**Episode 2470**

AVA

Aysel sat there, her white-blond hair in an ornate updo that was fit for the opera instead of a diner. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she looked around before turning to me.

“I can’t believe someone as lovely as you would ever set foot in a place like this. It’s so dirty, and it smells like stale grease. And the seats!” She looked at the booth, using one manicured fingernail to trace it. “My skin is sticking to the vinyl. *Seluna*, this is disgusting! When was the last time this place was cleaned?”

I snorted. “Depends on your definition of clean, princess.”

She gasped in horror. I couldn’t argue with her outrage—it was valid. My memories of this diner went far beyond the smell and the dirt, though. Everything here reminded me of Iñigo. The chemistry between us had been off the charts—something I hadn’t been able to fight. He’d been cruel, ruthless, monstrous, always trying to use me to gain control of the Orb…

I didn’t regret killing him.

I would never trust a bloodsucker, and he’d made it obvious that he’d seen me as nothing but a puppet to control. I didn’t take well to people thinking they could manipulate me. That applied to Aysel as well. She was acting all friendly now, but I knew better than to drop my guard.

“Do you have any idea why we haven’t been given menus yet?” she asked, clearly appalled as she looked around. Then she scoffed. “Though I’m sure anything I order here will give me food poisoning.”

Right on cue, two menus landed hard on the table.

In a monotone, Mabel said, “Welcome to the Rockaway. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Indeed, I—”

Before Aysel could finish her sentence, Mabel’s hooded eyes fixed on me. They narrowed. “Well, well. I can’t believe *you* came back.”

I tensed internally. Did Mabel know that I’d killed Iñigo?

I’d barely finished that thought when Mabel rolled her eyes and added, “You’re better than me. I’d never come back to this dump, if I could.”

Aysel smiled a perfectly polite, utterly cruel grin. “Understandable.”

“Hi, Mabel,” I said as calmly as I could.

Mabel snorted. “Anyway, can I take your order? The new cook is better than the last, but don’t order anything from the seafood menu.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “Just saying.”

Aysel grimaced. “I’ll have toast and coffee. I’d rather not die.”

“Good choice,” Mabel told her in a bland tone.

“Same for me,” I told Mabel, who picked up our menus and sauntered away, yawning.

Some things never changed.

“How in the world does the waitress know you?” Aysel asked after leaning forward, her eyes intrigued.

“I used to work here,” I said.

Aysel gasped, literally clutching the pearls around her neck. “*Why?*”

I shrugged. “I needed a job. Food. Not everyone is born into royalty.”

Aysel waved me off, as if ignoring that she was filthy fucking rich for no reason other than the fact that her ancestors had probably looted a bunch of jewelry and artifacts. Unfazed, she said, “I’m certain that you could have done a *lot* better than work in a dive like this.”

I recalled the desperation I’d felt at the time—how the Orb had confused me, how upset I’d been that Xavier had rejected me after I’d been brought back from the dead. I’d been at rock bottom.

“Yeah, well, I’ve usually deserved a lot better than life’s thrown at me, but I do what I need to to survive,” I said truthfully. “I was lost, and I was offered a position, so I took it.”

Aysel gagged. “I’m not sure I would have been able to endure such humiliation. What could possibly have driven you to come here?”

I tilted my head to the side, eyeing her. “I feel like it’s something you can relate to. My mate threw me out.”

Aysel gasped in that same exaggerated way. She reached out to place her hand over mine on the table, offering me a pitiful look. She was so theatrical, I’d have rolled my eyes if I’d known I could get away with it.

“How terrible that must have been, my dear friend,” Aysel said. I’d missed the part where we’d become friends, but what did I know? “I am aware that a broken heart can cause someone to do just about anything…” She looked around. “Including enduring this place.”

I tried to imagine an alternate universe where Aysel was forced to work at this diner, and immediately I knew it would turn into either a sitcom or a horror movie.

“Well,” I said, shrugging. “It is what it is.”

Aysel leaned further forward, all conspiratorial. “I saw you kissing Xavier at the party. It must be *so* painful to know that he would rather be with Caliana.”

At the memory of my kiss with Xavier and the mention of Cali’s name, I bristled, my jaw tightening. I needed to keep a level head, though—it felt like Aysel would prefer that. She was supposed to be the dramatic one around here, after all.

“Whatever’s happening right now doesn’t change the fact that I was Xavier’s first mate,” I said seriously, and I fucking meant it.

Aysel squinted, resting her chin in her head. “What happened between you and Xavier, exactly?”

I wasn’t about to tell Aysel about getting killed and coming back. I was only here to talk with her, not to braid her hair and spill all my secrets.

Keeping my tone nonchalant, I said, “I went away for a while. And when I came back, Xavier was with Cali.”

Before Aysel could offer one of her very well-placed comments, Mabel came back with the coffee. “The toast is coming,” she said, popping her gum before moving away.

The second she was gone, Aysel was all up in arms. “I can’t believe Xavier would do that—you poor thing! That kind of betrayal must be so heartbreaking. No wonder you were devastated! No wonder you—”

“I’m not here to wallow in self-pity,” I said, cutting her off before she could embark on a tirade. “You texted me yesterday asking to meet again—I’m pretty sure you didn’t reach out because you wanted to hear my life story. Am I wrong?”

Aysel sighed. “You’re astute, I’ll give you that. I wanted to know if you’ve thought more about my proposal.”

I ignored the way my throat tightened. “I haven’t really had the time. Too much excitement around the pack house.”

Aysel gave me a look, followed by a pointed smile. “I know you may think that we don’t have much in common.” She straightened the sleeves of her elegant purple blouse. “After all, I am a princess, and you are…” She looked at me up and down, offering a hint of disdain. “Well, forgive me, but you are a commoner.”

This time, I didn’t stop myself from rolling my eyes. “You sure have a way of making a girl feel nice.” I played it off with a snort, and she thankfully wasn’t offended.

“My point is that despite our obvious differences, we have several things in common,” she said. “We’re both in love with someone who isn’t yet returning that love.”

Aysel’s words made me wince internally. Xavier had turned me down time and time again, to the point where I resented both him and myself at times. He wanted me, and yet he denied us both, and my wolf was furious at him.

I was Xavier’s mate. I was bound by him, *forced* to love him.

Aysel was just some stalker who was fucking obsessed with Greyson, and the fact that she was comparing our situations as if they were one and the same made me want to tell her to shut up. I couldn’t do that, though. Unfortunately.

“The key word here is ‘yet,’” Aysel added. “They will love us. It’s just that both Greyson and Xavier *think* they want Caliana.”

“You think I don’t already know that?” I asked, my tone sharper than I would’ve liked. “Do you like rubbing salt in the wound? What is it exactly that you want? *Why* did you invite me here?”

Aysel leaned closer, grimacing as she wiped something from her elbow with a tissue she produced out of nowhere. “Listen to me, Ava. What if there was a spell that would make Xavier choose you?”

Well, that would’ve been amazing. If it existed.

“Why are you so interested in me and Xavier? What’s the catch?” I asked.

Aysel looked prim. “I just think we could help each other—if we can peel Caliana away from Greyson and Xavier, it would make our goals much easier to obtain. We’re stronger together.”

I didn’t see Xavier as a “goal.” Not like *she* saw Greyson.

And yet, I couldn’t stop myself from being tempted by her promises.

“How can you make such a claim?” I asked.

Looking around to make sure nobody was listening, Aysel whispered, “I know a powerful warlock who can perform the spell.”

It dawned on me, then—this warlock must be the one who’d put the revulsion spell on Greyson. If so, what Aysel was proposing could actually work.

“Let’s be honest here, Ava,” Aysel said haughtily. “You’ve been interested in collaborating with me ever since I first mentioned it. You want to do it. You know you do.”

There was something wrong about this—especially the part where Aysel was talking like we were one and the same, as if her kidnapping tendencies were just as understandable as my having no choice but to love Xavier. It was messed up to admit it, but a really big part of me didn’t care about what Xavier’s mind wanted—not when his heart and his wolf had chosen me.

I was bound to Xavier, and his rejection had already started to feel like a curse.

“So what do you say, Ava?” Aysel asked with a smirk. “Partners?”

**Episode 2471**

“Wait,” Lakini said, raising her hand. “Nothing’s set in stone yet—there’s still a lot to discuss.”

I frowned. “But—”

“You shouldn’t be impulsive,” Lakini said, much like my freaking mother would’ve done. “Isn’t your impulsivity what caused this mess in the first place?”

Okay, so there was some truth to Lakini’s comment. But also, I was done negotiating. This was taking way too much time. Every second I wasted here hammering out all these fine details was a second we could be using getting this curse reversed.

“I don’t know what else you want me to say,” I told Lakini. I hoped I looked as determined as I felt. “I’m not going to be forced into making any more Fae promises. There’s literally a whole subsection in our lore that warns us against making them. I feel like I’m being really clear right now.”

Lakini squinted at me. “What if I added something to sweeten the deal?”

“Oh my god, you are relentless,” I huffed, standing up, ready to walk straight out of the office. “Stop pushing!”

Lakini smirked. “But I like pushing.”

I blinked. Was she flirting with me? I didn’t need any flirting right now. Sometimes I wasn’t very good at holding my ground—except for when it came to my mates. Those two, I could deal with just fine. It was nice knowing that they were dorks when it came to me, and hardasses when it came to everybody else.

“What are you offering?” I asked Lakini, and she suddenly looked excited. This was alarming.

*This is what I get for wanting to negotiate with her without Big Mac in the room!*

“What if I could cast a spell that will protect you and Greyson long after the revulsion curse is broken?” she asked.

I sat back down, intrigued. This woman was a menace. “Continue.”

“What’s to prevent someone like the princess from having another curse cast upon you?” Lakini said casually, and I hated to admit it, but she had an excellent point. “Surely there will be others who will be jealous that you have Greyson’s heart.”

I scowled. “It’s *mine*, though.”

Lakini pressed her lips together. “Yes, we know. The point is, I doubt the princess will accept defeat so easily. She’s like a piranha, out for blood. Only in this case, the blood is your mate’s penis.”

I cringed so hard I wanted to explode. “Did you really need to make that comparison?”

“Anyway,” Lakini said, breezing through, “I need you to remember that using spells can be quite addictive, especially to someone like Aysel—someone with no moral compass, who sees people as objects to own while calling it love. She’s obsessed with Greyson, and I think it’s been established that she’ll stop at nothing.”

I huffed. There was some sense to what Lakini was saying. A lot of sense.

“What are you suggesting?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I could create a ward that would block any spell that Charon tries to cast on your mate,” Lakini said simply.

I actually loved the sound of that. With that ward, I wouldn’t have to worry about Aysel digging in her expensive, uncomfortable heels and going after Greyson again. And it would mean that the revulsion spell would be broken. And when the spell broke, I’d be able to kiss and hold and do all the things I adored with Greyson without fear of repercussions. Or vomit.

“There it is…” Lakini trailed off with a glint in her eye. She pointed at me. “I can tell you’re interested.”

“I didn’t say anything,” I declared.

“Oh, come on,” Lakini said coyly. It was like she’d waited till everybody else had left just so she could turn on the charm and manipulate me. “You’re intrigued, Cali. Admit it. Why not make it official?”

“Hah, how about no?” I said, feeling pretty proud of myself for fighting her off. “I’m not ready to make a Fae promise yet. Besides,” I pointed at Lakini. “I have a powerful witch just outside this door. Couldn’t Big Mac create the same kind of ward?”

The moment the words left my mouth, I realized that Big Mac would *definitely* be able to do something like that—but what on earth would she want in return? Hopefully not my eye. Or Greyson’s. He had such gorgeous eyes! *No*.

“No offense to ‘Big Mac,’” Lakini said casually, “but not just any witch can create this very specific ward—you have to have the proper ingredients.”

I squinted. “I’m pretty sure Big Mac has all the ingredients. Ever. For everything she needs—her room is filled with all kinds of witch spell-making stuff.”

Lakini raised an eyebrow. “I doubt Big Mac has the one thing that no other witch has access to—Charon’s tears.”

I paused, bewildered. “Wait, what?”

“To make those wards, you need the warlock’s tears,” Lakini said with a shrug.

“And you have them?” I asked, my voice dubious. What in the hell was happening right now? I probably shouldn’t have been surprised, though—these *were* witches we were talking about.

“Of course I have them,” Lakini said, almost offended that I’d doubt her.

“Why on earth would anyone keep someone’s tears?” I asked.

Lakini cleared her throat. “Well, when things between me and Charon started to fall apart, there were lots of tears on both sides. I figured I should take advantage of the situation—you never know when you might need your enemy’s tears.”

I paused, processing. Could Lakini be bluffing? I’d have to ask Big Mac, just to make sure Lakini wasn’t trying to trick me. Because I was pretty sure she wouldn’t hesitate to trick me. I trusted her so little that I wouldn’t even blink an eye if she and Charon ended up together again and this was some sort of weird love ritual for them.

*You never know with witches.*

“What are you thinking, Caliana?” Lakini asked. “You’ve gone awfully quiet.”

“Forgive me for trying to process all this new information,” I told her seriously.

“I will add the ward to the deal if you make a Fae promise that you won’t let me die,” Lakini insisted.

I paused. I was tempted as hell—especially by the part about getting rid of Aysel forever and ever. But still, I had to be sensible here. Mature. Not impulsive.

“I need to discuss this with my mates and Big Mac,” I said.

Lakini looked hopeful as she gestured at the door. “Understandable. Go ahead. I’ll be right here.”

I stood, straightening my clothes.

“Good talk,” I told her before walking out of the room. I hadn’t felt so important in a really long time. I had to give it to Lakini—she knew how to bargain without making a person feel underestimated.

*Clever witch.*

The second I opened the door, Greyson and Xavier stopped pacing.

“What happened?” they both asked at the same time.

I closed the door behind me and gestured for everyone to follow me to a relatively private corner. I gave them the lowdown, watching both my mates’ frowning faces and Big Mac’s intrigued one.

When I stopped talking, Xavier spoke up instantly. “This sounds too good to be true. Lakini just happens to be able to create this ward? She just *happens* to have exactly the right ingredients? I’m not sold on it.”

Greyson scowled. “I have to take Xavier’s side on this one.” He paused. “You didn’t agree to anything, did you?”

I huffed. “Of course not! I wanted to talk to all of you. But it does seem like a good option…”

The idea of Aysel not being able to use Charon to mess with Greyson ever, ever again was so incredible I could’ve freaking burst into song. The possibility of freedom was wagging its tail at me—a magnificent possibility, so tempting and just right there.

“I think it's a terrible option,” Xavier said gruffly. “No more Fae promises.”

“You know you don’t want to keep making those, Cali,” Greyson told me with an apologetic look.

“I know that!” I said, waving them off. “That’s why I didn’t agree to anything yet!”

Xavier shook his head. “We should stick to our original plan. This witch talks a lot—killing Lakini is starting to look better and better.”

I glared at him. “That’s not funny, Xavier.”

He scoffed. “Who said I was joking?”

I smacked him on the arm. “We’re not going to do that.”

“But—”

“No buts!” I said strictly.

Xavier pouted, and Greyson actually laughed at his brother. They were both very mature. Then I realized that Big Mac hadn’t said a single word all this time. It wasn’t unusual for her to just stand there and judge all of us, but given the situation, I’d expected more of a reaction from her.

“Big Mac,” I said, focusing on her. “You’re the expert witch. What do you think? Should we do it?”

**Episode** **2472**

GREYSON

Big Mac looked between Cali and me. “If Lakini already has the materials, then I say we do it. I don’t want to be on the hunt for some warlock’s sob story vendetta man-tears when I’ve got a wedding to plan.”

Well. That was one way to put it.

Cali frowned in confusion. “I thought Mrs. Smith was the one planning it?”

Big Mac glared at my mate. “What’s that supposed to mean? Why wouldn’t I be involved in planning my own wedding?”

Cali blinked and opened her mouth to answer, which made me sweat.

“Now’s not the time to debate that,” I said, before turning to my mate. “It might be a great idea to create this ward—borderline genius idea, actually—”

“Right?” Cali said excitedly, squeezing my arm.

“—but there’s no way in hell I’m going to let you make that Fae promise,” I finished my sentence, and Cali pouted.

“Yeah, I think we should tell Lakini no deal and leave,” Xavier told me.

“We’re already in over our heads with deals and promises,” I said, agreeing with my brother.

“Um, excuse me?” Cali poked both our shoulders. “You’re both talking like I’m not even here.”

I gave her a little smirk. “Love, you’re always here. Because you’re always on my mind.”

Xavier made a gagging noise, Big Mac rolled her eyes, and Cali blushed. A second later, though, she waved me off.

“Greyson, stop! You can’t distract me right now.” She pointed at herself. “A Fae promise is mine to make, and I have no intention of making it. But what if we can still get Lakini to create the ward?”

I paused. “How is that possible?”

“We can still make a deal,” Cali said. “Just make it between you two and Lakini. Keep me out of it.”

Xavier crossed his arms. “That’s possible. But why would Lakini take our word for it? That’s very different from a Fae promise.”

“That’s true—but it doesn’t hurt to find out. Cali’s right,” I said.

My mate preened, looking adorable.

I turned to Big Mac. “What do you think?”

“It’s worth a shot,” she said seriously.

I stepped forward to the witch’s office door, feeling good about this. I trusted Big Mac’s judgement—I knew she wouldn’t lead us astray.

I knocked, and Lakini called us in. When I met her gaze, her eyebrows rose.

“We want to take you up on your deal,” I said.

She asked, “And the Fae?”

“That’s off the table. This deal is between you and my brother and me,” I said. I made sure to say that like there was no room for debate, because there wasn’t.

The witch took in my expression and didn’t insist again.

“Just to be clear,” Lakini said, “I will break the curse that Charon cast on you, and Charon will be forced to watch me do it. In exchange, if there is any fallout, which there probably will be, not only will you not kill me, but you will make sure Charon doesn’t come after me. All right?”

I stared at Lakini. “Almost. What about the ward that’s gonna keep Aysel and Charon’s magic away from me?”

Lakini looked between all four of us, then her eyes lingered on Cali and me. “I’ll throw that in. Anything that will piss off my ex is fine by me.”

Cali clapped her hands. “Yay!”

Thank god Cali hadn’t accidentally made a Fae promise again by saying something like—

“I think we have a deal,” Lakini said, standing up from her desk. She held out her hand, but before I could touch it, she pulled it back. “How do I know you will hold your end of the bargain?”

“You don’t,” I told her. “You only have my word. But I’m the Redwood Alpha, and my word isn’t something I give lightly.”

Lakini eyed Cali. “Did he get you into bed by spouting this kind of bullshit?”

Xavier growled, Cali blushed profusely, and Lakini made an appeasing gesture with her hands.

“Only kidding. After all, we’re all friends now.” She glanced at Big Mac before staring at me. “I suppose I will have to trust your word, Redwood Alpha. You can’t be all that bad if one of us is hanging out with you so closely.”

Big Mac didn’t say a word, but somehow that was enough.

I looked over at Cali, who looked all fluttery and happy as she said, “This is gonna work.”

I smiled a little. This would bring her back to me—the curse would end, and Aysel would get off my fucking back. *Finally*.

I shook hands with Lakini, pretty happy with this outcome, but then the witch turned to Xavier. “And you?”

Xavier paused. For a second there, I wondered if he was going to come up with some objection. Despite his open willingness to help end the curse, there was no doubt he’d enjoyed watching me suffer through it.

“Xavier?” Cali said in a small voice, and that seemed to do the trick.

Staring at Cali, he shook Lakini’s hand. “You have my word too.” He eyed the witch then, his expression grave. “But if anything happens to Cali during this spell breaking thing, you won’t have a moment’s peace. I might not be able to kill you, but there are things I can do that are far worse.”

“Xavier!” Cali said with a gasp. “There’s no need to be so threatening.”

“It’s fine,” Lakini said, though she did look a little shaken.

“We’ll all have to look out for each other from now on,” I said, pushing Xavier slightly away from the witch. The quicker we could break this curse, the better. Cali seemed to agree, her gaze full of excitement as she looked between Lakini and me.

“What’s next?” she asked.

“We’ll reach out to Charon, set something up,” I said, and everybody agreed. I shook hands with Lakini one more time. “We’ll be in touch.”

When we got back to the bar area, my hand in Cali’s, I noticed there were now a few early customers. That was good, actually—at least we wouldn’t have to deal with the asshole bartender’s attention.

“I think this is where I remind everyone that I, Caliana Hart, was the one to get us a better deal,” Cali told me with a smirk, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

I couldn’t help but grin. “You were. You did an amazing job.”

“Imagine if I’d stayed in the car. You two would’ve been doomed!” she said, pointing between Xavier, who grunted, and me.

“You’re a piece of work,” I said. I wanted to kiss her so fucking badly, and it looked like she felt the same.

“You love me,” she said, shrugging, and that was true. I loved her so much.

“You must be a great negotiator,” I said. That would be a great skill for her to have as a Luna.

“I am, actually,” Cali said. “Not that it’s a skill I ever thought much about, but between Lakini and Lucian, I’m becoming a bit of an expert.”

“That’s true,” Xavier said, though he seemed pretty annoyed about it.

“You’re full of pleasant surprises,” I said.

“What happens next?” she asked as we all walked out to the empty sidewalk. “Do we have to capture Charon and bring him to Lakini?”

“Too risky,” Xavier said gruffly. “He’s a warlock.”

“But perhaps we can deceive him long enough to allow Lakini to do whatever she has to do,” I said.

Cali grinned up at me. “It’s so hard to believe that we might be done with the revulsion curse sooner rather than later.”

I put an arm around her shoulders, not giving a damn that Xavier could see us. “I know. I’m really happy about it too.” I turned to Big Mac. “And if Lakini’s ward works, it would prevent Aysel from using Charon against me again.”

“It was a good idea,” Big Mac admitted. That was high praise, coming from her.

I reached into my pocket and touched the tin box holding the tarot card pieces. Hopefully Aysel wouldn’t be smart enough to figure out why Charon couldn’t put any more spells on me.

“What about the Fae promise part of the equation?” Xavier asked, crossing his arms.

“Well, we agreed to take care of Lakini—isn’t that what we’re doing?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Taking care of her could also literally mean *taking care* of her,” Cali said, realization dawning. “Right?”

I smirked. “Precisely. And as long as you don’t assume an active role in all this, Cali, your Fae promise won’t be violated.”

Big Mac scoffed. “Fae promises and double meanings. What a joke.”

“It’s pretty cool, actually.” Xavier smirked a little now, reaching out to pull Cali closer to him, away from my arms.

I didn’t cause a fuss—I was too happy for it—and we all headed to the car.

“Call Charon now,” Cali said after getting to the back seat, squeezing my shoulder. Her excitement was contagious, and I pulled out my phone and dialed.

The warlock picked up right away. His voice was tense. “Is it done yet?”

Had this asshole been fretting by the phone ever since we’d last seen him? *Damn*.

“We’re going to finish the deal, take care of Lakini,” I told him. “Can you meet us in an hour?”

**Episode 2473**

MARTA

Lilac, Violet, and Charlie were laughing at something Violet had just said. I laughed along with them, but I hadn’t heard much of it. I’d spent most of my time staring at Lilac. The way he’d grin and tease and smirk, cheeky and charming. The way he’d touch me now and then, always so casual about it, as if this was what he was meant to do, as if we were meant to be, even though…

Even though I wasn’t his mate.

Still, I was feeling a bit better about my place with Lilac now that we’d decided to stay together. Despite everything that was going on with his wolf and the fact that he needed to find his mate, I took some comfort in knowing that he’d chosen me to be his right now. He had feelings for me—I could feel it in his every look, in every little thing he did for me—and that had to be enough for now.

The decision seemed to have put him in better spirits too—thank goodness. And in general, there had definitely been a bit more pep in his step since he’d been reunited with Plum. There was a vibrancy to him, an energy that was hard to ignore, and I didn’t want to. I wanted to keep on watching him, feeling him, feel every bit of this thing between us. The way he’d kissed me earlier—that hard, hungry, sensual way that carried so much emotion—had made my toes curl.

Just thinking about it made me blush.

Seeing him shift into his full wolf form and then return naked had certainly been something as well. It had felt like a brand new experience that he’d decided to share with me—that he was *proud* to share with me. There was this raw quality to the act that made it look so instinctual and dominant and just—

Sexy.

Lilac was goddamn sexy. Even *sexier* than he’d already been to me. He was much more confident now, much more in control of himself and his surroundings and his body, and that showed in his every move.

I’d seen members of the pack shift plenty of times before, and they were always freaking naked, but with Lilac, it was different. I *wanted* to look at Lilac when he was naked. Like, I wanted to look at him a *lot*. It was definitely something to watch my boyfriend turn into a massive wild animal.

*Boyfriend.*

This word that used to made me feel giddy now made me feel something akin to fear. I couldn’t help but feel like there was a time limit on that. On us being together. Loving each other. It was hard to ignore the lump that formed in my throat—Lilac had said he wanted to be with me and only me, but when a werewolf met their mate, all bets were off.

Wasn’t that sort of like meeting your soulmate or something? Hence the word “mate”?

“Do you want to go on a run with us, Marta?” Violet’s question broke me out of my thoughts. A merciful interruption at this point, because my overthinking was about to escalate, and if that happened, I’d probably burst out crying in front of everyone.

Regardless, at this point, I had no idea what she was talking about.

“A run?” I asked, confused. “I don’t really do a lot of cardio, but I guess it wouldn’t be a bad idea to start. They do say exercise is good for you, right?”

Lilac chuckled, placing his arm around my shoulders. “No, silly,” he said, leaning forward to nuzzle my temple before planting a kiss there. The gesture was so soft and familiar that I instantly felt my face heat up. “Violet means running with us in wolf form.”

“*Oh*,” I said awkwardly.

I did feel a little silly, but no one was laughing at me, because they were all so nice. Lilac especially was just staring at me like he couldn’t get enough, and I had no idea what to do with that right now. I had no idea how to just accept that he would stop looking at me like that after his “mate” showed up.

I was glad that whatever was going on in my head wasn’t obvious, because a chipper Violet then said, “We were thinking now that Lilac’s together with Plum, it would be so much fun to finally go on a run together—all four of us.”

“How’s that gonna work, exactly?” I asked, looking between the twins and Charlie. “I can’t shift.”

“You can ride on Lilac,” Charlie said. “Unless of course he doesn’t feel up to that kind of thing yet.”

“Hey!” Lilac barked indignantly before playfully punching Charlie. “I’ve never felt stronger, you ass—I could carry a dozen Martas on my back.” He turned to me sheepishly. “Though I of course only want just the one.”

I snorted, shaking my head. I loved the idea of riding on Lilac’s back, though. We’d both ridden on Plum during the battle with Letifer, and while I’d liked the feel of Lilac’s arms around me, I hadn’t had a chance to experience what it was like to wrap my arms around Lilac as a wolf. It sounded amazing. Definitely a lot more fun than practicing with Okorie and dealing with his faucet obsession.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t Okorie that was bothering me at the moment. In the back of my mind, the idea of Lilac and his mate remained, no matter how much I told myself to chill. It was troubling. For one, what I’d said earlier was true—I *couldn’t* shift. I’d never be a wolf. And no matter how much Lilac loved me, no matter how much I loved him, we would always be two very different people.

Chances were that his mate would be another werewolf, someone who’d fit in with the pack seamlessly, someone who he’d be able to run off with and howl at the moon with. Or whatever it was that shifted wolves did. How the hell would I stand a chance against a mate like that? How on earth could I ask to keep Lilac’s attention when I knew that I simply didn’t deserve it?

Mates were undeniable—that was my understanding of it.

And I was just… an outsider.

Wasn’t I?

“We should go through the eastern side!” Charlie was saying something about the route, and Violet nodded eagerly.

Lilac turned to me, still smiling, and I felt my stomach clench.

“You coming?” he asked, squeezing my shoulder tenderly. The way he looked at me, all the sweetness and want in his beautiful eyes, made me feel light-headed.

“I have to change into something more comfortable first,” I said, giving the first excuse that came to mind. I needed time to just calm myself down and get a grip.

As I walked toward the staircase, Violet quickly joined me.

“I need to use the restroom—believe it or not, I hate peeing in the woods,” she said.

I probably would’ve laughed under other circumstances, but this was different. There was only one thing in my mind now, and that was Lilac’s mate.

“Violet,” I started as we climbed the stairs, “I’ve been meaning to ask you—how did you know that you were Charlie’s mate?”

Violet smiled dreamily. “I saw this hot guy while I was looking out a car window. I felt this undeniable pull toward him, an attraction I couldn’t even understand.” She winked. “Then we got a chance to hang out, and the rest is history.”

“That sounds very… easy. The knowing part,” I commented.

She chuckled. “It was. Mostly.”

I paused, processing. “Does every mate feel that instant attraction? Is it like in fairytales, where people always fall in love at first sight?”

Violet grinned. “I know it felt that way for me, but Xavier and Cali marinated for a while. Like, a really long while.”

“How come?” I asked.

“Let’s just say Xavier used to have… issues,” Violet said. “But then he and Cali fell for each other.”

“So it’s not always instant?” I asked.

“No way. For example—Xavier’s twin, Colton, and *his* mate? Oh my god, they’re like oil and vinegar.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

“They hated each other, but last I had heard, things could be looking up,” Violet said. “But I’m not really sure.”

This wasn’t exactly good news, though. Because even if Lilac met his future mate and hated her, they might still end up together.

“Hey, why are you so worried about mates?” Violet asked as we paused outside my room. “You and Lilac were tethered together—that’s practically like being mated. And I’ve never seen my brother fall so hard for someone. He’s had crushes, but nothing like you. He’d literally do anything for you—I can tell.”

“Really?” I asked, a tinge of hope blooming in my chest. It was pathetic, but I supposed that was better than bursting out crying.

Violet squinted at me. “Why are you being so weird about this? Is something going on? Did my brother do something stupid?”

**Episode 2474**

LOLA

Ava and Aysel were looking *very* cozy as they chatted inside the diner. This was bad, BAD NEWS!

*What are they even saying?* Jay mind linked, clearly frustrated.

*I have no idea!* I huffed. *I’m trying to read Aysel’s lips, but she doesn’t speak very expressively.*

I couldn’t get a sense at all about what was going on. Was this an argument, or a catch-up between old friends? They looked pretty chummy. Or at least Aysel did, and that girl’s vibes were all over the place. She hated Cali but would smile at her all the time—an icy kind of mean girl smile. Was that how she was dealing with Ava as well?

Or were they truly growing close here?

I couldn’t even get a read on effing Ava—she was facing away from us. I pressed my wolf’s ear against the wall, trying to listen in, but it wasn’t working. This damned building probably had some sort of anti-eavesdropping protection.

*Should we just bust in?* Jay growled in my head, and I flinched.

I wasn’t used to him being so forward, but I loved it. Rawr and stuff!

*Not yet*, I said, assuming the role of the levelheaded partner. It was a part I rarely got to play, so I hoped I’d be able to deliver. *We have no idea what’s going on. We have the element of surprise—can’t give that up just yet.*

Jay gritted his teeth. Damn, Ava really did bother him, huh? He looked back—traffic was picking up on the road a little bit. People would start noticing us very, very soon.

*You and I can’t just hang around out here as wolves forever*, Jay said. *If we’re spotted, it would cause a real stink.*

*We’ll get noticed if we’re naked too*, I noted wryly. *I know I’d notice you from a mile away.*

Jay snorted. *Not the time, Lola.*

*What? I’m complimenting you! It’s my right as your mate!* I exclaimed.

*Let’s shift back and hide behind the bushes*, Jay said. *We won’t be spotted there.*

A few moments later, we’d completed that task, but we were still trying to figure out what was going on inside.

“What are they even eating?” Jay whispered, squinting to see.

I scoffed. “As if that’s gonna give us a clue.”

“It might,” Jay said. “More food to eat means more time spent together.”

I blinked. “Wow. You really are a genius.”

“Look!” he hissed. “It’s coffee and crappy toast.” He paused, frowning at me. “Is that the kind of thing friends eat, or enemies?”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, I take back the genius comment. This isn’t getting anywhere.”

“What are you two naked idiots doing?” a voice said.

I squealed, accidentally jumping deeper into a nearby bush. Jay followed—though much more gracefully—and we both turned to see the waitress who’d been smoking weed earlier. We’d seen her before but had clearly lost track of where she’d gone.

Shit. That hadn’t been smart

“So?” the waitress said, taking a drag from her joint. “Aren’t you guys gonna say anything?”

“Uh. Hi?” I squeaked as Jay gripped my hand.

The waitress shrugged. “Eh. This ain’t even the weirdest thing I’ve seen behind the Rockaway Diner.”

“It’s not?” Jay asked, looking confused. Poor baby—I shared his sentiments.

“Nah.” The waitress shook her head. “Besides, I’m on my lunch break now—off the clock. You two can do whatever you want out here.” She pointed to her nametag. “My name’s Mabel.”

Well. The waitress was friendly. I could work with that.

“Thank you for not ratting us out to management,” I said sheepishly.

“Are you guys roleplaying right now, or what?” she asked.

Jay cleared his throat, bypassing her question. “Actually, we were wondering about a couple of customers inside…”

Mabel’s eyes widened. “Ooh, you want the gossip.”

“We don’t care about gossip,” Jay lied. “We just have… a social interest. In certain people.”

Mabel squinted. “How come?”

“I don’t know,” Jay said, shrugging. “Why does anyone care about anything? What are we all even doing with our lives—am I right?”

Mabel looked confused. Oh my god, Jay was going to break her brain with his philosophical questions.

“Did you happen to hear what the customers with the toast and coffee were talking about?” I asked, cutting straight to the chase.

But Mabel remained confused. “Everybody orders coffee and toast. Gotta be more specific.”

“The two beautiful ladies,” I said. I hated to utter the words, but they were unfortunately true. Ava and Aysel were very horrible and very beautiful. It was unfair.

Mabel laughed. “No idea. I’m not interested in their pretty girl drama. I just want to get paid and mind my business.”

Her words made an idea pop in my head.

*Follow my lead*, I told Jay, who nodded.

“Well, we don’t want to cause a problem,” I said. “But, we’re naked out here looking like fools. Do you have any spare clothes inside? There must be a spare uniform—”

“Or two,” Jay added.

“Or two,” I repeated.

“Maybe in the back room,” Jay said.

“Maybe in the—*wait*.” I frowned, turning to face him. “How do you know there’s a back room? Have you been here before?”

My mate shrugged in that nonchalant way of his that sometimes drove me up the wall. “I get around.”

I glared. “*Without* me?”

“Hey, lovebirds,” Mabel cut in. “If I help you, what’s in it for me?”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked.

Mabel raised her eyebrows. “How about a hundred bucks?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jay scoffed, because he was a fucking accountant at heart. “We just want to borrow them.”

*And we don’t even have any money on us anyway*, I said.

*Maybe we can just go back to the house, grab our own clothes, and then come back*, Jay replied.

*We can’t both leave. Ava could be long gone by the time we get back*, I said.

“What are you two doing?” Mabel asked. “Why are you staring at each other?”

“It’s nothing,” I said quickly. “How about you bring me one uniform while my boyfriend goes and gets the cash?”

Mabel grinned. “Deal.” She ashed her joint and looked at me up and down. “You must be a size small. Be right back.” She headed inside as I prodded Jay.

“Go on, get going!”

Jay sighed deeply. “Promise me you won’t get in trouble?”

I blinked innocently. “Who? Me? I would never!”

Jay gave me a quick peck and then ran for the woods. I watched him go—his butt looked really cute from behind. Very round and muscular and—

*Lola, focus!*

I redirected my attention to where it was needed—on the two pretty, evil women inside the diner. I couldn’t imagine what they were talking about, but surely it couldn’t be good. It almost definitely had nothing to do with the Samara pack, but wait…

Could Ava be thinking of joining the *Vanguard* pack?

“Here you go.” Mabel was back, cutting off my thoughts. She presented me with a wrinkled mess of a uniform. “The only one I could find was in the laundry.”

I cringed. This was so gross!

“I should only give you fifty bucks for an unwashed uniform,” I grumbled.

She huffed. “Do you want it or not? I have to get back on my shift soon.”

I looked up at the sky, exasperated. “Fine.”

I put the uniform on. The smell of grease was so strong that it was like wearing a diner—and not a diner with delicious food.

“Hey, that doesn’t look half bad on you,” Mabel told me, all friendly. “I could probably get you a morning shift if you’re interested.”

“I assure you, this is a one-time deal. I am horrible anywhere near a stove,” I informed her.

“Then you’ll fit right in,” Mabel said casually.

I paused. “Thanks? I guess?”

I made a move to walk through the front, but then she said, “You actually have to come in through the back—it’s what Rosaura wants.”

“Who’s Rosaura?” I asked.

“The new owner,” Mable explained. She pointed to the sign—“Under new management”*.* “Didn’t you see?”

“Right,” I said, nodding. “Thank you for everything, actually.”

I marched toward the back—I figured that as long as I could keep my face away from Ava, I should be good. I could just roam around, pretend to be busy, and eavesdrop. But as I stepped through the back door, a harsh voice barked, “Stop!”

I froze.

“Who the hell are you?” A woman came out of an office, peering at me. She was extremely attractive, but in a cold, unforgiving way—somehow, she seemed out of place here. I swallowed roughly. I was in trouble now, wasn’t I?

Jay had warned me, and yet here I was, fucking shit up! What was I going to do?

“Cat got your tongue?” she asked, walking up to me in a prowling, confident manner. “You’re not one of my vampires—who are you?”

**Episode 2475**

XAVIER

Greyson gave Charon the details for our meeting. I was driving and listening, hoping the warlock would fall for our plan. If not, this whole thing could blow up in our faces. I didn’t give a damn about Greyson’s face—mostly—but Cali’s was very precious.

Charon sounded a little edgy on the speaker phone, though, which wasn’t good.

“Why are we meeting Lakini in a strip mall?” he asked in that nasally voice of his.

“It’s abandoned,” Greyson said smoothly, “and we can take care of business without worrying about witnesses.”

I gave Greyson a nod of approval, but Charon just harrumphed. Fucking jackass. Greyson, thankfully, knew how to deal.

“Look, if you don’t want to come, whatever,” my brother said. “But you’ll just have to take our word for it that we’ve taken care of Lakini.”

There was a long pause—Cali was literally biting her nails—before Charon spoke again. “I’ll be there.”

Greyson gave him the address, and then said, “We’ll meet at back of the mall.”

“See you soon,” Charon said.

When the phone call ended, I felt like grinning.

“Charon fell for it,” I said, nudging Greyson. “I’ve always said you’re a great liar.”

Greyson scoffed, looking over at Cali. She looked like an anxious little kitten.

“Hey,” I said, meeting her gaze in the rearview mirror, my smile fading. “Are you having second thoughts?”

She swallowed roughly, looking between us. “I’m not loving the idea of tricking Charon like this,” she said nervously.

Big Mac looked up from her book of sudoku—of all things—and scoffed. “This is business, Cali. Get a grip.”

I shot her a glare. “Don’t talk to her that way.”

Big Mac ignored me while Greyson told Cali, “Don’t forget that Charon is the one who cast the revulsion spell—he doesn’t deserve your pity.”

I wasn’t surprised Cali felt bad about double-crossing Charon. She always felt sorry for everyone—it was her thing.

“I think you should just be happy we’re not killing him,” I told her.

She gasped, outraged, and smacked me on the arm. I laughed.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Cali, come on—don’t feel sorry for that shifty warlock. You reap what you sow. If he didn’t want to get fucked over, he shouldn’t have harmed innocent people. You and Greyson were minding your own business, and he ruined everything when Aysel told him to.”

Cali sighed, nodding. “That’s true.”

Greyson reached out and took Cali’s hand—I grimaced—and then turned to me. “Do you have any questions about the plan?”

I shrugged. “It’s pretty straightforward. We meet Charon, pretend we’re going to kill Lakini, restrain him, and then Lakini can do whatever spell breaking thing she does.”

“Hopefully by ‘dealing with Lakini,’ the Fae promise will be fulfilled,” Greyson said.

“I really don’t like it. It’s not a straightforward meaning,” I said.

“That’s Fae for you,” Greyson said. “We’re taking care of Lakini’s safety, and we’re also dealing with her, because we’re making a deal with her. Literally.”

“Hopefully that works,” I said.

Cali grinned at Greyson. “You’ve thought of everything.”

I didn’t like the admiration in Cali’s gaze when she looked at my brother.

“Hope this whole double-meaning thing with the Fae promise works,” I grumbled. “I’m done *dealing* with both those witches.”

“Charon will be looking for any sign of deception, so all three of you had better be careful,” Big Mac noted. “I’ll be ready to step in, should things take a bad turn.”

“Thank you, Big Mac,” Cali said. I could tell she meant it.

Even though I’d never say it out loud, I thought Big Mac was cool. A little. She had taken Jay’s eye, after all, and I couldn’t exactly fully forgive that.

“Yeah, he bought it. At the mall,” Greyson was saying into the phone. He’d called Lakini to fill her in and give her the details. I was listening with one ear while processing what was about to happen. Because this was really happening—the revulsion curse was going to come to an end.

Safe to say, I had mixed feelings about that. I knew it was petty of me, but I didn’t give a fuck—I wasn’t about to lie and say that the revulsion curse hadn’t had its perks for me. Only I had been able to kiss Cali, touch Cali, fuck Cali. It had certainly been a good deal for me, but…

Greyson was miserable, and I knew that Cali hadn’t been happy. And for that reason, and that reason only, I would see this through. I just hoped that whatever happened didn’t have any bearing on Cali’s Fae promise. If it did, as much as I’d want to blame Greyson, I’d have to share the blame.

It was pretty fucked up, but what the hell was I supposed to do?

I couldn’t just ignore what Cali wanted—those days were long gone, and I didn’t want to return to that kind of attitude. Cali wouldn’t accept it, and I hated the idea of ever losing her. I *couldn’t* lose her.

“That’s done,” Greyson said, hanging up on Lakini. He pointed down the road. “Xavier, turn right up at the next intersection.”

As we drove down the road, I noticed that the neighborhood had taken a turn for the worse*. No witnesses*, I reminded myself.

“Lakini will meet us on the west end of the mall,” Greyson said. “Charon will be coming from the east side. We make a move on Lakini, she plays along, and when Charon approaches to watch…”

I raised an eyebrow. “I know the play. I imagine Charon will be surprised and pissed at the turn of events. Such a pity.”

Greyson scoffed.

“Do you guys think there will be trouble?” Cali asked. Her face was still anxious, but less so than before.

“Charon isn’t going to take this lightly,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean you need to get involved.”

Cali looked down at her lap, suspiciously silent.

“Do not get involved, Cali,” I repeated.

“He’s right, love,” Greyson added. “It’s the only way to make sure you don’t betray your Fae promise.”

Cali sighed, nodding silently as she looked between us.

I sure as hell hoped she’d listen this time.

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The strip mall was barely a mall—it was just a few abandoned stores with a crumbling parking lot. Greyson directed me to the west end of the mall, stopping in the back of what looked like an old bowling alley.

I scowled, looking around. “Where the hell is Lakini? She better not have chickened out—none of this will work without her.”

“Charon is due to arrive in just a few minutes. She should be here by now.” Greyson looked around, through the passenger window.

“Should we worry that Lakini isn’t here yet?” Cali asked in a serious voice.

“You shouldn’t worry about anything. Just stay here,” I told Cali. “Okay? Like we said.”

“Exactly,” Greyson said, turning to face her. “Remember—this is important. We don’t want to mess up the Fae promise.”

“Yeah, I know,” Cali said. She took a deep sigh, looking between us.

“It’s going to be fine. I’ll watch her,” Big Mac told Greyson and me. “Let me know if you need help.”

And then she opened up her sudoku book.

Lovely.

“We’ve got this under control, love,” Greyson said, reaching out to squeeze Cali’s hand.

“Be careful,” she told him. “For me. Okay?”

Greyson nodded. They stared at each other—probably mind linking things I didn’t want to fucking hear. Once Greyson had left the car, Cali turned her attention to me and said, “Please be careful too. I need you in one piece.”

I leaned across the seat and gave her a quick kiss. “I’ll be back soon. I’ll go take a quick look around before Charon arrives. Always good to know the lay of the land when you’re involved in a scheme like this.”

“Spoken like a true mercenary,” Cali said, snorting. “I know I can trust you with this.”

It felt good to hear her say that.

After I exited the car, I approached Greyson. I noticed that all the stores had back doors, and a few had loading platforms. It was possible that Charon was already here, watching us. I had no idea how much Charon trusted us, though I suspected that the warlock was blinded by his lust for revenge and had overlooked a bunch of red flags.

I’d seen it before—people often became too driven by their passion to see the reality, and as a result, they took unnecessary risks. Charon had fallen into that trap—his anger over Lakini was so great that he was past the point of no return. He wouldn’t suspect us, not until it was too late, because he resented her too much to focus on anything else.

Or at least I hoped so, for all our sakes.

One question remained, though.

Greyson checked his watch, cursing under his breath. “Where the hell is Lakini?”

**Episode 2476**

I watched through the car window as Greyson and Xavier disappeared around the back of the abandoned bowling alley.

Ugh, I hated this. I was getting that feeling again—that familiar, creeping sense of helplessness. Just sitting back and watching as events played out in front of me, without being able to do anything to stop them.

What if this went sideways? What if Charon figured out what we were up to and this whole plan went to hell? What if Lakini didn’t show up? What if she did but then tried to double-cross us? If anything happened to either one of my mates while I sat idly in a car with a sudoku-playing witch, I would never forgive myself. How could I live with that?

I shot a glance at Big Mac, but she was still focused on her puzzle book, her pencil between her teeth.

How could she be so frigging calm? She was a witch! She knew better than anyone what could happen when a warlock and witch had a personal vendetta against each other. It could be a *disaster*!

This was all because of that stupid Fae promise I’d made. I wished I’d never made it. I rubbed my eyes, wishing I could go back in time and snatch back the words.

“What do you know about Fae promises?” I asked Big Mac, breaking the silence in the car.

“Enough to know that you shouldn’t make them unless you mean to fulfill them,” she said without looking up from her puzzle.

I scowled. “Okay, that’s not hugely helpful. If I’d known what was going to happen, obviously I never would have made it. It’s not like I *wanted* to get us into this mess. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Big Mac looked up from her puzzle with an irritated sigh. “I don’t know much of anything about Fae promises. Probably about as much as you do.”

“I’m just anxious,” I admitted, worrying at a hangnail on my thumb. “I don’t feel good with them going out there. *I’m* the one who made the promise. Accident or not, *I* should be out there. It’s kind of like if a tree falls in the forest, you know?”

Big Mac stared at me. “Are you supposed to be the tree?” she asked flatly.

I nodded.

Big Mac shut her puzzle book and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. “I hate this.”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

“I hate when you actually make sense,” she said shaking her head.

This caught me off-guard. “Wait, am I making sense about the tree, or do you think I should be out there?’

“I’m not saying that, exactly,” Big Mac said quickly, looking over at me, “but you’re already getting out of the car, okay…”

I was out of the car and starting toward where my mates had disappeared.

“Where are you going?” Big Mac demanded.

I turned. “I’m taking responsibility for *my* Fae promise.”

Big Mac groaned and slapped her sudoku book down on the seat. Then she climbed out of the car and followed me into the parking lot.

We were quiet as we moved—we didn’t know what to expect. When we reached the corner of the building, we both paused and peered cautiously around it.

I could see Xavier and Greyson. They were standing in the middle of the empty lot. They were alone—neither Lakini nor Charon was there. They didn’t seem to be speaking to each other but were looking around at the dull, December afternoon.

“What’s going on?” I wondered out loud. “Has something gone wrong?”

“Stay back,” Big Mac said softly, grabbing my arm in case I tried to make a run for it.

“But think about it, Big Mac,” I said, shaking my arm free. “If Charon shows up and sees Greyson and Xavier here without me, he’s going to suspect something’s wrong, isn’t he?”

I looked around. There was a thin line of scraggly trees along the back of the parking lot, and I peered into them, looking for signs of movement.

“Maybe he already has,” I said quietly. “Maybe that’s why he’s not here. Aren’t I supposed to be part of this deal?”

“Don’t jump to any conclusions,” Big Mac warned. “It’s highly possible Charon’s just being especially wary. I wouldn’t blame him for that—where are you going now?”

“I’m just going to check out the front of the strip mall,” I said, looking around as I walked across the broken pavement.

“*Why?*” she asked, sounding exasperated.

“I want to make sure Charon’s not trying to pull a fast one on us. If he’s hiding somewhere around here, I can mind link and warn Xavier and Greyson.”

Big Mac made an irritated noise but followed me around to the front of the mall. There was no sound but the lonely rush of wind around the empty buildings. A few empty cans scuttled across the parking lot. Everything else was still and silent.

We walked toward the east end of the lot, and I stopped every fifty feet or so to listen. I peered into the empty storefronts—through the dirty windows and between the boards covering the glass. But it was dark as hell. If Charon was hiding somewhere in there, I probably wasn’t going to see him. This was yet another instance where wolf super-vision would have come in handy.

We’d just passed a boarded-up beauty supply store when there was a rush of wind. But it was too warm to be natural, and when I heard a pop, I wasn’t even surprised.

Charon appeared suddenly, just in front of us.

He looked around quickly, and when his gaze landed on me, he frowned. “Where’s Lakini?”

My stomach dropped. But before I even had a chance to wonder how to respond, Charon’s eyes slid to Big Mac.

“Who’s this?”

I thought fast. “My mom.”

I could see Big Mac react to that, but I ignored her.

“Your mom?” Charon looked between us, then took a wary step back. “Why did you bring your mother with you?”

“Oh.” I shrugged breezily. “You know how moms can be. She insisted. Wouldn’t let me come without her.”

Charon’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Okay,” he said slowly. “And what about Lakini? Where the hell is she?”

I was fighting hard to keep the fear from my face. “She’s here! I’m supposed to bring you around to the back of the place.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“That’s where Greyson and Xavier are meeting Lakini,” I explained, trying not to talk too fast. I did that when I was nervous. “I thought you wanted to watch,” I added, because Charon was looking hesitant.

He looked at me for a moment, then looked around, taking in our surroundings. “I don’t like this whole setup. Your daughter made a Fae promise,” he said, looking at Big Mac. “And if she breaks it—”

“She doesn’t need to be lectured on Fae promises by the likes of you,” Big Mac snapped, cutting him off. “Either you want to do this, or you don’t. It’s very simple. But if you back out,” she warned, “you’llbe the one breaking the promise. That will make it null and void.”

I had no idea what Big Mac was talking about—or even if Big Mac knew what she was talking about—but I nodded, playing along, praying Charon would fall for it.

He looked between us for a long moment. He was angry—I could see that—but he was doing calculations, trying to figure out which course of action would best suit him.

“Fine,” he finally said. “But I warn you, if you try anything, I’ll blast the hell out of you.”

Ignoring this threat, I gestured for him to follow me. “This way.”

I led him back the way we’d come, around to the back of the building, trying to plan my next move as I walked—but I didn’t have a clue what it was going to be.

When Xavier and Greyson came into view, Charon pulled to a stop.

“Where’s Lakini?” he hissed.

His voice was low, but it was loud enough for Greyson and Xavier to pick up, and they whipped around to look at us. They both froze, twin looks of shock on their faces.

*CALI?*

I could hear both their voices echoing in my head at once.

*What the hell are you doing?*

Until this moment, I hadn’t realized it was possible to yell via mind link.

I was trying to think up an answer when there was another rush of warm wind. It blew through the parking lot, and my mates looked up as it surrounded them. What was this?

An instant later, Lakini appeared, standing on the cracked black pavement, directly between my mates and me.

Next to me, Charon sucked in a breath.

“What are you waiting for?” he screamed, his eyes wild as he looked at Xavier and Greyson. “*Kill her!*”

**Episode 2477**

For a long, strange moment, no one moved. Even the cold wind seemed to die away as everyone stood, staring at each other, waiting for someone to say something.

Internally, I was completely *freaking out*. I could tell that both my mates were pissed at me for ignoring their instructions.

“*Kill her!*” Charon shouted again, rending the still air. “That’s why we’re here!”

Lakini didn’t speak, but she looked back and forth between the groups, her eyes wide and wary.

Xavier and Greyson moved toward her, and the scene was one of complete confusion. Charon was still screaming, but he had stepped behind me, like he was trying to use me as a shield.

I rolled my eyes. That figured. For all his tough guy crap, he was a coward. Completely terrified to face the woman he’d once loved.

*I’ll explain later*, I mind linked to Xavier as he glared over at me. *Just go through with the plan.*

*Oh, you* will *explain this later*, he growled back. *But in the meantime, you have to get Charon closer. Lure him forward somehow.*

I thought fast. “Do you want to say anything to her before we do this?” I asked, turning around to look at the warlock cowering behind me.

Charon’s eyes flashed dangerously. “You bet I do. I have a *lot* to say to her.”

“Well, pal, today’s your lucky day. You get to say it,” I said, grabbing his arm to pull him closer to Lakini and my mates.

The tension in the air was palpable, and I could feel my shoulders cramping up and my hands forming into fists. My self-defense impulse was screaming at me, and the urge to use my magic to protect myself and my mates was nearly overwhelming. But I knew I had to stay cool. Doing anything at this stage would be too much of a risk. I had to play along.

My mom *had* said that Fae could be tricky—this was my chance to find out just how tricky I could be.

Lakini turned to glower at Greyson and Xavier as they drew nearer to her. “Why is Charon here?” she demanded.

“We’ve got you now, witch!” Xavier shouted, with just a *bit* too much dramatic flair.

Oof. Well, I supposed he wasn’t trying to win an Oscar with this performance. Thank goodness.

“Do it!” Charon yelled, looking furious. “*Kill her!* What are you waiting for?”

Greyson reached for Lakini and grabbed her roughly by the arm. Lakini tried to raise her arms—as though to perform some magic—but Xavier caught her wrists and held them fast.

Lakini struggled against them, her expression furious and terrified, and I had to admit she was a much better actor than either of my mates.

“You *traitors*!” she spat, looking between them.

Charon barked a bitter laugh. “You fool! You thought you could escape me? We both know this reckoning was a long time coming.”

His laughter was grating as Lakini shot him a death glare.

I had no idea what the hell was supposed to happen at this point, and I shot Greyson a questioning look. *What now?*

*Just step back*, came the reply.

I hesitated for a moment, then stepped back to stand beside Big Mac.

Meanwhile, Charon had moved closer to Lakini. I was expecting him to gloat some more, maybe show off the power he thought he had over her. But what he actually did surprised the hell out of me.

He leaned toward her until his face was only inches from hers, then said in a quiet voice, “It doesn’t have to be like this.”

His voice was low, but I tried to play it back in my head. Was there regret there? Was he *sorry*? They’d been lovers once—did he still have feelings for her? Feelings that didn’t include the kind of hate and anger that would motivate someone to put a hit out on their ex?

Before Lakini could respond, Xavier put the plan into action. Moving so fast it was over before I’d properly seen it, he let go of Lakini and grabbed Charon’s arm. He twisted it behind his back, bracing himself so the warlock was completely restrained.

It happened so fast that Charon was understandably stunned for a moment, but then he recovered and spluttered, “What the *hell* are you doing?”

Lakini dropped the fearful expression and smiled brightly. “Hi, Charon. You want to talk about a reckoning? Let’s talk about a reckoning.”

Charon looked wildly around. “You double-crossed me?” he shrieked at Greyson—the only one he could see properly. He struggled hard to free himself, but he was no match for Xavier’s strength.

“*You’re* the one who double-crossed *me*,” Lakini snapped, jabbing a finger into his chest. “Because you were jealous. You who told me—*promised* *me*—that you would love me forever. Do you remember *that*?”

Charon made an unintelligible noise, like the growl of a frightened animal.

But Lakini wasn’t done. “*Do* you remember? Or have you been so blinded by your own insecurities that you’ve forgotten all of that—”

“It’s you!” Charon spat, interrupting her as his anger grew. “It’s *you* who’s been blinded by your own success!”

They spoke with such venom that it was painful to watch. There was so much hatred in their eyes as they looked at each other. How could this be? They’d been together for years. And it was clear from the depth of their feelings that they’d once cared for each other—deeply. How had that hardened into such hatred? How had they turned against each other to this extent?

I wanted to close my eyes and cover my ears. This was awful. Maybe Charon was right—maybe it *didn’t* have to be like this. Maybe if they’d gone to some couples counseling or something, things would have turned out differently for them.

Charon had cast a spell on Greyson that made us sick to be around each other, and I *hated* the warlock for that. But still, I couldn’t help but feel for the love that he and Lakini had lost. It was hard to explain, but I could feel the empty space where their love used to be. It was here, circling all of us like a black hole.

Charon turned toward me and lunged, but Xavier held him back.

“You made a Fae promise!” he raged, spit flying from his mouth. “You know what that means!”

“I didn’t make it intentionally,” I said, pushing back my own guilt as it rose to the surface. “But I’m sticking to it.”

“Like hell you are!” Charon bit out.

“You asked for us to *deal* with Lakini, and that’s exactly what we did,” I said heatedly. “We made a deal *with* her. A deal that will fix this horrible thing you did to us.”

“Oh, you Fae are all the same with your damnable semantics. You tricked me, and you *know* it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you’re going to make a deal with the Fae, you need to learn that the devil is in the details. Wording is everything, man.”

Charon’s eyes went wide, and he whipped around—as much as he could while being held by Xavier—to look at Lakini. “What do you mean, you’re going to fix the spell I cast? What does that mean?”

Lakini smiled broadly. She seemed to be enjoying herself. “I think you know exactly what that means, Charon.”

He sucked in a breath. “You’re going to break my spell?” He shook his head. “You can’t mean that. You can’t. It’ll ruin me.”

Lakini’s eyes narrowed with disgust. “Then you’ll get what you deserve.”

“You can’t—” Charon started.

“You tried to trick a Fae into having me killed!” Lakini exploded. Fury radiated from her as she glared at the warlock. “Isn’t that why you’re here, Charon? Isn’t that why you came back here? To get a front row seat? To witness my execution? The execution *you* ordered?”

Charon sputtered. He looked horrified and furious and scared, and he seemed to be having trouble stringing words together.

“I wonder what the witch council would have to say about all of *that*?” Lakini asked.

Charon stared at her for a long moment, his jaw working silently as he bit back a thousand replies, and then, suddenly, he slumped.

“You’re right,” he said, looking at the broken asphalt beneath his feet. His shoulders hung down in defeat. “Do it. Break the spell.”

My pulse ticked up, and it felt like my heart suddenly lightened. This was hope. This was *it*. We were going to do this. We were going to break this awful spell.

I looked around and saw that same sense of hopeful disbelief on everyone else’s faces as well.

Lakini opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Charon slipped an arm free from Xavier’s grasp and spun around, his hands raised, ready to blast us all.

**Episode 2478**

XAVIER

*Dammit.*

I’d barely let my guard down—a half-second, *maybe*—but that had been enough for that warlock to slip out of my grasp like a slimy little fish.

Swearing, I made a lunge for him, trying to stop him as he turned his beady eyes toward Cali, but a blast of energy—Charon’s magic—threw me backward. He’d only nicked me, but it was enough to stun me and knock me into Greyson, who stumbled back.

In a moment, I flashed back to the fight in the parking lot, which had been a shitshow. The last thing I wanted was this to turn into some kind of Wild West shooting gallery—with magic.

My ears were ringing from Charon’s blast, and as I shook my head, trying to clear it, Greyson steadied himself and pushed past me. He tackled Charon to the broken pavement with a hit that would have taken almost anyone else out, but Charon let loose, screaming and blasting his magic indiscriminately. Everything was getting hit—the backs of the empty mall buildings, the trees, the dumpsters… Lakini dove for cover behind a pile of loose bricks.

I scrambled back to my feet with only one thought—I *had* to get to Cali. I charged toward her and—as another blast of magic shot over my shoulder, barely missing my head—I tackled her to the ground and rolled on top of her, covering her with my body.

“You okay?” I breathed.

Cali nodded, gasping.

I winced, realizing I’d knocked the wind out of her.

“I think it’s time to get out of here, don’t you agree?” I asked firmly, and got to my feet, pulling her after me.

I half-pulled, half-carried her toward one of the empty buildings, where there was a row of old barrels that would be able to shield us from Charon’s blasts.

“Xavier, are you okay?” she asked immediately as we crouched down. “He got you. Are you hurt?” She ran her hands over my shoulders and my arms, looking for injuries.

“I should be asking you that. I can take a hit and keep on going. You, on the other hand—” but she looked all right from what I could see, only a little shaken up.

There was a boom like a bomb had gone off, and I wrapped myself around Cali, shielding her as bits of broken barrel rained down on us. I looked at her again, doing a lightning-fast assessment to make sure she was okay.

There was no blood, which was good, but Cali’s eyes were huge. She was scared, and all the anger I’d felt when I’d seen that she’d left the car drained away. I loved this woman. I couldn’t stay mad at her. All I cared about was keeping her safe. Nothing else mattered.

“What’s going on?” Cali asked, crawling past me to try to see around the barrels. “Is Greyson okay? He’s out there alone.”

“I’ll go back out there and help him,” I started.

“Please, Xavier,” Cali pleaded, grabbing my hand.

“But you *have* to stay here,” I finished. “Can’t handle a couple of crazy witches and warlocks if I’m worried you’re going to get caught in the crossfire.”

Eyes still wide, she nodded. I pressed a kiss to her lips, then turned back toward the fight.

As I peered around the barrels, I could see that Greyson and Charon were still grappling for control. Greyson was doing his best to keep Charon’s hands down, but Charon was fighting hard, and errant magic was flying everywhere.

One blast came straight toward me, and I swore and leapt away.

Glancing back toward where I’d left Cali, I felt my stomach tense. She had completely ignored my orders to stay in the car. Would she stay where I’d told her to this time? Out of harm’s way?

I knew she didn’t want to. I’d seen it in her eyes—she wanted to be out there, fighting. Protecting Greyson and me. That was Cali all over.

I looked back to where Greyson was still struggling with the warlock. Charon seemed to be growing tired, but Greyson was still strong. I wondered how long it was going to take before Charon realized he didn’t have a chance. All he had to do was think it through. Even if Greyson couldn’t pin him down on his own, I was here to help. And so was Big Mac, who was standing where I’d left her. She hadn’t even bothered to take cover and was watching the fight like it was WrestleMania.

I stared at her. What the hell was she doing? Was she crazy? Why hadn’t she gotten out of the way? More to the point, why wasn’t she *doing* anything?

A blast of magic from Charon shot just over Big Mac’s head. She didn’t even flinch.

As if sensing my gaze on her, she looked over at me. She raised an eyebrow and raised up a hand, telling me to stay where I was. Telling me to be patient.

How the hell did she expect me to be *patient*? All hell was breaking loose! Curses were flying everywhere. A five-thousand-pound dumpster flew up into the air and fell to the ground, landing with an ear-splitting crash.

I guess I could just stand there and hope she knew what the hell she was doing. But I’d told Cali I’d help Greyson, and if I didn’t take action soon, she was going to think I’d lied to her.

Leave it to Greyson to want to play Mr. Hero.

One of Charon’s arms got loose, and I took that as my cue. I sprinted forward and jumped onto Charon’s back. Taken by surprise, the warlock fired a blast of magic. It almost hit Greyson squarely in the chest, but he managed to narrowly avoid it. But the force of the magic blowing by him was enough to launch him back into the twisted remains of the dumpster.

Charon fought hard, but I held on tight. Even as I did, I kept my eye on Greyson as he lay still in the pile of scattered trash and metal. Had the impact knocked him out? With him out of the fight, Charon could go after Cali next.

To my relief, Greyson got to his feet. He looked shaken, but he was moving, and that was something. But my relief only lasted for a moment.

Lakini rose from her hiding spot behind the bricks and raised her hands, taking a shot at Charon—and me.

I had to release Charon to avoid the blast.

“What the *fuck*?” I screamed. What the hell did she think she was doing, taking such a risky shot?

*This* was why it was never a good idea to take sides in a witch fight.

Charon fired back at Lakini. Her brick barricade blew upward and crumbled into shrapnel that tore at my clothes as it flew by.

“Give up!” Lakini urged Charon. “There’s no way you’re going to be able to survive this.”

“I don’t care!” Charon raged. “If I’m going down, I’m taking all of you with me!”

As if to prove his point, he fired another blast—this one at the nearest building. The structure shook with the force of the impact, and debris began to rain down onto the parking lot.

*One of us has to distract Charon*, Greyson said through the mind link. *It’ll give the other one the opportunity to attack while he’s not looking.*

I nodded. *I’ll draw his fire, but you’d better move your ass. I don’t know how long I can do it without getting hit.*

Greyson’s mouth was a thin line. *On the count of three*.

My heart rate was through the roof. I really hoped my brother knew what the hell he was doing here.

*One, two, THREE!*

I stood. “Hey, asswipe! You still practicing that magic? Because I caught a hit, and I’ve heard whispers stronger than that little air kiss.”

Charon whipped around, fury radiating from him. He was tall, but he suddenly seemed ten feet taller as he glowered at me.

“How *dare* you?” he screeched.

Raising his hands, he took aim at me. I knew what I had to do. It went against all my survival instincts, but I held my position until the warlock had shot the magic toward me. Then I jumped away at the very last moment.

The magic exploded against the wall behind me, showering me with fine dust. I rolled to my feet and turned toward the warlock again.

“Was that supposed to be a curse or a love letter? It’s a nice offer, man, but I’m already taken.”

Charon’s face contorted with rage, and he prepared to fire at me again, but Greyson slammed into him from behind. The magic exploded from him, but the shot went wild. It hit the building just behind me with the sound of exploding dynamite. Cinderblocks and chunks of cement showered down like rain—right onto the barrels where Cali was hiding.

My stomach dropped, and I sprinted toward them. “*Cali!*”

**Episode 2479**

GREYSON

As I slammed Charon to the ground for the second time, I heard a deafening blast and saw a cloud of debris fall onto a pile of old barrels. Xavier yelled and went running toward them, and in a sickening moment, I realized—that was where Cali was hiding. I’d seen Xavier carry her over there.

My heart hit my stomach as my vision tunneled, my mind asking questions I didn’t want to ever ask. Could she have survived a blast like that?

My whole world spun. All I wanted to do was sprint to her, but I knew that wasn’t an option. If I released Charon, there was no telling how much more damage the bastard would do. I could knock him unconscious—just pound his head into the pavement until he blacked out—but that was too risky. I could kill him. Not that I cared about that at the moment.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump, and I looked up at Big Mac, standing just above me.

“I’ve got this,” she said, her voice calm. She nodded at Charon. “I’ll handle him. You go get Cali.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. Charon struggled to get to his feet as I rolled off him, but Big Mac used some kind of spell to keep him pinned down, though he swore and sputtered and foamed at the mouth.

I sprinted toward the barrels.

*Cali?* *Are you okay? Cali? Can you hear me?*

There was no response.

My stomach turned as a wave of fear rolled through me. Was she alive? She had to be. I still felt her with me. I would’ve been able to sense her loss if something had happened—if she’d died. She was my mate. I would have felt a severing.

But the silence in my mind was unbearable. It thundered in my ears.

As I drew closer, I could see Xavier working himself into a sweat, pulling broken barrels and cinderblocks and torn rebar from the pile.

He looked up at me as I hurried over.

“I can’t hear her,” he gasped out. He looked pale. “I can’t reach her through the mind link.”

I could hear the fear in his voice, and it was the same fear I felt myself.

“Be careful with that,” was all I could think to say. “If we’re too reckless with this, it could cause more of the debris to collapse.” My breath caught in my throat. “It could crush her.”

I grabbed a block of broken cement and pulled it out. My desperation was eating at me, threatening to completely overwhelm me. My mind was spinning, and it flashed back to the time I’d caught Cali at that barbecue, so long ago. She had jumped out of a third story window, and I’d watched her hanging there, curious and slightly amused. I’d wondered what the hell she was doing. It had been so long ago, before I’d known what she was going to mean to me. I’d considered just letting her fall—I’d known so little about this strange person. But something had compelled me to act—to save her.

And I’d never regretted it. Not once. She’d been my mate long before I’d known it.

But I knew it now, and I hadn’t been able to protect her from this.

I attacked the pile of rubble with increasing urgency.

*Cali? Love, can you hear me?*

Why wasn’t she responding to the mind link?

There was one answer I could think of, but I didn’t allow myself to entertain the idea. It was too soul crushing to even think about.

“Over here!” Xavier shouted.

My heart hammered as I rushed toward my brother. He was holding onto a barrel and peering into the rubble.

“There must be an air pocket here,” he said. “There’s something underneath this.”

I stepped next to him and looked into the darkness of the jumbled wood and metal and stone. There was a gap between the barrels and the crushed cinderblocks. And then—as my eyes adjusted—I could see something behind that.

“It’s Cali!” I breathed, my whole body reacting to this news.

But as I looked at her, I could see she was struggling with something. Her brows were furrowed, and she was sweating. Her whole body was shaking.

“Cali!” I called to her.

She looked over at me, but the shift in her concentration caused some kind of reaction, and the pile of blocks and concrete and barrels dropped closer to her.

She winced and shook her head. “I have to concentrate.”

As I scanned the area, I realized what was happening: she was using her magic to create a shield, protecting herself from the rubble.

“Xavier, we have to hurry,” I said, keeping my voice low.

Xavier nodded and moved without question—he saw the precariousness of the situation just as well as I did.

We worked together to clear the some of the twisted metal and broken shards of wood and stone. Soon, I could reach further in, and I held out my hand. But I couldn’t get past her shield charm.

“Stay calm, love,” I said, trying to keep the panic I felt out of my voice. “I need you to take down the shield so I can pull you out of there.”

“I don’t know,” Xavier said quietly. “If she drops that shield, this could all collapse on her.” He went to work, trying to clear more of the barrels out of the way.

Cali was struggling to keep the shield up. Her eyes were wide, and they darted from me to the debris piled on top of her.

“I’m scared, Greyson,” she whispered.

My heart gave a painful pulse.

*I’ve got you, love.*

I turned to Xavier. “Give me a hand.” He nodded and moved closer, and I turned back to Cali. “When I tell you, I want you to drop the shield. You can do this,” I reminded her. “NOW!”

Cali squeezed her eyes shut—and the shield vanished. In an instant, Xavier and I grabbed her hands and pulled her free as the debris tumbled heavily into the Cali-shaped space she’d left behind.

I pulled her into my arms and hugged her close, breathing her in—until a wave of nausea swept over me. When I pulled back, I saw that Cali’s pale face had gone slightly green, which meant she must have been feeling the same way.

Reluctantly, I stepped away and watched as Xavier pulled her toward him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. Everything about their interaction reminded me of why we were here in the first place.

The damn revulsion curse.

Brushing dust off my clothes, I stepped around the wreckage and back toward Big Mac, who was still towering over Charon. Lakini had joined her, and they were both looking down at the warlock.

As I got closer to him, it was all I could do not to tear the bastard to pieces with my bare hands. The curse aside, if it hadn’t been for Cali’s magic and her quick thinking, Charon would have killed her, and I was *not* in the mood to forgive.

Big Mac’s spell had Charon pinned to the ground, and—unlike when I’d held him—he was unable to move.

It was so tempting, seeing him lying there—defenseless. I wouldn’t have to do much to finally give this asshole what he deserved. I didn’t have to look back to see that Xavier was feeling the same seething anger. I was pretty sure he wouldn’t stop me if I tried.

But there was something that had to be done first.

I looked up at Lakini. “Do it,” I snarled. “Break this goddamn curse before I break his fucking neck.”

Charon attempted to squirm. “You don’t understand—” he started, but Big Mac cut him off.

“Save your strength,” she snapped. “You can forget trying to wriggle away from me, boy. I’m not as forgiving as the rest of these werewolves. I can break you in half the second I see you try and cast another spell.”

Cali walked toward us, wiping dust and crumbled cement from her face and clothes. She glared down at Charon. “What’s *wrong* with you?”

Before he had a chance to answer, Cali turned her angry gaze on Lakini.

“And *you*! What about you? You put curses on innocent people and then try to kill each other?” Cali looked incensed. “This is insane! This is what people do when they *hate* each other. I don’t believe you were ever in love.”

“We were!” Charon burst out. “We were in love! I loved Lakini with all my heart!”

I glanced up at Lakini, interested in her reaction. Was she falling for this? Charon had already proven that he would do or say anything to get what he wanted.

“And what about you?” Cali demanded, looking at Lakini. “Did you feel the same?”

Lakini looked away. She was silent for a moment, then she nodded. “Yes.”

“Fine.” Cali sighed. “If that’s true, then can you both *please* just call a truce?”

**Episode 2480**

GREYSON

It didn’t surprise me that Cali was scheming her way toward a peaceful resolution to the witch conflict, but I was past looking for a bloodless way out of this, especially after the stunt the two of them had pulled that nearly cost Cali her life. All I wanted was to break this damn curse. I couldn’t have cared less what happened to Lakini or Charon. They were both batshit crazy and could rot in hell, as far as I was concerned. As long as I was free to be with Cali—and didn’t have to worry about Aysel using Charon to curse me again—then I didn’t care.

*That* was what I kept thinking about: the prospect of being with Cali and never having to deal with Aysel again. The thought was filling me with hope. I was so close I could nearly taste it. But Cali wanted to waste time negotiating a truce?

I shook my head and opened my mouth to stop her, but I caught myself just in time. I’d waited this long, suffered through all of Aysel’s clumsy come-ons—what was a few more minutes for Cali to do her thing? She’d been through hell, too, and she’d managed not to get herself killed today, which was a feat.

I was still irritated that she’d left the car—ignoring my instructions—but I’d known she probably would. And I had no right to restrict her now. She was as much a part of all of this as I was.

“A *truce*?” Lakini asked, astounded. She glared at Charon. “He tried to *kill* me!”

“Yeah,” Cali admitted, “I can see that being a bit of a problem. What do you have to say about all that?” she asked, looking down at Charon.

He tried to shrug, but Big Mac’s spell held him fast. “I was angry at you,” he rasped, looking up at Lakini. “And maybe I let that get the best of me. The truth is, I didn’t actually want you to die.”

I raised a brow in disbelief, thinking of how furiously insistent he’d been about Lakini when we’d spoken to him. The claim that he didn’t really want her dead seemed dubious at best.

Just a few moments ago, he’d been frothing at the mouth at the prospect of having us finish her off.

But I kept my comments to myself. If Cali wanted to try this, who was I to stop her? As long as we all remembered the *real* reason why we’d gone through all this.

*To break the curse.*

“What the hell are you talking about?” Lakini demanded, her eyes narrowing. “You were screaming at them to kill me.”

“What about *you*?” Charon shot back, his face flushing with anger again. “You double-crossing wench!”

“*Shut up!*” Big Mac shouted. She glared at Lakini, then down at Charon. “I’m disgusted by both of you idiots. It’s because of witches like you that we have so many critics and doubters. And listening to you two bitch at each other, I’m starting to understand where they’re coming from. Yes, we can be self-serving, but you two are so far beyond that, I can’t even describe it. And you’re giving the rest of us a bad name.”

I thought about that for a moment, wondering if there were any witches *without* a bad name. Glinda the Good Witch was possibly the only exception.

But, then again, my own mother was engaged to a witch—*this* witch—and that had to mean something.

“You two are lucky to have found each other,” Big Mac went on, anger still sparking from her eyes. “I can’t imagine anyone else putting up with either of you. You should be ashamed of letting your own selfishness spoil something that started out so promising.” She shook her head, looking disgusted. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to find someone you care about—never mind someone you *love*? That’s worth fighting *for*, not against.”

As I listened to Big Mac speak, realization dawned on me. I had never fully understood until this moment, but I suddenly got it—I understood the connection between Big Mac and my mother. This witch—for all her gruffness and her tough talk and her beady stares—was madly in love with my mother. I’d never been able to pin down exactly what connected them, but I saw it now.

And I could sense that Big Mac—like me—would scorch the earth to protect my mother. And that was okay by me.

Big Mac was silent now, glaring between Lakini and Charon. The quiet was strained, and a little awkward. Neither witch nor warlock would look at Big Mac, or each other. It was as though they didn’t know what to say.

“Let’s break this curse,” I said, seizing the moment to reiterate our actual objective. I looked over at Lakini. “You can hold off. We’ve got the bastard who cast the spell right here—why don’t we have him break it?”

Lakini nodded, and I remembered the warning she’d given me: that while she would do her best, breaking another witch’s spell was complicated, and there was no guarantee it would work. Or that there wouldn’t be any unforeseen side effects.

I was sick of the unforeseen, so I pulled the two torn pieces of the tarot card from my pocket and held them up so Charon could see them. “Remember these? You said I needed both halves of the card to break the curse.” I resisted the urge to throw them down at his feet, paranoid they’d just fly off again like last time. So, I held them up, making sure he got a good look. “I’ve got them. So what are you waiting for?”

Charon stared at the card in obvious amazement. “The princess *gave* you her half?” He looked up at me, nakedly curious.

Cali’s gaze zeroed in on me—she was clearly interested in how I’d gotten the card, too.

Remembering what it had taken, I suppressed a shudder. Once this was done, I’d never have to think of it again.

“Why the hell does it matter how I got it?” I snapped. “Stop wasting my time.”

“Well, I… Of course, I… But the thing is…” Charon stuttered.

I had to stop myself from kicking the shit out of him. “Stop stalling,” I snarled.

Charon looked up at me, and for the first time I thought I saw some genuine remorse in his eyes. “I can’t.”

It felt like those two words had kicked the wind out of me. “*What?*”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

Fury climbed like a vine up through my body into my chest, and I crouched down and leaned close to Charon.

“Say that again,” I said quietly. “And speak carefully, because I’m not in the mood for any goddamn trickery.”

“I’d break it for you—I really would,” Charon said quickly, looking nervous. “But the princess paid her debt in full this morning.”

“So?” I demanded. “So what? I don’t see why that matters. And I’ve had enough of this. Now break this curse, or I’m going to break you, piece by fucking piece.”

“I can’t,” Charon said again, his voice a plea. “I would if I could, but that’s not how these deals work. I’m telling the truth.” He looked desperately up at Lakini, then Big Mac. “They’ll tell you! Once a witch’s contract has been fulfilled, it can’t be broken.”

“What kind of bullshit is this?” I asked, standing straight. I turned to Big Mac. “He’s just screwing around again, right?”

Big Mac shook her head. “Charon is right.”

“What about the Fae promise?” Cali asked, sounding panicked. When she turned to look at me, her face was colorless with fear. “What are we going to do?”

“I agreed to break the spell for you because the princess hadn’t paid me,” he said, looking at me. “But now that she has, things have changed. I *can’t* break it for you. And since part of the Fae deal was to kill Lakini—and now I guess we have a truce—my hands are tied. I can’t do it—”

“No!” Cali yelled. “*No!* You said we had to deal with Lakini, and that’s exactly what we did. And now Lakini can do exactly what we were planning. She can break the curse for you.”

Charon looked at Lakini, who was standing over him. His gaze swept over her, and he shrugged. “I won’t try to stop her.”

Lakini held out her hands for the card halves, and reluctantly I let her take them. She examined each half and held them straight out in front of her.

She stared at them, her black eyes laser focused on the cards. “*I call upon the heavens and the spirits in the four directions to release the curse from these tokens. I call on you East, I call on you West, I call on you North, I call on you South. What is done, let it be undone*.”

She let the card pieces go. But instead of fluttering down, the pieces stayed suspended in midair. They were still for a moment, then they started to circle each other, faster and faster and faster. When they burst into flame, Cali gasped, and we all watched as they drew toward each other, fusing back together.

The flame disappeared in an instant, and a whole card drifted slowly to the ground.

I stared at it, then up at Lakini. “Is that it?”

I was waiting to feel… something. But nothing had happened to me.

I bent and picked up the card. It looked like it had never been torn. “How do we know if the spell is broken?”

**Episode 2481**

LOLA

The pale, stately woman glared at me, her black eyes cold as ice. “I asked what you were doing in my restaurant. Are you going to answer me?”

“I—I’m sorry,” I sputtered, my mind spinning. What the hell *was* I doing in her restaurant? “I work here! It’s my first day!”

The woman took this in for a moment, then stepped closer and tugged on the sleeve of my uniform.

“This says your name is Carla,” she said, tipping her chin toward the name embroidered on my chest.

I nodded mindlessly. That was me. I was Carla now.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “Carla’s a seventy-year-old woman with grey hair and three grandkids. I should know. She never shuts up about them.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t always have the best plans, but this one had gone south a *lot* faster than I’d anticipated. “I—I haven’t gotten my own uniform yet. I had to borrow this one.”

“So—*Not Carla*—what *is* your name?” the woman asked.

“It’s…” My mind had gone blank. I didn’t want to tell her my actual name, of course, but I had suddenly forgotten the name of every other person I’d ever come into contact with. Finally, a name floated across my empty brain, and I grabbed desperately for it. “Jacqueline! My name’s Jacqueline.”

The woman eyed me warily. “And does Jacqueline have a last name?”

Wait, *did* Jaqueline have a last name? I wracked my brain.

“Markov!” I announced as the name came back to me. “Jacqueline Markov.”

The dark-eyed woman groaned. “So why are you wearing Carla’s uniform? I told Jack to make sure everyone had their own uniform on the first day. And he’s supposed to let me know when he hires someone new.” She rolled her eyes. “Idiot. I’ve hired idiots. That’s all I’ve got working for me around here! Are you an idiot?” she asked me.

“No,” I said emphatically. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Well, time will tell.” The woman held out her hand. “The name’s Rosaura. And don’t you dare call me Rose. I hate roses. They stink.”

“Got it. No Rose,” I said, nodding.

“Okay, follow me,” Rosaura said gruffly, gesturing toward a door.

She led me into the small kitchen, which was so smoky and greasy I could practically feel it in the air. A cook in a dirty white uniform stood before a flat-top frying station, holding a long metal spatula. He was working on a few things, and I watched as he cracked a couple eggs onto the griddle, then flipped over a slab of meat so grey and grizzled it made my stomach turn.

This place was a nightmare. What the hell had I just gotten myself into?

Rosaura ignored the cook and handed me a laminated diner menu. “This is us. Memorize it. If someone asks you what’s good for breakfast, tell them to get the Sunshine Platter.”

“Is that good?” I asked, opening the menu.

Rosaura gave me a beady stare. “It’s expensive. And if someone asks for something not on the menu, what should you do?”

I shrugged. “Tell them we don’t have it and to order something else?”

I glanced up at the clock on the wall. The face of it was nearly obscured with grease, but I could just about make out the time. How long before Jay got back?

Behind Rosaura, the door leading to the dining room was wide open—maybe in a failed attempt to ventilate the kitchen—and I could see where Aysel was still sitting with Ava.

What the hell were those two talking about? It was impossible to tell from this distance. I had to get out there so I could eavesdrop properly.

Rosaura was still staring at me, one elegant brow raised. “How exactly did you get this job?” she asked, her voice laced with sudden suspicion.

“Um, I applied for it.”

“Then what’s on the secret menu?” the woman asked, her eyes growing cold again.

*Secret menu*? Shit.

I thought fast. Rosaura was a vampire—that much I knew for sure. So the only secret menu that would make any kind of sense in a restaurant owned by a vampire would be a blood menu.

Rosaura was still waiting for an answer, so I gave her a sly smile.

“Red wine,” I said with a wink.

The woman was still for a moment, and my heart pounded with fear.

Then she rolled her eyes. “Don’t ever wink at me again.” She spun me around and pushed me through the open door into the dining room. “If you get any special requests, find either me or Jack, if that bastard ever gets back here. But don’t bother with Mabel.”

“Why not?” I asked, looking over my shoulder at Rosaura.

“Mabel’s a little vacant, if you haven’t noticed.”

Oh, I’d noticed. But vacant or not, that pothead waitress was costing me a hundred bucks and was partly responsible for getting me into this mess in the first place. But I kept that to myself.

“Got it,” was all I said, and then I stepped into the dining room.

And immediately ducked behind the pie display to avoid being seen by Ava.

I peered around the Dutch apple pie to see Ava and Aysel still sitting at their table, their heads bent together.

When a customer at the counter raised his coffee cup, indicating he wanted a refill, I crab-walked over to him and refilled his cup, staying low and out of sight.

“You okay?” the guy asked, accepting his coffee with a wary look at me.

“Fine,” I said quickly. “I went waterskiing yesterday, and I’m just sore today. My neck’s a little stiff,” I said, ducking even lower to avoid being seen.

The guy nodded, then took a business card from his shirt pocket and slid it across the table toward me. “I’m a certified chiropractor. Give me a call, and we’ll set up an appointment. You’re too young to be in pain.” He cracked his knuckles with a satisfyingly loud sound.

“Okay, thanks,” I said, grabbing the card from the counter. But as I turned to replace the coffee pot, Ava—her back toward me—raised her cup, waiting for a refill.

Shit.

Gripping the pot tightly, I walked slowly toward Ava, keeping my face averted. If Ava saw me, I would have to make some excuse, but I doubted that she’d buy it.

My heart thumping, I pulled out a few strands of hair from my ponytail and shook them across my forehead, obscuring my face.

Then I stopped myself. I could hide my face all I wanted, but was Ava going to recognize my scent? God, I hoped not. I could only pray that the pungent scent of the diner—combined with the dirty uniform and the pot of burnt coffee—would mask most of my smell.

I approached the two women cautiously, but neither turned. Aysel wasn’t paying me a scrap of attention, and I took Ava’s cup from her hand and poured the coffee behind her back.

I set the coffee cup down and was just turning away when I heard Ava ask an interesting question.

“And what would our… *friendship* entail?

Fascinated and waiting for the response, I dropped down into the booth behind them, pretending to be cleaning the formica table with a handful of napkins I pulled from the dispenser. When they fell apart in my hands, I took to mindlessly organizing the sugar packets as I strained to listen to Aysel’s answer to Ava’s question.

“If you take the time to get to know me better,” Aysel was saying, “you’ll start to realize what a good friend I am to have.”

Ava was quiet for a moment, and I leaned back, hoping to hear more.

“I’ll think about it,” Ava said. “But it does seem like we have some common interests.”

“Oh, I agree,” Aysel purred.

“We’re going to have to meet up again soon,” Ava went on.

I didn’t like the sound of that one bit. I hadn’t known Ava before she came out of that mirror—maybe she’d been different before—but I’d never trusted her. She’d fought against the Redwood pack before. And to see her here, meeting up with the Vanguard princess, didn’t make me feel any better about her.

I had no idea what she was up to, but whatever it was had to be bad news. Bad for Xavier, bad for Cali, and bad for the Redwood pack.

I slipped out of the booth and hurried back behind the counter. I’d heard enough. They were clearly up to something, and it was likely nothing good. I needed to tell Xavier right away. It was time for me to get out of here. I had to get back to the pack house and warn Xavier about what Ava was up to.

But as I replaced the coffee pot in the machine, I heard Aysel call out, “Hey, Blondie! Check, please!”

**Episode 2482**

Greyson was holding the card in front of Lakini’s face. “How do we know if the spell is broken?” he demanded.

Before Lakini could answer, I snatched the card from his fingers and dropped it to the ground. “There’s only one way to find out.”

Greyson turned to look at me, confused.

“Kiss me,” I commanded.

Greyson hesitated, but only for an instant. But as he moved toward me, I felt my stomach tighten, preparing for waves of sickness to wash over me. What if this didn’t work? Or what if something else—something worse—had taken the curse’s place? Lakini had made it clear that there was no guarantee of a perfect outcome.

Doubt was threatening to overwhelm me, but then I felt Greyson’s lips on mine, and suddenly, I was flooded with the memory of every kiss I’d ever shared with him—tender, surprising, experimental, and scorching hot.

With those memories came an overwhelming sense of *relief*. It was over. The curse was over.

This realization was followed *immediately* by an awareness of the tension that had built up within me during the time we’d been forced apart by the curse. I wasn’t nauseous—I wasn’t repulsed. I was fully, completely, overwhelmingly *his*.

I didn’t know that it was possible, but in that moment, I loved him even more than ever.

*I missed you, my love*. Greyson’s voice came to me, nearly a moan in its release.

*I missed you, too.*

The feel of his lips against me was heaven. The steely strength of his muscles beneath my hands contrasted with the velvet touch of his lips. Had it always been like this? Had kissing Greyson always made me feel like my feet had left the ground, and it was only his hold that was tethering me to the earth?

Greyson’s hand slid around my back and started downward to curve around my backside, but just as he deepened the kiss, I heard someone clearing their throat.

The sound was pointed, and I pulled away—breathlessly—to see Big Mac glaring at me.

Everyone was watching, and I felt heat flaring in my cheeks.

“Well, I guess we know the curse is broken,” Xavier said dryly.

I could feel the sharp edge to his statement, but I wasn’t going to apologize for what had just happened. Greyson and I deserved that moment, after everything we’d been through.

But…

I glanced over at Xavier—at the hard set of his jaw—and thought of how much he’d risked to help me.

Maybe I *had* gotten a little carried away. Maybe I shouldn’t have rubbed it in his face like that.

I shot a glance at Greyson to see if he felt the same awkwardness, but he was smiling at me.

God, how I’d missed that smile. His real, genuine smile. While we’d been under the curse, all I’d ever seen from his was a tense, strained smile.

“We should get going,” Big Mac said, breaking the silence. She looked around warily. “We don’t want to stick around here much longer.”

“Why?” I asked curiously. Everything around us seemed relatively quiet.

But Big Mac shook her head. “All that fighting and the curses flying—we might have attracted some unwanted attention.”

“But what about the rest of the deal?” I asked. “What about the ward?”

Lakini pulled a small glass bottle from her pocket. I recognized it as Charon’s tears.

Charon looked at it, then went pale. “What ward?” He looked around at all of us wildly. “What are you going to do to me?”

Greyson took a step toward him. “Just a little something to make sure you never cast a spell on me again.”

I expected Charon to fight back, or at least to protest, but he did neither.

All he did was sigh. “That’s probably for the best.”

“Hang on,” I said quickly. “Will this make it so only Charon can’t put a spell on Greyson? Or is this protection from all witches?”

“Only Charon,” Lakini said.

I felt my stomach clench with nerves. “So there’s a chance that when Aysel finds out we broke the spell, she might go to someone else to cast it, and we’ll be back in the same predicament.”

“That’s true,” Charon agreed. “Once the princess finds out the revulsion spell is broken, she’ll probably ask for something else. And she doesn’t really allow me to refuse. You have to know that she will find out about any ward you create.”

There was a beat of silence as we all considered the implications of this.

“A better option might be not letting Aysel know that the revulsion curse has been lifted,” Xavier offered. “If you just go on being repulsed, then Aysel will never know.”

For a moment, I thought he was joking. *Of course* he’d want me to be repulsed by Greyson. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. We would only have to perform the revulsion around Aysel, and I had no intention of spending any amount of time around that woman.

And as soon as Seluna removed the handprints from my back, I was going to say good riddance to Lucian as well. Which would mean a not-so-fond farewell to the prince, the princess, and the rest of the moon people.

“That could work,” I said slowly. A feeling of optimism was spreading through my chest. For the first time in a long time, I was starting to feel hopeful again. Finally, something was working out in our favor.

“Great, now that we’re all agreed,” Lakini said briskly, “it’s time to create the ward.”

“Step back,” Big Mac said gruffly, pulling Greyson, Xavier, and me backward. “Give the witch some room to work.”

Lakini uncorked the bottle and closed her eyes. “*I call upon the heavens and the spirits of the four directions. Bind this man from enchantments. I pour this offering to the spirits of the earth, and beg that they accept. So may it be done*.”

She poured the crystalline liquid onto the cold pavement at her feet. It hovered for a moment, then sank into the asphalt all at once, like it had been sucked in.

Charon shifted, then his whole body seemed to shimmer. He gasped, and a wave of shimmering light lifted from him and enveloped Greyson.

I looked around. Was everyone seeing this?

The light disappeared in an instant.

“Greyson,” I said. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “I feel fine.”

He looked fine. Whole and unhurt. But I couldn’t see that anything had changed.

“How do we know if the ward works?” I asked, looking around at the three witches.

“That’s easy,” Big Mac said. She looked down at Charon. “Try a simple spell.”

“You’re going to have to release me,” Charon said, looking back at her. When Big Mac released him, he sat up with a sigh and stretched. Then he closed his eyes. “*Rebrum*,” he murmured, waving his hands in Greyson’s direction.

I looked over at Greyson, but nothing happened.

“So, it worked?” I asked, unsure.

Xavier shook his head. “How the hell do we know that you’re doing anything? Waving your hands and muttering nonsense—you could be saying anything.”

Charon looked irritated. He focused on Xavier and waved toward him with a flourish, mumbling something under his breath.

I gasped as Xavier’s dark hair turned fiery red.

Xavier looked at me. “What?”

I pointed at his head. “Your hair, Xavier.”

I didn’t know how I felt about Xavier with red hair. It was different… Unsettling.

“How about this one?” Charon said, and with another flick of his wrist, Xavier’s hair turned platinum blond, making Greyson burst out laughing.

Xavier scowled and ran a hand through his hair.

“Now do you believe that the ward works?” Charon asked.

“I just want to be sure,” Big Mac said. She turned to Greyson and waved her own hand in the air.

Greyson’s blond hair turned inky black. Xavier snorted with laughter, but I didn’t like it at all.

“Okay, okay,” I said, completely weirded out by these witchcraft makeovers. “Can you just turn everyone’s hair back to its original color?”

Charon and Big Mac each muttered something, and Xavier got his dark hair back, and Greyson his blond.

“Well, I guess it works,” Greyson said. “The curse is broken, and the ward seems to work.”

He looked over at Big Mac, who nodded.

“Seems so,” she agreed.

“Great!” I said brightly. “Let’s get back to the pack house—”

“Not so fast,” Lakini said, stopping me as I turned toward the car.

“What now?” I asked.

“To make sure the ward sticks, Greyson should remain in Portland overnight.” Lakini smirked. “We like to keep people under observation for a while.”

“What?” I demanded, aghast.

Xavier smirked at his brother. “Oh, what a shame.”

I had just turned to glare at Xavier for his snide comment when Big Mac’s phone rang.

She fished it out of her pocket. “Yeah?” Immediately, her expression darkened. “What? When?” She paused. “Okay.”

“What is it?” Xavier demanded.

Big Mac looked up at him. “We have to get back to the pack house. Now.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Big Mac looked grim. “It’s Kira. She’s in trouble.”

**Episode 2483**

XAVIER

“Hang on, hang on,” I said quickly. “Slow down for a second. What’s wrong with Kira?”

Big Mac looked worried. “She’s not doing well. It sounds like she’s still having trouble recovering from Charon’s blast.”

I glared down at the warlock, who was still sitting on the pavement at my feet. I felt angry, but also guilty—that blast had been meant for me. I still carried the knowledge that Kira had absorbed it for me. And those feelings of guilt were even further complicated by her admission of *why* she’d done it—because she had feelings for me.

“Okay,” I said, “we’ll all go back. Greyson can stick around here and come back tomorrow. He doesn’t need a ride.”

Big Mac nodded. “Don’t worry. We’re on our way,” she said into her phone.

“Cali, let’s go,” I said, waving her toward the car.

She looked at me, then at Greyson, then back at me. Her expression was tense. “I’m worried about Greyson. I think maybe… Maybe I should stay in Portland with him for the night.”

Fuck.

I bit back the sharp words that came bubbling to the surface in response to this. Deep inside, I knew what she was saying had been a possibility. But I was raging about that fucking kiss I’d just been forced to watch. And the memory of Cali calling out his name in her sleep was still a thorn in my side.

“Greyson’s a big boy. He’ll be fine by himself,” I said, trying to keep most of the irritation out of my voice.

“Xavier. A word?” Big Mac said. She took my elbow and pulled me toward the car. “Maybe you should think about this for a minute.”

“Think about what?” I snapped.

She gave me a long look. “About what you really want here. Cali and Greyson have been forced to stay apart for a while now. Now that there’s nothing holding them back, do you really want to be around to witness that when Greyson comes home tomorrow?”

“For fuck’s sake,” I muttered, my stomach turning.

“I’m just saying. Wouldn’t you be better off just letting Cali stay in Portland, keeping both of them out of your orbit for a little while?” the witch asked.

I made a growling sound in the back of my throat. I hated to admit it, but Big Mac was making sense. Cali loved both of us—I knew that—but if I were the one who’d been kept away from her, I’d be *all over her* the minute we were left alone together. There was no reason to believe that Greyson would be any different. Did I really want to suffer through that? Through *seeing* any of it? It would be like tagging along on someone’s honeymoon.

Would she resent me if I put my foot down for her to come home?

“Fine,” I grumbled, looking back at Cali. “Stay in Portland.”

Charon had gotten to his feet and was standing with Lakini. They were speaking quietly—and knowing them, probably arguing.

I stifled an angry sigh. The curse was broken, Greyson was protected, and everyone was alive. I guessed I’d done what I’d come to do, and the reward for my trouble was letting Greyson spend the night in Portland with Cali.

Fucking terrific.

I shot another glare at Lakini and Charon. As for those two, whatever happened between them now was their problem—as long as they stayed the hell away from the Redwood pack. I never wanted to see or hear from those two idiots again. They’d caused enough problems for me.

I’d just turned to follow Big Mac to the car when I felt a hand on my arm.

Cali was next to me, looking anxiously up into my face. “I know you’re upset,” she said, and shifted awkwardly on her feet, “but I really am worried about Greyson. We both know that witch spells aren’t always what they seem to be. And that includes wards. Sometimes there are unintended side effects. Someone has to keep an eye on him.”

Cali was clearly torn, and I hated seeing her looking so unhappy. I forced my face into a smile. However pissed I was at the moment, I did appreciate how much Cali cared about other people—even if in this instance it was Greyson she was caring so much about.

But I couldn’t help but doubt that it was simply concern that was keeping her here. I knew they’d been kept apart by the curse, and they’d both been miserable about it. It was clear she’d missed being with Greyson. It had been practically oozing off them during that little reunion kiss.

But still, I pulled her into a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“Let me know how Kira is, okay?” she said quietly, looking up at me.

She waved at me as I headed around the corner of the building toward my car.

I had to step around some fallen cinderblocks and a sheet of metal roofing that had been blasted down from somewhere to get to the car, but as I looked at it, I realized that my car hadn’t been touched. Even with the curses bouncing around and shit flying through the air, my car hadn’t been damaged.

Amazing.

But I was still feeling uneasy as I slid into the car. I didn’t like the idea of leaving Greyson and Cali behind. I didn’t want to do it, and I didn’t even want to *think* about why they were both so eager to be left alone together.

Try as I might, I just couldn’t stop their kiss from flashing through my mind again.

I tried to shake it off. It wasn’t doing me any good to dwell on it.

“Ready?” Big Mac asked, looking over at me.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. The air in the car grew charged, like it had suddenly been electrified. Then, an instant later, Big Mac had blipped the car—and me—back to the pack house.

“I fucking hate this,” I growled, a wave of what felt like intense seasickness rolling through me. “Why have we been driving anywhere if we could have been doing this the whole time?”

Big Mac gave me a sideways look. “I didn’t want to spoil you. And I’m not going to be anyone’s chauffeur.”

I blew out a breath through my nose—trying to shake off the dizziness—and climbed out of the car.

Orla pounced on us the moment we walked into the house.

“Where’s Cali?” she demanded.

“She’s fine,” I said. “She’s still in Portland with Greyson. I’ll explain in a minute,” I added, when Orla started in with another question. “Is Kira still upstairs?”

Swallowing her question, Orla nodded. “Yes, she’s just this way.”

She led us up the stairs and pushed open Kira’s door. Torin was sitting with her, holding her hand.

He looked drained when he looked up at us, and he sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I’ve been doing all I can.”

“What happened?” Big Mac asked, striding to the bed.

Torin shook his head. “I’m not sure. But she won’t wake up.”

Big Mac looked at Kira for a moment, then put a hand on Torin’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said softly. “You did fine.”

I looked at Kira with mounting concern. She’d been fine when I’d spoken to her last night. She’d looked tired and a little sore, but she’d been awake. I’d known she was hurt, but I’d never expected *this*.

“I know it looks bad, but she’s not dead,” Orla said.

“Well, that’s good,” I said dryly. Seeing Kira looking so pallid really freaked me out. It felt like just a moment ago I’d been up here talking to her. The conversation had been awkward as hell, but she’d seemed fine.

I stepped toward the bed and picked up her hand, which lay motionless on top of her blanket. Her skin was cold.

My heart raced, and my first thought was to have Big Mac blip me back to that godforsaken strip mall so I could beat the living shit out of Charon for what he’d done. Whatever was happening, it was all that warlock’s fault.

I thought about finding Kira, all that time ago. I hadn’t known it would happen, but I’d grown fond of her. And I knew how much shit she’d been through to get to this point in her life. She’d endured a lot, and she didn’t deserve this.

I’d meant what I’d told her last night—I thought of her as a friend. A good friend. Something I didn’t think of many other people in this world. It had snuck up on me, and the thought of losing her like this really scared me.

I leaned closer. “Kira? Can you hear me?”

She didn’t answer, but I could hear her breathing. It was shallow and rapid.

Then, suddenly, her eyes began to flutter. They opened, and—quick as lightning—she reached up, wrapped her hands around the back of my neck, and pulled me into a kiss.

**Episode 2484**

Xavier had just disappeared with Big Mac, but I could already feel the empty space of his absence. It was clear he’d been unhappy about leaving me in Portland with Greyson, but I appreciated that he hadn’t argued with me about it.

And I really hoped Kira was okay. I’d seen the hit she’d taken from Charon, and it had looked rough.

I looked over at Charon, who was standing talking to Lakini. Those two had a lot going on, and I hoped they’d be able to work some of it out. Though—admittedly—Charon probably had a pretty steep hill to climb, what with having tried to have Lakini murdered and all.

Whatever else they were doing, it was clear they weren’t paying a bit of attention to Greyson and me, and I was starting to feel like a third wheel.

I looked up at Greyson. “What do we do now?”

We’d somehow managed to achieve everything we’d set out to accomplish. I was shocked, but it felt incredible. Usually when I made plans, they all went out the window about halfway through the mission. But this had worked. I couldn’t remember the last time something had come together so well.

Almost too well. I nearly didn’t trust that we hadn’t left something undone.

I was just getting ready to anxiously scroll through the plan again when Greyson took my hand. The warmth of it instantly made me feel better, and my shoulders relaxed.

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. “What would you like to do?” he asked in a low tone.

My heart raced. My stomach flipped. I knew *exactly* what I wanted to do, but I couldn’t do it here. Not out in the open, in front of Charon and Lakini.

I had to cool down and keep myself under control. “What do you want to do?” I asked, fighting to sound casual.

When Greyson smiled at me, my heart started beating at a truly unhealthy rate. I could see from the hunger in his eyes that he was thinking the same exact thing. Only he wasn’t even bothering to hide it.

He glanced at Charon and Lakini. “Those two don’t seem to need us.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

Greyson slung his arm around me—I had to physically stop myself from jumping on him and wrapping my legs around his waist—and leaned down, close to my ear. “How about we go to my apartment—”

I nodded, hoping my face hadn’t gone too pink. “I was thinking the same thing—”

“—to get my car,” he finished. “And then we can go wherever we want.”

I opened my mouth to speak—to tell him I didn’t want to go anywhere but his bed—but I shut it again and nodded. I was too afraid to speak, afraid I was going to say the exact wrong thing.

Greyson walked me over to Lakini and Charon, who were still in the middle of a discussion.

“We’re going to be saying our goodbyes now.” He looked at Charon. “I assume you’ll be sticking around here until tomorrow.”

It wasn’t a question. Greyson wasn’t asking Charon, he was telling him.

Charon seemed to hear this and nodded. “We’re going to try to work things out.”

Lakini rolled her eyes but didn’t refute Charon. “Thank you,” she said, almost shyly. “For everything.”

“Yeah, thank you,” Charon nodded. “This was the kick in the ass I needed to see how much I still care about her.”

“That’s great,” I said, really meaning it. “Good luck.”

As we turned away, Greyson muttered, “I give them a week. Tops.”

I elbowed him in the side, and he looked down at me with a smile. His eyes were bright, and it felt like I was melting beneath their warmth. Everything about him drew me closer. Every time his body brushed against mine, it felt like my skin had been lit on fire.

Out in front of the strip mall, Greyson ordered an Uber. As we waited, I was just hoping I’d be able to control myself on the ride to his apartment. How long a ride was it, anyway? Maybe I needed to mentally prepare to keep my hands to myself.

Greyson took my hand and gave it another kiss. “I was worried I’d never be able to do that again.”

“I know,” I said softly.

He traced his finger across the skin of my hand. “This revulsion curse has been hell, but it’s made me realize just how important the little things are. Just being able to hold your hand, or hug you, or listen to your laugh without worrying what’s going to happen next.”

I pulled his hand toward me and kissed it. I felt the same way.

The Uber pulled up, and Greyson let go of my hand. He opened the door and put his hand on the small of my back as I slid into the back seat, his hand lingering a little longer than was strictly necessary.

As he walked around to the other side, I shot a quick look at the driver—a dark haired guy who had smiled a silent greeting when I’d gotten in. I wondered if he’d be upset if I just couldn’t control myself. Was there an Uber version of the mile high club?

Greyson slid into the car, and the slamming of the door snapped me out of me reverie. But we weren’t halfway down the block when Greyson spoke.

“Pull over.”

The driver stopped the car, and my heart beat hard as Greyson leaned toward me. His lips passed just millimeters in front of mine, and my whole body felt like it had burst into flames.

Then he reached *past* me and grabbed the seat belt, pulling it across my body and clicking it into place.

He smiled. “I did promise I’d keep you safe.” He sat back and, pulling on his own seat belt, told the driver, “You can go ahead.”

The driver pulled out, and we left the strip mall behind.

I was trying to regulate my breathing, but it was getting harder and harder. It was like the space between us on the car seat had grown physical. I knew exactly how far I’d have to reach my hand out before I touched him, how quickly I could get my seat belt off and straddle his lap. The air inside the car was so charged with electricity, it was getting hard to breathe.

I shot a glace at Greyson, who looked perfectly calm. What the hell did he want to do? Besides fetching his car, he hadn’t really answered my question.

“I went there once,” he said, pointing as we passed a small bar. “They had poutine; famous for it, I guess. People were ordering it like crazy.”

“Wow,” I said, barely listening. I couldn’t believe how *awkward* this felt. We were mates, for crying out loud. We’d already slept together. A lot. I should be able to get through this car ride without feeling like a teenager on a first date.

When we pulled up in front of Greyson’s building, he leaned across me to unfasten my seat belt, and the pressure of his body against mine sent a shockwave of desire pulsing through me.

When I stepped out of the car, the cold December air felt like a lifesaver, and I was finally able to breathe.

“How about some ice cream?” Greyson said, tipping his chin down the block. He smiled at me. “It seems like we could both stand to cool off a little.”

It was hard to tell if he was kidding. Though he must not have been, because he took my hand and started walking toward the ice cream shop.

Desperate to keep my eyes anywhere but his ass, I looked around the street. It was a hip part of town, and I spied a cool-looking jewelry shop across the street. Maybe I should stop in there later to see if I could find something for my mom’s Christmas gift.

The bell over the door jangled as we walked in. Ice cream must not have been on anyone’s mind on a cold night, because we were the only people in the shop and went right up to the counter.

“What do you want?” Greyson asked me.

I knew *exactly* what I wanted, but it wasn’t on the menu.

My cheeks started to heat, and I jabbed my finger at the first flavor I saw. “Pistachio.”

“Cone or cup?” Greyson asked.

“Whatever,” I said, staring to feel fatally flustered. “You choose.”

He turned to the green-haired girl behind the counter. “A scoop of pistachio in a cone for the lady, and salted caramel in a cup for me.”

The girl nodded and got to work.

“I’ve never been in here,” Greyson said, walking down to the register and pulling out his credit card. “But I’ve been meaning to come in.”

The petty part of me liked hearing this. That meant this place hadn’t been part of his routine with old girlfriends or one-night stands. It wasn’t part of his past and couldn’t be associated with former lovers. Or Maren.

“There you go,” the girl said, handing over our ice cream.

Greyson paid and dropped a ten into the tip jar, which made the girl grin.

There were small tables ranged along the front of the shop, positioned so customers could look out the windows, and we took a seat.

A lick into my cone, I wondered what the hell had possessed me to choose pistachio—I didn’t even like pistachio that much.

But an instant later, Greyson reached over and snatched my cone from me. He dumped my ice cream along with his into the trashcan behind him and stood, pulling me to my feet.

I stared at him, stunned, as he pulled me out of the shop. “Greyson?’

He turned to look at me, his eyes blazing. “Let’s stop kidding ourselves, Cali—neither one of us is in the mood for ice cream.”

**Episode 2485**

GREYSON

As I pulled Cali onto the sidewalk, I didn’t even wait for her response. I’d known from the moment she took that first lick of pistachio ice cream and my mind went elsewhere that I wasn’t going to be able to endure any more waiting. The tension between us was unbearable—I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin—and waiting even a moment longer would be absolute torture. And hadn’t we suffered enough already? Why were we kidding ourselves? We were out here pretending like this was just some ordinary day, like we hadn’t broken a curse that had been keeping us apart.

I couldn’t sit in a little café and make conversation. The person I wanted most in the world was standing right in front of me. I didn’t want ice cream—I wanted her.

The dark clouds had been threatening all day, and it had finally started to rain, but I barely noticed. I pulled Cali close and kissed her. Hard.

The feel of her lips against mine broke over me like a heatwave. I was so hungry for her—I had to stop myself from devouring her.

Cali pulled away and looked up at me, her face flushed. She was breathing hard. I loved when she looked at me like that, cheeks red, chest heaving. I wanted her breath to come in gasps. I wanted her to ache for me. I wanted her to want me like never before. Just like I wanted her.

The rain was soaking into her hair, and I wiped a drop away as it ran down her heated cheek. I bent and kissed her neck, reveling in the warmth of her skin in the freezing December air.

“I want you,” I whispered, making my way up to her ear.

“Greyson! Right here?” she gasped.

That made me laugh. “Honestly, if I could, I would. But I have an even better idea.”

I took her hand and led her down the street toward my apartment building. We were hurrying, but it still didn’t feel fast enough. I wished I could move through time and space the way witches did.

As I stepped into the street to cross, a car honked, then rushed by. My whole body pulsed with the heat of my desire. Any second’s delay felt like a second less I could spend with Cali.

I pulled open the glass door and waved at my doorman. It was warm inside the building, and I put my hand on the small of Cali’s back and hurried her toward the elevator. I punched the up button, then turned and kissed her again. I couldn’t seem to stop. When the doors opened, we pulled apart and stepped inside, breathless. We stood for a moment, staring at each other. We didn’t say it, but we were both waiting for the doors to close, which felt like it took a thousand years. When they finally did, I stepped toward Cali and pressed her against the chrome wall of the elevator.

I looked down at her beautiful face. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold, rain was dripping from her hair, and her eyes were wide as she looked up at me. I couldn’t wait a moment more, so I closed the gap between us and covered her mouth with mine. I pressed my body against hers, swirling my tongue into her mouth and tangling my fingers into her hair. I was consuming her, and she arched her pelvis so that it pressed against mine.

I gripped Cali’s hands and lifted them over her head, lacing my fingers through hers. I plunged my tongue into her mouth, and she opened to it. She was rocking against me, the rhythm needy and suggestive.

If it were up to me, I’d have hit the STOP button the elevator and had my way with Cali, right there and now. I couldn’t believe that I’d been missing out on this—how she tasted, how she felt, how she moved—all because of some dumbass spell.

But the joke was on Aysel, because all the spell had done in the end was make me want Cali more than ever. I tried to slow our kisses. I didn’t want to rush this. I wanted to savor everything about her. But that couldn’t last. I needed her too much. Her kisses were addictive, and I didn’t know what I would do if she tried to pull away.

Luckily, she needed me as much as I needed her. I released her hands from my possessive grip and let my own hands travel slowly down her body, my palms brushing down the curves of her breasts. I couldn’t wait to strip off her clothes and feel her skin pressed against mine with nothing between us.

She shivered, and I pulled away, suddenly worried.

“Are you cold?” I asked. Maybe I’d made a mistake, kissing her out in the rain like that. I didn’t want her to get sick.

But Cali shook her head. “Trust me. Cold is the last thing that I am.”

And given the way her eyes flashed as she looked up at me, I believed her.

I smiled and was just pressing her against the wall again when the elevator dinged.

I felt Cali stiffen, and I looked over. An older, well-dressed woman stood in front of the elevator, her tiny Pomeranian at her feet. She was looking at Cali and me with a frank, assessing gaze.

Even as I stepped away from Cali, I could see that she was blushing bright pink. The color streaked down her neck, and I suspected she was probably blushing from head to toe.

The woman stepped into the elevator—standing in the middle of the small space, right between Cali and me—and reached forward to press the button for her floor.

The dog, which was at the end of what looked like a black silk leash, looked up at me and bared its tiny teeth. Then—to my surprise—it growled.

“Antoinette,” the woman said in a chiding tone, “you stop that. You shouldn’t growl in the face of young love.”

Then she looked up at me and gave me a sly wink.

My floor was next, and I was smiling when I reached for Cali’s hand. When we stepped out, I noticed that Cali still looked utterly embarrassed, and as the door closed, she looked up at me.   
 “Next time, I’m taking the stairs.”

I laughed at the shell-shocked look on her face and fumbled in the pocket of my jeans for the keys. We were here—so close to privacy, I could barely stand it. I wanted to get this door open as quickly as possible so that I could shut it again and close the two of us in so no one could interrupt.

Cali wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me down, pressing a kiss to my lips. I managed to get the door open blind, and I swiveled her into the apartment. I kicked the door closed and felt a complete sense of relief when I heard it slam shut.

We were alone. *Finally*. There was no one here to interrupt us, and I could finally have Cali—the way I’d been aching for her for days on end.

I bent and swept my arm beneath her knees, then lifted her, carrying her into the apartment and setting her down on the counter.

Cali made a sound like a cat purring and wrapped her legs around my waist. My hands seemed to sizzle against her skin, and I dug my fingers into her hair, wild with desire.

It was like I couldn’t touch enough of her. I yanked off her coat and grabbed for her shirt—I couldn’t get to her fast enough—but the shirt was wet and stuck to her skin. Without a second thought, I ripped the fabric from her body with a growl.

Cali pulled away and looked at me, shocked, as the shirt fell to the floor in tatters. For a moment, I wasn’t sure how she was going to react to this, but after a beat, she started to laugh.

And I joined her.

“I can’t believe I just did that,” I said. I didn’t usually lose control like that. But then my eyes swept down her body, and I took in her bare skin and lacy black bra, and the laughter died in my throat. The desire that replaced it was white hot.

My whole body thrummed with lust, and I gathered close again and kissed her.

Cali shifted, and something—a small elephant figure—clattered off the counter and fell to the floor with a sound of shattering glass.

“I’m sorry,” Cali gasped, pulling away and looking horrified.

“I don’t give a shit about that thing,” I breathed.

I picked her up and carried her through the apartment. She shrieked with laughter as I tossed her onto the bed, and I growled as I climbed on top of her, the last of my willpower completely sapped. I wanted her now, and there was no reason to wait a second longer.

Episode 2486

XAVIER

The kiss took me completely by surprise. *What the hell?* But I kept myself from shouting that out loud. Kira had been in a magically induced coma only a few seconds ago. She was probably disoriented. She didn’t mean anything by it.

My instinct was to shove her off me, but that felt too harsh—especially after the awkward conversation we’d had last night about her feelings toward me.

So, instead, I gently lifted her arms from my neck and ducked beneath them.

“Are you okay?” I asked, when I was properly detangled.

But it was hard to tell if she’d even heard me. Her eyes were still open, but they seemed far away and confused. She was looking through me, like I wasn’t there at all.

I shot a glance over my shoulder at the others. “Anyone?”

Orla and Big Mac were staring at her with twin looks of worry on their faces.

Torin was staring at her with unmasked shock. “*Whoa*,” he breathed.

Which wasn’t a great deal of help.

I turned back to Kira. “Kira? Can you hear me, Kira?”

This time she looked at me, her head swiveling in my direction. Her gaze pierced through me with a strange intensity. “Geoff? Is that you?”

“No, Kira, it’s not Geoff…” But I trailed off when her eyes fluttered shut again and she dropped back down onto her pillow.

Okay, that was… weird, but I had to keep reminding myself about the coma. I’d said and done some pretty wild shit when I was trying to come ‘round from a beating. This was no different. I hoped.

I glanced back at Orla and Big Mac, wondering if they’d heard Kira call me Geoff. She’d spoken softly, so I wasn’t sure if they’d caught it. It was strange that she’d gotten confused—but she wasn’t in her right mind. The kiss had made that clear. Her confusion probably wasn’t the worst thing that was happening right now, so I needed to focus.

The real question remained: how long was it going to take for her to recover? I didn’t know much about witchcraft or its effects, but I was still feeling guilty as hell about this whole thing. She’d taken that blast to save me.

And looking at her now—unconscious—I wondered what she’d saved me from. How would the spell Charon had cast have affected me, if it had landed? I was a werewolf, and Kira was a witch. I wondered if magic could affect us differently.

“Is there anything more we can do?” I asked, looking up at Big Mac.

She looked grave. “I think we’ve done all we can for now. The best thing to do is let her rest.”

I stood and—with one last glance at Kira—followed Big Mac, Orla, and Torin out of the room.

Closing the door behind me, I leaned against the hallway wall with a frustrated sigh. Kira had risked her life for me. She’d only been there in the first place to help Cali and Greyson with the curse, and now she was in a fucking coma.

“How can we just stand here doing nothing?” I demanded angrily.

“I’ve done everything I can think of,” Torin explained tearfully. “Kira *should* be getting better. There’s nothing I can see to explain why she’s not.”

“I know this is hard,” Big Mac said grimly, “but the blast of magic she took is bound to have some residual effects.” She shot me a sideways glance. “And apparently one of those effects is kissing Xavier.”

Uncomfortable, I shifted on my feet and glanced over at Orla. I wasn’t too worried about what she thought about what had happened. It was pretty clear that everyone had been surprised by Kira’s kiss. But still. Orla was Cali’s mom. I didn’t want any story that got back to Cali to get twisted in the retelling.

If there was any bright side to leaving Cali in Portland for the night, it was that she hadn’t been around to see that kiss. Not that I was worried Cali wouldn’t understand—I knew she would—but I didn’t want anything adding to her worries. And seeing that might’ve reminded her of our problems with Ava.

The only person I wanted to be kissing was Cali. Not Ava, and not Kira.

Not that I had the option of kissing Cali at the moment. She was with Greyson…

I shoved that disturbing train of thought aside. There was nothing I could do about any of it, and I knew if I started dwelling on it, I would end up in a very dark place.

“Okay, are there any other effects we should be looking for?” I asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “I wouldn’t think so, but it’s always hard to say.”

“So what do we do?” I pressed.

“Nothing, really,” Big Mac said. “The best thing we can do is keep her comfortable and just watch for any changes.”

“I can keep watch for a while,” Torin offered. He held up a cookbook. “I can do some cookie research while I sit with her.”

Big Mac nodded. “You do that. I’m doing a second checkup on her.”

She and Torin disappeared into the room, and I shot a look at Orla. Should I say something about the kiss to her? Would that just make it worse?

It felt so awkward, but in the end, I decided I wasn’t going to say anything. It was best not to kick a hornet’s nest.

I was covered with dust and grime from digging through the debris at the strip mall, so I turned toward my room, intent on a shower. But I stopped when Orla spoke.

“You were going to tell me about Cali.”

“Right,” I said, turning back to her.

I thought about what I wanted to tell her. I didn’t know how much to reveal. I looked down at my hands; they were still streaked with dirt and rust from the rebar and cement that had almost crushed Cali. But it just didn’t feel wise to tell Orla that her daughter had almost been buried alive.

I cleared my throat. “We had kind of a nasty run-in with the same warlock who hurt Kira, but we took care of it. Did what we went out to Portland to do. Cali’s fine.”

Orla smiled. “Thank you. For keeping Cali safe. I know you love her and you’re always thinking of her.”

I nodded but felt strangely awkward. “Well, she’s my mate. That’s what mates do for each other.”

I turned away again, but Orla laid a hand on my shoulder.

“This must be hard for you, being apart from her.”

This made me feel even more uncomfortable—probably because she was right.

I shrugged, trying to look casual. “It’s something I’m learning to deal with.”

Orla looked thoughtful. “If I’ve learned anything, it’s that the *due destini* is very strong. I know my daughter struggles with it. And I imagine you do as well. I imagine it’s just as difficult for you as it is for—”

There was a crash from inside Kira’s room, and Orla and I both turned toward the door. I pulled the door open but stopped in the doorway, shocked.

Big Mac and Torin were pressed against the far wall, and Kira stood before them, wielding a lamp like a weapon. She was using the other hand to conjure the magic that had the two pressed against the wall, but her magic was weak and kept cutting out.

Her eyes were wide open, but she still didn’t seem to be seeing anything. That glassy-eyed look spooked the hell out of me.

“Kira,” I said softly. “Kira, take it easy, okay?”

She spun around. “Geoff?” she said, looking at me. “Geoff, what’s going on? Who are these people?”

She sounded very afraid, and I was pretty freaked out myself by this turn of events.

I moved toward her and carefully took the lamp from her hand.

“I’m right here,” I said softly, putting the lamp back down on the table and guiding her back to the bed. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

I pulled the blankets up around her, but as I straightened, Kira reached for me and grabbed the front of my shirt.

“Please don’t go,” she pleaded, her eyes alight with terror. “Please, Geoff, stay with me. Don’t leave me with them.”

She looked so scared, it broke my heart.

“I won’t,” I said gently. “I’m right here. You’re safe.”

With a shuddering sigh she grasped my hand and relaxed back into the pillow, closing her eyes.

I didn’t have the heart to pull my hand free, but I looked up at Big Mac. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Seems pretty obvious to me,” Big Mac said flatly. “She thinks you’re her dead husband.”

I groaned and gave my hand a tug, but she held fast.

“Kira,” I said, looking down at her. “It’s me, Xavier. I’m not G—”

“Don’t say that!” Big Mac hissed, stepping forward and giving my shoulder a hard shove.

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

She rolled her eyes at me. “You have to play along, Xavier, or we could lose Kira forever.”